

Mary Kennedy

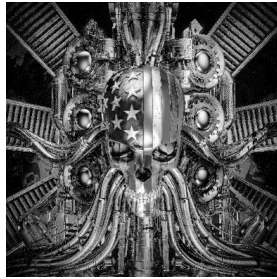
CHIEF

REAPER-Patriots:
Book Forty-Two

CHIEF

REAPER-Patriots

Book FORTY-TWO



Mary Kennedy

Copyright © 2022 by Mary Kennedy

All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be constructed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Editing provided by: [pccProofreading](#)

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

| | | | | | | | |
|----------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|-------------------|
| 1 | Miller & Kari | 31 | Hawk & Keegan | 61 | Hunter & Megan | 83 | Sean & Shay |
| 2 | Alec & Lissa | 32 | Eagle & Tinley | 62 | Cam & Kate | 84 | Wade & Hannah |
| 3 | Gabe & Tory | 33 | Ace & Charlie | 63 | Jax & Ellie | 85 | Parker & Dani |
| 4 | Gaspar & Alex | 34 | Razor & Bella | 64 | Adam & Jane | 86 | Eric & Sophia Ann |
| 5 | Raphael & Savannah | 35 | Tango & Taylor | 65 | Ben & Harper | 87 | 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 |
| <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> | |
| <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> | |
| <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 |
| <u>22</u> | Griff & Amanda | <u>52</u> | Mac & Rachele | <u>78</u> | Ian & Aspen | <u>103</u> | |
| <u>23</u> | Gibbie & Dhara | <u>53</u> | Nine & Erin | <u>79</u> | Doug & Miguel | <u>104</u> | |
| <u>24</u> | Blade & Suzette | <u>54</u> | Clay & Adele | <u>80</u> | Dom & Leightyn | <u>105</u> | |
| | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|------------------|---------------|------------------|----------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| <u>25</u> | Skull & Avery | <u>55</u> | Trak & Lauren | <u>G5</u> | Remy & Charlotte | <u>106</u> | |
| <u>26</u> | Axel & Cait | <u>56</u> | Lars & Jessica | <u>G6</u> | Magnus & Addie | <u>107</u> | |
| <u>27</u> | Sniff & Lucy | <u>57</u> | Ian & Faith | <u>G7</u> | Duncan & Lindsay | <u>108</u> | |
| <u>28</u> | Noa & Kelsey | <u>58</u> | Kiel & Noelle | <u>G8</u> | | <u>109</u> | |
| <u>29</u> | Eli & Jane | <u>59</u> | Jean & Ro | <u>81</u> | Aiden & Brit | <u>110</u> | |
| <u>30</u> | Grant & Evie | <u>60</u> | Dexter & Marie | <u>82</u> | Callan & Juliette | <u>IM</u> | Milo, Torro |

Contents

[MAP of Belle Fleur and Cottage Assignments](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)

[EXCERPT for MATTHEW](#)

[SERIES AND FAMILY GUIDE](#)

[OTHER BOOKS BY MARY KENNEDY YOU](#)

[MIGHT ENJOY!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHAPTER ONE

Eric Ryan Stanton watched as his father comforted the children that were just brought to Belle Fleur. He was only twelve, but he knew what those kids had been through. He'd heard his parents and the other team members talking about it. Taken from their homes in Central and South America, they were sold to a group of men who had horrible intentions for them. That's what Uncle Nine said. Horrible intentions. His mind was spinning at thoughts of what that could be.

Most of the children were being returned to their families, but one young girl was being sent to a group home for girls. It was run by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, a charity that Mama Irene and Miss Ruby gave to often. The girl was crying, and his father was trying to calm her until Ashley or Bree arrived.

"Are you okay, Eric Ryan?" asked his mother. Everyone used both of his names because there were so many with the same name. His own father's first name was Eric.

"Yea, Mom," he said, nodding. "I was just watching Dad try to calm her down. He's really good at what he does. I

want to be like that one day. But I'm curious, why can't she go back to her family?"

"They don't want her to come home," said Grace, wrapping an arm around her son's shoulder. He was already taller than she was, and he was only twelve. He was going to be big like his father. And God help her, probably a SEAL.

"But why? I mean, she's their daughter. You would never tell me or JT we couldn't come home."

"No, I would never do that. Her parents feel shame that their daughter was taken and that she was raped by the men who took her. Not only that, Eric Ryan, she's pregnant now." He frowned, looking down at his feet. He was somewhat embarrassed but didn't know why.

"So, because those men abused her and she got pregnant, her parents don't want her?" Grace nodded, a sad look on her face. "That's not fair! It wasn't her fault. She didn't ask for this to happen to her."

"I know, honey. I wish I knew what her parents were thinking, but I don't. Your father and the other men are going to make sure she gets to a good home where they'll help her deliver the baby, and then it will be placed with an adoption agency."

“She won’t keep her baby?” he asked.

“Eric Ryan, this is a very complicated thing. She didn’t willingly go with one of these men. They didn’t love one another; they didn’t have a relationship. He raped her. It was violent and forceful. A painful memory that will take years for her to overcome. It’s not the best way to bring a child into the world.”

Grace’s young son, already three inches taller than her, had a pained, pensive look on his face. He had such a good heart. He was struggling not just with the violence of it but the morality of it all. A boy, not quite a man, already understood the consequences of such actions and wanted to find a way to stop it.

“I don’t understand how men can be so mean to a girl. I mean, she’s only a few years older than me, Mom.”

“I know, baby,” said Grace, kissing his cheek. They watched as Ashley and Bree rushed toward them, taking the young girl from Ghost’s arms. She nodded a few times as he spoke to her, then followed Bree and Ashley to the clinic.

Eric Ryan watched as his father looked up at him and his mother, then stalked toward the docks at the mouth of the bayou.

“Give him some time alone, Eric Ryan.” He nodded, just watching his father. Taking a seat on the steps of the big house, he stared at his father, making sure he was okay. When he just stood there, not doing anything, he decided to go to him. As he neared, he heard something disturbing. Something he’d never heard before in his life. His father was crying.

“D-Dad? Dad, are you okay?” he asked, reaching for his shoulder. Ghost nodded, then turned, wiping his face as he pulled his son in for a hug.

“Promise me, Eric Ryan, promise me that you will never harm a woman like that. You won’t abuse her body. You won’t take advantage of her innocence, and you won’t leave her to bear a child that she didn’t ask for.”

“Dad, I...”

“Promise me,” he said, gripping his shoulders.

“I promise, Dad. But I would never hurt a girl. Ever. You and all the men here taught us that. We know right from wrong. I would never, ever hurt a girl. I know you think JT and I aren’t grown up enough to understand yet, but we are. We know what girls and boys do when they’re in love. We would never make a girl do that with us if she didn’t want to.”

It seemed that his words only made his father cry more. His boys weren't boys any longer. They were intelligent, well-mannered young men.

“Dad, I'm sorry. Tell me what to do,” he pleaded, hugging his father.

“Oh, Eric Ryan, there's nothing anyone can do.” He pointed to the bench and nodded at his son. “Sit with me a while.”

He sat next to his father, staring out at the water. It was a cool spring day, the flowers blooming, making his eyes itch. They didn't say anything for a long time, then his father spoke again.

“On our last mission, my team, Uncle Zulu, Whiskey, all those guys, we had to find a bunch of little girls that were taken from a school. When we found them, Eric Ryan, they had been beaten and raped, just like that young girl. Only these girls were your age and younger.”

His son swallowed, tears filling his beautiful eyes.

“We all swore that we would never allow something like that to occur again. I've worked my whole life to try and fulfill that oath, and yet these things still happen. One day,

Eric Ryan, you will decide whether or not to go into the military or go on to college. Either way, I will support you.

“What I hope, what I pray for, is that you will come back here and carry on the work that we do. I don’t ever want to have to hold a crying child like that again. To tell her it’s all going to be okay when I’m not sure it will be. I don’t think it will ever happen, but I want to wipe evil off the face of this planet.”

“Me, too, Dad,” whispered Eric Ryan. “Dad? Will you tell me the story about how you met Mom again?”

Ghost smiled, nodding at his son. It was a story that made him sad and then eternally grateful and happy. Thirty minutes later, he felt better, looking down at his beautiful son. He was an exceptional student, already taking advanced placement classes. He was a star athlete in football, baseball, and basketball. He was involved in community service projects, and he was a fierce protector of the younger children at RP.

His son was everything he wanted a young man to be.

“Hey, Dad? What happens if a guy gets a girl pregnant by accident? I mean, I know about condoms and stuff and that the girl can take things to stop it, but accidents happen all the

time. Calvin Doges' sister got pregnant with her boyfriend during their senior year. They didn't get married, but they take care of the baby together."

"Well, that's one way to manage the situation," said Ghost. "If you're not in love, a baby is not the reason to get married. It creates more problems, not less. They're also very young and may not be able to financially support the child."

"We always use the saying that accidents happen, Eric Ryan, but in this case, they shouldn't happen as long as both parties are being very careful. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Dad. I just can't imagine marrying a girl that I don't love. Not even for a baby." Ghost smiled, nodding.

"Then that's a thought you should always have in the back of your mind. When you're old enough, and you are going to have relationships with girls, think about that before you go too far. It might just stop you from making a mistake."

"Dad?"

"Yea, son?"

"Do you always cry after a mission like that?" he asked quietly. Ghost thought about it a moment and nodded.

“You know what? I do. I don’t always let people see me, but it always affects me, Eric Ryan. A man is allowed to cry and show emotion, especially in our business. If we lock it all up and don’t show it, something might happen to us. We might get sad, or we might get ulcers.”

“Don’t let that happen, Dad,” he said compassionately. “If you ever want to cry, let me know. I’ll just sit here and be quiet.” Ghost smiled at his son, pulling him in for a hug, kissing his forehead.

“One day, Eric Ryan, a young woman is going to be very lucky to have you as a boyfriend or husband. I hope she’s worthy of you.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

They sat quietly for another hour, just watching the sunset over the bayou. When they finally rose to head back to their cottage, they both felt a little better. Ghost could not have been prouder of his son. He’d done all the right things, asking thoughtful questions and considering the answers.

After dinner, he met with Ashley and Bree.

“How is she?” he asked. Ashley bit her lower lip, and Bree looked away. “Ashley? Bree? Sweeties, look at me.”

Ashley turned, Bree crying openly now.

“I’m s-sorry, Ghost. She got to the home, and they got her settled in. The sisters that run the home said she told them she wanted to rest.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No.”

“They found her in the bathroom. She was gone, Ghost.” He stared down at his feet, then looked back up at the two therapists.

“Maybe she wouldn’t have made it after all,” he whispered.

“She was in a lot of pain, Ghost. Her family disowning her was traumatic enough, but the violent way those men took her was too much for her. Ghost? They took her repeatedly in front of the other children. She couldn’t even identify which one might have been the father.”

He nodded at the two women, then walked toward a table with Nine, Gaspar, Ian, Zulu, and Razor. Whispering to the men, they all nodded and left the cafeteria.

“Where do you think they’re going?” asked Bree.

“You and I both know where they’re going,” said Ashley. “I wish I could tell you that I want to stop them, but

God help me, I don't. If I were trained, if I were braver, stronger, I would be following them.”

It was three days later before Eric Ryan saw his father again. He'd never been gone that long without calling them or telling them where he was. His mother didn't seem worried, but he was. When he finally returned, he seemed better than before. He wouldn't know for another ten years where they'd gone. When he asked, his father simply said one sentence.

“We brought revenge for someone who couldn't do it for herself.”

CHAPTER TWO

Rachel remembered the first time her mother gave her a doll as a surprise. It was pretty. It had cool hair, but it didn't interest her. Nothing about the doll interested her. Then she kept wanting to take her shopping, but shopping didn't interest her either.

What did interest her was something that perplexed her mother to her very core. She was so confused by it, no matter what Rachel did, her mother looked as though she were sucking on a lemon.

"Rachel Michele Davis! What are you doing digging in that dirt?" screamed her mother from the back porch. Her father was putting a pool in their backyard. It was going to be great when it was finished, but what really had her excited was all the dirt he'd dug up from the yard.

"I'm just looking, Mom," she called back. She was covered in dirt from head to toe, her fingernails caked with it. She smelled the pile in her hands and giggled with excitement.

"Looking for what? It's dirt, for God's sake! Look at your sundress. Oh, for heaven's sake, Emmitt, your daughter is digging in the dirt! Her dress is ruined," she called to her

husband. Emmitt Davis laughed at his wife. They only had the one child, a daughter, but in many ways, she was all boy.

“She’s just digging, Helen. It’s not a big deal. The girl likes dirt. Let her play.”

“Emmitt, she’s thirteen years old. Not five. She should be fixing her hair and makeup, going to the movies with friends, and shopping. What the hell is she doing digging in the dirt?”

“Have you thought about asking her?” he said, smiling at his wife.

Helen Davis rose from her lawn chair and took careful, cautious steps toward her daughter. She had on a brand-new pair of white Keds® and didn’t want them to get dirty.

“Rachel? What is so fascinating about dirt?” asked her mother, standing over her.

“Look, Mom. Look at everything that’s in it. It’s not dirt, it’s soil. Dirt is something that happens because of the soil, but what’s in our soil is what makes it special.”

“Rachel, I don’t understand what you’re saying.” Her mother put her hands on her hips, shaking her head. Rachel stood, a handful of dirt in her palm.

“Try to understand, Mom. Listen.” Helen looked down at her pretty daughter, now covered in dirt.

“All right,” nodded Helen calmly. “What’s in the soil?”

“I would have to use the equipment at school to be sure, but you can find things that are living now or were once living like fossils! Look, there’s a worm there, and there are other bugs I can’t even see. And there’s stuff that my science teacher called abiotic. It means nonliving things, like minerals and water.

“If we tested our soil, Mom, we’d know if there were ever any living dinosaurs or other animals here. I mean, Mr. Jeffers’ farm is only two miles from here. I wonder if this land ever belonged to his family. We might find old cow poop. Or, even better, what if it was an old burial ground!”

“Oh, Rachel, for heaven’s sake. Cow poop. Burial grounds.” She shook her head but then noticed the disappointed look on her daughter’s face. Smiling, she reached out and touched the dirt in her hand. “It feels soft.”

“It is!” she said excitedly. “There are lots of reasons for that.”

Rachel chattered on for another forty-five minutes before she finally took a breath. Helen had to admit that her daughter gave a wonderful tutorial on soil and all the amazing things about it. When she was done, she simply smiled, realizing that this would probably go away, just like the fad with her friendship bracelets.

“One day, Rachel, the dirt won’t be as fascinating for you,” said her mother, brushing back her hair. “You’ll meet a lovely man and want to get married and have children.”

“Can’t I have both?” she asked. Helen laughed, shaking her head.

“Well, yes, I suppose nowadays a girl can have both. When I was younger, that wasn’t always the case. I had a degree in music, and I wanted to be a singer, but singing and having a family didn’t exactly go together.”

“But you could have done it on the weekends or maybe just for friends or family,” said Rachel.

“Yes, I guess I could have done that. But I wanted to be home with you and your father, Rachel.” Her daughter stared at her as if contemplating the statement.

“I do understand, Mom, but that life isn’t for me.”

Kneeling in the dirt again, she dug in with her bare hands.

Helen watched her daughter for a few moments and then just resigned herself to the fact that it was a fad. That’s all it was. A fad.

When it didn’t go away after the school year ended, she was perplexed. When she asked to go away to an environmental science camp, she agreed but was still hopeful this was a passing phase. But when she announced that her science fair project would be about soil and the environment, her mother knew it wasn’t going away.

Her love of all things dirt never ended. She made trips to Africa, India, and Asia, all studying soil and the environment. Helen never really caught on, but she didn’t argue with her daughter’s choices any longer. Emmitt just rode the dirt trail, thrilled to see his only daughter happy.

After graduating from the University of Arizona with a degree in soil science and a minor in agriculture, she began work for the Environmental Protection Agency. The work was long and tiring, but she received experiences she never dreamed she would have.

One of her good friends was a young meteorologist at the national storm center. Stormy, a real name, was a beautiful woman who had a fear of being on live television and being judged for her full figure.

They didn't get to see one another often, but when they did, they would always have a wonderful time together. They would pick a location between the two of them and spend a weekend shopping, eating, exploring, and talking about dirt and weather. They were the weirdest women on the block. But they were genuine and true.

She'd heard from her recently and learned that she'd taken a very unusual job. There was also the probability of there being a job for Rachel as well.

"I don't know, Stormy. What in the world do they need me for?" she asked. "I mean, a security company?"

"It's hard to explain, Rach, but I would never steer you wrong. It's an amazing place, I promise you. The people are wonderful, intelligent, kind, and genuine. I've never been anywhere like this in my life."

"I don't know."

“Look, I’m getting married the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Come for the holiday and stay for the wedding, stay a few days and meet the team. I know you’ll have a great time and see that what I’m offering you is truly a once-in-a-lifetime job opportunity.”

“Well, I don’t want to miss your wedding to this Mr. Wonderful. I sure hope he knows how lucky he is. You’re one in a million, Stormy. He’d better be worth it.”

“He’s more than worth it, Rach. He’s beautiful and kind, strong and protective. I adore him, and I know you will too.”

“Alright, alright, sold,” she laughed. “I’ll be there on Friday afternoon. Send me the directions.”

“Oh, no. We’re very private about where we’re located. Someone from the team will pick you up and bring you here,” said Stormy.

“And the mystery continues,” mocked Rachel.

“Oh, hush! Trust me, it will all be worth it. See you soon!”

“See you soon,” she said, ending the call.

It was such a peculiar request. She'd done a cursory search of REAPER-Patriots, but very little came up. Words and phrases like 'mysterious,' 'best in the world,' 'highly skilled' were the small pieces that she was finding, but nothing concrete.

"Well, you always liked a good mystery," she said, staring at herself in the mirror. "Let's solve this one."

CHAPTER THREE

“Eric Ryan, we’re so happy to have you home,” cried his mother.

“Mom, everyone just calls me Chief now. It’s easier, and then I don’t get confused with everyone else,” he smiled.

“Well, in reality, there are about a dozen chiefs on the property,” smirked his father. “But you’re right. You’re the only one that uses the name.”

“I named you Eric Ryan for a reason,” frowned Grace. “I’m not calling you a ridiculous rank. You’re my son, and your name is Eric Ryan.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he laughed, kissing her cheek. “I’m home for now, Mom. I’m still not sure if I want to return to the teams. I’ve got until January 20th to think about it.”

“Well, either way, I’m glad to have you home, and I know that JT will be happy as well.”

“Mom, we both know that you think if I come home, JT will come home. Gives us both time to adjust and think. We’ll make a decision sooner or later.”

“Chief,” called Luke. Grace rolled her eyes, kissing her son’s cheek and walking toward the group of women decorating the cafeteria for Thanksgiving.

“Hey, man, what’s up?”

“Would you head to the airport and pick up Jalen’s dad and Stormy’s friend, Rachel? I’d send someone else, but we’re all in the middle of helping to ensure the security systems are functioning as we hoped. We’ve got the new stealth netting up, and we want to test the gates and walls. Just have to convince the rest of the world that we’re just ghosts from here on out.”

“Yea, no problem. How will I know these people?” he asked.

“Beats me,” shrugged Luke. “Make a sign or some shit. Try not to get kidnapped like Jalen and Stormy.”

“Very funny,” he frowned.

Heading to his office computer, he printed two signs with the names. Mark Carson and Rachel Davis. Standing at the bottom of the escalator, he waited patiently. Mark Carson’s flight landed eleven minutes ago. He should be off first, then the girl. When a tall, smiling man appeared at the

top of the escalator waving in his direction, Chief couldn't help but smile.

“You must be Reverend Carson,” he said.

“Please, it's just Mark these days. And you are?” he asked.

“Oh, they call me Chief, but my name is Eric Ryan Stanton.” The man seemed confused, but he just laughed, nodding. “Just call me Chief.”

“Alright, Chief, when do I get to see my son and his beautiful girl?”

“We'll leave in just a moment, sir. We're waiting on one more.”

“Wonderful. I think I'll use the facilities and grab a coffee at that stand over there.” Chief nodded, grinning at the man. He looked a lot like Jalen, but his demeanor was definitely more chipper.

“Uh, hi,” said the raspy, throaty voice behind him. His cock stirred at the sound, and he turned, grinning down at the beautiful woman speaking to him.

“Well, hello,” he grinned.

“Hi.”

He couldn't help himself. He looked her up and down. The snug denim molded to her curves, the long-sleeved crewneck sweater highlighting her beautiful breasts. Her hair was so black it could only be labeled ebony. But her eyes were a bright, beautiful blue.

"I'm a little busy right now, but if you give me your number, I can come into town later tonight," he smiled. She raised her brows, giving a soft smile.

"Is that right? Well, lucky me. Here I thought the sign with my name on it was fate."

"Oh, fuck," he muttered. "Shit, I'm so sorry. I didn't expect, I mean, I wasn't given a description of you. I'm so damn sorry. Really."

"It's fine," she smirked. "That's probably the cutest pickup line I've heard in a while."

"Hello," smiled Mark. "I'm Mark Carson, father to the groom."

"Oh, it's so nice to meet you, Mr. Carson. I'm Rachel Davis. Stormy is one of my best friends. You're very lucky to get her as a part of your family."

“Well now, those are definitely words I love to hear. Please, just call me Mark.”

Chief guided them out of the airport and to the SUV, loading their bags in the back. As he wove down the interstate, they passed the city, and Mark frowned.

“I thought it would be brighter, prettier somehow,” he said quietly.

“The city has been through a lot in the last thirty years,” said Chief. “Hurricanes, floods, just about everything you can imagine. Sometimes, it is this gleaming jewel in the sunlight, and sometimes, it’s simply a muddy mess. When we get to Belle Fleur, you’ll see the real Louisiana. It’s magnificent.”

Rachel smiled at the handsome man next to her, looking over her shoulder to give a grin to Mr. Carson. When he propositioned her, she nearly said yes. Fourteen months, two weeks, and three days. That’s how long it had been since she’d had sex.

Paul Morris, who worked at the EPA, had just gotten divorced, was hornier than a dog in heat. He was good-looking and tall but a bit on the dull side. Rachel didn’t care. She was a woman who liked sex and needed it. She’d been so

busy this last year she just couldn't find anyone that she was really interested in.

But this man, this man right here, was one worth doing. He had fine chiseled features. A beard that made her lady parts tingle, and this head full of auburn hair flopping in his eyes. She wanted to run her fingers through that hair.

“Are you alright?” asked Chief.

“Hmmm? Oh, yes, sorry, I was just thinking. I don't think I got your name,” she said, changing the subject.

“Chief. They call me Chief.”

“Isn't that a rank?” she asked, smiling.

“It is,” he laughed. “My name is Eric Ryan Stanton, but they just call me Chief. Jalen is one of the teammates at RP.”

“Are you not with RP?” she asked.

“I am, but not officially. Currently, I'm still an active-duty SEAL. I'm trying to decide if this is the next step for me or if I should stay in the Navy.”

“That's a tough decision,” she said, nodding her head.

“I'm sure you'll do what's right for you.”

“I understand that you’re going to be interviewing with the team,” he said. She nodded but didn’t say anything.

“What made you become a soil specialist?”

“Dirt always fascinated me,” she laughed. Chief gave her a confused expression, and she just laughed harder. “Now you really want to meet me downtown, don’t you?”

“Actually, yes, but first, why dirt?” he grinned.

“Well, I just always was amazed by what was in the soil. The minerals, the fossils, the animals, the parts of our history that we walk on every day. When I was in high school and college, I was able to do some summer internships with the EPA. I was in southern India when these torrential rains occurred. Mudslides and flooding were happening everywhere.

“I remember standing on this cliff, just watching everything because we couldn’t do anything else. Tons of mud and soil were running down the sides of hills, sweeping away homes and cars. It’s where I met Stormy. She was there studying storms. We became fast friends after that. The two weird girls. One who loves dirt, the other loves weather.”

“I don’t think that’s weird at all,” said Mark. “I think intelligent women are put here by God to keep us all in line.”

Rachel laughed, and it was the sexiest sound Chief had ever heard.

“I love that you think that,” she smiled. “My experience tells me that men don’t like intelligent women. They say that they do, but when it comes down to it, they run the other way.”

“That seems a narrow view of the male population,” said Chief. “When you meet our men and their wives, you’ll change your mind.” Smiling at him, she nodded again.

“We’ll see. Chief.”

He just chuckled, shaking his head. Pulling up to the gates, Chief pressed a button in the vehicle, and the concrete barrier lowered into the ground. Next was an ornate iron gate that opened with an elegant sway.

“What is this place?” asked Rachel.

“I told you, it’s a special place.” Driving down the long main road, they began to see cottages up ahead. But Rachel wasn’t looking up. She was looking down at the ground, the canals, the bayou off in the distance.

As the car stopped, Jalen ran toward them to greet his father while Stormy ran to Rachel’s side.

“Rach! I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, hugging her friend.

“What the hell, Stormy? What is this place? Secret gates, places that magically appear out of thin air.”

“It’s a long story, but it’s a good one.”

“And who the hell is the hottie that you sent to get me? Shit, my ovaries are literally pounding against my...”

“Maybe don’t finish that until I’ve stepped away,” smirked Chief. “Here’s your luggage. Let me know if you need help in your cottage.” He gave her a wink and walked away toward the offices.

“Oh, my,” smirked Stormy. “Tell me all about it.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The back-to-back-to-back interviews with the lawyers and human resources team were brutal. The women, all exquisitely beautiful, were intelligent, well-spoken, and ruthless in their pursuit of answers. She couldn't really blame them. They were making sure that their husbands, sons, and daughters were all protected.

Leaving the offices, she removed the blazer, just standing in the cool breeze with her turtleneck sweater and slim skirt. The black, block-heeled boots were comfortable and much better when walking outside.

“Well, what do you think of my soil?” smiled the handsome older gentleman walking toward her.

“You must be *the* Mr. Robicheaux,” she grinned with an outstretched hand. He pushed her hand aside, hugging her tightly and kissing the top of her head. All Rachel could think was that this old man was very tall and very solid for his age.

“My great-great-great-great grandfather was *the* Mr. Robicheaux. I'm just Matthew, honey. Nice to meet you.”

“It's an honor to meet you, sir. This place is simply spectacular.”

“Would you like a little tour?”

“Really?” she asked excitedly.

Matthew chuckled, nodding his head as he extended a gentlemanly elbow. Irene watched from the front porch of the big house, smiling as her husband led the young woman around. They needed her to stay and help. If Belle Fleur were to survive the environmental changes coming in the next few years, it would require action on their part. And only that young woman could tell them what that action would be. She had it on good authority that she was the right woman for the job.

“That’s her,” said Nathan behind her.

“I know that, Nathan.”

“She’s lovely,” said Martha.

“I know that, too. Y’all think I don’t have eyes?” she murmured.

“You’re getting cranky in your old age, Irene,” smirked Franklin. “Maybe you need to eat more fruits and vegetables.”

“The day I take diet advice from a group of ghosts is the day I become one myself. Y’all run along and watch the babies.” Her ghostly trio moved away from her, laughing as

they did. In the distance, what only she, Julia, and Noah could see clearly were Grip and Yori walking with the men. They didn't know they were there, but Irene damn sure did.



“Now, these gardens were planted by my great-great-great grandmother. She worked with some of the best landscapers in all of Europe to ensure we had the right plants here.”

“Mr., I mean, Matthew, some of these plants don't exist any longer. The soil in the parts of the world where they originate doesn't allow them to flourish any longer.” She appeared confused and intrigued.

“Is that so?” he said, pretending to be surprised.

“Yes, I mean, these aren't even normal boxwoods. I've never seen anything like it.” She knelt, holding firmly to his forearm, and grabbed a handful of the soil. It felt velvety and thick in her hand, the cool earth trickling through her fingers. It was almost as if she could feel the life flowing through it.

“And those!” she said excitedly. “Those are Christmas Heliconia. They're only supposed to grow in Brazil!”

“Really?” he smiled. “Now, ain’t that somethin’.

Well, you can see why we need you here. We need to know what’s goin’ on with our soil.”

“I need to know!”

“Yes, I’m sure it would be exciting for you, Rachel, but you can’t release any information outside this property. What you discover stays here. And it’s not just looking at how we preserve our own land and expand it. We want to know how we can help to ensure our neighbors don’t get caught up in terrible floods or storms. If our boys are out there catchin’ bad guys, well, they might need you. You never know.”

“So, I could study all of this, but I wouldn’t be able to tell the world about it?” she asked.

“I’m afraid not. We are happy to let you duplicate what you see here but not mention our property. These men rely on anonymity to survive, Rachel. Without it, they’re dead. Every day, every single day, some madman is out to get them because they messed with his plans.

“My boys, they’re special. I got nine that are my own. Mine and Irene’s. The rest, well, they’re my boys just the same. Just like the girls are. We gotta protect ‘em. We gotta

make sure no one knows we're here and why Belle Fleur is so special.”

“Wow, I guess I didn't realize,” she whispered. “But to get to work with this. To see all of this and study it. I'm not sure I can walk away from that.”

“Well, you've got a few days before your interviews are done. Enjoy your time here, and find someone to dance with at the weddin'. Eric Ryan is a good one.” He kissed her cheek and followed the pathway through the maze.

Rachel sat for a moment, staring at the strange plants and flowers, shaking her head. It's impossible. Simply impossible, yet there it is in front of her. Standing, she walked around the fountain and then back toward the maze. Slowly walking between the hedges, she let her fingers glide over the shrubs, feeling the waxy leaves.

Turning the corner, she realized she wasn't exactly sure where she was, so she took another pathway and found herself walking between rows and rows of cottages. Up ahead, she saw an iron gate and headstones inside.

Rachel stood outside the gate for a few moments, just staring at markers. Some dated back to the late 1700s. Others

were more recent. Opening the gate, she wandered between the stones, reading each one.

“Kind of a morbid place to hide,” smirked Chief. He was standing at the headstone of Willa.

“Oh, shit!” she whispered, gripping her chest. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“I like to visit everyone when I come home. I enjoy having conversations with them, even if they can’t have a conversation with me.” She nodded, smiling at him. He looked so hot today. He had on tight blue jeans and a long-sleeved Navy t-shirt. His dirty running shoes were well-worn, which was more than obvious looking at him.

“This one, she died not long ago, and she was young.”

“Willa. Yea, she’s the late wife of Skull, Scott Crawford. He’s remarried now to an amazing woman. A hit-and-run driver killed Willa. It was terrible. They had two small boys. We thought we might lose him as well.”

“God, I’m so sorry. That must have been awful for everyone.”

“It was, but Avery changed all of that for him. They’re so in love. It’s really amazing to see.” He grinned, shaking

his head.

Rachel didn't say anything, just looking around at the beautifully maintained grounds. Someone really believed that they should honor those before them.

"I think I got turned around," she said, staring at him. "I was with Matthew in the maze and then couldn't figure out where I was or where to go."

"I can get you back to your cottage. Dinner is at six, and you don't want to miss that. It's always a big affair here." Chief guided her toward her own cottage and stepped up onto the porch with her.

"Would you like to come in and wait while I change?" she asked.

"Yea, sure," he smiled.

Rachel walked back to the bedroom, and he could hear her moving around the room, changing out of her suit. He wished he was the kind of man that watched from the doorway unasked, but he wasn't.

As she walked out of the bedroom, she was still buttoning her cotton blouse. Chief stared at her, smirking. Those breasts of hers were spectacular. Not too large, not too

small. Perfectly round. The black hair falling over her shoulders was wavy from being up in a bun all day. Her big blue eyes looked up to meet his own hazel ones.

“Like what you see, big guy?” she smiled.

“Actually, I do,” he grinned. Rachel stepped forward, placing a hand on his shoulder. She stood on her toes, her mouth just a breath from his.

“Maybe you should do something about it?”

“Maybe I will,” he said, gripping her neck. He slammed his mouth to hers, covering her lips. As their tongues tangled, tasting one another, he gripped her ass and thrust his hips into hers. When Rachel felt the thick, hard cock, she gasped and pulled back.

“Don’t be afraid. I don’t bite,” he grinned. Rachel laughed, shaking her head.

“That might be, big boy, but I realize that we might be working together. This could be career suicide before I even get my career started.” Chief smiled at her again. “What? What’s so funny?”

“If you haven’t noticed, all of our couples work together here. It’s not frowned upon at all.”

“Well, for my own sanity, let’s just go to dinner right now. I’ll think about how that anaconda can help me later.”

“Always happy to help,” smirked Chief. “Let’s eat.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Over the next two days, Rachel was in and out of interviews with the team, including Noelle. The woman was a plethora of information regarding the soil and plants growing at Belle Fleur. Rachel knew what her answer would be if she was offered the job. She just had to wait until after Thanksgiving for the final interview with the leadership team.

Thanksgiving was chaotic and crazy, young men arriving in their uniforms, obviously home on leave. She met Chase Green, the son of Tango and Taylor. And then the incredibly handsome AJ Mills, Ace and Charlie's son. Ty, HG, and Benji O'Neal, sons to Eagle and Tinley, walked in the door in their Marine Corps uniforms, looking like poster-boys for a recruiting office.

“Man, my girlfriends back home would be having a field day if they were here,” she whispered to Stormy. Her friend nodded, smiling.

“I know. I thought the same thing. The thing is, they're all good-looking, but they're beautiful human beings on the inside, Rach.” She smiled at her friend and nodded. When another young man walked in the door, she watched as

his parents rose, hugging him fiercely, followed by at least another twenty.

“Who is that?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” said Stormy. Raven leaned over and whispered.

“That’s Corey, Cait and Axel’s son. He has Down syndrome, but he’s highly functioning. He lives in Amsterdam and teaches at a school for kids with special needs. He has a master’s degree and speaks three languages.”

“Wow, that’s incredible,” said Rachel. “What an amazing story!”

“He’s so lovely and sweet. That’s his girlfriend, Miranda. They don’t want to get married, and they don’t want to have children, knowing that they both carry the gene. But they’re incredibly happy, and Cait and Axel are ecstatic for them.”

“This is just an amazing group of people,” said Rachel, shaking her head. “I’ve never seen so many people in one place that get along and care for one another.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” smirked Antoine as he walked by their table.

Irene and Matthew stood at the front of the room with George, Mary, Ruby, and Sven. The ‘true’ senior members of the family smiled at everyone.

“Happy Thanksgiving, my babies,” said Irene. A chorus of ‘happy Thanksgiving’ flooded her, and she laughed, shaking her head.

“Y’all only have to indulge us a few times of year. This is one of them. We have much to be grateful for this year. New members, new wives, new babies, new adventures. We have made it another year around the sun to say thanks.

“I am reminded in these moments of how fortunate we are. Had I walked a different way to the coffee shop that morning, I might not have met Irene. Had she decided to stay home from the bake sale, she wouldn’t have met Ruby. Had we not trusted that our children would come home where they belong, we wouldn’t have any of what you see here. I am reminded and thank God every day for our blessings.

“Now, we get to celebrate another union this weekend. Jalen and Stormy, you are part of this family, and we love that you are. You are our children, and we will always be here for you. Stormy, I’m sorry that your parents won’t be coming, but

you do need to choose someone to walk you down the aisle.”

Matthew stared at the young woman, grinning at her.

“Oh,” she mouthed. “I didn’t think about that.”

Standing, she looked around the room, then walked to Matthew, whispering in his ear.

“Yes, that’s fine, child.”

“Raphael? Baptiste? Will you walk me down the aisle?” They both stood, smiling at the young woman. “You protected me in Iran while the others were gone. I won’t ever forget that. Will you? Please?”

“Our honor,” they said in unison. She hugged them both as the room erupted in applause.

“Alright then, that’s taken care of,” said Irene. “Now, if you’ll bow your heads, George is going to give us a little prayer of thanks.”

“Bow your heads,” said George, nodding at the group. “God, thank you for bringing us together today. While it’s sometimes hard to make time to be together, we pray you will help us to enjoy these next few hours as a family. We are reminded that today is about relationships, not just a meal, but the people you have brought together. Help us to enjoy the

laughter, conversations, and memories we make on this day. Thank you also for the hands that have prepared the meal, and we pray the energy we receive from it will empower us to do what is pleasing to you and speak your love, grace, and mercy to others. We pray for those that cannot be with us today. For all the blessings you have given us and those yet to come. We thank you. Amen.”

“Amen!”

For Rachel, there was more food than she'd seen in her entire life. The laughter was so heavy, so joyous, she thought she was in some sort of sappy movie. As the meal ended, outdoor games and activities began. She watched the children play their games, then the adults acted like children.

Matthew and George started a few bonfires, and crowds gathered to keep warm. When she reached for another apple cider, Chief smiled at her.

“You do know that those have alcohol in them, right?” he smirked.

“What? No, I didn't know that! Shit, I've had like five of them.” He took the cup from her and replaced it with a hot cup of coffee.

“It’s always best to ask around here. Would you like to walk toward the water? It’s a beautiful night.”

“Sure,” she smiled. Sipping the coffee as they walked, Chief told her about his own parents.

“I met your father. He was wonderful.”

“He’s a great man,” smiled Chief. “My dad was a Navy SEAL as well. He taught me about right and wrong, treating women with respect, and helping others. My mom is just as great. I’m very lucky to have them.”

“I think you’re all lucky,” smiled Rachel. “I was raised in a smaller community. I had my parents, but we didn’t really have a lot of close friends. This is like something you were craving and didn’t even know it.” Chief laughed, nodding his head.

“Yea, they’re definitely all special people. Listen, Rachel, we haven’t had much chance to speak since the other night. That was a helluva kiss, and I’d sure like another chance at one.”

“I know, it was amazing,” she said, turning to stare up at him. “I guess I’m just worried about all of this. I mean, if you go back to the SEAL teams, will I be sitting here waiting?”

If you don't, will this all get in the way of us working together?"

"I think we don't know until we try," he said, reaching for her.

"Shouldn't we know what we want out of life? I mean, do you want kids? Five? Ten?"

"No," he laughed. "I think it might be a little early to talk about kids. Let's just get to know one another and go from there."

"Alright," she said, staring up at him. "Maybe you should walk me back to my cottage."

"Maybe I should."

Chief took his time, strolling past the other cottages, the nip in the air already creating a fine layer of frost on the plants. Stepping through her door, she set the coffee mug down and then kicked off her shoes. He did the same, leaving them at the door.

Rachel walked toward him, grabbed his hand, and pulled him toward the bedroom. She wasn't shy about going after what she wanted, and right now, all she could think about was that hard ridge in his pants.

Pulling the sweater over her head, she shoved her dress pants down and stood in front of him in just her panties and bra. They weren't anything special, just a soft lilac color. No lace, no flowers. But the way they hugged her curves and glowed against her skin made him nearly howl.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," he growled. He tossed his shirt on the chair and pushed his own pants down. When Rachel saw his thick, long cock, she nearly ran into the other room.

"Now, that is beautiful," she smiled.

He could only laugh, kissing her and backing her up to the bed as they went. Reaching down, he gripped her ass cheeks and lifted her onto the mattress. Fishing a condom out of his pocket, he wrapped up and then knelt between her legs.

"Slow and steady, gorgeous," he said, looking down at her. Inch by inch, he pressed forward, filling Rachel like no man had done in her life. When he started rocking his hips into her own, she met him with equal thrust and excitement.

"Holy shit, you're really good at this," she whispered. He shook his head, bending to kiss.

"No, I'm good at this with you."

They went all night, barely stopping for a drink of water and bathroom breaks. When the clock said 0410, they both agreed they needed sleep. But every time she rolled over and felt his body, she was rubbing her own against him.

Sleeping in at Belle Fleur was not an option. Chief was up to run with the others, feeling the effects of the night before. When he returned, she was showered and changed, already having her first cup of coffee. He bent, kissing her.

“Last night was perfect,” he murmured against her lips.

“It absolutely was,” she nodded. “I’m headed out to do some things with Stormy. I’ll see you later.” She left the cottage, and Chief stood there, staring at her back as she walked down the steps of the porch.

“What the fuck was that?”

CHAPTER SIX

“I saw you take a moonlight walk with Chief last night,” smiled Stormy. “He’s a beautiful man.”

“Oh, yea,” she said, waving it off. “I mean, we’re just friends.”

“Rachel,” said Stormy, eyeing her girlfriend, “it’s alright to have feelings for Chief. There are no rules here about dating one another or marrying one another, obviously. I know you’ve had some shitty dates in the past, but don’t lump him into that group. It’s not fair.”

“I’m not lumping anything, Stormy. He’ll go back to the SEAL teams or stay. I don’t care. We’re just having a good time.”

“And you don’t think that will be awkward if you take the job?” Rachel opened her mouth, then closed it. “I mean, you two have your ‘fun,’ and then he comes home to work full-time with the team. What will that feel like?”

“Look, I don’t know. Let’s just get through the wedding.”

Rachel did everything she could to avoid Chief over the next twenty-four hours. But when the wedding festivities were done and the dancing began, she couldn't help but be sucked in by his handsome face and gorgeous body. When he asked her to dance the first time, she told herself only once.

When it was the tenth dance in a row, she knew she was in trouble. The problem was he wasn't just handsome. He was a great dancer. He smelled good. He was polite, and the way he held her made her feel unlike any man had.

“Maybe we should go back to the cottage,” he grinned.

“I don't know, Chief. I mean, I think we're on different paths. I'm a couple of years older than you. We want different things.”

“We haven't discussed the things we want, Rachel. And you're two years old than me, not twenty,” he grinned. “We're good together. Perfect together, in fact.”

She cursed herself with every step she took toward the cottage. She wanted his body like most women want chocolate. Her ovaries were screaming at her to take this man to bed and take everything she wanted from him.

Then she remembered her conversation with Stormy. He was a good guy. A very good guy. Yes, she'd had her fair share of assholes, but this guy genuinely appeared to be a good one. Why? Why did this have to happen now?

Thinking about it the entire way, she finally gave in to her own urges. She would do her final interviews Sunday morning and make her decision.

If Rachel thought their last few nights of hot, steamy sex were off the charts, this night was epic. They barely made it to the bed. When they rolled off the bed, they did it on the floor. When they were done there, they were in the shower. When she went to get a snack from the kitchen, they did it on the countertop.

She could not get her fill of him. Well, figuratively.



Oh, shit. Oh, shit, oh shit, oh shit, repeated Eric Ryan in his head. He looked at the woman next to him, her naked body stretched out on the bed. She was a friend of Stormy's, but she was also interviewing with the company for a role. He already knew all of that. None of that bothered him. What

bothered him was that he wasn't sure he'd used condoms every time last night.

“Fuck,” he muttered. She rolled over, staring at him.

“Take it easy, stud. We were both drunk. It doesn't mean anything,” she said, sitting up. She looked at the floor and felt better seeing empty condom wrappers. Standing, she walked to the bathroom, and he could hear her taking a shower.

“It doesn't mean anything,” he mumbled. “What the fuck? It means something to me.”

A few minutes later, she appeared freshly showered and pulled on her dress and heels from the night before. She looked around the room, and he frowned at her.

“If you find my panties, let me know. I gotta run, but it was fun. Be safe, or whatever, if you're going back to the SEALs.”

“Wait, did we talk about that last night?” he asked.

“We talked about everything,” she smiled. “And in case you forgot, you do have a magnificent dick. Congratulations.”

His mouth dropped open as she left the bedroom, and he heard the front door slam. He remembered almost nothing except dancing with her. They'd eaten dinner together, had a few drinks, then a few more. Then there were the shots. Shit. He remembered taking that damn dress off her body and removing the thong with his teeth.

He looked up at the ceiling fan. Oh, yea, that's where that went. Son-of-a-bitch.

She might be working here. At RP. With him. And he was more than happy about that. As the memories flooded back, he remembered talking to her about returning to the SEAL teams or maybe staying here at RP. He told her things he'd never told anyone, and she acted as though it meant nothing. She asked again about having kids, and he didn't remember his response. He thought everything was going beautifully.

What the fuck?

A few days later, after not having seen Rachel, Chief learned that she had accepted the job and was moving here full-time. He was thrilled as shit but also confused. What the hell happened? They'd been building up to the night of the

wedding. Their chemistry was off the charts, and he just wanted her to know that he was serious about her.

When he had to return to his unit to make his decision on his contract, it was the easiest decision ever. He wanted to go home. With a buildup of vacation time and sick leave, he signed off, gathered his things, and returned to Belle Fleur within a week.

After he put his things back in his cottage, he walked toward the offices, only to be bombarded by a conversation between Stormy and the others.

“I don’t know why she left,” said Stormy. “She said this job wasn’t right for her, and she didn’t feel as though she were making a difference. I tried calling her several times, but she won’t take my calls.”

“Something is wrong,” said Cam. “Eric Ryan? Did something happen between the two of you?”

“What? No,” he said emphatically. The entire room stared at him, including his father and brother. “What? Nothing happened between the two of us.”

“Go check her cottage,” said Luke.

Fuck. Muttering to himself the entire way, Eric Ryan made his way out to the cottage. He knocked, just in case she'd returned, but no one answered. The door was unlocked, everything was left exactly as it was. The dishes were done, blankets were folded, and the lights were off.

Walking from room to room, he searched drawers and closets, hoping to find something that would tell them all where she'd gone. He finally remembered everything from the night of the wedding, and when he did, he confronted her, wanting more. But she avoided him constantly, saying she had to take a call or attend a meeting.

The problem was, she wasn't sure she wanted him. He couldn't figure it out. He was a good-looking guy, physically fit, intelligent, didn't smell. What the hell was wrong with him? They'd had a few conversations about family and what they wanted for their futures, but nothing earth-shattering, and certainly nothing that should have made her run.

He checked the bathroom cabinets and didn't find anything so much as a facial cream or cleanser. Not even a feminine product. Turning to leave, something caught his eye in the wastebasket. He stood staring down, his heart beating against his chest.

“No,” he whispered. “No, it can’t be.” He held up the urine stick and swallowed, seeing the double plus signs. She was pregnant. Son-of-a-bitch. She was pregnant, and she was on the run.

Taking off out the door of the cottage, he ran into the offices.

“Hey! Did you find out anything?” asked Cam.

“Yes. Ace? Did you give a tracker to Rachel?” he asked the man.

“Yea. Let me see if she still has it on.” He tapped the keys and then turned to face Chief. “She’s at the Marriott downtown. Looks like the seventeenth floor.”

“I’ll be back.”

“Wait! What the fuck is happening?” asked Cam.

“I’m going to get Rachel, and we’re going to be married.” He took off like a bat out of hell, and they all just stared at one another.

“Did he say married?” repeated Stormy. Cam smiled at the young woman, nodding.

“Yep, that’s what he said.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rachel wiped her eyes one more time, shaking her head. Why now? Why did this have to happen now? The doctor tapped her knee and told her to push back.

“So, it took? The embryo?” she asked.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ve spoken with your doctor back home. Your embryo and the sperm donor didn’t take. You’re pregnant, but not by artificial means.”

“Wh-what? That’s not possible. I was told...”

“Ms. Davis, sometimes it just takes one time with the right partner. You wanted this, right? You wanted to have a child?” he asked. She nodded, her lip trembling. “Then congratulations. You’re going to be a mother.”

Fuck. She was pregnant. And she wasn’t pregnant the way she’d been planning for months. She was pregnant thanks to that big sex stick at Belle Fleur. Shit! She’d left this morning, not saying anything to anyone. When she checked in at the Marriott, she called her OB/GYN and asked for a referral to someone local as quickly as possible. He got her in right away, and after two hours of bloodwork, ultrasounds, and examinations, it was confirmed.

“Yep. I’m pregnant.”

She shook her head as the valet took her car, and she walked through the lobby. It was a massive hotel, and with the holidays so close, people were moving about shopping and happy. Just as she reached the elevator, someone grabbed her hand.

“You’re not having this baby without me,” said the sexy voice. Rachel turned, swallowing hard, tears filling her eyes.

“You don’t understand.”

“I understand that you got scared and you ran, but you’re not doing this without me. It is mine, right?” She nodded, almost pissed that he asked, but then again, he had a right.

“Please, I can’t do this here. Can we go up to my room?” He nodded.

“As long as when we’re done, you pack your shit and come home where you belong,” he grinned. Rachel just shook her head as he pressed floor seventeen.

“How did you know what floor I was on?” He raised a brow, a knowing smirk on his face, and she could only laugh.

Settled in her room, she took a seat on the sofa, and he sat across from her, not wanting her to feel uncomfortable.

“I need you to listen to the whole story, Chief. Okay?” He nodded, respecting her wishes. “I’ve always wanted to be a mother. Always. I love my work, but I want kids too. A few years ago, my OB/GYN said that if I didn’t freeze my eggs and use them soon, I wouldn’t be able to bear children. I was crushed. I wasn’t dating anyone, and I damn sure didn’t want to have a baby with someone I didn’t care for.

“I have a rare condition that eats away at my ovaries. Eventually, it will spread to my uterus. Right now, it’s good.”

“I’m so damn sorry, honey.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, “it’s okay. Before I came down here, I used the last of my implants with a sperm donor.”

“Wait...”

“Nope, stop. It didn’t take. I saw the doctor this morning. I thought it had, but he said it wasn’t the implant. It was by a natural occurrence.” She shook her head, tears coming freely now. “I thought you were using condoms, Chief.”

“I was,” he said, kneeling in front of her. “The night of the wedding, we were going at it pretty heavy. I had a few too many to drink, and so did you. Once my head cleared, I remembered our conversations and the number of times we had sex. I had four condom wrappers on the floor, but we did it...”

“Seven times,” she smiled. “I remember. Chief, I can’t do this to you. You said you didn’t want children.”

“What? When the fuck did I say that?”

“The night we were walking. I asked if you wanted children. Five? Ten? And you said no. Then the morning after the wedding, you said ‘fuck’ like you were mad at yourself.”

“I said no to ten, baby. I want kids. As many as we can have. If this is the only one, fine. If there are more, great. And I said ‘fuck’ because I had a headache and couldn’t remember everything. Is that why you ran?” She nodded.

“I’m so sorry. I thought you didn’t want kids, and then I thought about how hard it would be to see you every day knowing that I had a baby that wasn’t yours, or so I thought. At the time I wasn’t sure that it was yours. Chief, we just met. We’ve known one another three weeks today.”

“Three weeks, three months, three years. It doesn’t matter, Rachel. I’m crazy about you, honey. I would tell you that I love you, but I’m worried you might run again.” She laughed, shaking her head.

“I think I might need to hear that if you really mean it.”

“I really mean it, baby. I’ve been crazy about you since I picked you up at the airport. Seems like Stormy and Jalen’s luck rubbed off on us.”

“Oh, God, what will your parents think?” she asked.

“My mother is going to go fucking bananas buying baby clothes. My dad, he’s going to love being a grandfather. And me? I’m going to hold you every night and make sure that you and our child are well taken care of, healthy, and happy.” He pulled her toward him, standing to hug her and hold her. “I love you, Rachel. I know it might feel fast, but I do. I’m done with the teams. I’m permanently a member of RP now, and so are you.”

“Really? You’re done?” she asked with a shocked expression.

“I’m done. That’s why I was gone. I wanted to get everything finished and return to you. Now, what do you say

we get you back to Belle Fleur and let Gray take a look at you. I know you just saw a doctor, but it would make me feel better if you did.”

“Alright,” she nodded. “Are you sure?”

“Baby, I should be asking you if you’re sure. So many times, you just left abruptly. What was that all about?”

“Oh, Chief. I’m sorry. I was so used to men dumping me that I just figured it would be easier if I pretended I wasn’t attached. I’m sorry.”

“Not again,” he smirked, kissing her sweetly. “From now on, you and me and this little one. Together.”

“Agreed,” she laughed. “Now, will you please take me home? I have a terrible craving for banana cream pie.”

“Banana cream pie for my baby.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chief opened the car door for Rachel, taking her hand and pulling her to him. He kissed the top of her head, then gave her a wink as they walked toward the cafeteria. It was already dinner time, and everyone was enjoying their meal, but he also knew they were waiting for their return.

Outside the cafeteria, his mother and father waited patiently.

“Mom? Dad? Rachel and I will be getting married as soon as possible. You’re going to be grandparents,” he grinned. Rachel held her breath, literally shaking, as tears filled her eyes.

“Oh, my sweet, sweet girl,” said Grace. “Did you think we’d be upset?”

“I didn’t know,” she said with a shuddering cry. Grace pulled her in for a hug, rubbing her back gently.

“We are thrilled, Rachel. Ghost and I want to get to know you better, but we are so very happy for you and Eric Ryan. You’re going to have beautiful babies.”

“Mom,” said Chief, shaking his head. “This might be the only one.” Grace looked at Rachel, who was already on the brink of a solid breakdown.

“Honey, I’m so sorry,” she said, holding her again. “One or twenty-one, I’ll love them all.”

Rachel looked at the fierce expression on Ghost’s face. He removed his trademark sunglasses, tears in his eyes. His features softened, and he looked at Eric Ryan, smiling, then down at Rachel.

“I’m so glad you came home,” he said simply, then pulled her in for a hug.

“You’re all so wonderful,” she sniffed. “Thank you for understanding. I swear this wasn’t planned. I mean, I had no idea it would happen so fast.”

“You’ll find that surprises are the norm around here,” smiled Grace. “Do you need to be checked by Gray?”

“I think we can wait until tomorrow,” she said. “I saw a doctor in New Orleans, and he said everything was okay. It’s a long story. Maybe I could tell you over dinner.”

Rachel told her story to Grace and Ghost, both understanding her need to be a mother. Grace never thought

she'd get her second chance, and when it came, she was thrilled. Ghost never believed he'd have children at all, so to have two boys was like a gift.

As the others came toward them, congratulating the couple and welcoming Rachel back, Stormy hugged her friend.

"I told you this was where you needed to be," she smiled.

"Am I going to get the 'I told you so' speech for the next fifty years," she laughed.

"Probably longer, but you'll love me for it." She hugged her friend, nodding.

"You're right. I will love you for it. Thank you, Stormy. Thank you for bringing me here and convincing me of what I already knew. Chief is a great guy, and I'm lucky to have him."

"Not as lucky as I am to have you," he said from behind her. He rested his hands around her waist, laying his palms on her still-flat stomach. "I can't wait until this is swollen with our child."

Rachel just shook her head again. How did she get so lucky? How in the world was this possible? The best thing to do was not question it all.

Despite her pleading for sex that night, Chief refused, instead giving her pleasure with his tongue. He said he wouldn't do it unless Gray said it was okay.

The following morning, Gray did an examination and followed up with more blood work of her own. Everything seemed normal and on track. With just four weeks until Christmas, she needed to get started on the analysis of the Christmas plants at Belle Fleur.

In Noelle's hothouse, she had Christmas cacti, Christmas heliconia, poinsettias, cyclamen, phalaenopsis orchids, and even guzmanias. The colors were spectacular, and they were flourishing in the warmth of the building.

"This is like stepping back in time," whispered Rachel.

"I know," nodded Noelle. "I've always helped with the holiday decorations here at Belle Fleur since I was a little girl. When I met my husband, Zeke, at Christmas time here, I never dreamed I'd be living here doing all this full-time."

“Some of these plants, as you know, are rare and endangered. Yet, they thrive here, and I can regrow them every year. We’ve shipped some to other sites, and they do alright, although none of them have the success that we do.”

“What do you add to the soil?” asked Rachel. Noelle smiled at the other woman.

“Nothing.” Rachel’s mouth opened, and she shook her head. “I water them with water from the bayous, not even filtered. I think the combination of fish remains, the helpful bacteria, and this magical soil all make them grow like crazy.”

“Well, I’m headed out to G.R.I.P. to look at some of the soil samples they’ve brought in. I want to see if there’s anything we can do to help with erosion in the area. It’s tough to tackle, but I feel as though this place might have a magical spell surrounding it.”

Noelle gave a nervous laugh, nodding her head. A big Native American walked in the door and headed straight for them. At first, Rachel was nervous, but when he grabbed Noelle, kissing her soundly, she knew it was all okay.

“Hi, baby,” smiled Noelle. “Rachel? This is my husband Zeke Wolfkill. Zeke, our newest member, Rachel.”

“Yes, I saw her at the meetings last week. I’m here to take you out to G.R.I.P. Are you feeling alright? Any sickness?”

“Nothing,” she smiled. “An insane craving for banana cream pie, but that’s it.”

“Well, let’s get you out there, and we’ll come back here for dinner.” He kissed Noelle again, winking at her as they walked toward the docks. Zeke smiled as Julia and Noah came toward them.

“Good morning, Zeke,” said Noah stoically. “Hello, Rachel. Are you well this morning?”

“Yes, thank you. I’m feeling well.” Rachel watched as the other young woman stared at her, then looked down at her stomach. She looked up at the other man, Noah, then looked behind her but said nothing.

“Is everything okay?” asked Rachel.

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry,” said Julia. “I get distracted sometimes by the littlest things.”

“Have a lovely day, Rachel,” said Noah. “We’ll see you at dinner.” Rachel nodded, walking toward the boats with Zeke. When she was gone, Julia smiled up at her friend.

“Holy cow.”

“Yes, indeed,” smirked Noah. “I’m going to guess that it has not been detected on the early tests. This will be joyous but also dangerous.”

“I think I should give Gray a heads up,” said Julia. “She might want to do more tests on her just to confirm that we’re right.”

“I’m never wrong,” said Martha.

“Me neither,” said Franklin. Julia frowned at the group, then at Noah.

“You are wrong sometimes,” she said quietly.

“Not about babies,” grinned Franklin. “We’re never wrong about babies. I’m gonna have to haunt this place for all eternity. This is gettin’ real interestin’.”

“Alright, my sweet specters,” smiled Julia. “You’re always right. About babies. Noah, have you checked on Claudette lately? She’s out there with a whole new crew, and I’m hoping she’s behaving herself.”

“She shows herself to everyone now that she is aware of who we are. She feels comfortable with that, and I like that

she has company out there,” said Noah. “Let’s go pay her a visit.”

Noah led Julia to the small boat, and they went out to the island mansion to check on things there. Since the island had been expanded, the grounds were beautifully maintained and manicured. The English gardens were back to their glory, and the house was repaired, painted, and looking better than the day it was built.

Milo and Torro were both staying at the mansion, loving the solitude and bachelor life. They enjoyed their visits with Claudette, although had to caution the ghostly teenager that it wasn’t alright for her to watch them get undressed or bathe. She saw no harm in watching them, and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

In the end, they tried to dress as quickly as possible and hoped she would give them their privacy.

Noah helped Julia off the boat, lifting her easily and setting her on the dock. As they walked, he was careful to always be by her side in case she fell. She wasn’t sick, she wasn’t pregnant, she wasn’t a clumsy girl. He, however, was an extremely protective male.

“Oh, no,” whispered Julia. “Something is wrong.”

Lying on the porch was the form of Claudette. It was unusual for many reasons. One was that ghosts did not sleep. Ever. Two was that she looked paler than usual. And three there was an odor coming from the house that they'd never smelled before.

"Is that gas?" she asked Noah.

"No, it's not gas."

"Claudette? Claudette? Are you alright?" asked Julia.

"I don't feel well," she said, pushing herself upward.

"The ground is sick, and it's making me not feel well."

"The ground?" asked Noah. "Do you mean the family burial plot here? Is something there making you feel sick?" She shook her head.

"No, something in the ground is making me sick. It's going to spread."

"Okay," said Julia. "We recently brought someone onto the team and will call her to come over here."

"No," said Noah. "Let's take some soil samples and see what she finds. If there is something on the island making her sick, we do not want her exposed right now."

Julia nodded as Noah gathered several samples from around the island. When they were done, they tried to see if they could get Claudette onto the boat. But whatever was holding her to the island would not let her cross the water.

“It’s alright,” she grinned. “I’m already dead. It shouldn’t be affecting me. Perhaps it’s just warning me.”
Julia smiled at the young girl, nodding.

“We’ll figure it out, Claudette. I promise.”

CHAPTER NINE

“This equipment is better than anything I’ve ever seen,” said Rachel, touching the testing machines.

“Matthew said to buy the best, so we bought the best,” said Ryan.

Rachel stared at the man with the prosthetic arm. She’d been talking to him for nearly two hours now. He was extraordinarily intelligent and very good-looking. She knew that he and Paige were married but wondered about the arm.

“It’s not so bad,” said Ryan, looking down at his arm.

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to stare. I was just impressed that it doesn’t seem to stop you from doing anything you want.”

“I wasn’t always like this,” he grinned. “My aunt saved me from an addict mother. Unfortunately for her, traffickers didn’t care that my mother was gone. They wanted their money. They took me and Aunt Ella and were auctioning us off.”

“Holy shit,” whispered Rachel.

“Dad, Antoine, he and the others rescued us. I was only nine at the time, but I was really little for my age. Underfed, under stimulated, under everything. Antoine and Ella adopted me and gave me an amazing life, but one I didn’t always appreciate.

“I started to get into gambling and then drugs. When I found myself in deep shit with a terrorist and trafficker, it came full circle. To get me to tell them where they were, they cut my arm off.”

“Oh, God, Ryan, I’m so sorry,” she said, grabbing her stomach.

“Don’t be,” he smiled. “Losing my arm made me realize all that I had within my reach. The people who had loved me no matter what. The person that came to visit me the entire time I was in rehab was Paige. I’ve always loved her but committing to me in that way was unbelievable. She fought with me, for me, the entire time. She helped me to get in shape again and gave me the chance I thought I’d never have. A chance at a family.

“Now we have Danny, and we’re lucky enough to work together every day. She’s the most beautiful woman I know. Not once has she ever looked at me with pity. Not

once has she ever looked at my stump and cringed. I will never again be ungrateful for what was placed in front of me, Rachel.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” she asked quietly.

“Because I don’t want you to be ungrateful either.” He held up his hands as she started to speak. “I’m not saying you are. I’m saying that I can tell you’re not sure of Chief’s commitment to you. It feels fast. It feels rushed. What if he loves you only because of the baby?”

“How did you know?”

“Let’s just say we all seem to know everything here,” he chuckled. “He loves you, Rachel. Don’t doubt that. You two have the opportunity to create a life here that will be unlike anything you’ve ever dreamed.”

“I know that in my heart. It’s my head that’s having trouble catching up,” she smiled.

“Time to head home,” said Zeke.

Doug was smiling at his team, giving them a wave to check out. After the incidences years ago, no one stayed on the island after 1630 in the afternoon during winter or 1800 in

the summer. When they left, they left in pairs. No one went out alone or came back alone.

Nowadays, one of the guards would usually ride in the boats with them. As Zeke helped Rachel into their boat, Torro and Milo got everyone loaded into the larger vessel.

Following one another back to the mainland, they were happy to be home. When thunder cracked above them, they realized this could be a storm that would keep them away from G.R.I.P. for a few days.

Chief came running toward them with an umbrella, tucking Rachel under his arm. He handed another umbrella to Zeke while JT gave umbrellas to the others. Walking past the first row of houses, Rachel smiled at the big man, Skull, and his wife, Avery. She was sitting on his lap as they playfully kissed one another.

“They’re really in love,” she smiled. Chief nodded.

“Yep. Mama Irene would tell you that Avery was put in his path for a reason. Those two are almost as bad as Tailor and Lena, always needing to touch one another.”

“I don’t think that’s a bad thing,” she smiled, wrapping her arms around his waist. Chief kissed her, smiling down at his girl.

“Neither do I, baby. Neither do I.”

When they walked into the cafeteria for dinner, Gray was talking to Julia and Noah. Her eyes went wide, then she nodded, nibbling on her lips. She turned to see Rachel and Chief walk in and smiled at them.

“When do you see Gray again?” asked Chief.

“She asked me to come by the office tomorrow morning. I’m not sure why. Something about some additional tests. I mean, I’m only four weeks along. I’m not sure how many tests you can do.”

“Christmas is almost here,” smiled Chief. “My favorite time of year. What do you want Santa to bring you this year?”

“I think Santa has brought me enough,” she laughed. “I’ve found a man that I love and who loves me. I’m going to have a baby. I have a career that’s like a dream job. I’m not sure what else I could possibly ask for.”

“Ask for it all, and I’ll get it for you,” he said, kissing her sweetly.

“Oh, Chief. Eric Ryan, why do you have to be so perfect? It makes it feel less real,” she laughed.

“Less real? So, if I treated you like an asshole, you’d think it was more real?” he frowned.

“Well, that’s just what I’m used to.”

“Explain.”

“Well, I – uh, what I mean is that men never wanted to know the real me. They wanted the physical me. Once they got that, they were done.”

“Then you were choosing the wrong men,” said Chief.

“Obviously,” smirked Rachel. “What I mean is that they wanted the hot sex or the mystery, but once they figured out that I was the nerdy girl who played in dirt, they were gone.”

“Their loss, my gain. I’m not those men, Rach. I’m me. I love everything about you. Your brain, your body, those fucking beautiful breasts.” He groaned, adjusting himself in his seat. Rachel couldn’t help but giggle. “I like it all, and you are the woman I’ve been waiting for.”

“I called my parents,” she said quietly. “I asked if they could come down for a Christmas wedding.”

“And?” he smiled.

“They said yes. They’ll be here two days before Christmas. Mama Irene is planning everything for Christmas morning at eleven. Is that okay?”

“I can’t think of anything more perfect.” As Gray and Lena walked toward the couple, they both smiled.

“Don’t forget your appointment in the morning, Rachel. Eric Ryan, you’ll want to be there as well.” He kissed Rachel, nodding.

“Nowhere else to be.”

“That’s what you say now,” smirked Lena. Gray nudged her. “I mean, I’m glad you’re supporting her. It’s important.”

“See you both tomorrow.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Chief! Chief!” yelled Wilson, slapping his face.

“Eric Ryan, wake your ass up and get off the floor, or I’m going to give you a shot you won’t forget,” said Lena.

Chief sat up, Wilson pulling him off the floor. He’d hit his head, and a goose egg was developing, giving him a fucking headache. Rachel was crying, and he couldn’t remember why. Then it was clear as day. He stared at the monitor and started to sway again.

“Oh, no. Fuck no. You’re not falling on me again,” said Wilson, shoving the chair behind his legs. “You’re a deceptively heavy bastard.”

“Chief, what are we going to do?” cried Rachel.

“What do you mean, what are we going to do? We’re going to be parents, Rach,” he smiled. Realizing that she needed him to be strong. To hold her and let her know all would be well, he stood and sat on the edge of the bed, holding her.

“How is this possible?” she cried.

“They’re all yours, Rachel,” said Gray, smiling at the woman. “We can see the failed attempt at your last egg and donor. What remains are four very healthy babies.”

“Four,” she whispered.

“It’s extraordinarily rare, Rachel. I’ve only read of a few cases of spontaneous quadruplets. The other thing you need to know...”

“Oh, shit. Please don’t tell me one could be hiding,” said Chief.

“No,” she laughed. “Four is the number. But they’re all in the same sac. They’re identical. We’ve run every diagnostic test we possibly can to ensure that they’re healthy. Do you want to know the sex?”

“Yes,” said Rachel, looking at Chief. He nodded, and she grinned. “I’m a planner. I need to know. Four. God, how will we feed four?”

“I think you’re gonna be just fine,” laughed Lena.
“Take a look around you, honey.”

“Right. Okay, the sex.”

“You’ve got four girls. Four beautiful, identical girls.”

“Fuck me,” whispered Chief. “This is the universe’s way of getting back at me, isn’t it? I’m paying for all the evil shit every one of my friends did to girls. My brother. JT. He went through women like underwear the first few years in the SEALs. He’s the one that caused this.”

“I don’t think your brother caused us to have quads,” smirked Rachel. She grabbed his hand, turning him to look at her. “I thought this would be the only one, but I’m getting four, Chief. Four with the man I love.” He nodded, kissing her sweetly.

“Now, listen to me, both of you. You’re a healthy young woman. I won’t lie to you. Carrying all four full-term will be very difficult. We’ll watch their growth, and then we’ll pick an appropriate time that’s safe for you and safe for the babies and deliver by c-section.

“There is a high probability with multiple births that you could lose one.” Rachel gasped, Chief holding her tightly to his side. “Wait. Wait a minute. I said there is a high probability, not a definite. You are going to need to get used to being off your feet and taking things slow. If someone offers to help you, let them. If you’re not feeling well, stay in bed. These first few months are critical. If we can get past month

four with all four babies, your chances go up. If we get past month six, we're doing great. If I can get you to week thirty-two or thirty-three, we're golden."

"But full-term is forty weeks," said Rachel.

"Honey, I'm well aware," smiled Gray. "We just need for you and the babies to be healthy. We have plenty of NICU beds here, and Kelsey is experienced at dealing with multiples and NICU babies. You are in great hands, Rachel."

"Okay. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure we have four healthy baby girls." She smiled up at Chief, who suddenly felt woozy again.

"Oh, damn, he's gonna faint again," said Wilson.

"No, no, I'm not," he said, shaking his head. "I just realized I'm going to have four daughters. Four. Four of everything. Four proms. Four homecomings. Four graduations. Four weddings." Wilson smirked at him, bending toward his ear.

"Four periods. All at once."

"Oh shit," muttered Chief.

"Look, I don't know what makes some people susceptible to multiples. We have enough of them around here

that we should be able to do a clinical study,” smiled Gray.
“Hell, Virginia and Wes have triplets. So do Kiel and Liz.
We’ve got twins everywhere.”

“Maybe it’s all these handsome, virile men,” smiled Rachel, winking at Chief, then giving a shy grin to Wilson.

“Oh, damn,” laughed Lena, “she’s already experiencing the pregnancy sex hormones. You need to start taking vitamins, big boy.”

“What?” gasped Chief. “No. Absolutely not. We are not having sex while she has my four daughters inside her.”

“First of all,” laughed Gray, “they don’t know what you’re doing. It’s not like they see your penis going into her. Second of all, for the next few weeks, I would agree, no penetration. But third, and most importantly, if she needs satisfaction, give it to her. Don’t deprive one another of love and affection. You need it right now, for you and the babies.”

“We need to tell your folks,” said Chief, looking at Rachel.

“We’ll tell them when they come at Christmas. Right now, we need to tell everyone else.” Gray looked at her watch and smiled.

“It’s lunchtime. Let’s go.”

Despite her protests, Chief lifted Rachel off the table and carried her to the ATV. He carefully buckled her in, then wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, blasting the heat at her face.

“Chief, I’m warm enough,” she smiled. “Please don’t be like this, or I’m going to go crazy. If I need something, I’ll tell you. I’m not even showing right now. It’s too early. I still don’t understand how she would know to do additional tests on me.”

“We have some very special people here,” smiled Chief. “Some of them have a sixth sense of what’s happening. I’m going to bet they said something.” He wasn’t prepared to tell her anything else, not yet. He was positive that either Noah or Julia heard from the ghostly caretakers that she was carrying multiples.

Pulling up to the cafeteria, the crowds were milling about as they came through the doors. Ghost walked toward his son and soon-to-be daughter-in-law, kissing her cheek.

“Hi. Everything good with Gray?” he asked.

“Actually,” smiled Rachel, “we have an announcement.” Ghost frowned, a concerned expression on his face.

“It’s all good, Dad,” said Chief. “Everyone! Everyone! Can we have your attention?” All eyes turned to look at the couple, and Eric Ryan looked down at Rachel, nodding.

“We’ve just come from seeing Gray...”

“Oh, shit, they’re having twins,” smirked Nathan. Rachel shook her head.

“It’s triplets,” laughed Kiel. She shook her head again, and he frowned.

“We’re having four. Quadruplets. All girls, God help me,” said Chief. “My girl is carrying four identical girls. F-four...” He stumbled back, and his father gripped his arms, pulling him upright. Zeke and Kiel were close and ran to hold him up as well. Rachel just shook her head, smiling.

“That’s the third time he’s done that,” she grinned. Ghost looked at the beautiful young girl, smiling. He removed those glasses once again, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“You’re making me a grandfather of an entire litter. All at once.” Rachel giggled, nodding at the big man. “Girls. I get to spoil and pamper four little girls all at once. Thank you.” She felt the big man’s arms wrap around her, then smaller arms, realizing that Grace was behind her.

When the applause and congratulations were done, they sat down, and suddenly, Rachel was very, very hungry. She ordered a toasted ham and cheese sandwich with extra pickles, then asked for two cookies and a salad with ketchup on it. Chief stared at Doc, and the man just laughed.

“Get her the damn salad,” he said.

After she finished the sandwich and the salad, she had a horrible craving for macaroni and cheese. George brought a small cast iron skillet with oven-baked mac and cheese. If it weren’t so hot, she’d have devoured it in minutes. When that was empty, she wanted another cookie and then a nap.

“Is she gonna eat like that the whole time?” Chief asked Doc.

“No, brother,” he laughed. “She’ll even out eventually. Right now, give her whatever her body is craving. She’s feeding four little humans through her own body, Chief. There’s nothing more miraculous than that.”

“Yea,” he grinned. “Miraculous.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rachel wasn't allowed to venture off anywhere on the property without someone beside her. If Chief wasn't available, they sent someone else. Sometimes, she just went for walks. Other times, she collected soil samples as well as plants.

The rain had begun and wasn't letting up. Wrapping up in a rain poncho and rain boots, she had Milo take her out to the edges of the property, where she could watch the erosion of the land happen in real-time.

The rain, coming down so hard and heavy, hit the soft earth causing it to simply wash away into the bayou.

"I'm not even sure what you're looking at," he smirked.

"Well, I'm trying to see how well the soil holds the water, then holds its position. The soil here is soft. It holds water well for growing, but it reaches a saturation point very quickly. I might be able to figure out a way for the soil to hold water longer and increase the absorption. If we could make that happen, the ground would be saturated, but it wouldn't wash away."

“I guess I’m slow,” said Milo. “I’m still confused.”

“Every state, every area of the country, of the world, has unique properties to its soil. Texas is known for having very dry soil to the west, but north-central Texas has a lot of clay. It gets saturated, and the water has nowhere to go. East and the Gulf Coast of Texas are low-lying areas, and the ground just isn’t capable of handling the heavy rains.

“If I look at a place like California, the earth is craving water, but the problem is that it comes few and far between, and when it comes, it comes in a deluge. It’s so much at one time the earth can’t handle it. Loose dirt, rock, and earth create mudslides and cause more problems.”

“Wow, I never gave it much thought,” said Milo.

“When I was on Garrett’s team, we spent a lot of time in South America, and the rain was a constant pain in our ass. The flooding, mudslides, all of it, were annoying as shit.”

“Yes,” laughed Rachel, “it is annoying and deadly. People don’t realize the power of water. When it’s carrying soil, dirt, homes, cars, you can only imagine the power it has.”

“We see it every time we watch a hurricane or tsunami, a flood, but I guess because we haven’t been in the middle of

it, we don't pay attention." Rachel nodded, kneeling to gather another soil sample.

"Hey! You're not supposed to be doing that," said Milo, gripping her elbow and making her stand. "What do you need me to do?"

"I just need you to gather another sample for me." She watched as he filled the glass jar and screwed on the lid. Sniffing, she looked around at the water surrounding them. "Do you smell that?"

"Yea," he nodded, frowning at her. "It smells like sulfur or some sort of gas."

"Are there any chemical plants around here?" she asked.

"It's south Louisiana. There are chemical plants everywhere," he smirked. "But I don't think there are any in the bayous around here. Most are along the Mississippi so that they have access to the ships. We can ask Matthew."

"There's something wrong," she said, looking around them. "This soil feels and behaves differently than the soil on the main property. You can see the island mansion from here, and it looks like it's holding too much water."

“That doesn’t make sense. It was reinforced with more sand, gravel, and landfill to expand it. We had engineers out here to make sure of it.” Milo stared at the water slowly rising and began to feel a sense of panic. “I need to get you out of here.”

“What? Why? I need more samples,” said Rachel.

“Nope. We’re leaving. Something is wrong, and I don’t know what it is. You need to study those samples, and we need to figure out what that odor is and where it’s coming from.”

Rachel wanted to argue but knew it would be pointless. Milo had been a SEAL for almost twelve years, and according to Garrett and Jalen, was one of the best they’d ever seen. At six-feet-three and two hundred and ten pounds, he was a lean man but possessed the physical power of a man twice his size.

“Will you tell me about you?” asked Rachel.

“Me? What do you want to know?” he asked.

“Well, I know that you were a SEAL on Garrett’s team, but what else? Where do you come from? What do your parents do for a living? All the good stuff,” she smiled.

“Well, my full name is Milo Theodore Abbott.”

Rachel smiled at him, nodding. “Theodore was my grandfather. He was an amazing man, and I loved spending time with him. My parents both worked full-time, so Grandpa would pick me up from school every day, and we would hang out in his garden or workshop. He taught me how to carve, how to fix a lawnmower, how to change the oil in my car. He was amazing.

“My folks, Christine and Del, were teachers at a Christian school in Mt. Cory, Ohio. Population three hundred and thirty-two.” Rachel laughed as he said the number proudly. “I loved my folks. They were great, but too much of anything can be bad.”

“Too much religion?” she asked.

“Yep. I was a good student, but I questioned things I didn’t understand. I learned early on not to question anything about the Bible or God with my parents. I could ask my grandpa, but not them. When Jalen and Stormy got married, I had a long conversation with his dad. He grabbed two beers, handed me one, and said, ‘let’s go for a walk.’

“He listened to all my questions, all my concerns, and never once said I was right or wrong. He always asked me

what I thought. He even said that he had his own questions about certain parts of the Bible. When I joined the military, my parents weren't exactly happy. They felt that I should be able to settle any dispute with God's words, not a weapon."

"But your grandfather understood, right?" she asked.

"He did, Rach. He came to my graduation from boot camp. He was there when I finished BUDs, and he was there the day my trident was pinned on my chest. My mom still writes me letters now and then, but they're pretty bland. The gas station got a new sign. The church got a new roof. Your father planted begonias instead of azaleas. They never ask how I'm doing or what I'm doing."

"And your grandfather? Is he still alive?" she asked.

"He is," smiled Milo. "I asked him to come down for the holidays, but he's having hernia surgery and can't travel for a few weeks. I asked Mama Irene if maybe we could bring him down in April or May."

"I bet he'd love it here," said Rachel. "I mean, look at all the older people he could be with. And if he loves gardening, this is the place for him."

“You don’t have to convince me,” said Milo. “I’d like nothing better than for him to be close to me. I don’t know if the island mansion is the right place for him, but I could get him a cottage here.”

“Well, you’re very lucky to have him. I hope I get to meet him soon.” Rachel looked into the back of the ATV and frowned. “Stop! Milo, stop!”

“What’s wrong?” She opened the door to the ATV and stepped out, looking at the jars. He walked around to her side, then pulled her shoulders back, stepping into the soft, wet terrain off the path.

“What the hell?” muttered Milo. “Base, we need another ATV at our location. Fast.” Before he could say anything else, the jars shattered, sending pieces of glass flying through the air. Milo pressed Rachel to his body and turned his back, taking the full brunt of the debris.

“Fuck!” he howled.

“Oh, God! Milo, are you alright?” she asked. Walking around to his back, she hissed, seeing the three big shards lodged in his back. She started to touch them, but he moved away from her.

“Don’t touch them. We don’t know what was in that soil to make it do that, and I don’t want you touching them.” Grabbing the big golf umbrellas, they waited for the others to show. Cruz, Torro, and Razor pulled up first, then a second cart with Luke and Cam.

“What the fuck happened?” asked Luke. Milo turned, pointing a thumb to his back. “Shit.”

“I gathered some soil samples, and there was this horrible smell. We put them in the back, and for some reason, I turned to check on them,” said Rachel. “It was like they were filling with smoke. I had Milo stop the cart, but then he protected me, and the glass hit him.”

Cruz donned the gloves and carefully pulled the glass from his back, dropping the shards into a plastic bag. Gathering as many pieces as they could, they headed back to the clinic where Riley cleaned the wounds, making sure there wasn’t anything else lodged or that whatever was in the soil seeped into his skin.

She stitched the bigger wounds, cleaning the others thoroughly.

“What the hell was in those jars?” asked Cam, looking at Rachel and Milo.

“It was soil on the south side of the property, closest to the island mansion. Something is wrong, and I need to figure out what’s happening,” said Rachel. Luke nodded, looking around the room.

“We’re all gonna figure out what’s happening.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“You could have been hurt, Rach,” said Chief, brushing back her hair from her face.

“But I wasn’t. Milo protected me and took the glass in his back for me. I need to know what’s in that soil and what’s causing that smell.”

“Rach, I get it, but the safety of you and our babies is my priority. If you need soil samples, we’ll go get them for you. If you need equipment, we’ll move it from G.R.I.P. to here.”

“Matthew is already doing that,” she grinned, curling into his side on the sofa. “He’s putting it in one of the empty cottages. I won’t have to go over there every day.”

“Well, that makes me very happy. Now, tell me about this odor and what you saw? It sounds strange. Milo said it smelled like sulfur.”

“No, it wasn’t sulfur,” said Rachel, shaking her head. “I can’t really describe it. There was definitely a chemical reaction occurring, though. That soil was soaking wet. When we put it in those jars and closed the lids, it was as if the gas

built up and filled the jars. I turned and saw a smoky grayish-blue color in the jars.”

“Grayish-blue?” said Chief. “That could be any number of chemicals. When we go through basic firefighting training, we learn that things like bleach or chemicals in certain cleaning products can cause smoke to turn blue instead of gray or black.”

“I won’t know until I really do some extensive studies on the soil, and I need for it to dry out before I do anything. I would like to ask for someone to go to the island mansion and gather some samples from it as well. The ground wasn’t holding water at all, and it appeared that the earth is just slipping away. At this rate, we could lose the mansion within a year.”

“That’s awful,” frowned Chief. “Poor Claudette.”

“Claudette? She and Jake live not far from us, right?”

Chief held his breath, then looked down at Rachel.

“I’m talking about a different Claudette.”

“A different Claudette?” she repeated. “How many are there?”

“Well, let’s just say the one at the island mansion is the original.” Rachel looked at him, a confused expression on her face. “Remember when I said that there are people here who have a sixth sense about things? Noah and Julia are able to speak to and see ghosts.”

Rachel was quiet for a moment, staring at him. She looked out the windows, then back at him once more.

“You’re serious.”

“I’m very serious. They’ve been able to do it since they were children. Julia’s gift is much more advanced than Noah’s, but they both hear them and see them almost all the time. The Redhawk brothers, Nathan and Joseph, their great-grandfather is here. So is Matthew’s great-great-Aunt Martha, and a man that worked here almost two hundred years ago, Franklin. There are a few others as well, but those are the main ones.”

“And Claudette?” she asked.

“Oh, so she’s the little girl whose family owned the island mansion. They all died of some kind of fever. She was the last to go, dying all alone. Julia and Noah communicate with her frequently, but she’s gotten braver lately and shows herself to Milo and Torro, as well as some of the other guys.

It's sad because she's so pretty and would have had a wonderful life had she lived."

Rachel stared at him, wondering if he was playing some sort of trick on her. Two-hundred-year-old dead girl haunting an island mansion?

"Can she not move on?" asked Rachel.

"Apparently not. I think part of it is she doesn't want to. She loves her home, and she was the one responsible for really getting all of us out there and refurbishing the home. Noah said she loves to play tricks on people."

"I'm having a hard time believing it, but I have to say, I felt something when I was staring at that mansion. It wasn't evil, but something was wrong."

"She told Noah, Julia, Milo, and the others that the earth was making the house sick. They thought maybe she was transitioning but maybe not," frowned Chief.

"Milo said that Matthew had landfill and soil brought out to expand the land that the mansion is on," said Rachel.

"Where did he get it from?"

"I'm not sure. I would imagine that he hired a company to bring it out, or maybe Grant did. He's responsible

for a lot of the building here, so he might have recommended someone. Why do you ask?"

"Well, maybe the materials they brought out were contaminated. Landfill material, if it hasn't been checked, could contain toxic materials or chemical waste. I think it would be great to find out where it all came from."

"We can definitely get with Grant and Matthew tomorrow," smiled Chief. "Tonight, I just want to hold my girl, watch a movie, any movie at all, and dream of what my babies are going to look like." Rachel laughed, shaking her head.

"Well, we know they'll have auburn to dark hair," she smiled. "I hope they have hair your color. Their eyes could be blue, green, or hazel. It will definitely be interesting to see what they inherit from us and our parents."

He was quiet for a moment, just holding her as the fire crackled in the darkness.

"Are you disappointed?" she whispered.

"Disappointed?" he frowned. "What in the hell would I be disappointed about?"

“They’re all girls. Not one son to carry on your legacy or your father’s. Girls can’t be SEALs, not yet anyway.”

“Rach, I just want four healthy, happy girls. They’re going to be badass no matter what they choose to do with their lives. They might be doctors or lawyers, scientists or schoolteachers. Hell, they could still join the military or the FBI or CIA. Our girls are going to be absolutely amazing, and I will be so damn proud of them.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she grinned. “There are a lot of boys on this property. In fact, far more boys are born than girls. It’s odd that you and I have multiples, and they’re all girls.”

“Oh, I don’t think it’s so odd. Mama Irene and Matthew had Rachelle and Adele, and Camille and Claudette. We just happened to get two sets of twins at the same time,” he smiled. She nestled into his arms a little further, and he pulled the blanket over them both from the back of the sofa.

“This is perfect,” she said softly, closing her eyes. Chief grinned, nodding into the darkness.

“Perfect, baby. Perfect.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Grant Zimmerman read the e-mail for the third time, shaking his head. Picking up the desk phone, he dialed the number and waited.

“Hey, Joanie, this is Grant out at Belle Fleur. Is Floyd available?”

“Sure, hun. Hold on.” He waited patiently for the man to pick up the phone. He was probably avoiding him and for good reason.

“Heya, Grant. How’s it hangin’?”

“Crooked,” said Grant with a straight face. “Where the fuck did you get the landfill that you sent us?”

“Well, now, Grant, don’t get upset. I explained it to you in the e-mail. Pip was my man that handled all of that, and he’s not with me any longer.”

“And pray tell, why is he not with you any longer?” growled Grant. Normally a completely calm, cool, and collected individual, Grant was losing his temper, and when that happens, people stand back. Grant was as big as any of

the team members. He could have and would have been a SEAL had it not been for his hearing loss as a child.

“Now, Grant, people make mistakes. You know that. Pip was just tryin’ to get that landfill as quick as he could. I didn’t realize where he went for it, but he got some from Burnside and a little more from Ventress and New Roads. Then a fella over in Houston called and said he had huge piles of landfill he needed to get rid of.”

“Christ, Floyd! Are you fucking serious? You sent me fill from at least three locations near chemical waste plants, possibly four, and you have no idea if they cleared?”

The other man said nothing at first, just rapid, nervous breathing. Grant scanned through his files, then spoke again.

“He gave me the clearance documents, Floyd. Were those faked?”

“I’m not sure, Grant. That’s the God’s honest truth. I’m just not sure. I was out with my knee surgery, and I asked Pip to take good care of y’all. He said he did, and then he went and disappeared.”

“Disappeared? He quit?”

“No, he didn’t quit. Didn’t so much as leave a goodbye note. He just didn’t show up again.”

“And this was after he sold us the landfill?” asked Grant.

“Well, yea, I guess it was around that time,” said Floyd. “Look, Grant, I’ll do whatever you need me to do. Matthew’s been good to me over the years, and I’m sorry my man did this to y’all.”

“I don’t even know what the hell he did yet,” said Grant. “All I know, Floyd, is that the ground has some sort of flammable ability to it. It smells. It’s wrecking the soil, and it might damn well be killing the wildlife.”

“Just let me know what I can do for you, Grant,” he said quietly.

“Yea, I’ll do that,” growled Grant. He hung up the phone and walked down the hallway to the auditorium. The morning meeting was wrapping up, but he could give his report to everyone when it was done.

“So, we’ve decided to take off until after the holidays. No new jobs until after January 5th. It’s been a while since we’ve had a good long holiday, and we deserve it,” said Luke.

Grant grimaced, realizing that he was about to ruin this announcement. He stood from his spot in the third row and heard the groans of those around him. He wiggled his fingers, feeling the tingling ache that was always present when it rained for days on end. Lucky that he even had his hand, he was grateful that the surgeons had been able to save it. Most especially, he owed Doc and Wilson for making sure the hand was reattached and that he didn't do anything stupid.

“Grant, why do I get the feeling you're about to ruin my holiday,” said Eric.

“Sorry, brother. I just got off the phone with our contractor who provided the landfill for the island mansion, as well as G.R.I.P. All of the materials we used were obtained from chemical plants, manufacturing sites, and dumps used for chemical waste. Floyd was out when it was happening, and his man that handled it is long gone.

“I did find out that he purchased the landfill for eleven cents on the pound and charged us sixty cents on the pound. When I find him, I'm going to get our money back.”

“Shit,” muttered Luke. “What do we need to do?”

“We're going to have to take some teams down to these sites. I'd recommend that we have folks with us that have

some experience in this. Erin, Ryan, Paige, and..."

"Me," said Rachel, standing in the doorway. "You need me."

"Nope," said Chief, shaking his head. Ghost smirked at his son, admiring his innocent thinking. He wasn't going to stop that girl from doing anything she wanted to do.

"Chief."

"Nope." Luc smiled at Antoine, nudging their older brothers on either side of them.

"This is going to be fun to watch."

"Eric Ryan, let me speak," she snapped. "I will go with a team of people. I will be seated in a comfortable SUV, buckled in with you. I will not touch anything or do anything without you right beside me. But I need to see this for myself. Erin, Ryan, and Paige can go to the sites along the river. We will go to the one in Houston."

Chief seemed to be chewing on the inside of his mouth, probably hoping he didn't explode in front of everyone. Ghost watched, waiting, as he looked to see JT moving to stand next to Rachel.

“I’ll go with, Rach. I mean, I have an investment here. I’m going to be an uncle to four beautiful little girls. I can do this for you, brother.”

“You’re not helping my case,” growled Chief.

“I’m not supposed to help your case,” grinned JT.
“I’m supposed to help us find the truth. She’s right. She needs to be there to look at this stuff and figure out what’s happening here.”

“I fucking hate it when you’re right,” said Chief with a huff. He looked toward Rachel and frowned, then kissed her forehead and nodded. “Alright, I’ll go with you.” Rachel kissed him, then turned to leave.

“See how easy life is when you agree with me.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Laughter followed Rachel as she left the room as JT and Ghost smiled at Chief. He had his hands in his hair, cursing beneath his breath.

“I hate you bastards, sometimes,” he frowned. “She shouldn’t be off this property. She shouldn’t be riding in a car. Don’t you understand?! I don’t want my wife and children harmed. I need for them to remain safe!”

“Uh, well, I think you might have taken this to the extreme,” said Wilson. Doc and Cruz were seated beside him, nodding. “She needs to be careful. No jostling or extremes in temperature or excitement. Riding in a car from one location to another at a respectable speed, buckled in and protected, is perfectly fine.”

“I stand by what I said. I really hate you bastards, sometimes.”

“She’ll be fine, brother,” smirked JT. “Grant? What do these dump sites have at them? Should we wear protective gear?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve sent a text to Erin to look into this for us so we’re prepared. I also asked the sites themselves to

disclose what could have been in the materials that were purchased. It's going to take a few days to get all that back. Once we have that, I say we form our teams and go down and take a look."

"I have another idea," said Milo. All eyes turned to look at the young man as he stood. "I say we dive into the waters around the island mansion and get samples of what was placed down there. We know where most of the landfill was placed. We're all capable divers. We can get down there and pull samples from the island itself and bring them back up."

"That's a great idea," said Garrett, nodding at his old teammate. Garrett looked at Noah. "Any chance Claudette can tell us anything?"

"I can check with her," he said. "She was not feeling well when we were out there earlier in the week. I cannot fathom how chemicals can make a spirit ill, but she seems to be ill."

"She's tied to the land," said Julia, seated next to Joseph. "Like all of the spirits who are here, they're tied permanently to the land because of all of us. When we're happy, they're happy. When the land is sick, they get sick."

“So, it is possible that she’s feeling some of the effects of whatever is down there?” asked Chief.

“I suppose it is,” said Julia.

“I know this is an odd request, but Wilson, Doc, or Cruz, can we go out there with Julia and Noah, and maybe you ask her some questions about what it is she’s feeling? If we can narrow that down, we might know what’s happening.”

“I’ve never diagnosed a ghost before,” said Cruz, “but it sounds cool. I’m in.”

“I have duty at the clinic,” said Doc. “I’ll leave it to those two.”

“Noah, let’s go diagnose a ghost,” smirked Wilson.

Noah nodded, although failing to see the humor in it. If their little Claudette was ill, it wasn’t funny. The young Claudette, although technically not young at all, stood at the door waiting for Jake.

“May I go with you?” she asked. “I’ve never officially met my namesake.”

The men nodded, leading Claudette to the boat as the rain continued to pound down around them. As they got closer to the island, Claudette started to feel strange. A wave

of nausea came over her, and she sucked in a deep breath, hoping to calm the feeling. She never got seasick. Never.

Stepping off the dock, it didn't pass. In fact, it got much worse.

“Claudette?” Cruz reached for her arm, helping her.

“Something is wrong,” she whispered. “Something is very wrong. Where is she? Where is Claudette?” Noah took off running toward the porch. Lying on the worn weathered boards was the fading specter in her white dress.

“Child? What is wrong?” he asked. She looked at Noah and then around to see the others who were there.

“Why is the doctor here? He cannot help me,” she said in a weak, mousy voice.

“He wishes to understand how you are feeling. We want to help you and the land, but you must tell us what you are feeling,” said Noah. “Can you allow them to see you, sweet girl? Please.”

Claudette pushed herself up, staring at Noah. She closed her eyes, and there seemed to be a light shining around her.

“Whoa,” whispered Cruz. “Hello there, sweet girl. Aren’t you beautiful?”

“I don’t feel beautiful,” she said to Noah.

“She says she does not feel beautiful,” frowned Noah. He looked behind him and then back, smiling at the ghost.

“Yes, this is Claudette. She was named for you.”

“You are so lovely,” smiled Claudette. “I’m very happy to be able to see the beautiful girl I was named for. I think I’m feeling some of what you’re feeling. It’s very odd.” Noah chuckled, nodding his head.

“She likes you very much, Claudette.”

“Noah? Ask her if something is hurting?” said Wilson.

“She can hear you. You cannot hear her. Ask, and I will respond for her.” Wilson laughed, nodding his head.

“My apologies, Claudette. It’s my first time diagnosing a ghost. Are you hurting anywhere or have any specific symptoms?”

“Her stomach hurts,” said Noah slowly. “She says it feels as though she should use the privy, the toilet, but she has not done so in more than a hundred and fifty years.”

“That’s odd,” said Wilson, then checking himself, realized the whole damn thing was odd. He was talking to a fucking ghost, for shit’s sake. “Do you feel weak or nauseous?”

“She does. She has not moved from the porch for nearly three days. She says she does not even enjoy watching Milo and Torro undress any longer.” Noah stopped, giving a frown to the young girl. “Claudette, we spoke of this. It is not appropriate for a young girl to watch as young men undress.” The live Claudette laughed, nodding her head.

“You go, girl. Do you. You’ve had to live in this world without physical touch for too long. It’s nice that you can at least see what could have been your future.”

“Yes, she has a point,” nodded Noah. “Just do not frighten them any longer. And give them their moments of privacy to do, well, to do things they need to do.”

“Claudette? Do you have a headache? Do your fingernails or toenails hurt?” asked Cruz.

“Really, Claudette. What is with you lately? Yes, they are both beautiful men, but they are married. Now, please answer the question.” Cruz and Wilson both laughed, winking at the young girl. “She says that her head feels pressure but

not an ache. Her nails do not hurt, but the nail beds hurt. One more thing. She feels hunger.”

“Hunger?” asked Cruz. “Is that possible?”

“I’m not sure,” said Noah. “I have never had a ghost tell me that they were hungry. They missed the smell or taste of food but didn’t feel hungry.”

“Could she be passing into the next life or this one?” asked Wilson.

“No, not this life. Even if she was passing to the next, she should not be hurting. Something is changing for her.” Noah turned once more to listen to the little girl, nodding as she spoke. The others could see her talking to him but could not hear her. They knew she was sharing a great gift just by allowing herself to be visible.

“Claudette says that her body is tied to the island. The island is what caused the fevers that killed her family. Something, I would guess malaria or dysentery, was created right here and passed through her body, tying her to the land forever. She says that all pains are directly from the land beneath her feet.”

“The landfill,” said Cruz. “She’s feeling whatever the landfill is, that was put as an addition to the island.” Noah looked at the girl again and frowned.

“What do you mean tell the man to stop bringing more?” Wilson and Cruz stared at her while Claudette took in her delicate features. It was eerily similar to what she looked like as a young girl. She and Camille were twins, but Claudette, the young and old, looked identical at the same age.

“She says that a man continues to come here and dumps something on the back of the island. He comes at night and pushes it overboard. He is always just far enough that she cannot see him.”

“We need to dive and find it,” said Cruz. “Claudette? Is there no way we can take you away from here? It would make you feel better.”

“In all her decades here, she has never set foot off the island. This is her home, and she does not wish to leave. She wishes for you to make it healthy again, so she can remain.”

Cruz nodded, smiling at the girl.

“We’re going to try, sweet girl. I promise.”

Noah spoke softly to the girl, telling her what their plans were. He told her to notify him immediately should the man show up again. When they left, he watched as she entered the house, at least out of the elements. Although, he knew in his head that the elements meant nothing to Claudette. The boat was quiet when Cruz finally spoke.

“Well, all these years, and I finally got my first ghost as a patient. Fucking cool.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I’m not sure any of my research is going to be helpful,” said Erin, looking at Rachel and the others. “Most of these sites accept everything from toxic waste from chemical plants to household cleaning items, which of course, can be toxic as well.”

“Something is eating away at the richness of the earth here at Belle Fleur. When I tested the soil further from the water, the findings were unlike anything I’ve ever seen,” said Rachel. Connecting her laptop to the big screen, Cam, Luke, and Eric watched with Erin, Ryan, and Paige listening as well.

“Here at Belle Fleur, you have a combination of rich soils. The most dominant is Alluvial soil. It’s extremely good for agriculture because of the rich mineral content, but it also contains gravel, sand, and silt.”

“Can you tell us what you mean when you say ‘mineral rich’?” asked Paige.

“Absolutely,” she smiled. “Soil that we consider rich in minerals usually contains iron, potassium, magnesium, calcium, and sulfur. Sulfur is good in the right context and in minimal amounts, but it can also be harmful. The other part of

this is what we refer to as the organic substances. This is formed due to decomposition of plants and animals.

“If this area was land that, say, the dinosaurs once roamed, and their bones and remains have crept into the soil for thousands of years, that could create exceptionally rich soil. We’ve also seen, in other parts of the world, strange phenomena where certain elements, minerals, what have you, filter up from the earth’s core. We have no explanation for it, only that it occurs.”

She paused, looking around the room. Each person looked at one another, a small grin on their lips, then looked back at Rachel.

“What? Do I have something in my teeth?” she asked, rubbing her finger across her teeth.

“No, that’s not it at all,” said Luke. “Rachel, has anyone told you about our very special pond?” She shook her head, and Luke stood, holding out his hand.

“Where are we going?”

“I think we need a field trip,” said Cam. “I’ll make sure it’s alright with Gray.”

Rachel frowned but took Luke's hand as he helped her outside and into the ATV. The new ATVs held six people comfortably and even had cargo space. They were like mini-buses that could carry people from one end of the property to the other comfortably on the paths. They were all-electric but powerful with tremendous speed.

As Luke took off down the paths, she looked behind her at Erin and Paige.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Cam checked with Gray, and she actually thinks this could be good for you and the babies,” said Luke. “We should have shown you sooner.”

“Does this have anything to do with Julia and Noah speaking to ghosts?” she asked. Paige laughed, nodding her head.

“I'm glad you know my sister's gift,” she smiled. “She's lived with it her entire life. It wasn't easy, and she was often overwhelmed by the voices and ghosts on the property. As you can imagine, Belle Fleur has had a lot of death in its history.”

“Yes, I guess that would be true. But how does this pond fit into that?”

“Oh, it doesn’t fit in with the ghosts. It just fits in with the overall mystery of Belle Fleur.” Luke stopped in front of a crystal-clear pond, a ledge with a waterfall at the back. The warm waters were emitting steam, and Rachel smiled.

“It’s a hot spring?” she asked.

“No,” said Luke. “Not like you think. The waters are thermal but never dip below ninety-four or above ninety-seven. Never. You spoke of land and water being rich with minerals and things derived from decomposition. We’re not sure, but we did have Lindsay look at it when she first arrived, along with Remy, who has an engineering degree but an incredible love and appreciation for the land. There were things in it that even they couldn’t identify. Maybe the three of you should work together on this.”

“I’m still not following. I mean, it’s beautiful, and it’s always wonderful to have a thermal spring on the property. But what am I missing?” Paige stepped forward, smiling.

“Do you have any old scars? An old injury or something that still aches?” she asked.

“I-yes. I have two large scars on my knee from a surgery I had when I was in high school. When it’s really cold, they still hurt, but it’s nothing awful.”

“I need you to strip,” said Erin. Rachel looked at the two women and then Luke.

“Have you lost your mind? I’m not stripping in front of the two of you and a man I barely know.”

“I’ll turn my back, Rachel. Please, you need to trust us in this.” She started to argue but somehow knew that they meant no harm. Paige and Erin didn’t seem capable of evil. They both smiled, nodding at her, then turned their backs.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she said, huffing as she undressed. “It’s fucking cold out here.”

“Once you’re undressed, just get in the water,” said Erin. A few moments later, they heard her slide into the water, and they all turned. “Well?”

“Well, what?” she said, frustrated. “It’s warm. It feels wonderful, but why did I need to take a swim in the nude in the middle of the day?”

“Look at your knee,” smirked Luke. She turned her back to him, lifting her knee to the surface.

“That can’t be. It’s not possible,” she whispered. She bent the knee back and forth, then straightened it one more time. Bringing it to the surface again, she shook her head and turned, swimming toward the dock. She didn’t even care that Luke was watching. Pushing out of the water, she grabbed the towel from Erin as Paige held up another towel to block her from Luke.

“You do realize I’m six-feet-six,” he smiled. “I can see over the towel if I want to.”

“But you won’t because you’re a good boy,” frowned Erin. Luke could only laugh. Only Aunt Erin could call him a ‘boy’ and get away with it. Rachel quickly dressed, then knelt several times to feel the knee.

“What in the hell is in that water?” she asked.

“We’re not quite sure,” smiled Paige. “We know it contains decomposition from dinosaur bones as well as certain plants and wildlife we’ve yet to be able to identify. Its healing abilities are nearly perfect. It cannot regenerate a limb like for Parker or Ryan. And we tried to use it to help Miguel when he had his stroke, but it was only partly successful. However, it can help with aches, pains, aging, scars, even muscle tears or bullet wounds.

“Julia brought Joseph here after he was shot in the calf. It was so bad, the doctors in the Navy said he’d never be able to run again, maybe not even walk normally. She just brought him down here, and that’s how we all knew. My baby sister is pretty special.”

“You can turn around now, Luke,” smiled Erin.

“It’s not just the soil that’s rich on the land, Rachel. It’s this pond as well, and we want to preserve it for as long as we possibly can. And keep it a secret.”

“I can understand why you would. I need to get to the clinic to see Gray. I have another appointment this afternoon. Can you take me? Chief is out with the others at the island mansion diving today.”

“Absolutely,” said Luke. “Let’s go.”

Paige and Erin went back to their reports, trying to find something that they could have missed, while Luke took Rachel to the clinic. He waited patiently while her exam was done, speaking to Ajei for a while, always loving extra time with his beautiful wife. Then talking to Doc and Wilson, he learned about their visit out to the island mansion. Wilson told him about their ‘examination’ of Claudette and how sad and

sick their little ghost was. They all hoped that they could find the cause.

Rachel walked out of the examination room with Gray, a look of shock on her face.

“Is everything alright?” asked Luke.

“Everything is just fine,” smiled Gray. “We should have thought of the pond before. Her little swim helped to strengthen her uterus. She won’t have any issues carrying these babies.”

“I-I was told nothing could help me. Nothing. I don’t understand any of this, but I’m going to find out what’s causing the problems on the property. You’re right, Luke. This needs to be preserved for generations to come.” He smiled at the young woman, nodding.

“That’s what we want, Rach. That’s what we want.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Julia went with the men out to the island mansion, just in case Claudette needed to tell them something. She pointed in the direction the man had been dropping things into the water, and the men began putting on their dive suits.

“Claudette, it’s not polite to watch the men dress,” said Julia with a smile.

“Is she watching me all the time?” asked Milo. Julia looked at the young girl and smiled.

“She appreciates your physique,” said Julia, “and she, uh, she enjoys it when you, well, when you’re alone and need to...”

“No. Fucking hell, no,” said Milo. “Look, Claudette, you’re a sweet little two-hundred-year-old ghost, and I get that you’re bored but watching a man do things like that is not okay.”

Claudette smiled at him, then turned to Julia, speaking to her.

“She says she will try to be more respectful but that you must understand she’s been alone a very long time.

Although she's trapped in a fourteen-year-old body, her mind has grown over the last century."

"Dude, a ghost is watching you jack off. That's pretty cool," smirked Torro.

"Um, she watched you too," smiled Julia.

"Shit," he muttered.

"When you boys are done with your stories of playing with yourself, I'd like to get this done," said Chief.

They tested the regulators and tanks, then the six men got into the water. Chief, JT, Milo, Torro, Dalton, and Tiger. The others were on the surface, ready to dive if they needed them. Hiro and Ace sat beneath a tent with monitors, watching every move they made.

With the temperatures low, it would be unlikely that they'd encounter snakes, but the alligators would still be out and hungry.

"It's pretty murky down here," said Chief into the comms device.

"Yea, we're getting a lot of silt and dirt stirring. I know it's hard but try not to stir anything up if possible."

"Roger that," he said.

On Dalton and Tiger's cameras, they could see the foundation of the landfill that had been placed. The compacted components of track, rock, and dirt had slipped more than a hundred yards from their original positioning.

"What could make all of that move?" asked Ace.

"Maybe an earthquake?" frowned Hiro. "I mean, it's possible. We might not have felt it, but it could have happened below the surface."

"Claudette said it is not an earthquake," said Julia. "She says earthquakes don't make the land sick." The two men nodded, smiling at the little girl. Although they weren't sure how they felt about it, they actually liked that she was comfortable enough with them to show herself.

"Hiro? Are you seeing this?" asked Chief. Hiro and Ace stared at the screens. More than a dozen blue steel barrels were sitting on the bottom of the bayou.

"We see, Chief. Are they heavy? Can we move them?" asked Ace.

"They're heavy as fuck," said Chief. "I'm afraid to open them below water. If they have shit in it, we don't want

to expose it to the bayou. Let's get the boats out here and a wench."

The men came to the surface, standing on the docks to wait for the boats from G.R.I.P. Ryan and Doug brought the equipment that would haul the barrels to the surface, where they could examine their contents. It took nearly nine hours to get everything loaded and then brought to G.R.I.P.

Once there, the men changed out of their dive gear and into hazmat suits with respirators and masks. The barrels were moved into a sealed saferoom where they would not expose anyone to its contents.

Chief took a crowbar, prying off the top. Sliding it to the floor, he looked down and then took a fast step back.

"Holy fuck."

"What's wrong?" asked Doug and Ryan outside the room. The other men in the hazmat suits stepped forward, then each removed the lids of the barrels.

"We've got fifteen barrels, Doug," said Chief. "Fifteen barrels and fifteen dead people. I think some are women. We need to get the coroner and sheriff out here."

“There’s a solution inside the barrels,” said Dalton. He took several vials and dipped them in the barrels, then placed them carefully in a rack on the table. “There’s no odor. There should be an odor of some sort with all these dead bodies inside barrels. The bayou wouldn’t mask that odor.”

“What the fuck is this?” murmured Chief. He looked around the room, seeing a large Ficus tree in the corner in a huge concrete pot. Walking toward it, he dipped a large glass dish into the dirt, filling it nearly to the top. Then, moving back to the barrel, he dipped a vial into the solution and poured it over the dirt.

The men all watched as the dirt began to dissolve and disappear before their very eyes.

“We have to figure out what this is,” he said, looking at the men on the other side of the glass.

“Right now, get out of there,” said Doug. “We’ve called in Hazmat from the fire and sheriff’s departments, the coroner, and the EPA. Let’s let them take it from here.”

“We can do that,” said Chief, “but we’re going to be part of this. Someone is dumping toxic waste along with dead bodies on our property. We didn’t even get to see what’s around the entire island. This is only the beginning.”

“No,” said Doug. “It’s going to be the end of whoever thought they could do this.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“It was incredible, Chief,” said Rachel excitedly. “I mean, the water was warm and soothing, and then when I saw Gray, she confirmed that my uterus was strengthened by it.” Chief smiled at her, kissing her sweetly.

“I know, baby. It’s a remarkable place. I hope you’ll forgive me for not telling you sooner. We’re very protective of our property here.”

“I understand,” she said, kissing him sweetly. “But that does raise the question of how someone was able to dump those barrels and waste off the shore of the island mansion. I thought everything was on camera.”

“That is the question of the hour,” said Chief, frowning. “The tech team should have been able to find it on our surveillance equipment, but we haven’t found anything.”

“I know that we’ll figure all this out,” she said, taking another bite of the evening meal. George had made an exceptional variety of comfort foods. Pasta, homemade bread, three varieties of soup, and much more.

“Eric Ryan,” said Mama Irene, walking toward them. “We couldn’t get a tuxedo rental for you, so you’re gonna get

married in your uniform. Don't argue with me. Just make sure it's cleaned and ready to go. Weddin' is in two days. We'll be combining our Christmas Eve party with a rehearsal dinner.

“Rachel? Your folks arrive tomorrow, and I'll get 'em settled in their cottage. They already know there's a big party tomorrow night. If you're feelin' up to it, you can help Noelle and the others put the bows on the wreaths.”

“Yes, ma'am,” smiled Rachel.

“Mama Irene, I'm not sure Rachel should be doing anything.”

“Eric Ryan, you won't argue with me on this. I carried fifteen babies, four sets of twins. Ain't nothin a pregnant woman can't do and still have healthy children. Your girl is just fine, and she'll be deliverin' them girls in no time.”

“Alright, Mama Irene,” he said, kissing the older woman's cheek.

“I love her,” smiled Rachel.

“Yea, well, when she chews your ass out one day, let me know how much you love her. She's wonderful and kind

and sweet and loving, but she can also be a viper when she wants things done her way.”

“She’s lived a long time,” said Rachel. “I’m going to guess that she feels as if she’s owed a little bit of ‘do it my way.’”

“You might be right,” nodded Chief. “You never answered my question. What do you want for Christmas?”

“Oh, Chief. I don’t need anything. I feel so fortunate to have this. This life with you, these babies, everything. I don’t need or want anything more.”

“Well, we have to at least pick out wedding rings.” A man walked toward them with Irene by his side, and Chief just shook his head. He’d seen that man before and knew exactly who he was. “Alright, Mama Irene, where are the listening devices?”

“Don’t sass. It’s not attractive,” she said. “Rachel, honey, this here is my friend. He’s supplied us with rings and jewelry for every occasion. You pick your engagement and wedding ring, and he’ll have it ready for you by Christmas day.”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” smiled the man. “Now, it looks as though you probably wear a size six-and-a-half.”

“How could you know that?” asked Rachel.

“I’m a professional. Most of these rings are in that size, so we may not need to do anything.” He opened the cases, and the room seemed to light up with the shine of diamonds and jewels. “Do you see anything you like?”

“Oh, wow,” she gasped. “They’re all so beautiful. This one is really spectacular, but so is that one. What’s our budget?” She looked at Chief, who smiled, shaking his head.

“Not how this works. You pick one. I buy it. End of story.” Rachel cocked her head, frowning.

“Chief, we have to have a budget. I don’t want to start out in debt because of an engagement or wedding ring.”

“It’s all within his budget,” smiled the man as he pulled the two rings from the case. “Let’s try these on.”

It was an hour later when Rachel finally made her choice. The diamond wedding band was a stunning addition to the three-carat pear-shaped diamond engagement ring. It made sense for Rachel. They all come from the earth, but diamonds held particular sentimental value to her.

“Now it’s official,” smirked Chief. “No takebacks. You’re going to be Mrs. Eric Ryan Stanton.”

“How about just Rachel Stanton,” she grinned. Chief laughed, nodding his head.

“I can live with that. Now, why don’t I take you home? We can take a nice warm bubble bath together, curl up, and watch a Christmas movie together.” She smiled, kissing him.

“Perfect, Mr. Stanton.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rachel hugged her parents, kissing their cheeks as they smiled at their daughter.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, laughing. “Mom, Dad, this is Eric Ryan Stanton, but he’s called Chief.”

“Oh, are you Native American?” asked her mother.

“No, ma’am,” laughed Chief. “I was a Navy SEAL, and my rank was Chief. Everyone just called me Chief. It was just easier.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” she smiled. “He’s very handsome, Rachel.”

“I’m right here, honey,” said Emmitt Davis.

“Oh, you’re handsome, too,” she laughed. “We were surprised when we got the call that you were getting married, Rachel. It seems so sudden.”

“Ma’am,” said Chief, stepping in. “I know it might feel that way, but I assure you, your daughter is the only woman for me. She’s beautiful, smart, talented, and I cannot imagine my life without her. My own parents didn’t know one another very long. That man over there with the black hair

and his wife, they knew one another less than twenty-four hours.”

“My,” she gasped.

“Yes, ma’am, I know it feels unusual, but we’ve had more success than failure here, and almost every man and woman dated less than a month before they were married. We can’t explain it, but it seems to work here.”

“We’re not questioning it, son,” said Emmitt. “We just want our daughter to be happy, and it certainly appears that she is. You look radiant, Rachel.”

“Well, there might be a reason for that,” she smiled.

“You’re pregnant!” said her mother excitedly.

“I am. With multiples.”

“Multiples? You didn’t say twins,” said her mother.

“You would have said twins if it was twins. How many are we talking?”

“Four,” smiled Chief. “Rachel is pregnant with four girls, and they are all healthy so far. She’s a very strong woman.”

“Rachel, what about...” Helen’s face shrank to a concerned expression, reaching her hand toward her

daughter's abdomen.

“It's a very long story, Mom, but I'm alright. Gray, my doctor here, says that my uterus has strengthened, uh, on its own and will be able to hold the babies.”

“A miracle,” smiled her father. “A miracle. I'm very happy for the two of you. This is a beautiful place, by the way. I've never seen plants like these before in my life. And the decorations are absolutely stunning.”

“They're amazing, Dad,” said Rachel, taking her father's arm. She walked toward the gardens, pointing out things as they stopped and spoke.

“Those two always bonded over dirt,” smiled Helen. “I never understood it, but I'm glad that he did. She needed it, and I just needed to see my daughter happy. She was unhappy for a long time, Chief. She was looking for something that seemed to not exist, and then suddenly, she called me a few weeks ago and said, ‘Mom, I've found the one.’ Well, you can imagine my surprise. All this time and she hadn't found ‘the one,’ and when she takes a new job, she suddenly finds the man that's going to make all her dreams come true.”

“It goes both ways, ma'am. Rachel is everything I've ever dreamed of in a partner. My parents are the most

amazing couple I know, but honestly, I'm surrounded by wonderful examples of couples who love one another," said Chief.

"Yes, it was very secretive coming out here. The SUV that brought us had blacked-out windows. I couldn't see where we were or where we were going. Very odd."

"Yes, ma'am, we like to keep it that way. I'm sure Rachel told you that we are a security agency. That makes our jobs dangerous, and we want to keep the wolves from our door if at all possible."

"Well, no matter, I'm just happy that you make my daughter happy. Now, what do you say you show me the way to a hot cup of coffee and the famous pie I keep hearing Rachel speak of."

"Yes, ma'am," laughed Chief, extending his elbow. "That I can definitely do."



Ghost straightened the trident on his son's chest and then adjusted his ribbons. He'd already done the same for JT, despite his son saying he knew how to do it himself.

“You’re marrying a wonderful girl, Eric Ryan,” said Ghost. “All within a year, you’re going from dating, to engaged, to living together, to married, to a father of four. That’s a lot of changes for one man.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of this, Dad?” he smirked.

“No way in hell. In fact, if you try to leave, I’ll hog-tie you to the chair.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Dad. I love Rachel.” Ghost smiled at his son, then stood, yielding the floor to the man who’d given every groom on this property words of wisdom. Gaspar grinned at his father, touching his shoulder as he passed. Matthew stopped, kissing his son’s cheek, then Nine, Ian, and Ghost’s.

“One day, this will be your job,” he said to the older men. They all frowned, not liking the thought of that at all. “Don’t worry. It won’t be any time soon. Eric Ryan, you are about to embark on a new chapter of your life. One that includes that beautiful young woman across the way and, soon, four beautiful little girls.

“Your life will forever be altered. It’s one thing to take a wife, to have someone that you cherish every day, but to

have four beautiful young women that you are also responsible for is a burden and a gift.” Wilson smiled at Matthew, then looked at Chief.

“Don’t you faint, or I’ll kick your ass,” he frowned.

The room chuckled, and Chief shook his head.

“There are plenty of men here who know what it’s like to raise a daughter,” said Matthew. “I raised six. Six of the finest young women on earth. Then, I got the opportunity to help raise dozens more. All beautiful, all smart, all unique in their own ways. It fills my soul to know that they are in my safekeeping. That God entrusted me with such a wonderful gift.

“Women can be challenging to understand sometimes, Eric Ryan. When they are pregnant, that seems amplified. I suspect that Rachel will be amplified times four.” Again, the room chuckled, nodding their heads. “A man must be patient and loving, gentle. Listen more than you speak. And when you speak, choose your words carefully, for once released, they cannot be called back.

“Tell her that you love her every day, for tomorrow is not promised to anyone. Seek to understand, not to disagree. Admit when you’re wrong, and sometimes, even when you’re

not wrong, say that you are. It's just easier." Chief smiled at the man, understanding the wisdom of his statement.

"Know that sometimes, when she's crying, she doesn't want you to fix her problems. She only wants you to hold her. Kiss her in the morning, kiss her at night, and every chance you can in between. Love her as she grows old with you, for she tolerated your wrinkles and warts when you were young.

"But mostly, the most important thing, Eric Ryan, is to always leave your heart open. Don't close it off to your wife or anyone. If you need help, don't be afraid to ask it of any man here. We are invested in your marriage succeeding." He pulled the big man into his arms, kissing his cheeks, then his forehead.

"Matthew, thank you," said Chief with tears. He nodded, then walked by each man, touching their hand or arm. At the end of the long rows of men was Alec. He bent low, kissing his father's cheek.

"You always surprise me, Pops."

"Gotta keep 'em on their toes, Alec. I'll see you boys at the church." They watched as he left the room, smiling at his straight strong back.

“He’s amazing,” said Chief to the others.

“He is that,” said Gaspar. “We’re all very lucky to have him.”

“Are you ready?” asked Ghost. Chief looked at his brother, JT. As his best man, he would hold the rings.

“Got the rings?” he asked. JT held up his hand, the rings on his pinky finger. “Then I’m ready. Let’s go.”



Rachel turned in front of the mirror, shocked that the dress Mama Irene chose for her was exactly what she would have chosen for herself. It was simple and sweet, no frills, no lace, no embellishments. Just a soft satin, flowing from a high neck to long sleeves with buttons from the wrist to the elbow. Her hair was twisted at the back of her head in long tendrils with baby’s breath and magnolia laced through.

“You look so beautiful, honey,” sniffed Helen.

“Don’t cry, Mom. You’ll make me cry.”

“I wish I had something wise to say,” she said, shaking her head. “Just be happy.” The women all smiled, then slowly turned to look at the tiny woman with the white hair. She was

dressed impeccably in a pale blue suit, her pearl and diamond earrings sparkling at her ears.

“Why are y’all lookin’ at me? This is Rachel’s day,” said Irene.

“Mama Irene, I could use some advice from a woman who’s been married as long as you and seen all these successful marriages,” smiled Rachel. Helen nodded at the older woman, thinking she needed her approval to give Rachel advice.

“If I know my husband, and I do, he’s across the way givin’ Eric Ryan advice right now. I hope he’s listenin’. Marriage is hard, children. It’s not for the faint of heart. You gotta work at it every single day. Some days you’re a maid. Some you’re a chef. Some you’re a teacher, a lover, a seamstress. Some days, you’re all those things at once. Those are the days you need a little more patience and a lot of loving support.

“Look around you, Rachel. There is a room full of women who are eager to support you in this new adventure. They will help you when you need it. They will pull Chief to the side and fill his ear with advice when it’s warranted. They

will hold those babies for you when you need a nap. And you're damn sure gonna need a nap.

“My best advice, honey, is to talk to that man. I find too often women think that a man should be readin' her mind. I hear things like, ‘you should know what I want,’ and I just shake my head. We got a lot of talented men here, but ain't one of ‘em a mind-reader. Tell him what you need and what you want. Don't be afraid to do that. Listen to one another but talk to one another as well. Don't yell. Talk. Try to understand his feelings, so you can convey your own when it's time.

“When you allow love to grow and flourish, it will always blossom anew constantly. It will not fade. It will not falter. It will not die. You will begin this life knowing that you are loved by a man who chose you as his partner. You will share love and hardships. It's easy to get through the love parts. It's not so easy when you're tested. That's when you know. When you get through those times, that's when you know you're perfect for one another.”

“Mama Irene,” sniffed Rachel.

“Oh, don't cry,” she laughed. “You look beautiful, and that man is waitin' to make you his for the rest of your lives.

It's a great gift, Rachel. Cherish it, and he'll cherish you."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

There wasn't a dry eye in the church as the wedding ceremony was completed, and then a brief Christmas service followed. As they walked toward the massive tents set up for the celebration, the sun peeked out for just a moment, and Rachel knew it was a good sign.

They danced, or at least Chief did. He wouldn't allow her to stand on her own feet, lifting her onto his toes and doing all the moving for the both of them. They ate, and ate again, then exchanged their Christmas gifts and opened their wedding gifts.

Many were baby gifts, including four stunning dreamcatchers for the babies to hang above their cribs. Zeke and Trak had worked on them together, ensuring that the babies would sleep well and have no nightmares.

While Rachel and Chief locked themselves away for a honeymoon, Mama Irene and the others made sure that Helen and Emmitt enjoyed their stay. Two days before New Year's Eve, they traveled back home, promising to return when the babies were born.



He is here again. He is here again.

The voice came through loud and clear to all those capable of hearing. Noah looked at Julia, who nodded, then he gathered several men, including Chief, and headed out to the island. Hoping to catch the man in the act, they took the long way, coming at him from the river side, not the bayou side. But he was long gone when they arrived.

Seeing Claudette on the docks, Noah moved the boat closer to their young specter. He listened as she spoke, nodding his head.

“She says that he dropped four more barrels into the water. She was beginning to feel better, then started feeling sick. He did it in broad daylight this time,” said Noah.

“He must think because of the holiday, we wouldn’t be around,” said Luke. “Let’s get the barrels out again. We need to put guards out here twenty-four-seven. We’ve got Milo, Torro, and JT right now, but JT is returning to his team next week.”

“We can all take shifts,” said Noah. “Julia and I will need to be nearby in case Claudette needs to speak with us. I

am certain that she and Joseph can stay out here with Tru and I.”

When the barrels were pulled into G.R.I.P., it was no surprise that they contained the same thing. Dead bodies and chemicals.

Rachel looked at her samples in the lab, hoping that the testing would reveal something today. She’d ignored them during the wedding festivities and honeymoon, but with the additional barrels, she knew something had to be done.

“I know what it is,” she said, looking at the men in the auditorium. “My tests came back conclusive. It’s dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane.”

“Say what?” frowned Milo.

“DDT. The pesticide DDT. I mean, it was originally developed as a pesticide. It’s colorless, nearly odorless, and it’s great at killing insects, but it’s also toxic. We know that when DDT gets into our bodies, it’s stored primarily in our organs.”

“Shit,” muttered Cam.

“Large quantities will kill you. But smaller concentrations can lead to such symptoms as headache,

nausea, vomiting, confusion, tremors, among others. It affects the nervous system by interfering with normal nerve impulses, so if our victims were alive and exposed to massive doses, they wouldn't have been able to scream or run. They effectively could have been paralyzed.”

“But isn't DDT banned?” asked Chief. Rachel nodded, smiling at her husband.

“Yes. It is, which would lead us to ask the question, where on earth would someone get barrels full that they could put live humans in?”

“We're going to find out. I know we said we'd wait until after the holidays, but it can't wait any longer,” said Luke. “We need to get down to those plants along the river and find out what they have in them.”

“Hey, Luke? The sheriff is at the gates and wants to speak with the entire team,” said Sly. Luke frowned but nodded.

“Should I leave?” asked Rachel.

“No, stay, please,” said Cam. “If he wants to see us all, that means he wants to see us all.”

The team whispered amongst themselves, wondering what the sheriff would want with everyone. As he walked in the door, three deputies followed him, and Luke frowned.

“Sheriff Templet, always happy to have you here. Who are the guests?”

“Sorry, Luke. We have to ask you all some questions.” Luke nodded, giving him the floor. “When was the last time any of you were in Kuala Lumpur, Moscow, Delhi, Johannesburg, or Bangkok?”

“What the hell?” muttered Nine. “It’s been years since we were in those locations.”

“Can you prove that?” asked one of the deputies. Nine stood, walking toward the young man, who wisely swallowed and took a step back.

“Yes, junior, I can prove that. What the hell is this about?”

“The bodies found in the barrels were known international criminals that we believe you have had encounters with,” said the sheriff. He handed a list to Luke. Cam and Eric stared over his shoulder, their fathers staring over their shoulders.

“We know these names, and we have tried to catch them but were unsuccessful. We wouldn’t be stupid enough to kill them, put them in barrels, drop them off our own land, and then call you to identify them,” said Luke.

“I figured as much, Luke, but I gotta do my job. Besides, somebody went to a lot of effort to get them from their own countries to Louisiana. Some of them were dead for weeks, maybe months. They could have been killed in their own country and transported here.”

“Do you think someone knew that land was ours?” asked Cam.

“Not sure. I can’t imagine how, but it must be someone with power if they were able to prevent you from seeing them on surveillance.” Luke wanted to mention that they’d found three more but decided he wasn’t going to risk that.

“Look, just let us know if you hear or see anything,” said Sheriff Templet. “We all know what you boys do, but dead bodies in the bayou ain’t a good way to stay hidden.”

“Why the extra manpower with you?” asked Luke. “We’ve always cooperated and welcomed you out here. Why bring them?”

Gaspar smirked at his son's perceptiveness, then noticed as Julia whispered to Piper. Piper stood, moving toward the men. Rory watched his gorgeous, badass wife saunter toward the men. He leaned back, knowing she wouldn't need his help.

"Let me see your ID," she said, holding out her hand.

"Wh-what? No!" squealed one of the men.

"You're going to show me your ID, or I'm going to take it off of your person," she smiled. The man looked at the group of men behind the woman, then at his fellow deputies.

"Don't worry, I won't call anyone for help."

"You don't need to see my ID," he said emphatically.

"Have it your way."

Before he could respond, Piper had him on the ground, her knee at the back of his neck, her hand in his back pocket, holding up an FBI ID.

"You want to tell us why the feds are pretending to be sheriff's deputies?"

"Nice work, Piper," smiled Eric.

"Get her off of me!" yelled the man. She leaned down, whispering in his ear.

“You’d better be grateful I didn’t break your neck. How dare you come in here under false pretenses. What the hell do you want?” She stood, and the man scrambled to stand next to his teammates, giving them a pissed-off glare.

“Answer the lady,” said Luke. “What the hell do the feds want with us?”

“We think we’ve got a rogue agent with an axe to grind with RP, but also with us,” said the agent. “My name is Aaron Peters. This is LaRon Brown and Robert Zilow. We’ve been tracking an agent by the name of Randy Goodwin for two years now.”

Luke looked around the room as men and women shook their heads. He turned to Piper, who did the same.

“Never heard of him,” said Luke. “Why would he have a beef against any of us?”

“He’s dirty. He’s been dirty for twenty years, but no one was able to pin anything on him. He’s like the Teflon agent. Nothing sticks. You took down three operations that we knew had inside involvement, but we couldn’t prove it.”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” said Chief. “How in the hell would he know where to dump those barrels?”

“We don’t think he did,” said Brown. “Finding the property was a coincidence. He most likely saw the security cameras and just thought they were for some rich recluse on the island. He was able to disrupt the signals while he dumped. The victims are another story.”

“We think that he was trying to get information about all of you when he killed his victims,” said Peters. “The sheriff is right. We think he killed the victims overseas, perhaps even while on the seas, and then dumped them here.”

Rachel leaned over to Chief, whispering in his ear.

“We still need to see if the plants downriver have a connection to this man,” she said quietly. He nodded, kissing her forehead.

“I’m sorry, Luke,” said the sheriff. “I was told this was necessary, and I can hardly argue with the feds.”

“It’s alright. We figured it out,” nodded Luke. “Next time, you might try just being honest with us. You’ll get much better results.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

With the toxic fill removed from the land around the island mansion, Grant and Matthew set to work on getting solid replacements in place. Working with Rachel and Lindsay, they carefully examined their options, checked them with common tide flows, storm surges from the last twenty years, and other elemental issues. When they found a contractor that could bring the fill almost immediately, Rachel tested the material twice and agreed that it would build the island up without toxicity.

Massive tugs pushed flat-bottomed crane tugs into place, lifting the materials off one boat and placing it around the island. Within four days, the land was already healing, and Claudette was playing once again. Although they'd set up surveillance teams, no one had come near the island since the last drop.

Downriver, teams split up to see if they could find the source of the DDT barrels and any sign of the rogue agent, Randy Goodwin.

At the first stop, Ryan, Dalton, and Milo drove the short distance to Burnside, Louisiana. The small French

colonial community was situated on the river, making it ideal for transporting goods.

“Mrs. Carter? I’m Ryan Robicheaux, and...”

“I know who ya’ are,” she smiled. “I’ve lived in this area my entire life. Besides, Matthew called and asked me to welcome you boys. Come on in.” She opened the door to the offices wider and welcomed them into her sanctuary.

“Thank you, ma’am. We really just need to know what sort of landfill would leave from this location,” said Milo.

“Here, it’s mostly aluminum waste that isn’t recyclable. Wildlife and Fisheries use this sort of stuff a lot to recreate coral reefs and such. There were cinder blocks and even large rocks in that pile. Everything was cleared for delivery. It should have created a great foundation below the land and allowed for wildlife to thrive.”

“Yes, ma’am, that’s what we were hoping to hear. It appears that one of the sites the contractor got the landfill from wasn’t quite as ethical as you.” She nodded, pursing her lips.

“Ah,” she said. “Well, I hate to tell you it’s rampant around here. We’ve got several plants in the area that have learned their lessons. At one time, this part of Louisiana had

some of the highest rates of cancer in the country. Although no one would admit it or say it, we knew that a lot of it was coming from our beloved chemical plants.

“It’s a love-hate relationship. They bring jobs, millions of dollars to our economy, everything you think they would. But they also bring silent killers that we don’t see or hear. Hell, my own husband worked at one downriver and died eight years ago of liver cancer. Didn’t drink a day in his life. He was a runner, up every morning at four to run seven miles. Ate healthy before healthy was a thing. You’ll never convince me it wasn’t the plant he worked at.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, ma’am,” said Ryan. He pulled out the photo of Randy Goodwin and showed it to her. “Does this man look familiar to you?” She stared at it a moment and then nodded.

“He came in here about six months ago looking for work. At the time, I needed a foreman, but he had no experience at all and couldn’t give me any references. I turned him away but told him to visit the plant over in New Roads. I’d heard they were hiring truck drivers.”

“Thank you for your time, Ms. Carter,” said Dalton.

“Listen, when Matthew or Irene call and say, ‘be nice to my boys,’ I’m nice. Besides, you’re all pretty easy on the eyes for this old girl. I welcome you back anytime.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Ryan.

“Which one do you belong to? I know the others are their ‘boys,’” she said with air quotes, “but you belong.” Ryan could only smile. Others saw what it took him years to see. He did belong.

“Antoine is my father, ma’am.”

“He was a good boy. They all were. Tell your grandparents I said hello.” Waving at the older woman, they sent a text to the others that Burnside was cleared.



Paige, Parker, Frank, and Duncan walked toward the man who was waving at them to get a move on. Paige could only grin as the three men with her intentionally slowed down.

“You guys like to piss people off, don’t you?” she smirked.

“I don’t like to be rushed,” said Frank.

“I got a business to run here,” said the gruff man.

“What can I do for you?”

“Sir, my name is Paige Robicheaux. This is Frank Robicheaux, Devon Parker, and Duncan Adams. A contractor working on the Belle Fleur property picked up some landfill from here a few months back and used it to support and add to the land on one of our outer islands.”

“So? What do you want me to do about it?” huffed the man.

“Hey, asshole, be nice to the lady, or we won’t be nice at all,” growled Duncan. “We just want to know if the materials that left here were cleared for landfill.”

“Of course they were!” he snapped. As Parker and Frank took a step toward the man, he took a step back.

“Sorry. My team checks everything. I don’t want the EPA down my throat, and if it’s goin’ back in the waters around my home, you can be damn sure I’m gonna make sure it’s cleared.”

“Sir, we only ask because there were four separate shipments of landfill sent to this location. One of them was obviously not cleared. We’ve had some serious issues with it,” said Paige.

“I’m awful sorry about that,” said the man, “but I can assure you it wasn’t my fill. We only take dirt, rocks, and the clean barrels sent from the plants upriver.”

“Barrels?” frowned Parker.

“Yea, they use them to transport their products.”

“Chemical products?” asked Frank.

“Suppose so,” said the man, scratching his jaw. “The barrels are cleaned at an industrial cleaning site. They have to pass their inspection before they come here. Folks buy ‘em all the time to use in their gardens for plants, or they fill ‘em with concrete and use ‘em as anchors for boat docks, swing sets, hell, just about everything.”

“But, when they leave here, they’ve been cleaned?” asked Paige.

“Yes, ma’am, I can guarantee that.”

“Thank you for your time,” smiled Paige.

“Hey, don’t know if you folks are gonna check them out, but there’s a place just across the border in Houston that’s been in hot water for years. Constantly reusing materials without cleaning them. Sometimes dumping the barrels with product still in it.”

“We have them on our list,” said Parker. “Do you recognize this man?”

“Hell, yea,” said the man, nodding. “Gave him a chance as a truck driver, and he showed up two days in a row and then skipped town. Boys that were trainin’ him said he asked a ton of questions but didn’t do a damn thing.”

“Thank you,” said Frank, looking at the others. “Seems our friend was searching for something and didn’t find it here.” Paige nodded.

“Hopefully, the others will have better luck.”



In the small town of New Roads, Louisiana, Clay, Kiel, and Mac spoke to the man who owned the tiny landfill. He was an old man who’d probably decided he couldn’t work his land any longer and converted it to a moneymaker.

“As you can see, most of what I get is just household trash. Old furniture, things folks don’t want. The things I send for building up levees and such are usually concrete blocks, old patio pavers, things like that. In the bunch you’re talkin’ about, I sent some old tires as well. Makes for good rebirth of the fishin’ areas.”

“So, you didn’t send any empty barrels?” asked Mac.

“No, sir. Ain’t my thing. Anything from the chem plants is usually old recyclable stuff. Empty boxes, plastic bags, or bottles, that kinda thing.”

“Sir, have you ever seen this man?” asked Clay. He took a step toward the old man and winced as his prosthetic hit a dip in the road, turning him slightly. The man eyed him, then grinned, pulling his pant leg up.

“Got mine in sixty-nine,” he smiled. “Stuck in a rainy jungle for four days. Just when I thought I was gettin’ out, bastards got me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir,” said Clay. “Mine was a bit later but similar. This is the photo.”

“Oh, hell yea. That boy was in and out of here several times wantin’ work. Had no skills, from what I could tell. Finally said I’d put him to work sortin’ things. You know, metal in one place, plastic in another, and so on. He worked here for a day. Asked me if I had any empty barrels he could have. I didn’t and never saw him again.”

“Thank you, sir. Hope your new leg is working as good as mine,” smiled Clay.

“Works as good as it can,” he grinned. “Ladies don’t seem to mind.” He winked at the men as they waved, leaving the property. Mac sent a text to the others, hoping that the last location would have better luck.



There was a small landing strip near Gulf Coast Waste. For Rachel, she wondered why in the world there would be a landfill and waste site near several wildlife refuge areas. It made no sense at all. Houston was at least ninety minutes away, maybe more. Beaumont was probably forty-five minutes away.

“Something isn’t right here,” she said to Cruz, Chief, Titus, and Tailor. When Chief asked for volunteers to fly with him and Rachel, hands went up. Tailor, Alec, Max, and Titus played rock, paper, scissors for the opportunity to bust a few heads. They all won.

“What do you mean, babe?” asked Chief.

“I mean, we’re sandwiched between three wildlife refuges. Why would they put a landfill and dump here? It makes absolutely no sense.”

“This is gonna be fun,” smiled Titus.

There was an enormous chain-linked fence with webbing that made it impossible to see. It stretched around the entire property. As they pulled up to the guard shack, Max noticed that the guard not only had a nine-millimeter strapped to his hip, he had an AK-47 slung over his shoulder.

“What the fuck are they dumping here?” muttered Chief.

“Help you folks?” he asked, staring into the vehicle.

“I’m here to speak with Mr. Fleming,” smiled Rachel. The guard barely gave her a look, staring at Chief behind the wheel and the four giants in the backseats.

“You go straight to the offices, no further. If you attempt to get behind the gates of the fill site, you will be shot on sight.” Alec opened the backdoor and unfolded himself from the seat while Max did the same on the other side. The guard rested the heel of his hand on his sidearm but was smart enough to swallow and back up.

“Just getting some air, little man,” smirked Alec. When Tailor and Titus got out of the third row, he knew he was screwed.

“Let’s make something perfectly clear,” said Max.
“We’re not here for any trouble, but if you so much as attempt to spell the word in our direction, I’ll put a bullet between your eyes before you ever even get that weapon out of the holster. And if you’re going to wave an AK-47 at a man, make sure the safety is on. You might shoot yourself in the foot.” Max reached over his head and flipped the lever on the right side of the weapon.

Taylor tapped the hood of the vehicle, telling Chief to drive on through and they would follow on foot. Taylor, Alec, Titus, and Max were sending a message. You want to fuck with us? That’s what we’re hoping for.

“It’s been a while since we got to play,” smirked Alec. Taylor rubbed his hands together.

“I know. I’m so excited. It’s like it’s Christmas all over again.”

“Can I help you folks?” said the man at the door of the mobile office building.

“My name is Rachel Stanton. I’m here to see Mr. Fleming,” smiled Rachel, stepping carefully from the vehicle, her hand in Max’s big palm.

“You always put on a show with bodyguards?”

“Only when dumbass guards at gates act like a weekend-wannabe soldier,” said Titus. “Next time he threatens the use of a weapon with someone, he better know who he’s dealing with.”

The man stared at the men, then back at the beautiful young woman.

“What do you want?”

“I want to know what was in the landfill sent on this order to this location.” She handed him the copy of the order, but he didn’t take it, barely glancing at it. “It should be fairly simple, Mr. Fleming. You’re required by law to disclose this information.”

“Our dump site is large. I have no way of knowing every tiny little thing that’s in a fill order. If I remember right, that was going to expand some land in a bayou. I’m sure it was fine.”

“Are you? Are you sure it was fine?” said Alec, stepping toward the man. “Because it was my family’s land, and the shit you sent was toxic.”

He started to back up but didn't get far. Chief reached for his ankle, pulling hard. He fell to his back against the steps, crying out in pain. Two men appeared at the door, both with weapons, but they weren't pulled. Max laughed, pulling his own weapon first.

"I wouldn't if I were you, children." The men raised their hands and stepped down out of the trailer.

"What was in the fucking delivery?" asked Chief again.

"Look, I get asked all the time for shit, and I don't argue if the money is right. I mean, a man has to make a living."

"Go on," growled Tailor.

"A guy came in and asked me for some barrels or buckets that might have contained toxic materials."

"And you just so happened to have some, right?" frowned Alec. Rachel turned, looking around the site. She saw just a hint of blue and knew the barrels were the same. Taking out a pair of gloves and a mask from her bag, she nodded at Titus to walk with her.

"Hey! Where is she going? She can't go over there!"

“She can go anywhere she damn well pleases,” said Chief. He pulled out Goodwin’s photo. “Was this the man?”

“Yea, that was him. He’s been back a few times since then, but I didn’t have any barrels. Those were for someone else.”

“So, you just sell this shit to whoever offers to buy it, right?” smirked Max. “Man, I wonder what would happen if there were a small fire here?”

“NO! No, you can’t do that!” yelled Fleming.

“Oh, I can. But you see, I have a conscience. I know that there are several wildlife refuges nearby, and I would like for those things to be available for my grandchildren.”

Fleming seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, but when the woman and her monster bodyguard walked back over, he frowned.

“Would you like to explain to me how you have seven full barrels of DDT?” she asked. The man shrugged, looking at the other men, who were now getting very nervous.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. As I said, I just got those, and someone else asked for them. I don’t check what’s on the inside.”

Rachel took out her phone and sent a fast e-mail to her old friends at the EPA, then sent a message to the Texas Department of Safety and the Texas Wildlife and Fisheries Bureau. Tucking it back in her purse, she stared up at the man.

“What now, babe?” asked Chief.

“We wait. People are on their way that are going to want to question Mr. Fleming. Until then, we sit right here so he can’t attempt to get rid of what’s there. I’m going to bet what’s behind the fence is even worse.”

“You bitch! You fucking...” He was silenced before he could even move. Tailor leapt the three steps, slamming his fist into the man’s face. When he went down and out, Max leaned forward to be sure he was still alive.

“Shame he slipped like that,” smiled Alec.

“I know,” frowned Tailor. “I was kinda hoping he’d get back up. Any of you boys wanna go at it? I’ll let you swing first. No? Damn.” Alec slapped his back, chuckling.

“It’s just no fun anymore, brother.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was hours later before the team flew back home. Fleming and his men were all arrested, and the landfill would be gone over with a fine-tooth comb. If Rachel was right, they would find barrels of DDT on the property, probably along with other banned chemical substances.

She didn't know how right she actually was.

“Rachel, good work yesterday,” said Cam. “Good work, all of you. Rach, the barrels did come back conclusive for DDT. They were completely full. Thirty-one more barrels were found on the site, along with almost a hundred barrels of Ricin.”

“Ricin? What's that?” asked Mac.

“It's a toxin used to poison people by killing their cells,” said Rachel. “It comes from the beans of castor oil, but believe me, it's not medicinal in any way.”

“There were also twenty-two barrels of VX. Initially, it looked like motor oil, but after testing it, they discovered it was VX. It's a nerve agent that makes your muscle contractions go out of control, and you usually die of

asphyxiation.” Cam looked around the room, letting all that soak in.

“What the fuck have we found?” growled Nine.

“We think that this landfill site was actually a distribution facility to the horrible and rich. Crime families, gangs, politicians, you name it would place an order, and it would be sent to them from the site. It was easy access via the Gulf and could get out fast without prying eyes,” said Luke.

“If Goodwin really has some sort of axe to grind with all of you,” said Rachel, “he might have been planning to report the chemical dumping off the island and make it look like you did it. When they opened the barrels and found, uh, previous associates, it would look like you all used it as a dumping ground for your kills.”

“We need to find Goodwin,” said Chief. “He’s out there, still trying to make his point, and he probably won’t stop. Somehow, he knew that island was ours, or at least close enough to our property that he was willing to bet it would land on us.”

“If he was former FBI, wouldn’t he be able to see some of the records and know about where you were located?”

asked Rachel. Everyone was quiet for a moment, thinking that over.

“They could find the address of G.R.I.P.,” said Doug. “The bureau, Homeland, and the CIA all have the physical location of our facility because we’re testing equipment for them. Seeing the island mansion, he might have thought it was a house for one of you.”

“Maybe,” said Cam. “Either way, we need to find him. He’s pissed off because we interfered in several of his investigations, in which he was dirty, by the way. Ace? Find out which investigations those were. If you can make some connections that way, we might know what he has up his sleeve.”

“This guy is killing the very people we want dead,” said Jean. “The list of people dead is like our own personal who’s who. They’re pedophiles, traffickers, organized crime, terrorists. It’s everyone. There’s no tie for them.”

“Yes, there is,” said Miriam. Jean looked at the woman and nodded. They said the word in unison. “Money.”

“It’s always money,” smirked Jean. “Of course. Somehow these criminals are tied together by money. Ace?”

“I know, I know,” he said over his shoulder. “We’re working on it now. Give us a hot fucking minute.” The others smiled at the tech team, their heads all down, pecking away on their computers.

“I think we need to bring those three feds back in here and ask them some questions,” said Luke. “We might have interfered in his deals, but what the hell were the feds doing in all this? If they couldn’t find their leak, why?”

“I’ll call the sheriff and get them back out here,” said Eric.

“Rachel? What do the test results look like for the island and the lands closest to the water?” asked Luke.

“Better. They’re not anywhere close to what the rest of the property is, but we’re getting there. I think it’s just going to take time. I did request that Grant bring in more fill from the last contractor for the south end of the property. That’s the lowest point, and technically, it’s a good forty feet below sea level.

“That’s not unusual for New Orleans, but we want to get our land at least to sea level to help avoid any catastrophic flooding. We’ll start with the south end, build it up, and then

build up the fences in that area, and then we can start on the other areas.

“Another thing I’m looking into is to use river engineering or a meander cutoff to reroute the water.” When the blank stares and ‘what the hell’ looks made her giggle, she started again.

“Listen, people have been using engineering for centuries to change the flow of waterways. The Mississippi didn’t look like it does now at all. I mentioned before that it used to look vastly different. Through levees, dams, and landfill, we could reroute some of the water away from Belle Fleur without harming the wildlife or dampening any of the outdoor activities that everyone loves so much.

“There would still be great fishing and hunting. You could still go for long boat rides through the bayous. The biggest change would be access to the smaller bayous from the river. But that could be a plus if you were trying to keep people out.”

“But it could keep our neighbors out as well when they need help,” said Matthew, standing in the doorway. Rachel turned to look at the handsome older man.

“Y-yes, that’s possible, but we would find other ways to allow them to get to you.”

“And my Mardi Gras boat parade?” asked Irene. “And what about our New Year’s float by? The Christmas parade? All of it happens on those waters right out there.” Rachel stared at the older couple for a moment and then realized what she was suggesting to them would change their way of living, their way of being a part of their community.

“I think I understand,” she smiled. “We’ll find another way to ensure the land is reinforced and the water remains as it is. If it shifts direction, it will be naturally by mother nature.”

“Thank you,” smiled Matthew.

“Alright, everyone, let’s try to enjoy the next few days for New Years. We probably won’t get anyone to respond right away with the holiday,” said Luke.

As they filed out of the auditorium, Sly pulled Luke back to read an e-mail. He frowned at it, then reread it twice.

“Is it credible?” he asked.

“The e-mail address is legitimate. Whether or not it’s credible is another story. But, if the sender is right, we need to get to them right away.”

“I’ll send Milo and Torro,” said Luke. “This shit never ends.” He heard the chuckling behind him and turned, giving a dirty look to his father, Nine, Ian, and Ghost.

“Same shit, different day, son. Same shit.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Unbelievable. Un-fucking-believable!” growled Goodwin. He watched the television report carefully walking around the landfill, talking about all the toxic waste found on the site.

“No shit, asshole,” he frowned. “I put it there.”

Although the owner is not releasing any names, he is asking for a plea bargain. According to authorities, had the chemicals leaked into the nearby wildlife refuges, it would have been disastrous for wildlife for decades to come.

“Big fucking deal,” he growled.

Decades. He’d given fucking decades to the bureau only to be shit on and spit on and then had them wipe their feet on his back. Years of working twenty-hour days away from his wife, well, ex-wife and daughter. Fucking kid wouldn’t even talk to him any longer.

His first bureau chief was so by the book you couldn’t squeeze a piece of tissue paper between his ass cheeks. The second was dirty to the core and taught him every trick in the book for skimming off the top of an op. A meal ticket made

by a machine you could buy out of a catalog. A hotel bill for a stay that never happened.

Seven years of that, and he had a nice little nest egg worth more than three hundred thousand. When he left, the next one was part honest, part look-the-other-way. He didn't last long, but none of them ever did. When the last one came in, they had their deal all worked out.

Goodwin would feed the marks just enough information that they could slip away, usually leaving a few of their men they didn't need behind. They'd drop a nice little check into an account for him and the boss. No harm. No foul.

Then RP became the go-to boys for the POTUS. Anything that he thought they could end without harming government personnel, he sent them in on it. Dozens of busts that took money from their pockets. When his idiot boss took one too many risks and RP brought him down, he knew his days were numbered.

Citing exhaustion and depression, he took an early retirement. His ex-wife was pissed, of course, because she no longer got the big checks. Good thing she didn't know about

his money in the other account. He chuckled to himself about that.

He hadn't seen his daughter since her high school graduation, and that was more than seven years ago. Now a young woman with a college degree, he guessed she was out there somewhere making a living for herself. As long as she didn't call him, they'd be okay.

He never got his son. Wanted one, but his wife tended to close her legs more than open them. He'd had his share of side-pussy, but they always wanted more. More time, more money, more jewelry, more everything. Prostitutes were too risky, so he satisfied himself with one-night stands in barrooms or hotels.

Yes, sir. His little account should be spilling over about now. A few hundred thousand more, and he'd have enough to hit the Greek Isles and live the rest of his life. Feeling the need to check the account, he logged into his bank and waited as the page came up.

"No. This can't be," he whispered to himself. Picking up his cell phone, he dialed the number of the bank and asked to speak with someone.

"Monterrey Bank of the South, this is Julie."

“Julie, I think there’s a problem. My account is showing a zero balance.” She asked him a few questions, and he attempted to remain calm.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Goodwin. This money was withdrawn last week by your confirmed second signer.”

“My what?”

“When you opened the account, you assigned one Lia Goodwin as an authorized signer.”

“Signer, not withdrawer!” he yelled.

“Sir, it’s one and the same. You gave her authorization to deposit, sign for documents, and withdraw money.”

“I want to file fraud charges,” he said.

“Mr. Goodwin, you can’t file fraud charges on someone you assigned as the second authorized signature. I’m sorry, sir. This appears to be a domestic matter. Is there anything else I can assist you with?”

He hung up the phone, fury, and panic rising in his chest. The fucking little bitch. He dialed her number, but when he heard the message, he wanted to vomit.

We’re sorry, this number has been disconnected.

Please try...

Calling his ex-wife, he got the same message. He knew that she'd remarried and moved to Maine, so she probably had no idea what her little bitch of a daughter did. Well, he knew, and he was going to find her.

When he did, she'd know that Daddy wasn't a nice man at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Milo and Torro flew into Nashville and drove the rest of the way north to Fountain Run, Kentucky, population two hundred and seventeen.

“Damn, they actually advertise that,” smirked Torro.

“I think it’s sad,” said Milo. “All these little towns used to thrive, and then big box stores took over in the larger towns, interstates were rerouted, and their whole world shifted. One day, the cities will be so big, they’ll push into the smaller communities, and they’ll just disappear.”

“I never thought about it like that,” said Torro. “I’m from L.A. There’s nothing little about my hometown.”

“Up there,” said Milo, pointing to the small bed and breakfast.

They parked the car on the grass, being that there was no driveway or parking lot. The old Victorian home had seen better days, the porch falling apart, and the whole place needed a good paint job. There was an older woman at the door, smiling with a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

“Afternoon, fellas. Come on in outta the cold,” she smiled.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Torro, grabbing a cookie. “Man, those are delicious.”

“You boys sit in there. I’ll get you some coffee. I think you’re here to see my guest. She said she had some friends coming to help her, poor thing. She’s been scared out of her mind. Sweetest little girl ever. Sit tight. I’ll go get her.”

Milo frowned at Torro, glancing around the sitting room. The furniture was worn, covered with blankets and quilts to hide the tears. There were dozens of old photos that showed the traffic that had once come by the old place.

“Those are photos of when folks used to stay in these parts for the big horse races. My husband, Gil, and I used to welcome dozens of people every summer.” She stared at the photos a moment, then set the coffee down and wiped her eyes. “She’ll be down in a minute. You boys let me know if I can do anything for you.”

Torro looked at Milo, knowing they both had the same thought. Shooting a quick text message to Grant, they gave the address of their location and snapped a few quick photographs. Torro stepped outside to photograph the outside

of the house and walk around. When Milo heard the creaking of the steps, he stood, waiting for their mystery writer to appear.

He wasn't prepared for what stepped around the corner. The young woman couldn't have been more than twenty-four or twenty-five. She had short, light-brown hair that kissed her chin and beautiful soft brown eyes. When she turned to see him, her hair swung away from her face, and Milo saw what she was covering.

A long nasty scar stretched from her cheekbone to the corner of her lip. It was old but certainly had been painful when she received it.

"A-are you from RP?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. My name is Milo Abbott. My partner, Torro, Niccolo Torres, but we call him Torro, is outside."

"Okay," she said shyly.

"You said you needed our help and that you might be able to help us with something we're currently pursuing."

"Someone. Someone you're currently pursuing."

"Right," he smiled, waving her to a seat. "Will you do me the courtesy of giving me your name?"

“Lia. Lia Goodwin.” Milo involuntarily raised a brow at the young woman. “Please, don’t hold that against me.”

“I would never hold it against you. Are you running from your father?” he asked.

“Yes.” Torro walked in, and Lia stood, hiding behind the chair as she lowered her head, forcing the hair to cover her scar.

“Hello,” said Torro softly. “I’m Nick. My friends call me Torro.”

“Nick, this is Lia. Lia Goodwin.” Nick stared at Milo, then gave a small smile to the woman, indicating for her to take a seat again.

“Why are you in the middle of Kentucky, Ms. Goodwin?” asked Milo.

“It’s just Lia. I knew my father would come after me, and I had to hide. Small towns are good, but nothing towns are even better.”

“Did he give you that scar?” asked Milo.

“Yes. But it was a long time ago.” Milo and Torro waited patiently, and she finally nodded. “My parents were going through a nasty divorce. My dad was abusive to my

mother, and I couldn't stand it. I was maybe eleven or twelve. I don't really remember much. She had his gun and was asking him to leave. He refused and grabbed a knife. I stepped between them just as he swiped."

"Fuck," muttered Torro.

"I knew he didn't mean it, but it didn't change the way I felt. Once he realized what he'd done, he put the knife down and left. Mom used that in court to ensure that he couldn't see me again. The bureau put him through anger management classes, which, ironically, only made him angrier."

"I'm so sorry," said Milo. "So, why are you running from him now?"

"I always suspected my father was dirty. When I left for college, I knew that I wanted to help others achieve their financial goals, and I became a financial manager. My mom had lived on a fairly meager budget since the divorce, but I was always really good at putting her money where it should be. When I went to college, my dad gave me some money, but I didn't tell him that Mom had saved enough for me to go without debt."

"That's fucking impressive," said Milo. She smiled, nodding.

“I think Dad was trying to make things up to me. He had an account that he said was an emergency account. He said if something ever happened to him, I was to drain the account and use it for myself.”

Milo did not like where this was going. He watched as Torro leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

“I never checked the account. Never. Then I heard from an Agent Zilow that they were looking for my father. They suspected him of being rogue and a bad agent. It kept festering and festering inside me. So...”

“You checked the account?” smirked Milo.

“Yes. I checked the account. There was a little under four million in it. My father could not have saved that much money. Not ever. So, I decided to check the deposit dates. They aligned to large cases that the FBI had at the time. Terrorist bomb threats thwarted, two hundred thousand deposited. Organized crime ring stopped. Three hundred thousand deposited.”

“What did you do?” asked Torro.

“I emptied the account.”

“Oh, shit,” muttered Milo. “Where did you put it?”

“Nowhere. Yet. I got it all in a bank draft. I need to deposit it somewhere, but I didn’t want to use my own account, obviously. It doesn’t matter any longer. He knows it’s me. I heard from my old employer that he’s been calling up there asking for me every few days. He must have gotten a hold of my stepfather and told him some bullshit because he gave him my cell phone, which I had to promptly toss.

“How long have you been here?” asked Torro, standing to look outside.

“Just since late last night.”

“I don’t see a car,” said Milo. “How did you get here?”

“I walked.”

“From the airport?” said Torro in surprise.

“Yes. I mean, people stopped along the way and offered me rides, and I took them when it was nicer older people, but I arrived around midnight. An old farmer from down the road was working late, clearing the snow from the area roads. He said Marie would give me a room.”

“Alright, we need to get the hell out of here,” said Milo.

“There’s more,” said Lia. Milo and Torro both looked at her, frowning.

“Honey, there’s always more. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jean and Miriam scoured the spreadsheets and banking ledgers for Randy Goodwin. After speaking with the FBI, they'd learned that no one had subpoenaed his banking records. When asked why they simply said they weren't interested in his financial records. Luke didn't accept that and pushed harder.

“Who made that decision?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” frowned Agent Brown.

“I mean, what idiot thought that looking at the banking records for a rogue agent suspected of killing people from the bureau's own most wanted list was not such a good idea.” Luke leaned forward on his fists, staring down at the three agents.

“It was Director Montgomery,” said Peters.

“He was the director two directors ago. Didn't one of you suggest that you pull the records on this guy with the next two directors?” he pushed.

“We did,” said Peters. “Look, I understand that you guys have stellar resources here and seem to be able to find

shit that no one else can find. But for the rest of us mortal good guys, we fight to even get the okay for a general background search. Budgets have been slashed, and if the suspect isn't a terrorist, domestic or international threat, the answer is no.

“We could have gone against orders, but you know as well as I do that's career suicide. We did what we could and what we could do was just good old-fashioned investigative and police work.”

Luke stared at the three men and nodded. He understood what they were saying, and it wasn't the first time they'd heard it. Something needed to change at the bureau, and the agency for that matter, if they were going to make a difference.

“Believe it or not, we do understand,” said Luke. “The men who founded this organization, our fathers, left for some of the very reasons you're talking about. Red tape, paperwork that never seemed to end, begging for resources when their teammates were dying around them. We do get it. Let me extend this branch right now. If you find yourselves in this shit again, you come to us, and we'll help. This man had an

agenda, and part of that agenda was to make us look like murderers.

“Now, this time, he wasn’t successful, but sooner or later, he could be. We’re going to help you find him, but if we find him before you do, don’t expect there to be a trial.”

Brown looked at his fellow agents and frowned. He didn’t want to kill Goodwin, but he damn sure wanted him to go to trial and get the maximum penalty. The problem was he wasn’t sure that the current administration would make that happen.

Sly whispered something in Cam’s ear, who then whispered in Luke’s. They both nodded and gathered their things.

“We’re done, for now, gentlemen. We may have a witness that can help you win this case, but we’ll be protecting the witness,” said Luke.

“Understand,” said Peters. “If you don’t tell us the name, we have no name to intentionally or unintentionally give to command.”

“Exactly,” smiled Eric. “We’ll walk you gentlemen out.”

Aiden, Noa, and Chris walked the men to the ATVs, driving them the long way through the paths to the ‘guest’ designated parking area. The one thing the sheriff had done right was bring them in the same way. It was part of what tipped Luke off in knowing that they weren’t his real deputies.

The men were so turned around they weren’t even sure which direction was New Orleans. Aiden smiled, pointing northwest. They watched them pull away, and Noa looked at the other two.

“You think they’re on the up-and-up?” he asked.

“I do,” said Chris. “They want this guy, and you could see their frustration talking about not being able to get the resources they needed. We all know what a cluster-fuck the bureau can be with the wrong leaders in. Maybe one day, they’ll have the right leaders.” Noa slapped his back, chuckling.

“Brother, I love your optimism.”



“Where did they take her?” asked Luke, walking out of the offices with Eric and Cam. Hex was coming toward them as well.

“You needed to ask that?” laughed Hex. “Your grandmother took her to the cafeteria. Thought she could use a hot meal and some beignets.”

“Lord, save me,” said Luke, rolling his eyes. He could see Milo and Torro seated at a table but couldn’t see a woman anywhere. When his grandmother walked up with a tray of food, the tiny person seated next to Milo moved forward, giving him a view of the girl.

“She looks awful young,” said Eric, frowning. Then he noticed the scar. “What the fuck is that from?”

“No clue, but we’re going to find out.”

“Now, you eat all you can,” said Mama Irene. “This is hot gumbo, perfect to warm you up. George made a roast beef au jus po’boy for you, a side of hush puppies, and beignets on the side.”

“Ma’am, I’m not sure I can eat all that,” said Lia.

“What did I say? No ma’ams, no Mrs. I’m Irene, Mama, or Mama Irene. That’s it.”

“Yes, m-Mama Irene,” she said awkwardly, shrugging her shoulders. Milo smiled down at her and nodded.

“Alright, you boys make sure she eats. I’m going to prepare the garçonnière that Ryan and Paige moved out of before the holidays. It’s gonna be cold. I’ll get the fire goin’ and put out some extra blankets. Milo? You walk that girl to the cottage before you leave. You hear me?”

“Yes, Mama Irene, I hear you,” he smiled.

“Grandma, that’s enough food for all of us,” said Luke, walking up to the table.

“Don’t test me today, Luke. Y’all already made me scale down my New Year’s Eve party. I’m not a happy woman right now. If you want to eat tonight, you’ll leave me be.” He bent down and kissed his grandmother, then lifted her hugging. She hated it. She didn’t like not touching the floor, and she swatted at him.

“Love you, Grandma,” he smirked.

“Damn boys, more unruly the older they get. I swear,” she muttered, walking out the door.

“Wow,” said Lia. “What was that?”

“That was Irene Robicheaux, the matriarch of this merry band of men, women, and children. We’re not really

sure who the children are yet,” smiled Hex. “Lia Goodwin, I assume.”

“You assume right,” she said, staring at the group of men. Thank goodness, a young woman walked toward her with a sweet face and a smile. Hex introduced the group and then took a seat.

“Maybe give the girl some room to breathe and eat her dinner,” said Rachel. “Hello, Lia. My name is Rachel Stanton. I’m the one that’s been studying the soil here.”

“Studying the soil?” frowned Lia.

“We haven’t had the chance to tell her,” said Hex.

“Okay, let me give you the short version,” smiled Rachel. While Lia ate her dinner, taking every bite carefully, savoring the flavors of the food with every bite, Rachel told the story. She started with how she met the team and then how she found the differences in the soil, and the finding it led to at the island mansion. She told her of what they’d found out about her father, and Lia seemed unsurprised by the facts.

“Then you already know that he killed those men?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so, Lia,” said Cam. “We were able to track everything back to him, including the use of the chemicals. I think at first, he wasn’t sure that this was our land, but because it was close to our research facility, he made an assumption, and it paid off. Or he thought it would.”

“He’s never been an honest man,” said Lia. “I wish I could say he was, but he wasn’t. The abuse of my mother started when I was around six and ended when I was around eleven. That’s when he gave me this.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and looked up at the table. Seated at a table next to them, two men and a woman looked their way.

“You might be able to get that revised,” said the handsome man. “Sorry, my name is Cruz. I’m one of the nurses and P.A.s here. This is my wife, Camille, and that’s another nurse, Doc.”

“Y-you think it can be fixed?” she asked quietly.

“Maybe,” he said carefully. “Why don’t we take a look at it while you’re here?” She nodded and then looked at the others at the table.

“I know what you’re thinking. He actually didn’t intend for this to happen. He was trying to get to my mother. When he realized what he’d done, he left. It doesn’t make it

right, but I know at least that he wasn't trying to kill his own daughter. At least not that time." She murmured the last line and looked down at the food once more.

"We understand that he hates us because we interfered with several of the ops he was working on and taking a cut," said Cam. Lia shook her head.

"I don't think that's all," she said. "I wasn't there. It was before I was born, but you saved my mom."

"What the fuck?" whispered Luke.

"Yea, she didn't know that you had saved her from her own husband. She was pregnant with me, and she was taking a tour of the National Gallery in D.C. There was a bomb threat, but Mom was in the ladies' room because she was pregnant with me," she grinned. "Anyway, she came out, had her headphones on, so she didn't hear the alarms. Three men came up and just lifted her and carried her out."

Luke knew that it would have been one of the older team members and looked around at the crowd now gathered. Baptiste, Stone, and Vince all gave a half-nod in his direction, letting him know that her story was correct.

They had been chasing a terrorist through the city that had planted several bombs. The last one was in the gallery. They couldn't neutralize the bomb, so they got everyone out. She had been the last one. Little did they know that the device would fail and not detonate. They got lucky, but there was no doubt that Goodwin knew his young pregnant wife was there.

“That was our team,” said Luke. “Do you think your father was trying to kill your mother? Did he know she was there?”

“He sent her,” she said quietly. “She was new to D.C., and he told her to go that day and explore. He'd actually recommended every location where there had been a bomb threat that day. She said she didn't figure it out until later when she was talking to one of the other wives in the bureau. The woman mentioned that her husband had worked the same case and then told my mom all of the bomb locations. She was never the same after that. She tried to get away, but it was like he wanted to torture her by keeping her there.”

“I'm so sorry, Lia,” said Rachel, reaching for her hand. The young woman just shook her head, her blunt, beautiful cut sweeping across her shoulders.

“I don’t understand it,” she said. “He was a good father when I was a little girl. He would take me to work with him sometimes. He would take me to breakfast on the weekends. We would go bike riding along the trails. He would always bring me gifts when he came back from any overseas trips.” Milo frowned at the woman.

“Do you have any of those with you?” he asked. She tilted her head at him with a wry grin.

“I’m young. I’m not stupid. No. I have only a few items of clothing. That’s it.” She pushed the tray of food away, blowing out a long breath. “I don’t think I can eat another bite. Is she going to be angry?”

“Nope,” said Eric, shoving the other half of the po’boy in his mouth. “It will be gone when she comes back.”

“Come on,” said Milo, “I’ll walk you to your cottage.”

“We’ll walk with you,” said Chief, taking Rachel’s hand. Lia stood from her seat and smiled at the huge crowd that had gathered.

“Thank you all for believing me. I’m not sure what to do with that check, but it can’t go to my father. It just can’t.”

“We’ll figure it out,” said Luke. “Tomorrow. Tonight, get some rest.”

They watched the young woman leave with Milo, Chief, and Rachel. Hex looked at all the men and exhaled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“This is beautiful,” said Lia, looking around the small cottage.

“They’re all historic and original to the property,” said Chief. “The island mansion we mentioned, where we found the barrels, it was actually built around the same time as the original house here. It’s been restored, along with all the garçonnères, some outer buildings, and now the sharecropper cottages are being restored.”

“Weren’t they shacks?” she frowned.

“Not on this property,” said Milo. “The Robicheaux family was well ahead of their time. They freed their slaves long before Lincoln said to do it. They were given the cottages. They were maintained by the Robicheaux family. They were paid fair wages. It’s why they chose to stay. They even fought to defend the property when the union soldiers came this way.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” she said, taking a seat by the fire.

“Are you cold?” asked Milo. He turned up the thermostat and handed her a blanket.

“Thank you. I guess I just can’t get warm from the inside out.” Rachel looked at the young woman as she stared at everything in the small space. “Is-Is it safe here?”

“Lia, it’s incredibly safe here,” said Rachel. “No one knows where we are. No one. Not even your father truly knew, and even if he tried to find us from where he dumped the barrels, he would most likely get lost in the bayou. There are cameras everywhere, defenses, and fences. Plus, you’ve got all these very handsome, very skilled men defending the property.”

She gave a small grin and nodded.

“Are you scared to be alone?” asked Rachel.

“Very,” she said, exhaling with a tear in her eye.

“That’s an easy fix,” said Milo. “There are two bedrooms in the cottage. I’ll run out to the island mansion and grab a bag. Rachel and Chief can stay here with you. You’ll take the loft bedroom, and I’ll take the one down here. Easy.”

“I don’t want to put anyone out,” she said.

“It’s not a bother,” said Milo, walking out the door.

“I’ve never lived alone,” she blushed. “I went from my mother’s home to rooming with someone in a dorm, then

sharing an apartment with two girls. I just got an apartment by myself and was considering getting a dog. I guess I'm a big twenty-five-year-old baby."

"Oh, honey, you're not a baby," said Rachel. "Living alone is scary, especially in this world. Plus, you have something to be afraid of. It's understandable. Why don't you let me show you the loft."

"Nope," said Chief, standing. "Sorry, Lia, my wife is pregnant with quadruplets."

"Holy crap!" said Lia.

"Yes," laughed Rachel. "Holy crap, indeed. However, my very over-protective husband doesn't seem to understand that I can do certain things for myself."

"Yea, but don't," said Lia. "Let him do it all. How about I make us some hot chocolate?"

"That sounds perfect," said Chief, "but let me."

He busied himself in the kitchen as Lia walked around the small cottage and then up into the loft. She couldn't get over the attention to detail in the beautiful space. Everything from the linens to the wall hangings and the rugs felt authentic for the space.

By the time she returned downstairs, having washed her face and freshened up, Milo was already back.

“That was fast,” said Rachel. She could tell that Milo must have run to the dock, taken the faster boat to the island, and literally tossed his shit in a duffel and run back.

“Well,” he huffed, “when a woman is scared, I move fast.”

“Interesting,” smiled Rachel. Chief looked at Milo, his eyes growing wide. No. No. No.

“Okay, babe,” said Chief, “let’s go.”

“Wait, we didn’t get our hot chocolate.” Chief grabbed her hand, heading to the door. He wrapped her shawl around her and waved at Lia and Milo.

“I’ll make you some at home.” Rachel waved at the couple and then frowned as Chief held her tightly to his side, moving toward their cottage.

“Why did you do that? I was enjoying talking to her,” said Rachel.

“Yes, babe, I know, but I think Milo is feeling that protective feeling that happens to all of us unsuspecting fools,” he grinned.

“A fool, huh?”

“Well, not a fool with you, babe, but you know what I mean.”

“Eric Ryan, I would very much like you to take me home, get into a bubble bath with me, let me taste that beautiful long wonderful cock of yours, and I need, desperately need, for you to return the favor.”

Chief stopped on the path, looking down at his wife. His wife. He grinned, still shocked by the realization that he was a married man with four daughters on the way. Carefully lifting her in his arms, he feathered her with kisses until they were safely inside their own cottage.

When the night was done, when Rachel was finally sound asleep, he felt the panic rising in his chest that he'd felt every night since he'd found out about the quads. He sucked in some deep breaths, using the exercises that Bree had given him. When his heartbeat settled, he looked at her sweet, sleeping face and smiled.

“It will all be okay. It has to be.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Michael Bodwick and Doug walked in the door of the meeting hall at the same time. Both wearing frowns, both holding a communication in their hands.

“What now?” asked Luke.

“We were trying to figure out if our three amigos from the bureau are on the up-and-up. Good news is they are,” said Michael.

“And the bad news?” asked Cam. Doug grinned at him. “There’s always bad news following good news, Doug. Lay it on me.”

“As promised, we didn’t go to the bureau chief, but all of this seemed a little unsettling considering how long Goodwin has been on the take. We talked to the POTUS, and he said he was aware of an investigation but nothing else,” said Michael. “Not unusual. I mean, this is something beneath him in the grand scheme of things.”

“Buuuut...” said Eric, rolling his finger.

“You children seriously need to learn patience,” growled Doug. “We went around him. We contacted some

folks at the agency, DEA, even went to the joint chiefs.”

“Fucking hell, the joint chiefs?” said Cam.

“Yes. This goes way beyond him and some former directors helping crooks, criminals, and terrorists.”

“Do we need to sit for this?” asked Luke.

“Maybe,” smirked Doug. By now, the members of the team were filtering into the room, all huddled around their senior statesmen. Even the senior leaders were listening intently.

“We’re not sure if Lia is aware or not, but her grandfather was also with the bureau. He was there during some of the worst times in America. JFK being killed, Vietnam, Bobby and Martin Luther King being shot, Nixon, the race riots. You name it, and Papa Goodwin was in on it.”

“In on it?” repeated Luke.

“The word was there was evidence to prove that he instigated or took part in fanning the furnace for all of the historical events that took place between 1962 and 1979, at which time he was killed. His son was just a boy but apparently had a desire to be an agent as well.”

“And no one raised a red flag with his father’s history?” asked Hex.

“No. No one because the hiring director at the time was his father’s old friend. He was in his last years at the bureau but apparently gave some advice to the young protégé and shared some highly confidential files. Files that would have implicated his father as a homegrown terrorist.”

“Wait, you’re telling me that this maniac has secret files on homegrown terrorism, and no one is even worried about it?” said Hex.

“Yes. They’re not worried about it because it’s history. Goodwin believes as long as he has them, his father’s reputation is intact, which is stupid since he’s been dead almost fifty years. What they’re more concerned about are the recent files Goodwin took from the bureau that implicate him in terrorism.”

“Holy shit,” muttered Luke. “We stumble onto this bullshit because of a sinking island and dirt that’s toxic.”

“Toxic because Goodwin made it that way,” said Chief. “He’s doing everything he can to push suspicion away from himself. The question would be, what sort of terrorist

activity is he involved in right now? What pot is he stirring up?”

“That’s a little easier to pinpoint. Kat contacted some of the old families that she had dealings with when her uncle was alive. According to them, Goodwin has made a name for himself in organized crime and terrorist cells by promising intel on what the agencies are doing. Now that he’s been labeled a traitor, he doesn’t have that intel any longer, and they’re pissed off,” said Michael.

“The families that Kat knew are not involved. They have a line, and it involves traitorous acts against America. I guess organized crime doesn’t count,” continued Michael. “Anyway, what they didn’t want any part of was terrorism. This communication is from a confidential source. I promised I would not reveal their name, and I will not breach that.”

“We get it, Michael,” said Hex, reaching for the papers.

“What is it?” asked Luke.

“It’s e-mails back and forth to Al-Qaida, Isis, and other known terrorist groups. He’s giving instructions on weak points in American borders, airline security breaches. Fuck, he even includes weaknesses in school security. Elementary

schools.” Hex looked at the others, his face paled. “What the hell.”

“He’s totally lost it. He probably needed the money that Lia took to fund his little operation. We need to make sure she doesn’t leave this property or have any contact with her mother or stepfather,” said Chief. The others all nodded, and Milo jerked his head to the door, indicating he would have the ‘talk’ with her.

“Uh, there’s more,” said Doug.

Hex, Luke, Cam, and Eric all turned and in chorus said, “Of course there is.”

“He has started a homegrown conspiracy organization called the 1776ers. Clever, I know. He feeds them conspiracy theories, ideals on how we could be more like Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan, taking the vote from women, immigrants, that sort of thing. They even advocate closing schools to girls over the age of twelve, mandatory head coverings for women, and denying them the right to drink or smoke.”

“I’d like to see them try that here with our wives,” smirked Ghost. The others all chuckled, but the look on Doug’s face was not one of mirth.

“This guy is serious. He wants to fire up middle America. This isn’t just about border walls or limiting immigration into this country. This is about shoot them on the spot, don’t ask questions, don’t bury them. Their name says it all. They want the same rights that our ancestors had in 1776. Women can’t own property. Arranged marriages are common. Dowries. No birth control. Slavery. Do I need to go on?” he asked the room.

The men shook their heads, frowning. Faith had once given a lecture that the next great threat to America would come from within her own borders. It was coming to fruition.

“How do we stop him?” asked Cam.

“You have to find him to stop him, and I’m not sure how to do that. You’re the experts. But,” he paused, “it might involve using his daughter. If he wants that money bad enough, he might actually go to her, or she could leave it for him at an undisclosed location, and we can put trackers on the cash.”

“She has a check,” said Hex.

“I know, but she could cash it. We can run it through our scanning systems, track him and the money without him

even knowing it. She's removed from the equation, and we find him."

"Why wouldn't we just pick him up when he picks up the money?" asked Chief.

"He won't trust a location unless it's public. We can't risk a shootout in downtown Chicago or somewhere. If it's crowded, he'll feel safe. He'll get the money, leave, and then we find him," said Doug.

"For someone who wasn't sure what to do, that's a helluva plan," smirked Hex.

"I listen to you children every now and then," smiled Doug.

"So, I'm assuming we have a system to place trackers on paper now?" asked Cam. Doug laughed, nodding his head. "What? It was a legitimate question."

"We can put trackers on a gnat's ass, my sweet boy." Doug turned, leaving the room, while Michael smiled at the team.

"This is a lot. More than we may be able to handle. There are hundreds of names on this list already in this

country. Others are Americans and have their right to freedom of speech and all that shit,” said Michael.

“No one has the right to commit terrorist acts,” frowned Max. “I’m happy to let people do their thing, but not when it threatens my country or my way of life and that of my family and friends. This asshole has to be stopped. Then, I think we have to go after the people on that list.”

Hex looked at the other members of the leadership team. He’d fought terrorists almost his entire career in the military. Did it ever end for them?

The answer was no. No. It didn’t end for them. That’s why they were in existence.

“Let’s talk to Lia and see if she’ll cash the check. If this is our only way of finding him, we have to take it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Rachel kneeled down, holding on to Matthew's forearm as she dug up samples along the shore. The tests from the other parts of the property were all back, and although she'd been able to identify most of the material in the soil, there were three very distinct, very unusual, yet-to-be-named composites.

Dropping a solution into the samples, she swirled it around and then stood, smiling at Matthew.

"The toxicity is neutralized. It's as if the land is coming back to life," she smiled.

"That's wonderful to hear," said Matthew, letting out a long sigh.

"You love this land, don't you?"

"It's the only place I've ever called home. Most folks live in four or five places in their lifetime. For me, it was always right here at Belle Fleur except when I was in the Army."

"Did you miss it when you were gone?" she asked, smiling at the handsome face.

“Something fierce, Rachel. I’m not a man that tends to cry, but those first few weeks were awful for me. It was like a piece of my soul was missing, and I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t realize how tied I was to this land, this property, the house, all of it! Back then, you couldn’t just e-mail home or even call when you wanted to. It was all old letters and postcards.

“I would write to my mama and daddy every day. I’d send a big packet of letters all at once so they’d have a bunch to read before the next ones came. Once in a while, I’d be in a rice patty or a piece of jungle that would remind me of bits and pieces of home. But it was the smells that I missed. Not just my mama’s cookin’, but the smells of the cypress after a good rain or the magnolias when they were in full bloom.”

“That’s so beautiful,” she smiled.

“There’s nothing like home, Rachel. Nothing. This land has had a member of my family on it for almost three hundred years now. I don’t know who was here before us, maybe a dinosaur if the pond is right,” he smirked, “but I know that I’m tied to it and my ancestors like a thread to my heart, straight to my soul.”

Rachel looked out over the bayou as an alligator swam past them, ignoring them as if they weren’t of interest. In the

distance, two cranes were standing on a piece of high ground as a brown pelican dove for his supper. She heard the croaking of the bullfrogs and soft winter cadence of cicadas.

There was something special, something magical about this land, and she couldn't put her finger on it. She couldn't even give a name to what was in the soil.

“Would you like to visit some of the other buildings with me?” asked Matthew with a sly grin. “I need to check on the work that Adele, her team, and Grant are doing. Some of them are two hundred and fifty years old.”

“I'd love that,” she smiled, then gave him a wink. “Am I allowed?”

“I think I'll cover for you with Chief. I've wiped his nose for him. He can let me have his beautiful wife for an afternoon of history lessons.” Matthew took her hand and gently helped her into the seat of the ATV. He never drove fast but took an even more leisurely pace as they wound through the paths. When he got to the family plot, he stopped and pointed to a grave.

“Martha Prudence Robicheaux,” read Rachel.

“She was my great-great-great aunt. A wonderful, powerful lady that was well ahead of her time. Her father tried to marry her off, but she didn’t find anyone worth giving up her freedom to. She ran this place by herself for years. Her brother is the one that built the island mansion.”

“Really? He didn’t run this place?”

“Nope. Martha was older, and she was more than willing to share the duties, but Irené knew that his sister was capable of handling this on her own, and he applauded her for going against the grain of the old south. They were definitely trendsetters.”

“It’s amazing what she did here as a woman in that time period.”

“I like her, Matthew. Tell her I said so,” whispered Martha to her nephew.

“Uh, yes, well, I know Martha would say the same about you. You’re a trendsetter. A strong woman with a great spirit. She would have liked you.” Rachel smiled at the strange comment and nodded.

“Come on, much more to see. Those buildings over there are the sharecropper cottages.”

“They’re huge!” she gasped.

“Yep. Another of Martha and her father’s ideas. They never felt that slavery was necessary. They didn’t like it at all but getting farmhands to work was nearly impossible out here back then. They bought the slaves, then laid out the rules. They got a home with furnishings, a monthly stipend to spend at the general store, a fair wage, and – their freedom.”

“Wow, did they take it?” asked Rachel.

“Every last one of them. When they realized that my ancestors were serious, they knew leaving was suicide. They would be captured, resold, and enslaved again. Here they had good work, good food, a nice place to live, and safety. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better than most of the country at that time.”

“I think it’s just remarkable. Was Irene from here?”

“No, she was from a ways up, Lafayette. She had family here in the New Orleans area, but her immediate family was all up that way.” He had a far off look on his face and then smiled at Rachel, a wetness to his eyes.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever met a couple more in love after so many years,” she smiled. “It gives me great hope,

Matthew.”

“Well,” he laughed. “It wasn’t all wine and roses, but we made it feel like it was. There were some lean times, but we never went without.”

“Will you tell me about it? Will you tell me about meeting Irene and bringing up fifteen amazing children?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll tell you the story one day if you’ll promise to keep my land healthy and prospering for years to come.”

“Whoa, that’s quite a promise to make, Matthew,” said Rachel. “I mean, you know what all could happen. Hurricanes, floods, fires, even earthquakes could change the land, and I wouldn’t be able to do a thing about it.”

“I know, I know,” he nodded. “But I know that if you’re here, it will have a better chance at survival.”

Rachel was quiet as the ATV pulled up in front of the cafeteria. People were entering the building, ready for their evening delight.

“What is this really about, Matthew? I’m not going anywhere. You know that. Chief and I are married. We’ve

got four babies on the way, God help us.”

“And he will,” smirked Matthew.

“Yes,” she laughed, “I suppose he will. I’m not going anywhere, Matthew, and for as long as I’m here, I’ll fight to make sure the land is healthy. But now you have to make a promise to me.”

“Anything,” he smiled.

“Well, it’s two promises. One that you’ll stick around long enough to teach my girls how to fish.”

“Done,” he laughed.

“And two, that one day you’ll tell me the story of you and Irene. I think we’d all like to hear it. Straight from you.” He nodded as Rachel kissed his cheek and went inside to meet Chief. He watched the crowds of his children laughing and filling their plates for a moment.

“One day. I’ll tell the whole story.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“I know it’s a lot of cash, Henry,” said Gaspar, “but the check is valid, and we need to do this.”

“Alright,” he said, shaking his head, “but it took a lot to get this much cash in our little branch. I hope you folks know what you’re doing.”

Gaspar, Nine, Alec, Eagle, and Hawk loaded the money, and under rifle and bulletproof armored vehicles, took it back to Belle Fleur and then out to G.R.I.P. to be treated. Forty-eight hours later, it was ready to go.

“So, all I have to do is call him and say I’ll leave the money for him somewhere?” asked Lia.

“That’s all, honey,” said Rachel, holding the girl’s hand.

“What if he wants to know where I am?” she asked.

“Don’t tell him,” said Chief, “but let him know that you’re under the protection of RP. He probably already knows that, but you telling him will let him know he can’t get to you.”

“If he knows where I’m leaving the money, won’t he just be waiting for me?” she asked. Milo smiled at her, nodding.

“Smart girl. You’re not going to call him until we’re in the location. You’ll tell him where to meet you and what time. Once we have it all set, all of us watching, we’ll make sure we see him coming in. He can see you drop the money, and we’ll get you out of there before he can get to you.”

“But, but what if he does. Get to me. What then?”

“He won’t,” said Milo, squeezing her hand, “but if by some strange twist of fucked-up fate he does. We will come after you. You will not be alone.”

Lia stood, walking around the meeting space. She stared out the windows as rain began to fall again. It was New Year’s Eve. She was supposed to be out with friends, dancing, having champagne, and toasting to another year of resolutions that would be broken.

Instead, she was running from her father and hiding out at a top security agency. They’d allowed her to call her mother to ensure that she and her stepfather were safe. Their cabin was remote, but it was well protected by several large sled dogs and a security system. Turned out her stepfather was

a retired agency man that met her mother while investigating dear old Dad.

“Okay. What do I say?” she said, turning to the room.



Goodwin wrote out the list of all the people he would need to track down his daughter. He was fairly certain she'd taken refuge with RP, but even they could be found with enough money and influence.

The problem was, right now, he had no money. She had it all. That's all he wanted. Once he had that, she could live her pitiful existence at whatever stupid fucking job she took at the encouragement of her mother.

Fucking bitch. After the unfortunate incident with the kitchen knife, one he did regret, he found out that she was already seeking help from the agency and bureau boys. That was the end for him. Sooner or later, if he stayed, she would be digging into this business. A year later, he learned she had remarried one of the agency's finest. A fucking spy.

Unfortunately, that fucking spy was good at his job and had her protected and away from the public. That was fine. He didn't want her. He wanted his daughter and his money.

Setting the pen down, he stared out the window of the small hotel room. Fortunately, he hadn't been a total idiot with the money. Yes, she'd gotten the bulk of it, but he'd learned with the bureau to always have passports and cash at the ready.

He jumped, hearing his cell phone ring. Looking down at the ten-year-old face of his daughter, he hit speaker.

"Lia, nice of you to call," he growled.

"Hi, Dad. I guess you know why I'm calling."

"You have something of mine, and I want it. I won't hurt you. You're my daughter, but you took something I need."

"I know, Dad. I was scared and nervous. I thought I was going to help you invest it, and then I realized... It doesn't matter what I realized."

"Where are you?"

"I'm being protected by RP, Dad. What you're doing scares me, and I just needed to be somewhere safe."

"Well, I guess I deserve that for trying to place blame on them," he grinned. "Are you going to give me my money, Lia?"

"Yes. That's why I'm calling. Where are you?"

“Uh, uh, uh,” he smiled. “You first.”

“I’m not trying to play games, Dad. I just need to know where to bring the money. I cashed the check, and it’s all cash in a duffel bag.”

“If you come, Lia, it had better be alone, or I won’t hold up my end of the bargain. I’ll shoot you if you’re with RP.”

“They don’t know I’m coming, Dad.”

“Alright. Chicago.”

“O-okay. I have to get there, but I’ll call you again when I’m there.” She was quiet for a long moment, then spoke again. “I don’t understand what you’ve done, Dad. I never will, but you’re still my father, and a small part of me still loves you.” She hung up, and he stared at the phone for several seconds.

“And that’s where you made your mistake.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

With rooms booked at the Hyatt Regency under the guise of the National Dog Walker's Convention, thirty men checked in with one woman and a very large duffel bag. And no dogs. There was more than a foot of snow on the ground, with another six inches predicted for tonight. Chicago was no fun in the winter.

The plan was to make the drop at Millennium Park beneath the Bean. It would be crowded in spite of the snow, and she could be whisked away.

“Are you ready?” asked Milo.

“I guess so,” she said, twisting her hands.

“It's all going to be okay. Do everything we say, and you'll come back safe and sound,” said Chief. He looked at Hiro, Ace, and Pigsty and smiled. “Let's go.”

With the other men already positioned around the park, they knew they were well covered. In the windows of several nearby buildings were Hawk, Eagle, Hex, Nathan, and Joseph, watching for their man.

“God, it’s so cold here,” shivered Lia. She knew the others could hear her in the communications device, and she heard the reassuring voice of Milo.

“It is Chicago in January,” he said with a chuckle. “Just do what you need to. Drop the bag under the northwest curve of the Bean and step away.”

“Alpha team, I have him. He’s making his way toward Lia.”

“Move, Lia! Move now, honey,” said Milo. She picked up the pace and found the spot to drop the bag. Turning, she ran in the opposite direction, pushing through the crowds.

“He got the bag. Checked it. He’s after our girl,” said Eagle.

Goodwin could see his daughter ahead of him. She was running, and she had every reason to. He’d changed his mind about letting her live. She betrayed him, and he wasn’t about to stand for that.

“Money is tracked to Charlie One,” said Eagle.

Goodwin yanked on the hood of his daughter’s coat and twisted her around.

“Got a problem, buddy?” asked Pigsty. He stared at the man wearing the blunt-cropped wig. Shaking his head, he turned around and went the other way. Ahead, he saw the same coat and haircut. Running to catch up, he grabbed the woman’s arm and turned her.

“Lia...”

“I’m not Lia, dude, but you’re gonna wish I was,” said Hiro.

What the fuck? What the hell is happening, thought Goodwin. There she was. Running like the fucking cowardly double-crosser she was. Racing toward his daughter, she suddenly stopped and turned. Another male face stared at him.

“Need some help?” growled Ace.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “What the hell is this?”

“This is how RP operates,” said Hex, walking slowly toward him with his rifle pointed at him.

They’d already cleared the park, letting the Chicago PD know what they were doing. Behind him, he looked to see

ten more men. In front of him, another six. He was certain there were more, but he didn't see them.

“Evening, Agent Goodwin,” said Agent Peters. “Nice to finally meet up again.”

“You little snot-nosed piece of shit. Couldn't get me on your own like a man. Had to call in the big guns.” Peters, Brown, and Zilow laughed.

“Not ashamed to admit to needing a little help,” said Zilow. “Besides, I don't call this a little help. I call it big help.”

“You can take me in, but I'll be out on bail in no time. My organization will make sure of it,” he said, holding his hands behind his back while Zilow zip tied him.

“Oh, you mean this organization,” said Hex, flashing the list in front of him. Goodwin tried not to show any signs of surprise, but it was fucking disturbing to think how they'd gotten all those names.

“Do I at least get to see my traitorous daughter?” he asked. Milo walked toward them. Lia tucked safely behind him. “This your boyfriend?”

“We only met a week ago, Dad. I’m sorry. I meant what I said. I do love you, but I can’t condone what you’ve done. Not to me, not to Mom, and not this country.” He laughed, shaking his head.

“Another misinformed do-gooder with unrealistic views of the shithole country you live in.”

“If it’s such a shithole, why didn’t you just leave?” asked Chief.

“Because it wasn’t always this way, and I was going to make sure it returned to the days of glory.”

“Fascinating,” nodded Chief, frowning at the man. “If that’s the case, we could give you a little taste of the former glory. You’ve been found guilty by this group of citizens. We’ll hang you in the town square.”

For a moment, his face paled, then he realized this was RP. They wouldn’t kill him in the open.

“Sorry, boys,” smiled Brown. “We have to take him in. Bureau Chief, Agency Chief, and the POTUS want to have a chat with him. He’s not going anywhere. No bail. We’ve been guaranteed.”

Parker, Aiden, Dalton, and Frank walked with the agents toward their car, ensuring that no one would get to Goodwin. As he was being pushed into the backseat, shots rang out, blood and brain matter splattering across the backseat of the car.

“Who the fuck fired?” yelled Peters.

“It wasn’t us,” said Hex.

“Up there,” yelled Chief. “In the window of that building!” Ten men ran toward the building, racing up to the floor where the shooter was spotted.

Lia just buried her face in Milo’s coat, not wanting to see the gruesome remains of her father. She knew the RP men hadn’t shot him. But someone did.

“It’s okay, honey,” said Milo, rubbing her back. She just cried, nodding her head against his chest.

While chaos rained around them, Chicago PD and fire showed up, along with ambulances that weren’t needed. The coroner took Goodwin’s body away with Brown and Zilow while Peters waited for the RP men to return.

“A few shells, that’s all,” said Eagle, handing the shells over to Peters. His phone pinged, and he looked down at the

message.

I did you a favor.

“What the fuck?” he muttered, holding it up to the others. “Unknown number.”

“If you give me the phone, I may be able to trace it,” said Pigsty. Peters grinned at the other man, knowing his capabilities.

“It’s a bureau phone. I can’t. But if we find out who it was, we’ll let you know.” He started to leave, then turned back to them. “You were right. We should have come to you for help in the beginning. Thank you for being so willing to work with us. I won’t forget it.”

Hex and Cam nodded at him as he left. Milo was still holding a crying Lia.

“Let’s get back to the hotel. We’ll get a good night’s sleep and head home in the morning,” said Chief. “I have four cribs to put together.” The men all chuckled, and Luke smiled.

“Don’t worry, brother. We’ll help.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Seven months later

Milo waited with the others while Rachel and Chief went back to the delivery room. He wished Lia would have stayed on, but she said she needed to get her head on straight before deciding what she wanted to do with her life. She moved to Maine to spend time with her mother and stepfather. They e-mailed one another and talked on the phone, but he missed her more than he thought possible.

“Why does she have to have a c-section?” asked Chief, looking frightened for his wife.

“Because she’s giving birth to four children, Eric Ryan,” grinned Gray. “Now, you can put a gown and mask on and come in, or you can stand out here and wait.”

He thought about it a moment, then Lena and Kelsey shoved the gown at him.

“Put the damn gown on,” said Lena. “God! Are you that dense? Your wife needs you. Get in there.”

“Short straw draws catcher,” said Cruz. Doc and Wilson stared at him. “What? You know he’s gonna faint

when she cuts her open.”

“Cuts her open!” screeched Chief, weaving back and forth. Cruz grinned.

“Told you.”

It was close several times, but Chief didn't faint. However, each time one of his daughters was pulled from his wife's enormously protruding belly, he couldn't believe the miracle before him. Four beautiful identical girls. Forty fingers. Forty toes. Heads full of soft brown hair. They all weighed slightly less than four pounds but were healthy otherwise.

Thirty-five weeks she'd been able to carry them. Far longer than they expected. When they were cleaned, Mama was sewn up and wheeled to her room. Four little carriers were brought in. Lights shone down on them, tightly wrapped in their pink blankets with pink caps.

The maternity rooms at the clinic had been enlarged to accommodate the masses that would come to visit. As the women oohed and ahhed over the babies, Grace looked at her son and daughter-in-law.

“Do you have names yet?” she asked.

“We do,” smiled Chief. “This is Eleanor. We’re going to call her Ellie. Madison, we’ll call her Maddie. Emelia, it’s enough. And this little one is Magnolia. The smallest of them all. Delicate like the flowers that grace our home.”

“They’re beautiful,” said Ghost. He kissed his daughter-in-law’s forehead, smiling down at her. He picked up Eleanor as Grace held Madison. Mama Irene took Magnolia, and Emelia was in the big arms of Matthew. He smiled down at the soft, pink skin of the infant in his arms. So tiny, so precious, so fragile.

“I believe it’s time for a story.”

EXCERPT from MATTHEW

He stopped and wondered how all this came to be. The land, the houses, the children. Looking at his beautiful wife, the only woman he ever truly loved, he knew the answer. So many lessons, so many trials and tribulations. So much joy and laughter and love.

One man should not have been so blessed.

Yet here he was. He looked down at the sweet baby, then back up at the faces of those in the room. Faces that he loved, called his own.

“Parts of this story will be hard to hear,” he started. “Some of it will be new, even to my own children and wife. But I suppose when a man gets to be my age, it’s time to tell the story. It will take a while. It’s not something I can tell in one sitting. I’m too old for that.”

The room chuckled, but they all listened. Some sat in chairs, others sat on the floor, ready for their bedtime story. He smiled at them, realizing that he had their attention. Not something he often got when they were all so busy.

“I suppose, like all stories, I’ll start at the beginning.”

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 | 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 | | |
| 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 | | |
| 34 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Cade Norgenson | Cassidy Pechkin | | |
| 35 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Bodhi Norgenson | Vivienne Green | | |
| 36 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Magnus Bridges | Addie Patterson | | |
| 37 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Hex Vernon | Gwen N'hana | | |
| 38 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Wade Slater | Hannah Evers | | |
| 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 | | |

OTHER BOOKS BY MARY KENNEDY YOU MIGHT ENJOY!

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| <p><u>REAPER Security Series</u></p> <p><u>Erin's' Hero</u></p> <p><u>Lauren's Warrior</u></p> <p><u>Lena's' Mountain</u></p> <p><u>Sara's' Chance</u></p> <p><u>Mary's Angel</u></p> <p><u>Kari's Gargoyle</u></p> <p><u>Rachelle's Savior</u></p> <p><u>Adele's Heart</u></p> <p><u>Tori's' Secret</u></p> <p><u>Finding Lily</u></p> <p><u>Montana Rules</u></p> <p><u>Savannah Rain</u></p> <p><u>Gray Skies</u></p> <p><u>My First Choice</u></p> <p><u>Three Wishes</u></p> <p><u>Second Chances</u></p> <p><u>One Day at a Time</u></p> <p><u>When You Least Expect It</u></p> <p><u>Missing Hearts</u></p> <p><u>Trail of Love</u></p> <p><u>My SEAL Boys</u> (connections to the REAPER Series)</p> <p><u>Ian</u></p> <p><u>Noa</u></p> <p><u>Carter</u></p> <p><u>Lars</u></p> <p><u>Trevor</u></p> | <p><u>Steel Patriots MC Series</u> (cont.)</p> <p><u>Tristan – Book Thirteen</u></p> <p><u>Ivan – Book Fourteen</u></p> <p><u>Griff – Book Fifteen</u></p> <p><u>Bryce – Book Sixteen</u></p> <p><u>King – Book Seventeen</u></p> <p><u>Grant – Book Eighteen</u></p> <p><u>Striker – Book Nineteen</u></p> <p><u>REAPER-Patriots Series</u></p> <p><u>Dex – Book One</u></p> <p><u>Jean – Book Two</u></p> <p><u>Jax – Book Three</u></p> <p><u>Hunter – Book Four</u></p> <p><u>Carl – Book Five</u></p> <p><u>Sniff – Book Six</u></p> <p><u>Cam – Book Seven</u></p> <p><u>Keith – Book Eight</u></p> <p><u>Eric – Book Nine</u></p> <p><u>Joseph – Book Ten</u></p> <p><u>Ryan – Book Eleven</u></p> <p><u>Nathan – Book Twelve</u></p> <p><u>Ben – Book Thirteen</u></p> <p><u>Sean – Book Fourteen</u></p> | <p><u>REAPER-Patriots Series</u> (cont.)</p> <p><u>Hex – Book Thirty-seven</u></p> <p><u>Wade – Book Thirty-eight</u></p> <p><u>Sam – Book Thirty-nine</u></p> <p><u>Tiger – Book Forty</u></p> <p><u>Jalen – Book Forty-one</u></p> <p><u>REAPER-Patriots Christmas: Do You Believe?</u></p> <p><u>Strange Gifts Series</u></p> <p><u>Dark Visions</u></p> <p><u>Dark Medicine</u></p> <p><u>Dark Flame</u></p> |
|--|--|--|

[Fitz](#)

[Chris](#)

[O'Hara](#)

[Steel Patriots MC Series](#)

[Ghost – Book One](#)

[Doc – Book Two](#)

[Whiskey – Book Three](#)

[Zulu – Book Four](#)

[Gunner – Book Five](#)

[Tango – Book Six](#)

[Razor – Book Seven](#)

[Ace – Book Eight](#)

[Hawk & Eagle – Book Nine](#)

[Skull – Book Ten](#)

[Blade – Book Eleven](#)

[Noah – Book Twelve](#)

[Kiel – Book Fifteen](#)

[Ian – Book Sixteen](#)

[Adam – Book Seventeen](#)

[Marc – Book Eighteen](#)

[Wes – Book Nineteen](#)

[Aiden – Book Twenty](#)

[Parker – Book Twenty-one](#)

[Dalton – Book Twenty-two](#)

[Frank – Book Twenty-three](#)

[Hiro – Book Twenty-four](#)

[Dom – Book Twenty-five](#)

[Bron – Book Twenty-six](#)

[Fitch – Book Twenty-seven](#)

[CC – Book Twenty-eight](#)

[Callan – Book Twenty-nine](#)

[Duncan – Book Thirty](#)

[Remy – Book Thirty-one](#)

[Garrett – Book Thirty-two](#)

[Robbie – Book Thirty-three](#)

[Cade – Book Thirty-four](#)

[Bodhi – Book Thirty-five](#)

[Magnus – Book Thirty-six](#)

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|

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,

I love hearing from you and encourage you to visit my website insatiableink.squarespace.com. Let me know your thoughts and ideas on new books or expanding on characters. It's also a safe space to give your own feelings, like those of the characters. I love reading about how you relate to the stories because as we all know, there's a little of each of them within us.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope you enjoy other books in my collections.

Explore... and enjoy!