

Mary Kennedy

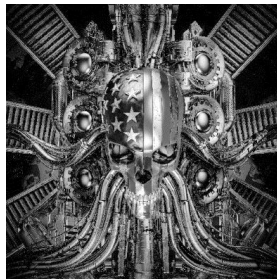
IRISH

REAPER-Patriots:  
Book Fifty-Four

**IRISH**

**REAPER-Patriots**

**Book FIFTY-FOUR**



**Mary Kennedy**

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# MAP of Belle Fleur and Cottage

## Assignments

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

**G1-8 = Garçonnière**

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

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



### COTTAGE Assignments

<b><u>1</u></b>	Miller & Kari	<b><u>36</u></b>	Gunner & Darby	<b><u>G3</u></b>	Pork	<b><u>97</u></b>	Jalen & Stormy
<b><u>2</u></b>	Alec & Lissa	<b><u>37</u></b>	Ghost & Grace	<b><u>G4</u></b>	Hex & Gwen	<b><u>98</u></b>	Chase & Kennedy
<b><u>3</u></b>	Gabe & Tory	<b><u>38</u></b>	Zulu & Gabi	<b><u>69</u></b>	Kiel & Liz	<b><u>99</u></b>	Sam & Mia
<b><u>4</u></b>	Gaspar & Alex	<b><u>39</u></b>	Doc & Bree	<b><u>70</u></b>	Joseph & Julia	<b><u>100</u></b>	Milo & Lia
<b><u>5</u></b>	Raphael & Savannah	<b><u>40</u></b>	Paul & Elizabeth	<b><u>71</u></b>	Wes & Virginia	<b><u>101</u></b>	Hiro & Winter
<b><u>6</u></b>	Baptiste & Rose	<b><u>41</u></b>	Luke & Ajei	<b><u>72</u></b>	Dalton & Calla	<b><u>102</u></b>	Ryan & Paige
<b><u>7</u></b>	Antoine & Ella	<b><u>42</u></b>	Fitz & Zoe	<b><u>73</u></b>	Nathan & Katrina	<b><u>103</u></b>	Chase & Maeve
<b><u>8</u></b>	Ivan & Sophia	<b><u>43</u></b>	RJ & Celia	<b><u>74</u></b>	Keith & Susie	<b><u>104</u></b>	Duncan & Lindsay
<b><u>9</u></b>	Tristan & Emma	<b><u>44</u></b>	Carter & Ani	<b><u>75</u></b>	Marc & Ela	<b><u>105</u></b>	JT & Kennedy
<b><u>10</u></b>	Luc & Montana	<b><u>45</u></b>	Bull & Lily	<b><u>76</u></b>	Jake & Claudette	<b><u>106</u></b>	Torro & Melanie
<b><u>11</u></b>	King & Claire	<b><u>46</u></b>	Trev & Ashley	<b><u>77</u></b>	Frank & Lane	<b><u>107</u></b>	Bron & Mila
<b><u>12</u></b>	Sly & Suzette	<b><u>47</u></b>	Whiskey & Kat	<b><u>78</u></b>	Ian & Aspen	<b><u>108</u></b>	Fitch & Carsen
<b><u>13</u></b>	Rory & Piper	<b><u>48</u></b>	Tailor & Lena	<b><u>79</u></b>	Doug & Miguel	<b><u>109</u></b>	Bogey & Alice
<b><u>14</u></b>	O'Hara & Lucia	<b><u>49</u></b>	Angel & Mary	<b><u>80</u></b>	Dom & Leightyn	<b><u>110</u></b>	
<b><u>15</u></b>	Titus & Olivia	<b><u>50</u></b>	Bryce & Ivy	<b><u>G5</u></b>	Remy &	<b><u>111</u></b>	Tanner & Mic

					Charlotte		
<b><u>16</u></b>	Max & Riley	<b><u>51</u></b>	Wilson & Sara	<b><u>G6</u></b>	Magnus & Addie	<b><u>112</u></b>	Irish
<b><u>17</u></b>	Stone & Bronwyn	<b><u>52</u></b>	Mac & Rachelle	<b><u>G7</u></b>	Chipper	<b><u>113</u></b>	Mo & Ophelia
<b><u>18</u></b>	Jazz & Gray	<b><u>53</u></b>	Nine & Erin	<b><u>G8</u></b>	Teddy	<b><u>114</u></b>	
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## CHAPTER ONE

Connor Patrick Kelly stood in the middle of their tiny living room. He was wearing his favorite pair of overalls with his Boston Red Sox t-shirt and black Chuck Connors tennis shoes. His red hair was longer than usual, flopping into his eyes.

He stared at his mother standing in the doorway of the one-bedroom apartment. She had a torn leather suitcase hanging from her hand. She anxiously stared out the ripped screen door. From their doorway and tiny front stoop, if they twisted and turned just right, you could see Massachusetts Bay on a clear day. If you were really lucky, you could see Minot Lighthouse, her lamp guiding ships as she'd done for almost two hundred years.

But his mother wasn't looking for those things. He wasn't sure what she was looking for in little Cohasset, Massachusetts, but it wasn't the water or the lighthouse.

"Where are you goin', Mama?" asked the red-headed six-year-old boy. She turned with pain in her eyes, a sad expression on her face. Even at six, Connor could see that she was sad. Then again, she seemed sad all the time. At first,

Connor thought it was his fault, but then his father explained that sometimes she was sick and that's why she was sad.

"I don't know, Connor. Just a short trip."

"What are you lookin' for?" he asked.

"Connor, not so many questions," she said, not looking at him. He swallowed his tears, knowing that she was getting impatient with his questions. Turning to see his sad face, she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Connor. I'm watching for your daddy. When I see the bus let him off, I'll be leaving."

"Will you be back?" he asked.

She said nothing, and Connor just looked down at the small toy car that his father had brought home for him a few weeks ago. It was the coolest car in the whole wide world because he had the coolest dad in the whole wide world. He was tall and had lots of muscles, not like Joey Mancini's dad. His dad had a big fat belly and always smelled like sausage. His father also had the same color hair as he did, and like Connor, he was always happy and always laughing.

"Your father will be home in a minute, Connor," she said, looking back at him. "You sit here and be a good boy. Don't move and don't go outside. Okay?"

“Okay, Mama.”

Connor watched as his mother opened the door. He heard her heels clicking on the steps, and he stood at the screen watching her. She didn't walk down the road toward his father. Instead, she went behind the house and toward the alley. He ran to the window and watched as she continued behind their house.

Why would she go that way? There wasn't anything that way except the bus comin' around to the street behind them. He ran back toward the door and spotted his father. He had a big smile on his face, as always, whistling a tune. His mother told him not to leave, but Connor was scared. He opened the door and ran down the steps and down the street toward his dad.

Sean Kelly spotted the flopping red hair of his son running to him and laughed. He knelt in the street, waiting for the boy to get to him.

“There's my man!” he said, picking his son up and squeezing him. He looked behind Connor and didn't see his wife. That pit that had been building in his stomach just widened. “Where's your mother?”

“Gone,” he said. Sean’s face sobered, and he looked at his son again.

“Connor, what do you mean, gone?” he asked.

“She had a suitcase with her and told me to wait at the door for you. She went down the alley,” he said, hugging his father.

Sean patted his son’s back. It wasn’t a huge surprise to him. His wife never wanted to be a wife and mother, at least not with him. She wanted a wealthy husband that would give her whatever she wanted. Although they never spoke of it, their marriage had been going downhill for some time. He just never suspected that she’d walk out on Connor.

“Am I a bad boy?” asked Connor with tears in his eyes. Sean stared at his son.

“Why would you think such a thing? You’re the best boy I know.”

“Cuz Mrs. Liffey left Mr. Liffey because she said Toby was a bad boy, and she couldn’t handle him.” Sean laughed, shaking his head.

“Connor, Mrs. Liffey was the fifth Mrs. Liffey in ten years, and Toby is a bad boy. Actually, he’s a bad young man

at nineteen now. No woman would be able to manage that kid. You are perfect. You've done nothing wrong."

"What will we do for dinner?" asked Connor.

"I think I can manage to make us some dinner," smiled Sean.

"Will you find Mama?" Sean thought about that a long time. He wasn't quite sure how to answer it, then decided he would only give his son honesty.

"No, Connor. Your mama doesn't want to live with us anymore, and if she doesn't want to do that, then I won't make her. Besides, she left me the best thing in the whole wide world that she's ever given me."

"What?" asked Connor excitedly.

"You, lad. You."

It was funny. Connor barely missed his mother. In the first few weeks, it was little things that reminded him she was no longer there. His father worked a lot and sometimes forgot that Connor needed clean clothes. When Mrs. Fishbein from downstairs offered to help out, she made sure his clothes were clean and he got to and from school on time.

By the time he was ten, he was doing it all himself, while his father still did back-breaking work wherever he could get hired. The one thing Sean Kelly never missed was Sunday dinner with his son. No matter what, he made sure he was home by six so they could sit and talk about their week.

He would tell his son about some of the things he'd done at work, and Connor would talk about school and what subjects he was doing well in. When he started to play baseball for the local high school, Sean made every single game. He was even making enough money that they'd been able to move to a bigger apartment. It was still in Cohasset, but it was theirs.

The day of his graduation, his father watched with pride as his son walked across the stage, graduating with honors. He'd already signed his papers to join the Navy and would be leaving in just two weeks.

Now more than four inches taller than Sean, his chest filled with a pridefulness that was almost sinful, watching his son's masculine physique walk toward him. They'd done it. Just the two of them.

“Well, we did it, Dad,” smiled Connor.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” laughed Sean, pulling his son in for a hug. “I’m so proud of you, Connor. Proud that you’ve chosen to serve your country. You’re going to be amazing.”

“I was talking to my recruiter, and I think I’d like to try to be a SEAL,” he said, staring at his father, waiting for his reaction.

“Whatever you do, I’ll be there to cheer you on,” smiled Sean. Inside, he was worried to death for his son, but his pride outweighed all of it. “I’ve a surprise for you.”

“Dad, you didn’t have do anything,” said Connor.

“It’s nothing big. I took the next week off. I thought we could drive down to D.C., see some of the sights, just spend some time together. Father and son.” Connor nodded, tears in his eyes. He hugged his father.

“I can’t think of anything better.”

They spent their week together and then came home. Connor packed everything he owned in his duffel bag and waited for his father to return from work. He’d have to say goodbye tonight since he was leaving so early in the morning.



Using his own money, he'd bought two steaks and made baked potatoes for them.

Having their last meal together for a while, Connor smiled at his father.

“Dad. I wanted to thank you for everything you've done for me. Not just putting a roof over my head and the food and stuff, but for being there for me after Mom left.”

“Connor, I've not done a lot right in my life, but you are my one true accomplishment. You are the one thing that I can say to the world, ‘look at that – that's my son.’” Connor hugged his father that night, treasuring the warmth of his security and affection. It was something that stayed with him for years.

They spoke on the phone nearly every week when he was able. After becoming a SEAL, they laughed at his nickname, Irish.

“What the hell were they supposed to call you?”  
laughed his father.

“I guess it was pretty obvious, wasn't it?” laughed Irish. “I'm gonna be deployed for a while, Dad. I'm not sure when I'll be able to call you.”

“It’s alright,” he said with a smile. “My son is a Navy SEAL, saving the world and killin’ bad guys.”

“Try not to tell everyone that, Dad,” he laughed. “I love you.”

“Love you, too. Irish.”

They both laughed, ending what would be the last call they would have together. Had Irish known, he would have talked longer; he would have asked for leave. He would have done anything to hear his father’s voice one more time.

Chase and the entire team attended the funeral with him. That’s what true teammates do. They were there for you, sharing in your grief. When he spotted the stooped, gray-haired woman at the edge of the circle of mourners, he knew exactly who she was.

She stared at Irish, seeing the pristine Navy uniform and the men around him. She knew. And so did Irish. His mother never found her rich man on the other side of town. She looked beaten down and tired. For a moment, he thought about going to speak with her, then decided against it.

More than twenty years, she’d been out of his life. More than twenty years, she’d never once sent a card for his

birthday or a candy cane for Christmas. It was his father who'd been there, not her. She glanced upward, catching his stare. It almost looked as though she might walk toward him, but Irish turned his back to speak with his teammates. When he turned a few moments later, she was gone.

Other than his team. He was alone.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lucinda Harwell had always wanted to follow in her mother's footsteps. A brilliant surgeon, she'd made the decision to have a child on her own with no prospects in sight. After careful consideration and scrolling through hundreds of not-so-desirable men online, she met a man who lived in Chicago. The perfect distance away, she thought. He was tall, handsome, intelligent, and allegedly single. An architect by trade, he owned several businesses and was hoping to find Miss Right.

Carolyn Harwell was a beautiful woman with light brown hair and huge doe eyes. Her natural long black lashes only emphasized their size. At five-feet-nine, she was blessed with full, natural breasts and hips made for a man to hold onto.

With her curves and height, Mr. Architect was smitten. When she proposed that they test the waters in bed, he was more than willing. They spent the entire weekend together.

Carolyn promised to call but knew she would not. Of course, she also told him her name was Eliza Victor. It was not. She'd given him a temporary e-mail address which she immediately deleted. She'd told him she worked in private

practice, but she did not. And worse, she'd used a temporary phone, so he would be unable to call her. She deleted her online profile and never looked back.

With all the stress of completing medical school, residency, and now joining a major hospital, she didn't need the added stress of a husband. She just wanted a child. And she got one. Others said that she'd tricked him, that she was unfair to him. Carolyn didn't care. This was her shot.

Lucinda was everything to Carolyn. She made sure she attended dance classes, joined soccer, participated in anything she wanted. She didn't miss one event for her daughter. But she was also all about good grades and creating a path that would lead her daughter to medical school.

Two years before Lucinda finished her residency, Carolyn found a lump in her breast. She tried to keep it from her daughter, relying mostly on venting to her old college friend, Gabi English Slater.

“You have to tell her, honey,” said Gabi. “You can't keep this from her. It's not fair. She's a doctor, for God's sake. She'll understand and may be able to help you.”

“I need her to focus on her residency, Gabi. I want her to have a clear head for this last part of her journey. I've been

pushing her off on a visit, telling her I'm too busy right now and that she needs to stay where she is. She needs to finish this," said Carolyn.

"And she needs her mother."

Carolyn finally told her daughter, but not until it was nearly too late. Her treatments had run their course. There were no more surgeries to be had. No more chemicals to pump into her body. No more options. The cancer had spread devastatingly fast, and Carolyn would have a few short months left. She was dying.

For Lucinda, it was a bitter moment. Her mother hadn't trusted her to possibly help with the situation or to even respect her as a fellow medical professional. Even if she didn't have a cure, no last resort options for her, she could have comforted her in the way a mother and daughter should. Instead, she'd stolen an entire year from her, not allowing her to spend time with her those last few months.

Depressed, exhausted, and unsure of what to do or where to go, she made the mistake of starting a relationship with a handsome man she'd met after her shift one night.

Mike Edmonds seemed like the guy who had it all. Successful, handsome, kind, and willing to put up with her

crazy schedule. Their relationship was hot and heavy at first. Nothing but sweaty sex and great food. Not always in that order.

Then it changed.

It was little things at first. He needed to be out of town for work, so their weekend was cancelled. He needed her to pick him up from work for their night out because his car was in the shop. If she offered to drive him home, he refused, taking a taxi or car service. When she'd planned an entire weekend getaway for them, he cancelled last minute. He told her he just didn't have the time.

When her next-door neighbor told her she should be suspicious, Lucinda felt terrible for having concerns. But the next-door neighbor, who worked for the billing department of their city, said she could look and see if he had a water, gas, or alarm bill. Then she would know his permanent address.

At first, Lucinda declined. What was a relationship without trust? But when the cancellations were becoming more frequent, the late-night calls in whispers happening more often, she didn't have a choice. She asked if she would help her find his home address.

With the house number and street in hand, she drove to the other side of town. The moment she turned into the neighborhood, she knew something was wrong.

The houses were picturesque family homes. White picket fences, barking dogs, and two-point-five children.

Kids were playing everywhere. One house had one of those inflatable bounce houses sitting in the front yard. Someone was having a birthday. Slowing her car, she stared at the house numbers, realizing that bouncy house was his house.

Totally stopped in the street, she stared in disgust at Mike, hugging the woman she could only assume was his wife. When he looked up, he paled, shaking his head at her pleadingly. She glared at him, unable to speak or move.

“Are you okay?” asked a woman coming to the window. “Are you looking for someone?”

“No. No, I’m sorry. I have the wrong house. I’m not looking for anyone.”

She drove home, called her mother’s friend Gabi, and asked for suggestions on relocation to another hospital. She wanted as much trauma room experience as she could get and needed Gabi to give her a letter of reference.



McAllen, Texas, was about as bad as it could get.

Lucinda didn't realize how bad until she found herself in a linen closet waiting on a savior. When she opened the door to six-feet-three and two hundred pounds of sexy redhead, she thought it was a dream.

Not only did he save her, he recovered the suspicious drugs, brought the killers to justice, and risked his own life in the process.

When she performed the emergency roadside surgery on him, she thought she would lose him for sure. Pulling into the location indicated by the GPS system, she prayed that they would be willing to help.

As it turned out, they were the help. With Irish on his way to healing, she felt it her obligation to watch his every move. Well, okay, it wasn't all that hard. He was beautiful. Lean muscles, a wide chest, arms that rippled as he moved.

"Lord, act like a lady," she whispered to herself.

Walking toward his cottage, she hoped to get him outside and walking a few laps today. When she took the first step onto the porch, she froze. Music was blaring from inside. Listening intently, she smiled at his choice of music. It was a fast, upbeat rap song from the '90s.

Standing at the door, she was about to knock when she saw him flying down the hallway, sliding on his socked feet to a sudden stop. He was using his fist as a microphone, gyrating his hips and twisting back and forth.

“What the fucking hell,” she muttered. Gripping the doorknob, she flung open the door, staring at him.

Irish knew he'd fucked up. He knew he'd fucked up big time. The betrayal and fear etched in her features told him this was going to take a while to fix.

“You lied.”

## CHAPTER THREE

“Lucinda! Doc!”

“Don’t fucking call my name again!” she yelled, turning to face him on the path. “You lied to me! You said you were still hurting.”

“Please, please, listen to me,” he begged.

Following in his socked feet and no shirt, he walked behind her as she went into the offices and ran down the hall. All eyes peered from their office doors while he chased the beautiful doctor down. When she slammed out the other side of the hallway and back outside, he was right behind her.

“Lucinda, wait! I can explain.”

“You made a fool of me! I was trying to help you. I thought you were still hurt because of me! Because of me!” she repeated. “You were making fun of me all this time.”

“I wasn’t. I swear to God, I wasn’t,” he said, reaching for her arm. She jerked it away, shoving his shoulder as she did.

“Stay away from me! I don’t tolerate liars. I refuse! Stay away from me!”

She stormed off as the men watched the entire spectacle. Irish turned to see the faces of his friends all frowning in his direction. He'd fucked up. He'd fucked up big time by not telling Lucinda how he was healing so quickly.

He watched as she slammed the door of the cottage, and he ran toward it, only to be stopped by Gabi, Erin, and Grace stepping in his path.

“Leave the girl alone for a while, Irish,” said Grace. “You really screwed up on this one. All she wanted was a little honesty from you.”

“I know. Please, let me talk to her,” he asked pleadingly.

“No,” said Erin. “Give her some space. If she wants to speak to you, we'll come and get you.” The three older women went inside, not letting Irish enter the cottage. He turned back to see the still-frowning faces of his teammates.

“I know. I fucked up, okay. I know.”

“Brother, let her settle down. The girls will talk to her,” said Luke.

Except she never settled down. At first, she just gave him the cold shoulder when he was around. When he tried to speak with her in the cafeteria, she would move tables. Nothing he said was helping. Flowers. Candy. Love notes. Letters. Nothing. He knew he'd fucked up, but it was only so he could get to know her better and spend more time with her.

He never expected her to leave.

He was in Hawaii. Fucking paradise. He should have been happy, surfing, swimming, taking in a little sun. Maybe even meeting a cute hula girl. But all he could think about was her. Trying one more time, he called her number.

“Irish, I need you to stop calling me,” said Lucinda.

“Please, please, listen to me,” he said pleadingly. “I never meant to lie to you. I was just trying to get to know you better. I wanted to get close to you, and I felt like if I continued to be hurt, you'd allow me to get to know you.”

“I would have allowed you to get to know me if you'd just asked. In an honest, grown-man way. You were deceptive, lying to me about everything. Telling me there was some magical pond. I'm not an idiot, Irish.”

“I never said you were an idiot, and the pond is real. Just ask Mama Irene. She’ll tell you,” he said.

“I can’t.”

“You can’t? Why not?”

“I can’t because I’m not at Belle Fleur any longer,” she said calmly. Irish’s stomach flipped, bile rising in his throat.

“Y-you’re no longer there,” he whispered. “Where? Where did you go?”

“I told you that I had a friend from medical school that offered me an opportunity in Seattle. It will give me more experience in a trauma center.”

“But, Gabi offered you a job with us. Please, Lucinda, don’t leave. I’ll leave you alone, I promise. Just don’t leave.”

“I can’t trust you, Irish. You say you’ll leave me alone, and then you’ll be on my door with flowers or some weak-ass apology. You lied!”

“I know!” he yelled. “I know, for fuck’s sake. I’ve apologized over and over again. How many times does it take, Lucinda? Have you never told a false truth? Have you never told a little white lie to someone to get around a rule? Lied to your parents about where you were when you came in late at

night? Are you so without sin that you're going to judge me on this one mistake?"

There was silence on the other end of the line, and he waited, hoping she would answer in a way that would make him feel better about the situation. In his heart, he knew that she was the woman for him. But his head couldn't get past her refusal to hear him out.

"He had an entire other life," she whispered.

"What? Who?"

"My ex. He lied about everything. At first, it was little lies. He had to go out of town on business. His check was short again. His car was in the shop. All lies. On the other side of town, he had a wife and two kids. Hell, he even had a dog. The wife needed the car, which is why he didn't have his. His check was short because she needed it for groceries.

"Everything that came out of his mouth was a lie. Everything. And it all started with one small lie."

"No," said Irish. "That's what you want to believe. What you don't want to admit is that it was all a big lie from the beginning, and you fell for it. You refused to see all the warning signs, and you're blaming me for his bullshit.

“I never lied to you about anything other than how fully recovered I was. It was a lie. I agree with that. But it was for all the right reasons. I care about you, Lucinda. I risked my life for you, and I would do it again. If you can’t see beyond that, then I guess I was wrong about us.”

There was a deathly silence on the other end of the phone, and he thought she’d hung up on him. Then he heard beepers and buzzers going off and knew she was in the hospital.

“I have to go, Irish. Take care of yourself.”

“No! Wait!” But the line was dead, and he was left standing there with his phone screen black. Mo looked at him, frowning.

“Everything okay, Irish?” He stared at his friend for a long moment, then shook his head.

“No. Nothing is okay.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

Irish must have reached for the phone a million times to call her but held back. He knew he'd made a mistake, but he'd apologized profusely for it over and over again. He never lied about anything big. Nothing.

Day after day, he worked out with the team, went out on assignment, did work around the grounds of Belle Fleur, anything to keep his mind off the one thing he really wanted. Lucinda.

“Irish? I want you to meet a few people that have finally decided to come home,” smirked Cam.

Irish nodded at the four young men, then stared at the first three. They were identical. Fucking identical triplets and they looked identical to Eagle and Hawk.

“This is AJ. He's Ace and Charlie's son. Ace has been in the Navy as a SEAL, primarily assigned to covert intelligence. He hit his sixteen years and made the smart decision. To come home,” laughed Cam.

“Hey, man, nice to meet you,” said AJ. “It's Andrew John, but I go by AJ. I've heard a lot of great things about you.”

“Nice to meet you. Heard good things about you as well.”

“These three bastards, and they are bastards, just finished sixteen in the Corps. The last twelve were all MARSOC. I give you Tyran, HG, and Benjamin.”

“You guys look just like your father and uncle,” laughed Irish. “Nice to meet you, brothers.”

“Cool to meet you,” said HG.

“I prefer my call name, Cam, if that’s okay with you?” said Tyran.

“Most of the guys continue to use that,” said Cam.

“Doesn’t mean shit to us here. What is it?”

“Bone,” he grinned.

“Dude, if that has anything to do with you having a constant boner, I’m not using it,” said Cam.

“No,” he laughed, shaking his head. “I was just known for breaking a lot of bones. On others.”

“What about you, Benjamin? Want to use your uncle’s name?” asked Cam.

“Hoot,” he laughed. “As the son and nephew of an Eagle and a Hawk, it would only make sense one of us inherited killer eyesight. Owl seemed odd, so they called me Hoot.” Cam laughed, shaking his head.

“Alright, Hoot it is. Got it?” he asked Irish.

“I think so,” he grinned. “AJ, Bone, Hoot, and HG. I think I can remember that. I’m sure your folks are happy to have you all home.”

“Your parents live close?” asked AJ.

“No. I only had my dad, and he passed a few years back.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

“Don’t be. We had a great run together,” he smiled. “I admire the shit out of all your folks. I was never much of a reader, AJ, but your mom damn sure got me reading.”

“Christ, don’t remind me,” he frowned. “When people found out who my mother was, they wouldn’t let it go. I’d find books all over the fucking place, mostly with pages stuck together.”

“Gross,” laughed Cam.

“You can laugh. She’s not your mom.”

“It wasn’t any better for us,” smirked HG. “Mom and Dad came for a long weekend about two years ago. My team saw us all together at a restaurant and thought Mom was one of our girlfriends. Mom. Shit, she’s like thirteen years older than Dad, and they thought she could date us!”

“Brother, I’d be happy about that,” said Irish. “That means her amazing genetics are coursing through your body. You’re gonna look younger than your years, thanks to her.”

“I never thought about that,” said all three at once. Irish frowned.

“Do they do that shit often?”

“All the fucking time,” said AJ. “It’s like having stereo surround sound. Fucking creepy.”

“Whatever,” laughed Bone.

“I refuse to call my son Bone,” said Tinley. “I gave you a name, and that’s what I’m going to use.”

“And Dad’s mother gave him a name, yet we still call him Eagle,” smirked Bone. Tinley smirked at him, nudging his arm.

“Mama Irene has the four of you set up out at the island mansion,” said Tinley. “There are cottages available,

but we've sort of used the mansion as a rite of passage."

"Is Claudette still out there?" asked AJ. Tinley nodded. "Does she still look at us through the walls while we're naked?"

"She's gotten better," smiled Tinley. "She and Tony have a relationship now."

"A relationship?" frowned HG. "How the fuck do two ghosts have a relationship?"

"Beats me," she shrugged. "All I know is that Martha and Nathan are quite happy, and so are Tony and Claudette. They're both technically just kids, but she's like a two-hundred-year-old kid, so it only seemed fair to let her have this opportunity."

"Weird as shit," said Hoot, shaking his head. Cam just laughed.

"I've seen weirder."

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Dr. Harwell? We have a gunshot wound to the chest in room four,” said the head nurse.

“I didn’t see the police,” she frowned, looking around the nurse’s shoulders. If there was a gunshot wound, the police were either already there or on their way.

“They’re not here. He walked in on his own.”

“Good lord,” she said, shaking her head.

She gathered her things and headed toward the treatment room. Gunshot wounds, knifings, gang violence. It was a daily occurrence in her urban emergency room.

She looked down at her phone once more, staring at the last text message she’d received from Irish. It had been nine months ago. She’d re-examined everything time and time again. In her heart, she knew that Irish had done it for a sweet purpose. To get to know her. But she was struggling with the lie, wondering what else he might lie about.

Stepping inside the trauma bay, she stared at the man lying on the gurney. He wore dark pants and a dark plaid shirt. There was a dark jacket lying between his legs. The

right side of his chest was bleeding, which might be the only thing that saved his life since the bullet avoided the heart.

“Mr. ...” She waited for him to finish, but he didn’t.  
“Okay. How did you get shot?”

“I was in front of a gun,” he remarked.

“I would have never guessed that,” she said. Lifting the gauze, she could see the bullet’s entry point, but there was no exit wound. “We need to get the bullet out.”

“Do it fast, please.”

“Sir, I can’t do this fast. I need to take my time, or I’m going to damage your chest wall and possibly more. Let me get an operating room ready and...”

“No,” he said, shaking his head, attempting to move.  
“No. Just do it.”

“Sir, this is going to be extremely painful,” she frowned. He gripped his bloody fingers around her wrist.

“Just take the bullet out,” he ground out. The nurse looked at her, and she nodded.

“Get a tray ready for me.”

While the nurse bustled around the ER getting the tray ready, Lucinda knew that she would need to call the police sooner or later. You couldn't work on a GSW and not report it to the police. First, she wanted to get him sewn up, or he might flee and bleed and die on the way out.

Luckily for him, the bullet was just below the surface, and Lucinda easily removed it. After cleaning the wound, she stitched it closed and applied the dressing.

"I'm going to get you some antibiotics," said Lucinda. "I'll be right back." He nodded at her as he wiped the sweat from his face.

"Dr. Harwell, do you want me to get the police now?" whispered the nurse.

"Yes. Let them know we have an unidentified GSW. He's semi-compliant and doesn't seem to be armed."

The nurse nodded as Lucinda gathered a few samples of the antibiotic and some additional items to redress the wound. When she returned to the trauma bay, he was gone.

"Erica! Erica! Where did my GSW go?" she called.

"What? He was right here," said the woman running to look behind the curtain.



“Damn,” muttered Lucinda.

Just as she was about to call for the police, the ER doors opened, and all hell broke loose. A four-car accident on the freeway brought nine people into the emergency room.

“Forget the cops. It won’t matter now. We have other things to worry about.”

It was eleven hours later before Lucinda could even stop to take a sip of coffee. Her shift done, she showered in the doctor’s lounge and changed her clothes. She always carried some basic medical supplies in her duffel bag just in case she ran across an accident or someone in her apartment complex was injured.

Seattle was a great city if you weren’t inclined to depression. The incessant rain, clouds, and overall dreariness were more than she could stand most days. She missed the sunshine of Louisiana. The smell of jasmine and magnolia. She missed Erin, Gabi, and the other women. She missed Mama Irene.

And if she were honest, she missed Irish. She just wasn’t sure she could trust him. She desperately wanted to. A million times, she’d reached for her phone to call him or text him. Just anything to have contact with him.

“Going home, doc?” asked Charlie, the security guard.

“I sure hope so, Charlie. I have the next two days off, so I’m hoping for some sleep.”

“You be careful walking to the bus stop. It’s still awful dark out there.” She smiled at the older man, nodding. It was dark because even the sun hated coming up in this place.

The short walk gave her time to run through everything that had come through the ER the night before. It allowed her to replay in her mind anything that she could have done better. A few broken bones, a collapsed lung, a head injury, a fall off a bicycle that led to a concussion, and of course, her mystery gunshot wound.

Standing beneath the fiberglass cover at the bus stop, she realized she was the only one out at this time. The usual morning commuters were nowhere to be found. Then it dawned on her. It was the wee hours of Saturday. That’s why. In the distance, she could see the bus moving toward her, but it was the image across the street that had her heart racing.

Dressed in the same dark hoodie and bloody t-shirt he’d come into the emergency room wearing, her gunshot victim was staring at her. Holding her phone, she looked

down for a moment, thinking of calling 911. When she looked up, he was crossing the street.

“Shit.”

## CHAPTER SIX

It had been almost a year since he'd heard that voice. Actually, that wasn't true. It was nine months and seven days. Nine of the most agonizing months of his life. In that time, there had been four pregnancies announced within days of each other. Milo and Lia, JT and Kennedy, Benji and Annie, and Bogey and Alice were all expecting in the next two months.

Ethan and Koana had given birth to Ulani, and Tanner and Micaela had given birth to Tillie. Two beautiful little girls to add to the ever-growing RP family. But with each birth, his misery deepened.

Not wanting to be reminded of what he couldn't have, he'd left his phone in the cottage as the team worked on training drills in the outer islands. When they got back, he was dirty, muddy, tired, and just wanted sleep.

So, he showered and went to bed, ignoring the incessant buzzing of his phone. The next morning, he poured himself some coffee and looked at his phone. Twelve missed phone calls and thirteen text messages.

*Irish – I need to speak with you. Please call me.*

*Irish I know you're probably angry with me, but please.*

*Irish please, please call me.*

*Look, I know I screwed up, but Irish I'm begging you. Pick up.*

*I don't know how much longer I have. My phone is dying and I'm hiding.*

*Irish. I'm sorry.*

“What the fuck?” he said to himself. He tried dialing the number back, but it only went to voicemail. Then, he tried calling the hospital where she went to work at in Seattle.

“Dr. Lucinda Harwell, please.”

“I'm sorry, but she left the hospital several days ago and never came back. Do you have information as to her whereabouts?”

“No, but I'm a friend. She called me asking for help, but I don't know where she is,” he said.

“Well, I know the police have been searching. Detective Walt Morgan is heading up the investigation with the Seattle police. Maybe check with him.”

“Walt Morgan,” he repeated. “Thank you.” Grabbing his gear, he ran out of the cottage toward one of the vehicles.

“Where the hell are you going?” asked Mo.

“I’m going to rescue a woman.”

“Whoa! Wait, brother, are we talking about Lucinda?”

“Of course! Who the fuck else would I be talking about? Listen,” he said, placing his phone on speaker. Mo frowned as the messages came through one after another.

“Don’t fucking move,” he said. “We’re getting Cam and the others in on this.” Within twenty minutes, there were thirty men listening to the messages again.

“We’ll send a team,” said Luke. “AJ, Bone, HG, and Hoot. You’re the newbies. Have Chipper take you and Irish to Seattle. See what you can find at the hospital, then head to her apartment and see if there is any sign of a struggle, missing clothing, suitcases, that sort of thing. I’ll let Gabi know and see if she’s tried to contact her.”

“Thanks, Luke,” said Irish.

“Don’t thank me yet, brother. Let’s find her.”

With their seemingly unending contacts, they were able to avoid SeaTac and land at Boeing’s private test runway.

Chipper would stay with the Osprey in case they needed him. Their first stop would be SPD to meet with the detective in charge.

“I’m sorry,” said Detective Morgan. “We’ve been slammed, and we didn’t find any evidence of foul play. Her apartment is fine. She left work after her shift, nothing unusual or earth-shattering. She was standing at the bus stop, but a camera across the street watched her leave the stop and head around the corner. That’s where we lost her.”

“You didn’t investigate other cameras?” frowned Irish.

“Look, you guys may have endless amounts of resources and money, but we don’t. There aren’t cameras everywhere in that part of town. Maybe she just took a break. According to the staff, she’d had a rough night with a gunshot wound, an MVA, a few other things.”

“So, that’s it?” asked Bone.

“As I said, we’ve got a lot going on. Murders, kidnappings, robberies. Hell, we’ve had three bank robberies in the span of two weeks. I’m sorry. If you find anything, let us know, and we’ll help. That’s all I can do.”

The men stood, all towering above the older man.

“It might be all you can do,” said Irish. “But this is just the beginning for us. I will find her, and if one hair on her head is harmed, I’m coming back for you.” Irish walked away, and AJ stood, smiling at the detective.

“He didn’t mean that,” he said, turning to leave. At the door, he turned back, grinning. “Actually, he did.”

Standing outside police headquarters, it began to rain. Again.

“Where to?” asked Bone.

“The hospital. I want to talk to the people on her shift and see what’s up. Can you and HG head to her place and see what you can find? Don’t let anyone know you’re there. Just do your thing and slip inside.”

“Got it,” smirked HG.

For the most part, Seattle seemed a middle to affluent class city. The homes and apartment buildings were beautiful, with lush green lawns and gorgeous views of the sound, the mountains, and beyond.

Except for the hospital where Lucinda worked. It was in the worst part of town with boarded-up businesses, graffiti,



homeless people meandering everywhere, and a general feeling of ‘watch your back.’

“Can I help you?” asked the ER desk clerk.

“I hope so. My name is Connor Kelly, and I’m a friend of Dr. Lucinda Harwell. I understand she disappeared, and I’m concerned for her. She left me a few messages saying she was in trouble.”

“Oh, man,” said the older woman. “I’m sure sorry to hear about that. Dr. Harwell is a sweetheart. I wasn’t here the night she last left, but Erica was. That’s her over there with the dark hair.”

“Thank you,” said Irish. They walked toward the woman standing in front of a whiteboard. “Excuse me. Are you Erica?”

“That’s me. Make it fast. We’ve got a school bus accident coming in,” she said without even turning to look at him.

“I’d like nothing better than fast. I’m a friend of Dr. Harwell, and I want to know what happened her last night here.” Eric stopped, turning to look at the handsome man.

She noticed the two behind him and jerked her head toward the nurses' lounge.

“It was a busy night. It always is here. Nothing too unusual other than a gunshot wound that refused to give a name or how it happened, and then walked out.”

“That’s not unusual?” asked AJ.

“Well, not terribly,” she smirked. “Dr. Harwell can’t refuse anyone treatment. She took the bullet out and stitched him up. We turned for two minutes, and he was gone. After that, it was a motor vehicle accident, a couple of bar fights. The usual.”

“Does she have a car?” asked Irish.

“No. She said she was trying to save money to buy a house one day. She took the bus every damn day, rain or shine. I would sometimes sit with her at the bus stop in my car if we left at the same time. I worried about her. It’s not a good area.”

“Yea, we noticed,” frowned AJ.

“Would anyone have wanted to hurt her? An angry patient? Ex-boyfriend?” asked Irish, praying it wasn’t the latter.

“Look, I wish I could help you. No one was angry with her, no one threatened her, she wasn’t dating anyone. In fact, she was called the ‘snow queen’ by the young male doctors. She refused anyone and everyone who asked her out.”

Something about that statement made Irish happy and pissed off at the same time. She was closing herself off.

“Here’s my card. If you hear anything, think of anything, please let me know.” She nodded and went back to her board while the three men moved against the wall to talk.

“What do you think, brother?” asked AJ.

“I don’t know. It’s eating me alive. She didn’t just walk off the face of the planet. There’s nothing fishy here, nothing missing.”

“Wait,” said Erica, turning back to the men. “I forgot about that. We can’t tie it to Dr. Harwell, but about the same time as the man with the gunshot wound came in, we noticed someone had been in the medicine closet. We keep it locked, but when things get hectic, sometimes it’s just easier to leave it open.”

“What was missing?” asked Irish.

“Three things. Hydrocodone, dabrafenib, and everolimus.”

“What the fuck are those?” asked AJ.

“They’re used for one thing, sweetie. Neuroblastoma treatment in children. Someone has a child with brain cancer.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Where are we?” asked Lucinda.

“It doesn’t matter,” said the man. “Just get some sleep. We’ll be there soon.”

“No offense, but I can’t sleep sitting as a hostage in a car with a man who I patched up not more than three hours ago. Who shot you, and what is your name?” She waited patiently, then reached for the door handle, willing to take the chance of killing herself by jumping out.

He stretched across the car, slamming the door and pushing her back against the seat. Wincing from the pain of his wound, he closed his eyes briefly, then opened them.

“Don’t do that again. I won’t hurt you. I just need your help.”

“I’ve already helped you,” she said. “Who shot you?”

“It doesn’t matter. It will be another few hours or so. Get some sleep.”

Lucinda was exhausted and closed her eyes for just a moment. When she felt the car stop, she thought it might be her opportunity to scream for help. But when she looked

around, there was nothing. Nothing except trees and a patch of dirt road partly covered in snow.

Her kidnapper was standing at the hood of the car, frowning at the engine. Carefully, she opened the door and stepped out of the car. Hunching low, she took off running down the dirt road in the opposite direction that the car was facing. She didn't get fifty feet when a gun fired, the bullet hitting just inches from her feet.

“I told you I won't hurt you, but that doesn't mean I won't disable you.” She turned, staring at him.

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“We have to go. Get your backpack. We have to get moving. The car is dead, and we have a ways to go yet.”

She picked up her backpack from the front seat and saw the top of her cell phone in the side pocket. Holy shit, he didn't take her phone. He came toward her with a long piece of chain.

“What are you doing?”

“I asked you to trust me, but you keep trying to run.” He wrapped one end around her waist and closed it with a padlock. The other, he chained around his own waist. “This

will ensure you don't run. You can't drag me with you. Let's go."

With the twenty feet of chain between them, he took off first and allowed her to lag behind. It was fine with Lucinda. She'd send some text messages and pray that Irish got them. The reception was spotty at best, so she wasn't even sure her messages were going through. When they stopped to rest and have some water, she watched as her captor chained his end of their tether to a tree and then walked off a few hundred feet.

It was her chance. With shaking hands, she dialed Irish's number.

"Irish, please, pick up. I need your help. Please, Irish, I'm so sorry." The phone lost signal, and she tried again. Five messages in the span of less than three minutes, and she still wasn't sure that he'd received any of them.

With only forty-percent battery, she tucked it back in her backpack, praying he would get the messages.

"We have to hurry," said the man, walking back toward her.

“Look, I’m tired. I’m hungry, and I just want sleep. If you’re going to kill me. Do it. If you’re going to rape me, I’ll fight you with everything I have.”

“I’m not going to kill you or rape you.”

“Then answer my questions!” she yelled. The echo of her voice had birds scattering from the trees.

“All in good time. We have to go. It’s going to snow tonight.”

“Where are we?” she asked, following him. When he didn’t respond, she asked again. “Please, I have a right to know where I am.”

“We’re at the base of Mt. Baker, and we’re headed to a cabin.”

Lucinda’s stomach dropped. They were in a remote part of Washington that she wasn’t familiar with. Snow was on the way. She wasn’t dressed properly, and she had no idea what this man wanted from her. She tried to focus on the area where they were walking, hoping to remember in case she could leave.

All her brain could think of was Irish.



Sweet, adorable, beautiful Irish. He'd lied to her, but for the last nine months, he was all she could think about. Of all the things he'd said and done, he'd only lied about one thing. His healing. Whatever his game was with the healing pond, she didn't buy it. But she did know that somehow, he was far ahead of where he should be from a healing perspective.

He was so incredibly handsome and kind. For the first time in years, she thought she'd found someone she could actually spend the rest of her life with. She'd been so hurt by his lie she didn't give him a chance to fully explain. Even Gabi couldn't change her mind.

"Honey, give him a chance. He's not lying to you except that he was healed," she smiled. "You have to see how adorable that is. He wanted to be around you longer. I think that's incredibly sweet."

"It's lying! I won't tolerate lying, Gabi," said Lucinda.

"Lucinda, everyone lies now and then. Everyone. There are little lies and big lies and all kinds of lies in between. There's the lie about where we're going to dinner, only to surprise someone for a birthday or anniversary. There's the lie to ourselves about our weight or how much

cake we actually ate. And there are bigger ones. Ones that hurt us, but the other person never intended for that to happen.”

“I can’t, Gabi. I’m sorry.”

She’d left without even a farewell to everyone. They must hate her. Now she was alone, chained to a man that might die because of his chest wound, and she had no idea where he was taking her.

Maybe the lie would have been better.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“I didn’t see anything in the apartment. Bills were paid, clothes were hung up neatly, she had a little food in the fridge but not much. It looked normal, brother,” said HG. “What about the hospital?”

“The same,” he said, shaking his head. “I was hoping we’d find something, but I think our only option is to park ourselves at that bus stop and see if we can find someone who might have seen her that morning.”

“Alright,” nodded AJ. “Let’s grab some dinner and then hit the rack.”

In the hotel’s restaurant downstairs, the five men took a table near the windows, staring out at the sound. It was beautiful, but it was too dark and too cold for Irish’s blood. The television above the bar broadcasted the news, with the top story being three bank robberies in less than two weeks.

“That seems unusual for today,” said HG. “I mean, banks are pretty well-equipped with all the bells and whistles to stop people from even thinking about it. Yet, this guy, or girl, robs three banks back-to-back.”

“Yea,” frowned Irish. “I wonder.” He took the card out of his wallet and called the detective at SPD.

“Morgan,” came the growl.

“Detective Morgan, this is Connor Kelly. We spoke this morning.”

“What can I do for you?”

“I was just watching the news and caught the stories about the bank robberies. I’m curious, has anyone been caught?”

“No,” he scoffed. “You have a magical tip for me?”

“No, sir, I wish I did, but I don’t. I do have a question, though. Did the police ever see a suspect or chase a suspect and fire on him or her?”

“How did you know that?” he asked quietly. “We haven’t released that information to anyone.”

“I’m fishing, detective, and I think I might have gotten a nibble. Did you hit the suspect?”

“Yes. The last bank had a bank guard who was a retired sheriff’s deputy. He carried and was pretty proficient with his weapon. The guy had the same M.O. He came in with a stocking cap, head down, dressed in black. When he

got to the counter, he pulled the stocking cap down and handed the clerk a note to put all the money in the bag.

“He never once threatened anyone or drew a weapon. Not once. The clerk did as she was told, then looked at the guard who was in the bank manager’s office. The guy almost got to the door. He hollered at him to stop, and he briefly turned. Guard fired and swore he hit the guy, but he just stumbled a bit and then ran.”

“I’ll be damned,” said AJ. “I think we know who the gunshot wound was in the ER.”

“Fuck me, I never put that together,” said the detective. “The nurse said he refused to give his name.”

“Did you get camera footage of his face?” asked Irish.

“No. Unfortunately, he never looked up, and when he was leaving, he had the stocking cap covering his face. He wore gloves, long sleeves, everything. You’d think he was a professional, but he didn’t have a weapon.”

“He didn’t want to hurt anyone, which may be good for Dr. Harwell,” said HG.

“So, he robs three banks,” started Irish.

“Three that we know of,” said the detective.

“How much did he get?” asked Bone.

“We haven’t released that, but it’s strange. He only asked for money from one teller at each bank. Banks don’t have millions sitting in their tills. They purposely empty them throughout the day. In two of the banks, the vaults were open, but he never asked to go in.”

“What was the total?” asked Bone again.

“A little under twenty grand.”

“That’s it?” said AJ. “I don’t get it. He goes to the trouble of robbing three banks for whatever is in the tills, which turns out to not be a lot. He steals the drugs from the ER, or at least, we think that was him. And he takes Lucinda. Why?”

“I don’t know,” said Morgan, “but if you hear anything, let me know. Gotta go.”

“Well, he’s helpful,” smirked Hoot.

“There’s more to this. Maybe I’m reaching or praying, but I don’t think this guy wants to hurt anyone. What did the nurse say the drugs were for?”

“Neuroblastoma. Brain cancer in children,” said Hoot. AJ nodded, reading his thoughts as he dialed the number.

“Hey, Dad. Yea, we’re good. Listen, we need to find a child, probably in the Seattle area, currently being treated for neuroblastoma.”

“Jesus, what the hell have you guys found,” asked Ace.

“We’re not sure, but things are starting to click into place. Any read on her cell phone?” asked AJ.

“No. We think she has her locator turned off. We didn’t have the time to give her a bracelet or to connect our system to her phone.”

“I’m going to try and text her back and see if she can turn the locator on,” said Irish. He sent the quick text, trying to control the shaking of his hands.

*I’m in Seattle. I’m coming. Turn your locator on.*

*Where are u?*

“Hey, man,” said Bone, reaching for Irish’s hand.

“We’ll find her.”

Irish nodded as they finished their meal. When it was done, they waited in the restaurant for Ace to call back. The news was still droning on in the background, and they tried not to pay attention. That is, until something definitely caught their ear.

*We've tried talking to the three CEOs in question, but they refuse to answer our calls, Marie. Alta Healthcare, PacWest Healthcare, and Washington Health have all denied hundreds of claims for patients who have paid premiums for coverage. Some of these claims are for life-saving drugs and surgeries. In one instance, Mr. Carroll Todd was denied his insulin pens. The pharmacist said he was told 'the patient is using too much insulin.'* The camera cuts to an older man in a wheelchair, one leg already amputated. He looked bloated, frail, and near death.

*It's just a cryin' shame. I paid my premiums for thirty years. I didn't ask to get diabetes, but I got it. My doctor tells me what insulin to take and how much. Who are they to tell me what I can and can't take for my disease? It's criminal!*

"I wonder," said Bone. AJ nodded again, calling his father back.

"I'm still working on it," said Ace.

"Dad, narrow the search. Look for the child with the neuroblastoma, but also someone who might be on Washington Health, PacWest, or Alta health insurance coverage."

"You could have told me that earlier," growled Ace.



“Are you getting grumpy in your old age?” smirked  
AJ. “I thought being married to a beautiful romance writer  
kept you young.”

“Oh, it does,” laughed Ace. “Found it.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Lucinda fell to her knees from exhaustion, breathing heavily from the thin air on the mountainside. Then, she looked up to see that her captor had done the same. She slowly walked toward him, hoping to convince him to let her go. His chest was covered in fresh blood.

“Please, let me go. I’ll patch you up and leave. I won’t tell anyone who you are or where you are.”

“I can’t,” he said breathlessly. “I can’t.”

“Then tell me why,” she pleaded.

“A little further,” he whispered.

She nodded and, for some strange reason, reached down to take his arm. He hadn’t laid a finger on her so far, and every time she looked at his face, there was pain and desperation, not craziness. Together they trudged up the path, the chain dragging between them. Just when she thought he would collapse, they came upon a cabin. A fire seemed to be burning inside.

“Where are we?” asked Lucinda.

“Home,” he said, opening the door.

In the mudroom porch, he unlocked the chain and let it fall to the floor. Then he removed his boots and opened the main door of the cabin. Lucinda slowly followed him inside, staring around at the quaint, dark space of the cabin. There was a large Wolfhound curled up in front of the fireplace. He lifted his head, then laid it back down.

“Good boy, Finn.”

Walking toward a small bed in the corner, he pulled back the covers and touched his cold hand to the forehead of a child. A child with no hair, no eyebrows, no color, and barely any life.

“Good God, what’s wrong?” she asked, quickly walking in their direction.

“You asked why I was doing this. She’s why. This is my daughter, Lisa. She has advanced stage neuroblastoma.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Lucinda. “What is she taking?”

“That’s just it. My insurance company refused to approve the medications the doctors recommended. It’s been three weeks, and she’s only worsened because they wouldn’t give her what she needed to potentially stop the growth. Hell, they wouldn’t even give her the pain medicine.”

“You left her here unconscious?” she asked.

“I left her with Finn. He’s been trained to put the logs on the fire and even get her water and food when she needs it. I wasn’t planning on being gone this long. I should have been back within a few hours.”

“How did you get shot?” she asked quietly. He shrugged, tears in his eyes.

“I didn’t have a choice. She needed the medicine, and I didn’t have the money. So, I robbed a bank. Actually, three of them. The last one, the guard got a little over-anxious and shot me.”

“Jesus,” said Lucinda, pacing back and forth. “What is it you think I can do? I’m an ER doctor, not an oncologist.”

“Look, I’m sorry, but the night in the emergency room, I stole her medications from your medicine closet, as well as from a pharmacy. I need you to give her the meds and keep her alive. I’m going to make the insurance company pays for her treatment.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, start again. Wait, what’s your name?”

“Dan. Dan Thompson. I’m sorry I’ve been so awful to you. I just needed to get back to her, and I needed you to help me. She’s all I have in this world. The only thing worth anything in my life. She had one round of chemo, which didn’t do anything. The doctors said we would try something else.

“They sent all these letters saying she wasn’t a candidate for the drugs and that my coverage wouldn’t allow for approval of the drugs. When I tried to buy them on my own, they were thousands of dollars. The pharmacist tried to call the drug company, but they said that the prices can’t be changed.”

“Well, you actually haven’t been awful, just evasive,” she said, staring at him. “I don’t understand all these letters, but I have friends who might if you’ll let them help. You’re bleeding again. Let me make sure you’re okay, then I’ll take a look at her, but no guarantees.”

After re-stitching and redressing his wound, Lucinda set about working on little Lisa. She was probably only sixty pounds and, according to her father, was twelve years old. She’d been a happy, healthy child, then started having extreme headaches and rapid weight loss.

“Look at me. I’m not an expert in oncology. But I know someone who is. Let me call her. I promise I’ll say nothing about where we are.” He looked at her, then at his daughter. Nodding at Lucinda, he lay back on his own small bed and closed his eyes. Lucinda immediately dialed the number for Riley.

“Lucinda! Oh my, God! Where are you? Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“Let the girl talk, honey,” said Max in the background.

“I’m fine, Dr. O’Neill, but I need some help with a patient,” she said in a very professional voice.

“Lucinda, are you being held by someone?” asked Max.

“Yes. But that’s not the issue right now. Riley, I have a twelve-year-old girl with advanced neuroblastoma. She was prescribed hydrocodone, dabrafenib, and everolimus, but I’ve never administered the two cancer drugs. I’m not even sure they’re the right dosage.”

“If she were prescribed those drugs, that means they identified the target molecule,” said Riley. Lucinda read the

exact details of the labels on the drugs and then administered the medication as Riley directed. “Is she in pain?”

“She’s been unconscious since I arrived. I don’t believe she’s experiencing any pain right now.”

“You can give the hydrocodone as needed. Just make the poor child comfortable at this point. If this is advanced stage, she probably doesn’t have very long to live.”

“That could be a problem,” frowned Lucinda, staring at the girl’s father on the small bed.

“Lucinda, turn on your locator,” whispered Max.

“Yes, I can look that up,” she said, taking her phone from her ear. She quickly went to her settings and turned on the locator. “Riley, the child’s father said the insurance company refused to give the life-saving medications to the little girl. I have several letters here that all say her disease is too advanced and would be a – wait let me find it – ‘a waste of medical resources.’”

“Holy shit,” muttered Riley. “Keep those letters, honey. We can go after them for him. Has he hurt you? Are you alright?”

“I’m well, thank you. I haven’t spoken to Irish in a while. Just let him know I’ll be away for a few days.”

“He’s in Seattle, honey. Good luck with keeping him away at this point,” smiled Max.

“I’m very happy to hear that. Let me get back to my patient, but thank you for your help, Riley. If you think of anything else I can do for her, let me know.”

“I’ll see what the boys can pull up on her.”

Lucinda hung up the phone and realized her whole act was for nothing. Dan was sound asleep, exhausted and in pain. He’d live, but his daughter most likely would not. What scared her most was what he would do when she died.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she took the child’s vitals one more time, then pulled the blanket up to her chin. Behind her, the massive Wolfhound stood and walked to the wood pile. Placing a log in his mouth, he walked to the fire and set the log on top of the flames.

Lucinda smiled at the dog, shaking her head. Lucy and Sniff would love to see that.

“Don’t blame him,” whispered the little girl. “He’s just sad because I’m dying.”



“I don’t blame him,” said Lucinda. “And I’m hoping you won’t die.”

“We both know I am,” she said, not even opening her eyes.

“Are you still tired?” asked Lucinda.

“Yes, but I keep my eyes closed for two reasons. One is that the light gives me headaches, although that shouldn’t matter.” Lucinda frowned at her. “And two, because I’m technically blind, so why bother.”

## CHAPTER TEN

“She turned her tracker on,” said Ace. They could hear Max yelling at them in the background, and they all shook their heads.

“Could we get one asshole yelling at us at a time,” said Irish in frustration.

“Sorry,” said Ace. “I found the girl. Lisa Thompson. Twelve years old, diagnosed with neuroblastoma three months ago. After several weeks of extensive tests, her doctors prescribed an advanced and aggressive approach with multiple drugs, but the insurance company came back and said no. The cost without insurance was sixty-two hundred per treatment.”

“Are you fucking with me right now? Can they actually do that?” asked Hoot. “A kid with cancer and they won’t give her the drugs she needs, and then the drug maker gouges the fuck out of the parents. I don’t want to stop this guy. I want to help him.”

“Help him after we have Lucinda,” said Irish. “Do you have an address?”

“No, but I have a location for Lucinda. She’s on Mt. Baker, the northwest side. I’m sending you the exact

coordinates now. It looks as though there's a road leading up to where she is. Let me get a good satellite view."

The team waited for him to come back on anxiously.

"The road leads to a log cabin. I'm going to send you everything right now. Remember, he wasn't armed for the robberies, so he probably doesn't have any weapons. But he is a father trying to save his daughter's life, and that makes a man aggressive."

"Got it," said Irish. "I won't hurt him as long as he hasn't hurt Lucinda."

"What do we do about the insurance company and the drug makers?" asked Bone.

"We're going to do some research on that here," said Riley. "If you can get him to agree to it, get them both back here, and I'm going to try and save that girl. Find a place for Chipper to land up there so she won't have to drive down the mountain."

"Will do, Riley," said Irish.

Worried that the father might hear the helicopter coming up the mountain, they asked Chipper to hold back for a bit. Driving the big SUV up the road, they passed the

abandoned car and continued down the dirt road. The sun had set, and the weather was frigid, to say the least. Snow was beginning to fall.

“I see smoke,” said Bone.

He pointed ahead, and they knew they were close enough to the cabin to hike in. Stopping the SUV, they got out and walked the remainder of the way, waiting and watching for someone to come at them.

When they reached the front of the cabin, they saw one light on but nothing else. Irish decided he would try to text her before barging in and potentially causing a firefight. Plus, if there were a sick child inside, he didn't want to frighten her.

*Lucinda I'm here.*

Seconds later, the door to the cabin flung open, and Lucinda ran toward him, leaping into his arms.

“Jesus,” he whispered, holding her to his chest. He inhaled the smell of her, soaked in the feel of her body, then pulled back, staring at her face. “Are you hurt? Are you okay?”

“I'm okay,” she said, nodding. “I'm okay. The child isn't okay, though, and he's hurt pretty bad.”

“He?” frowned Irish.

“The girl’s father. He hasn’t hurt me at all. He was just desperate for help with his little girl.”

She turned to walk back into the cabin, and the others followed. Each man scanned the small space, easily seeing exactly what had taken place. There was no danger here except for the danger Dan had placed himself in.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Dan Thompson looked like he was going to die. He was sweating profusely, his face was pale, and he was weaving back and forth like a drunk man. Irish stared at Hoot, HG, AJ, and Bone, then back at the man. This dude wasn’t going anywhere, let alone was he going to hurt anyone.

“I didn’t mean to scare her,” he said, shaking his head. “I promise I didn’t harm her. I didn’t touch her. I just needed help.”

“We get it,” said Bone, “but this wasn’t the way to do it.”

AJ walked over to where Lucinda was seated beside a small bed. His heart cracked into a million pieces staring

down at the frail girl. Lucinda looked up at him, shaking her head.

“Please,” pleaded Dan. “Please, just save my daughter. Do what you want to me, but please, help her.”

“Good news, Dan. We’re going to save you both,” said Bone. “Chipper? Get up here quick.” Bone spoke into comms, then made sure that RP heard everything and knew they were on their way with the girl.

“Wrap the girl as warmly as you can, gently,” said AJ. “Anything we need to do to stabilize her, Lucinda?”

“No. We just have to be very careful with her. She’s weak and frail. Make sure you don’t jostle her too much and try to keep her head still if at all possible.”

Hoot leaned over the bed, staring down at the little girl. Fifteen years as a spec op Marine, and this was the thing that was going to break his soul. This tiny, frail, dying child would crack him in two.

“Come with me, precious. My name’s Hoot, like an owl,” he grinned to himself. She didn’t even bother to open her eyes. There was a faint smile, and then she whispered.

“You don’t feel like an owl. You don’t have feathers or claws to hang onto a tree.” Hoot softly laughed, shaking his head.

“No, I guess I don’t. But my eyesight is really great, like an owl.” Wrapping her in a cocoon of blankets, he lifted her and brought her outside, where Chipper was eagerly waiting for them.

“Now, who do we have here,” said Chipper softly, seeing the small bundle in Hoot’s arms.

“Chipper, this is sweet Lisa. She’s not feeling so hot right now, so I’m gonna hand her to you while I buckle in. Then you’re gonna hand her back to me, and I’m gonna hold her. I don’t want anything to make her hurt any more than she already is.” Chipper smiled at the young man, nodding as Hoot handed him the little girl. He buckled in, and then Chipper gave the child back to him.

Behind him, HG and AJ were helping Dan Thompson board the helicopter. At the door of the cabin, Irish stood with Lucinda, trying to coax Finn to come with them. In the end, he just lifted the nearly two-hundred-pound dog and brought him with them.

Chipper notified the team that they would be using the jet propulsion systems to get the child to them as quickly as possible. He gave a brief update on Lisa and her condition, as well as the father, who didn't look much better. Wilson and Cruz listened intently, taking copious notes, while Riley went to work, readying everyone for what they might be facing.

Irish looked over at Lucinda's calm, concerned expression. The mask of her professional mode was completely taking over her beautiful features. Those same big doe eyes he'd fallen in love with were now staring at a dying child with love and affection but also concern.

She was checking Lisa's vitals, seemingly as satisfied as she could be. Hoot refused to lay the child down, wanting to hold her and make sure she was comfortable. Lucinda then checked on Dan. Satisfied that they were both okay for now, she took her seat across the aisle from Irish. He started to speak, then thought wiser of it. She needed to be okay with him being there, and he needed to back off a bit until she made the decision otherwise.

"Irish? Thank you for coming for me," she said calmly.



“No problem.” He nodded, a small smile on his lips, then just looked forward again. He didn’t want to get his hopes up. He couldn’t.

It felt like he’d slapped her face. Just a short, curt ‘no problem.’ What did she expect? After the way she’d treated him, she deserved it. She deserved the cold shoulder and so much more. She’d been a ridiculous bitch to him. Standing, she moved across the aisle to sit next to him.

“Irish, I’m sorry. I overreacted, and I’m so damn sorry. I have a lot to explain to you, but I’m so grateful that you came for me, for her. I must have seemed like a crazy maniac leaving all those text messages and the voicemails, and I wish...”

She didn’t get to finish her sentence. Irish slammed his mouth to hers, holding her face in his hands, pulling her toward him. She was stiff at first, then melted into his touch, wrapping her arms around his neck, trying to get closer.

She’d wondered for months what it would have been like to kiss him, to touch his muscles and feel his strength. Yes, he’d told a lie, but for the second time in her life, he’d risked his own to come to her rescue.

“Irish, wait,” she said, pulling back breathlessly.

“No, I’m not going to wait. I’ve waited nine fucking months. I know I fucked up, Lucinda, but it was out of affection. I never lied about anything really important.”

“I know,” she said, shaking her head. “I know that now. I should have called you sooner and given you the chance to fully explain. You were right about my ex, Irish. I was mad at myself for not questioning all the lies before I found out the truth. I was mad that I didn’t see the lies sooner. It made me look for lies in others instead of the truths. But it wasn’t just him.

“My own mother lied to me about her illness. She lied to me about my father and how she’d gotten pregnant. My best friend in college lied to me about taking my things and sleeping with my boyfriend. It was a lot of little things that led to my explosion over something so small and yet so sweet. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she said with tears in her eyes. Irish kissed her forehead, then her sweet lips again. His heart was beating so fast, fearful that she would walk away.

“We move on from here, Lucinda. No more lies, little or big. I just want the chance to really get to know you, to love you,” he whispered. She nodded, kissing him again.

“Did he hurt you at all?”

“No, not even a little. He didn’t know who to turn to or how to get help. I’m not sure I would have done anything differently had the situation been reversed. He just wants to help his daughter. The thing is, I’m not sure we can, Irish. I’m not sure she can be saved at this point.” Irish stared at the little girl in Hoot’s arms, watching as he softly rocked her back and forth, humming a lullaby to her.

He watched as Hoot whispered the words to the lullaby, “Baby Mine,” the soulful, mournful words cutting through his body.

“If we can’t save her, God help the men who denied her treatment.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hoot stared at the gaunt face of the child in his arms. Twelve. She was only fucking twelve. She should be out playing with kids her own age, running, and dreaming of her first kiss.

They were an hour into the flight when he sensed something was wrong. Looking at HG, he jerked his head back toward Lucinda.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, kneeling beside him. Hoot looked up. His eyes filled with unshed tears.

“She’s not breathing,” he whispered. Lucinda shook her head, then felt for a pulse. Nothing. Listening to her chest, again, nothing.

“God,” she muttered. “Her little body just couldn’t take it. She knew she was dying. She told me. I just thought if we got her to Riley, we might have a chance.”

“Do we wake him?” asked Irish, looking at her father lying back in the reclining seat.

“You could try, but I gave him enough painkillers to keep him knocked out the entire flight. I didn’t want him

ripping open his wound again.” She looked back down at the child and just shook her head. “We can lay her down in the back.”

“No,” said Hoot. “I’ll hold her until we get home.”

“Hoot, brother,” said HG, “she’s gone. There’s nothing any of us could have done.”

“I know,” he said, staring at his other two-thirds. HG and Bone could feel his pain, and they both hunched as if in agony with him. “I’m not letting her go. She deserves at least this last bit of humanity.”

It was another hour of him gently holding her, rocking her, and singing the sweet lullabies from his childhood. When the plane landed in a mix of clouds threatening to unleash rain, the medical team rushed toward them. Hoot stood and walked down the steps with the bundle in his arms.

“Fuck,” muttered Riley. The big man lay the girl down gently on the gurney just as a cloud opened, shining light on her face. Hoot then leaned down and kissed her forehead.

“Fly, angel. Fly away,” he whispered.

“Hoot? Brother, there was nothing you could have done for her,” said Wilson. “Her condition was tenuous at

best, according to Lucinda. Advanced neuroblastoma without treatment is aggressive.”

“That’s just it, isn’t it, Wilson? Without treatment. Had those fuckers at the insurance company approved her medications, she might have had a shot.”

“I don’t disagree, but we do this as a team. The right way.”

“Honey, come with me,” said Ashley, gripping his elbow. “Let’s just talk, okay. It’s required, Hoot, for everyone after something like this.”

He nodded at the pretty doctor and turned toward his two brothers. They had been connected at the hip since the day they were born. When he looked at them, he saw himself in almost every way.

“We’ll be waiting to go when Luke and Cam tell us it’s time,” said Bone. “They won’t get away with this.”

Cruz and Doc came down the steps with Dan on a backboard. He was still out, and everyone was grateful for the time being. Now they had a bank robber with a gunshot wound to the chest on their property and his dead daughter. This was not going to be easy.

“Are you okay?” asked Gabi, gripping the arms of her young protégé.

“I am now, yes. He didn’t hurt me, Gabi. He only wanted to get someone to help his little girl, and I couldn’t even do that.” Irish hugged Lucinda to his side, and Gabi gave a sad smile to the couple.

“Lucinda, I told you on the phone this is extremely complicated. I was hoping we would be able to get her to the pond and then St. Jude, but I guess God had other plans,” said Riley.

“I think she was sick longer than the father thought. She can’t weigh more than sixty pounds, and she’s twelve. Some of the letters were from two or three months back, others as early as last week. I can’t help but think maybe her pediatrician didn’t run all the tests on her because the insurance refused to pay for them. One of the letters even said a brain scan seemed unnecessary at this stage. How fucking cruel is that?”

“This is why I left traditional healthcare,” said Gabi.  
“Well, this and my big chocolate sex stick.”

“Me too, not your chocolate sex stick. My big sexy beast,” said Riley. “But we digress. I hated having to deal

with the fucking insurance companies that tell the doctors what's right for the patient. Those assholes didn't go to medical school and then spend years in a specialty. Worse is when the doctor is in on it or working with a specific pharmaceutical company to push their drug. It's all such a damn mess."

"I need to call the hospital and let them know I'm okay," said Lucinda. "I'm sure they're worried sick."

"We called them," said Wilson. "Our tech team called your employer as well as the detective and told them that you'd gone to visit a friend and got the flu. You had high fevers and were just now getting around to being lucid. We asked for a few weeks' leave of absence for you."

"Wow, you guys are really a full-service shop," she said. "I guess I could use a few weeks off after all that. Riley? Lisa said the tumor had made her blind. She didn't even bother to open her eyes any longer because she couldn't see, and the light hurt her."

"I think you might be right about the advanced stage of her disease. Tumors like those often press on the optical nerves, as well as those that control talking and walking. I assume she spoke to you."



“Yes, briefly. She knew she was dying.” She felt a cold nose hit her hand and smiled down at Finn. “I forgot about him. He’s the family dog. He was a good boy. He’d been trained to put logs on the fire and even get food or drink for Lisa. He’s sweet as can be.”

“Do you want us to take him out to Sniff and Lucy?” asked Wilson.

“No,” she said, shaking her head, then looking at Irish. “I mean, I don’t know where I’m staying, but can I keep him with me?”

“You can stay in my cottage if you like,” said Irish. “I have an extra bedroom.”

“Do I need an extra bedroom?” she asked with sad eyes.

“Only for Finn,” smiled Irish, kissing her sweetly.

“Well, it makes me happy to see you two finally getting yourselves straight,” said Gabi. “Listen, Lucinda, I heard everything you said to Irish on the plane. We have constant communication lines open in these situations. I didn’t agree with what your mother did to get pregnant. I

didn't agree with her not telling your father. But it was her decision, and as her friend, I respected that decision.

“But if you want to try and find him, we can help with that. I'm sure through DNA testing, we can find him or another family member.” Lucinda shook her head.

“No, Gabi, it's alright. I actually tried that a few years ago. He died in a construction accident at a building site. He never married and had no other children.”

“God, I'm so sorry, honey.”

“I know,” she smiled. “It's part of what made me so suspicious of Irish. I didn't mean to be.” She watched as Cruz and Doc secured the backboard to the ATV and frowned.

“Where are they taking him?”

“I think you need to come with us,” said Gabi.

Gabi, Riley, Wilson, Irish, and Lucinda followed in another ATV to the back of the property. When a still groggy Dan was lifted off the board and stripped, Lucinda frowned.

“Trust us,” said Irish.

She continued to watch as Cruz stripped, completely unfazed by being naked in front of a handful of people. He stepped into the pond, and then Doc carefully lowered Dan to

him, allowing him to fully immerse in the thermal waters. His eyes went wide, then his head went back, and he started to cry. Cruz let him decide if he wanted comfort or to be left alone. It wasn't easy hugging a man when you were both naked, but he was more than willing if needed.

Dan stared at everyone, then looked down at his chest. He looked at Cruz, then swam a few laps and returned to the dock. Pushing himself out of the water, Doc handed him a towel.

“His chest,” whispered Lucinda. “His chest is healed. You didn't lie. You didn't lie to me.”

“No, baby. I didn't lie about that. I lied about still feeling weak, mostly because I was enjoying the sponge baths. But I didn't lie about anything else.” She just shook her head.

“All these months, I've hidden away because of my own insecurities.”

They watched as Dan dressed himself, then stood with Doc and Cruz as the men explained what had happened to his daughter. Riley, Gabi, and Lucinda stepped out of their ATV. Wilson and Irish behind them.

“She was too far gone, but she wasn’t alone,” said Cruz. “One of our men held her the entire way home. He never left her side.”

“I knew she didn’t have long, but I hoped. I prayed that the medicines would give me more time to get the insurance company to help me,” he cried. “She was all I had.”

“Is your wife gone?” asked Lucinda.

“She was never my wife,” he said, shaking his head. “Heather was a one-night stand that showed up at my door nine months later, ready to deliver. She said the baby was coming, and she needed help. I called an ambulance, and they delivered Lisa right on the living room floor. She was so damned tiny. Barely five pounds.

“A few days later, I heard her crying in the middle of the night and got up to see that Heather was gone. No note, nothing. She was just gone. I took a DNA test, but it wouldn’t have mattered. She was mine. It’s just been her and I ever since. I bought that cabin a few years ago. She loved hiking and fishing,” he smiled.

“We can do whatever you like, but Mama Irene, the woman who owns this property, has already said there’s a place for her in the family plot.” He smiled, nodding.

“I have nowhere else to take her,” said Dan.

“Sir, we’d like your permission to do a full autopsy on Lisa,” said Riley. “Gabi and I are both surgeons, and I specialized in oncology when I was in private practice.”

“But we know what killed her,” he said, wiping his eyes.

“We do, but I want to do some tests to see just how long it was there. I think she might have been sick longer than we think. If that’s the case, our net just widened considerably.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Irish couldn't get Lucinda to the cottage without one of the wives running toward her, hugging her, and welcoming her back. Mama Irene didn't want to let her go for fear she might run again. She assured the older woman that it was all a misunderstanding and she wouldn't be so foolish again.

"We've put some clothes and things in Irish's cottage," said Irene. "Erin and the girls put some items in the bathroom that you might need, but if you find you're missin' somethin', you just holler, and I'll come runnin'." She kissed Lucinda's cheek and bounced down the steps and along the path.

"You know, I actually believe she would come running," smiled Lucinda.

"Oh, no doubt," laughed Irish. "That pond? What you witnessed today is only part of what it does. It keeps everyone here healthy and young. Mama Irene and Matthew are in their nineties. I don't know how old exactly, but they're in better shape than I am."

"I doubt that," smiled Lucinda. "You forget, I gave you sponge baths." Irish blushed, nodding at her.

"Again, I'm sorry," he said.

“Don’t be. I should have been flattered that you were willing to go to such extremes just to be around me. I admit I didn’t believe you about the pond, but I also didn’t give you a chance to explain or ask Gabi about it. Can we just start again?”

“I’d like to start where the good parts left off,” he grinned. “Like kissing you again.”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Irish held her, just staring down into her beautiful brown eyes, then lowered his head to her. Their lips connected, pressing against one another, devouring one another like starving children.

He lifted her, wrapping her legs around his waist.

“I-I need a shower,” she said against his mouth.

“Shower it is,” he smiled.

While he got the water running and stripped from his own dirty clothes, she undressed behind him. He wanted to give her time to be comfortable with them being together, but she was moving as fast as he was.

When the water was hot enough, he stepped in, letting the warmth cover his body. He felt her hands at his waist, wrapping around him, and his cock jumped to attention. Tracing kisses down his back, her neatly trimmed nails raked across his chest.

Lucinda felt the animal rumble in his chest. It vibrated through her with excitement and expectation of what was to come. She allowed her hands to move up and down his torso, then lower, needing to feel what she'd seen before. Soft, Irish was impressive. Hard, he was outstanding.

Wrapping her fingers around his stiff cock, she gently stroked up and down as his breathing became more and more labored. Still kissing his spine as she got used to the feel of him in her hands.

Irish couldn't take any more. Turning, he lifted her and gently lowered her down his length. Her mouth opened, surprised at the girth and length of him filling her body.

"Irish," she gasped. "God, you're much bigger than I remember."

"I tried not to be hard when you were around," he grinned. "It was an extremely difficult task, by the way. But fuck me, you feel so damn good."



“You too,” she smiled, rocking her hips against him. “I’m kind of a fan of these red curls.” She stroked a hand down his chest, then to his balls, and he laughed.

“Not a lot of people like red, but that’s me, baby.”

“Faster, Irish, faster,” she panted, jutting her hips harder and harder into his body. It didn’t take long for them both to be screaming with relief. But Lucinda wasn’t done yet. She wanted to taste him, to test how far he’d let her go.

Kneeling in front of him, she stroked and sucked while one hand gently squeezed his balls. One finger slid up his ass, teasing his tight hole. His eyes went wide, and she looked up, grinning.

“Not a fan?” she smiled.

“I’m not sure,” he laughed. “I’ve never had anyone, ironically, other than a doctor, want to go there.”

“It could bring you pleasure,” she grinned. “Putting pressure on just the right places.” He pulled her to her feet, smiling at her.

“And does the same bring you pleasure, sweet Lucinda? Will you like it if I take you from behind?”

“I-I’m not sure. No one has ever wanted to, but I’d like to try,” she smiled. “I want to do all things with you, Irish. Everything. When I was here last time, the girls gave me all the books that Charlie had written. I read them all.”

“All?!” asked Irish, surprised. It was nearly a hundred books.

“Yep. All. They sure gave me a lot of ideas I’d never thought of before. Toys, role play, bondage, it was all kind of exciting. Is that weird?” Irish gripped her hand and laid it against his now painful, purple cock.

“Does it look like I think that’s weird? It fucking turns me on, baby. Anything you want to do, anything you want to play with, I’m in. You’re mine, Lucinda. I’m not letting you go again, no matter what. I was fucking miserable without you, and I didn’t even know why.

“I’m not sure if the girls ever talked about it, but the magic here extends to every part of our lives. Love is the major one, in my opinion. Ethan got married while you were gone, and he knew the woman just a few days. But he knew he was in love. Nine knew with Erin within a few hours. Pigsty an hour with Sira. Jean, a few days with Ro. Everyone here has experienced the same thing.

“And it was no different for me. I knew the moment I saw you that you would be mine one day.”

“What are you saying?” she asked, filled with hope.

“I’m saying I want a life with you, Lucinda. I want you in my life. If you don’t want to get married, we won’t, but it won’t change what I think of as our marriage vows. I want a family with you. I want to wake up next to you every single day here, in our cottage.

“I’m saying I was in love with you then, and I’m even more in love with you now.”

“Oh, Irish,” she cried against his chest. “I was so stupid. We wasted so much time, and I should have been here with you.”

“Things happen for a reason, baby. I think you needed to find Dan and Lisa. We couldn’t help her, but maybe we can change the future for someone else.”

“Irish? I want more,” she said.

“What do you want, baby? I’ll get you anything you want,” he said lovingly.

“No, silly. I want more of you. I’m starving for you, Irish. For this big, tall, strong, handsome body. And speaking

as a doctor, for that abnormally large penis.” Irish laughed, shaking his head.

“Are you sure you’re not Gabi’s daughter? That woman talks about our penises like she’s talking about varieties of cheese.” Lucinda laughed, laying back on the bed with Irish.

“She was always a bit more vocal about sex than other women, even my mother. In fact,” blushed Lucinda, “Gabi gave me my first sex talk. So, you see, I learned from an expert how to fit my mouth perfectly around your cock. Like this.”

Irish looked down as Lucinda snaked down his body, gripping his dick, stroking and sucking. She opened her mouth wide, smiling at him. Then wrapped her lips around him, tasting him.

“Fuck, Lucinda. Baby,” he moaned.

“Let me finish,” she grinned. He was more than happy to let her do her thing because afterwards, it was his turn. By midnight, they were both spent, wrapped in one another’s arms.

“Will you tell me about your parents?” she whispered.

“I didn’t really have a mom. I mean, I did, but she walked out on my dad and me when I was six. It didn’t matter. My old man was the greatest. He worked mostly factory jobs, sometimes on the fishing boats or construction, but he was good with his hands. We didn’t have a lot, but what we had was ours. Gotten through honest, hard work.

“He never once complained. He made sure we had Sunday dinners together no matter what, and when I started playing baseball in high school, he was there for every game. He died while I was deployed.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, hugging him.

“No, I was lucky to have him for as long as I did. My mom was at the funeral looking old and worn out. I didn’t even speak to her. She walked out on us, never even sent birthday cards. I will never do that. Never. My children will know that I love them, and I will spend every moment telling them so.”

Lucinda leaned on her elbow, her hand spread across his muscular chest. The fine red hairs curled beneath her fingers looked so sexy. She wondered if he manscaped since he had no hair on his back or arms, and it was beautifully trimmed around his cock and balls.

“You picture us having children?” she asked.

“As many as you want, and we will raise them together.” Lucinda didn’t know why that one statement affected her so much, but it rocked her to the core.

“I love you, Connor ‘Irish’ Kelly.” He smiled at her, pushing a strand of long brown hair behind her ear.

“I know, baby. And I love you, too.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Wanting to keep a close eye on him, Riley and Max hosted Dan in their home. She was worried he might do something to himself in his grief or that he might leave and do something foolish to the insurance executives. He wasn't ready to take Finn yet. Every time he looked at him, he thought of his sweet little girl. In time, he'd take the dog back.

Fortunately, he only slept.

“Good morning,” said Max, handing the man a cup of coffee.

“Good morning,” he said quietly. “Listen, I want to thank all of you for what you've done for me and for Lisa. But the reality is, I'm a bank robber living in your home, under your roof, on your property.” Max nodded.

“Yea, about that,” he said, pointing to a chair.

“Strangest thing happened. We found almost twenty grand in a duffel bag. Told SPD that our boys found it while they were looking for Lucinda. We returned it, and what do you know, there was a reward.” Max slid the check across the table.

“Are you crazy?” said Dan. “I can't take this. I robbed those banks.”

“Well, technically, you asked for the money nicely, and they gave it to you. You didn’t even have a weapon, so honestly, it was their own stupidity.” Dan laughed, shaking his head.

“This is ten thousand dollars.”

“Yep. It should be enough to start a new life once you’re back in Seattle or wherever you want to go. In the meantime, we’d like to take on your case and go after the insurance companies.”

“I have no idea what’s happening right now.” He shook his head, rubbing his hand over his chest, still confused as to how his chest was healed. A knock at the door had Max standing to let a few other men inside. Dan stood and took a step back, seeing the goliaths coming toward him.

“Whoa, whoa,” smirked Jean. “We’re friends. I’m Jean Robicheaux, and these ugly bastards are my brothers, Gabriel, Alec, and Raphael. I have five more somewhere, plus all my non-blood brothers.”

“Holy shit,” muttered Dan. “I mean, I’m six-one, but you’re what? Seven feet?” He stared up at Alec.



“Aww, that’s so nice. He gave me a few extra inches. No, man, I’m six-eight. I had a late growth spurt.” Max just smiled, then spoke again.

“Jean is an expert in finance and banking, and his wife is an expert with insurance companies. She’s going to help as well. Our medical team is going to work on things from that angle, and together we’re going to nail these bastards.”

“Why? I mean, I appreciate what you’re doing, but why? You don’t owe me anything. In fact, I owe you everything.”

“No, you don’t,” smiled Gabriel. “That’s not the way things work around here. We fight for people who can’t fight for themselves. You paid insurance premiums believing they would provide for you and your daughter when you needed them. The insurance company didn’t follow through on their end of the deal and allowed your beautiful daughter to die. We don’t like that anymore than you do, and we’re going to stop it.”

The door opened, and Bone, HG, and Hoot walked in, followed by AJ and Irish. Dan looked at the five men, scanning their faces. He landed on Hoot, whose eyes showed pain, sadness, and guilt.

“You were with her,” he said calmly, walking toward the young man. Hoot nodded. “I was told that you held her, rocked her, and sang lullabies to her.”

“I’m sorry.” Hoot’s voiced cracked, and he shook his head. His brothers each gripped a shoulder, the identical triplets staring at the man. “I just wanted her to know that someone cared. I didn’t want her to lie down and be alone.”

“I will forever be grateful to you,” said Dan, wiping the tears from his eyes. “She knew. She knew, and I wouldn’t admit it. I couldn’t admit it. She kept saying that I needed to be okay with it, but how can you be okay with your child dying? She should have been out playing in the mud, fishing, hiking the trails like she always did. I tried so hard to get the insurance companies and doctors to listen, but they just kept denying every claim.

“When I made the decision to rob those banks, I knew it was wrong, and I knew it might kill me, but I had to risk my life for hers. I had to. I’m so glad she had you with her at the end. I’m sure with you holding her, she thought she was being held by an angel. It was something she believed in. She was always saying that an angel would take her home one day.”

Hoot stared at the man, shaking his head, then looked up at the others. His expression was one of sudden realization. Turning, he ran out the door and toward the family plot. He searched for the face he needed. Claudette.

“Is she here?” he asked breathlessly.

“She is,” smiled the apparition. “She’s quite happy to be here. Is her father ready to speak with her?”

“Hoot? What’s up?” asked Max, the others following.

“Good God, is that a g-ghost?” asked Dan.

“Yea, well, you already know about the pond, but we have other special things here as well,” smirked Max. “This is Claudette. She’s been on this property for more than two hundred years. Claudette? Perhaps you could help Dan understand.”

The girl smiled, then, in a cloud of mist and smoke, the image of Lisa appeared. She was wearing her white nightgown with the pink bow at the neck and smiled at her father. She looked healthy and happy, her cheeks nearly as pink as the bow on her gown.

“Is this a joke? It’s a cruel joke,” he whispered.

“It’s me, Dad. Isn’t this place amazing? I’m not hurting any longer, and I’ve met some wonderful people. Claudette and I are going to be friends, and her boyfriend is Tony.”

“A ghost has a boyfriend?” Dan shook his head.

“And there’s this cool man, Nathan, who was on the Navajo reservation. He’s going to teach me all about the native ways. And this man Yori, he’s Japanese.”

“I’m dreaming, right?”

“You’re not dreaming, Dan. It doesn’t always happen like this, but maybe because your daughter was ready to go, we’re able to see her. Plus, she feels safe here and knows that we’re going to take care of her and you.” Max smiled at the man, then back at the little girl. “Now, sometimes, when everything meets with closure, our ghosts disappear. You have to be prepared for that. Until then, you can speak with her.”

Lisa smiled at her father, then looked at the triplets. She moved closer to them, staring at each one, landing on Hoot.

“Thank you,” she smiled. “Thank you for holding me and making me feel safe. And I loved the lullabies.”

“You’re welcome,” said Hoot, some of the pain leaving him as he spoke to the girl.

“I wish I could have lived. When I grew up, I would have married you,” she said, laughing. Hoot laughed as well, nodding at her.

“I would have been an old man by then, but I would have welcomed you loving me, sweet Lisa.”

“I’m going to play now, Dad. Don’t worry about me.” She disappeared with Claudette, and Dan fell to his knees in shock. Max and Gabriel knelt beside him. Max gripped his arm.

“It’s a lot to take in. Come on, let’s get some breakfast, and maybe Mama Irene can explain things a little better.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Dan was completely overwhelmed by the number of people in the cafeteria. He'd never seen so many people in one place, all working for the same organization. When a tiny white-haired woman came storming toward him, he thought he was in trouble. Instead, she stopped in front of him, reaching up to place her hands on his cheeks. He felt her pull him down, and he just went with it. Not that he had a choice.

“I’m so sorry, baby. It’s all gonna be okay now. My boys are gonna take care of this, and you’re gonna be alright. Your little angel is here with all of us, and she’ll be safe, happy, and living in her own way. Now, you can call me Irene, Mama, or Mama Irene. Those are your only choices. Got it?”

“Uh, yes, ma’am.”

“What did I just say?” she frowned.

“Oh, yes, Mama Irene,” he said, staring at her.

“That’s a good boy. Tell me, Dan, what did you do for a livin’ back in Washington?”

“Well, I made custom-painted tanks for motorcycles.”

The sounds of silverware dropping echoed in the cafeteria. All eyes turned to stare, making Dan want to run. Mama Irene grinned, nodding at him.

“I see. I see,” she said. “And did you own your own business?”

“Yes, ma’ ... I mean, yes, Mama Irene.”

“Brother, what is your business called?” asked Skull.

“Oh, uh, it’s under the name PaintMaster.” Dan shrugged as if it were nothing. He had no clue that the men in this room knew exactly how important that name was in the industry.

“Son of a...”

“Don’t finish that, Skull,” said Mama Irene, shaking her finger. “I don’t want to fuss at you this mornin’.”

“You’re PaintMaster? You’re the man who did the tanks that won worlds three years in a row? You were just on the cover of Biker Magazine with a tank that had...” Skull stopped and looked at him. “I’m sorry, brother. It had angels on it.”

“It was for her,” he said, smiling with a painful smile. “She asked me to do it. I couldn’t understand why, but she kept saying it was important that the world see the angels. Lisa kept saying they would lead me to where I should be.” Mama Irene grinned, nodding her head. She kissed his cheek, and as she was walking away, she spoke.

“And they did, baby. And they did.”

“Brother, we run Patriot Motorcycles.” Dan’s mouth dropped open, and he stared at the big scar-faced man. “That’s right. I was the man who placed second behind you at worlds. But you weren’t there. You submitted the tank but didn’t go to the show.”

“No,” he said sadly. “Jesus, you’re Patriot. You guys have an amazing reputation. That tank you did two years ago with the Statue of Liberty and the flag flying behind it. I swear it was coming off the metal.”

“Dan,” said Whiskey, walking toward the man, “you might have a place here when all this is settled. We could use another man in the shop. We’re swamped and have orders that are backed up for a year.”

“Well, I don’t know if I can stay, but I’d be happy to help while I’m here.”



“Why wouldn’t you stay?” asked Razor. “I mean, you know our reputation. We need you, and this is an amazing place. You’d be with your daughter.”

“I have to stop those men,” he said.

“We are going to stop those men,” said Luke. “We.”

Dan nodded, grabbing a plate and sitting with the others for the morning meal. As he ate, he listened and discovered that these men and women were truly something special. Mama Irene came back with the keys to his assigned cottage and told him she had ordered him some clothes. He had no idea what that would look like, but the others just nodded and told him it would be okay.

“Dan, let’s go,” said Irish. “We have a morning meeting, and you and Lisa are the number one topic.”

“Sure,” he said, nodding. He pulled back on Irish’s arm as they walked. “Irish, I’m sorry about taking the doctor. I didn’t know she was your girl, not that it mattered. I just needed someone to help me. I swear, I never hurt her. I would never.”

“I know, Dan,” nodded Irish. “We’ve all done desperate shit, believe me. You wouldn’t be here if we

thought you'd hurt her. I'm sorry we couldn't get to Lisa sooner." They stepped inside the auditorium, and Luke and Cam waved him over.

"Dan, we'd appreciate it if you could run through everything that started this track," said Luke. "Leave nothing out. Our tech team will be recording it all and researching as we go."

"Right," he nodded. "Well, I've been self-employed for twenty years. I started painting tanks when I was just a kid. The first few were terrible, but then I got better. I started reading about my heroes." He looked at Skull and Razor, shaking his head.

"Do you guys have any idea how much you've influenced my work? I read everything I could about every bike you ever built. The bikes were badass, but it was the tanks that really had me. I had two bikes of my own that I had to sell for Lisa.

"Because I was self-employed, I had to get my own insurance. When it was just me, I wasn't too worried about it, but the minute I had her, I knew I had to do grown-up shit. I went to an insurance broker and asked for help. They told me the best rates for someone my age and a child were through

PacWest Healthcare. It was eight hundred and eleven dollars a month.”

“Jesus,” muttered Irish. Dan shook his head.

“That was the cost when I started. My last payment to them was thirteen hundred and four dollars.”

“Holy fuck,” said Tailor.

“Yea, that’s what I said every time I wrote the check. I wrote those checks thinking when the time came, if the time came, my little girl would be okay. When she was four, she fell out of a tree and broke her arm. They barely covered the cost of the cast. I argued with them but then just gave up, thinking it wouldn’t matter. We wouldn’t need them again. I was so fucking wrong.

“Lisa started losing weight right after Christmas last year. At first, I took her to the pediatrician, and he said she was growing taller and thinning out. Then it was slurred speech and complaining of headaches. I took her back to him, and he said I was being an over-concerned parent.”

“Fucking bastard,” growled Rory. Dan stared at the man, swallowing, then just nodded.

“When I finally got him to listen to me, he said he would draw some bloodwork. Her white blood cell count was so outrageous I could see it on his face. He knew he’d fucked up, but of course, he wouldn’t admit it. He said he was referring me to another doctor but never even told me who.

“We showed up for our first appointment, and when I saw the words oncology on the door, I couldn’t breathe. They did an x-ray of her chest, and then the doctor said she needed CAT and gallium scans, but the insurance kept kicking it back, saying they wouldn’t pay for it.

“I finally said I would pay cash. Seven grand, give or take,” he said, shaking his head.

“Seven grand,” said Janie. “No way. Not even on a bad day. It shouldn’t have been that much.”

“That’s what they charged me. They wanted more tests, and the insurance company kept refusing. I kept paying cash until my cash ran out. When they did the first round of chemotherapy and radiation, the doctor said it was unlikely it would help because the insurance company would only approve what he referred to as ‘weak-ass drugs.’

“I watched her dwindling away every fucking day. Every day a little thinner, a little less Lisa. The oncologist

pushed for an aggressive attack with the three drugs I stole. Sorry about that,” he said shyly. “The insurance company kept kicking it back, saying that it would be ‘wasted resources.’ I kept the letters and gave them to Lucinda.”

“We have them,” said Luke.

“Dan, I’m Dr. Jane Wolfkill Robicheaux. I’m a pediatrician, and along with Riley, who is an oncologist, we reviewed your daughter’s files and our initial autopsy results.” Jane swallowed, taking in a deep breath. “Dan, she could have been saved. From the time of her first visit almost to the time of her last oncology visit, she was still in a place where she could have been saved. I’m sorry, Dan.”

“No, don’t be,” he said, shaking his head. “I knew it. The oncologist told me. He was so frustrated he tried to get the drug manufacturers to give her the medications for free. Obviously, they refused.”

“Dan, did you ever speak with someone at the insurance company?” asked Ro.

“I spoke with dozens of people. I would sit on the phone for hours being forced to go through a robotic call system,” he said, shaking his head. “I’d get to one person, and they’d say ‘hold’ and pass me to someone else. It was the

same with all of them. I'm sorry, but it is not something we're going to cover for your daughter. How? How can they make those decisions? How can they decide against what the doctor advises?

"I went up there, hoping to speak to someone live. I wasn't the only one. There were a dozen other people in the lobby of that building. None of us could get past security. I met a man in his late fifties who'd had his leg amputated because of diabetes. The insurance company told him he was using too much insulin.

"There was a woman who suffered from grand mal seizures that could have been relieved by a procedure."

"Let me guess, they refused to cover it," said Luke.

"Yep. They all had the same story. All had paid thousands and thousands in premiums, just like me, and yet, what had been paid for and reimbursed for medical charges incurred was minuscule."

"Do you have a copy of the plan details?" asked Jean.

"Yes, it's on my laptop, but I'm not sure we got it," said Dan.

“We got it,” grinned Irish. “I gave it to Pigsty. That was before we knew you. He was downloading everything to do with the insurance company and the doctors.”

“That’s fine,” said Dan. “I really appreciate it. I don’t know what I would have done had you not come for Lucinda.”

“I knew you weren’t going to hurt me, Dan,” she said, clinging to Irish’s hand. “I just wish I could have helped Lisa.” He nodded, turning to Luke, Cam, Eric, and Hex.

“That’s all I have, I think. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Brother, nothing left to say,” said Hex. “Why don’t you go with Skull, Razor, and the boys and check out the shop. We’re going to keep digging and doing what we do. When we decide to take these assholes on, you’ll be involved.”

Dan left with the cycle team while the others stayed in the room. Hex frowned at the other leaders, then looked up.

“We’re going insurance executive hunting.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dan stood in the middle of the bike shop, running his fingers over the gleaming machines. Their engines were huge, superior pieces of equipment, all hand-done. The chrome on their pipes, the handlebars, the wheels, shining like a beacon to all who loved the rumbling thunder that would begin the moment the bikes were started.

He stared with interest at each tank, delicately running a hand over each painting and shaking his head. Yes, he'd won worlds, but these bikes were magnificent.

"I can't believe you run Patriot Cycles," he said, shaking his head. "Man, I used to dream about working for you guys. I'd see your shit in the magazines and think that's what I wanted to do."

"Brother, we've seen your work," smiled Skull. "You don't need to be dreaming about our bikes."

"Yea, I do. I did the tanks, but you guys build the entire bike. I had a few guys I worked with out of California who ordered my tanks regularly, and it allowed me to take care of my daughter and stay at home. I never dreamed all of this would come crashing down around me."



“We’ll get all of that handled,” said Razor. “How many tanks can you do in a month?”

“I don’t know. It depends on how detailed the artwork is. Sometimes people send me photos of family members, homes, personal shit, and that takes longer for me because I don’t have a connection to it. I need things that evoke emotion. I prefer doing really cool landscapes or national monuments.”

“Brother, I saw the one you did of Arlington Cemetery. I thought the whole thing was three-dimensional.” Dan nodded, giving a sad smile.

“That was actually for my own bike,” he said quietly. “The headstone up front was my father’s. Thirty years in the Corps.”

“You’re fucking with me, right?” growled Whiskey.

“No, I would never,” said Dan with a serious expression. “He always wanted me to join, but I have a curvature in my spine that prevented me from passing the physicals. Up until this week, I thought that day was the worst in my life.”

“I’m so sorry, brother,” said Skull. “It’s not the same, but I lost my wife a few years ago. It was sudden. A kid hopped the curb and hit her while she was waiting outside a hotel. Never saw it coming. Left me with two little boys who aren’t so little anymore.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” said Dan.

“It’s okay. She led me to my second wife, Avery. I can’t explain it, Dan, but somehow that woman was put in front of me, in my path, and I couldn’t turn away if I wanted to.”

“Yea, which brings me to my question. That woman, Mama Irene, she seemed to know a lot about me, or at least that was the impression I got.”

Skull, Razor, and Whiskey laughed, shaking their heads.

“Well, it’s hard to explain, but she has this unbelievable sixth sense about all of us. If you ask her kids, they think she’s a voodoo princess. If you ask me, I just think she’s got a hotline to God and knows everything. Either way, I’m not messing with her,” smirked Razor.

“Yea, I got that impression,” smiled Dan. He looked around the shop again and nodded. “This place is so fucking cool. Well, I’m a felon, but if you don’t mind, I don’t. Tell me what you need me to do.”

“Dan, you’re not a felon, brother. You were a distraught father searching for answers. The banks have their money back, you didn’t hurt anyone, you didn’t point any weapons. All is good,” said Whiskey. “Believe me, I should know. My wife is one of our corporate lawyers.”

Dan laughed, grabbing one of the heavy canvas aprons and a pair of safety goggles.

“Tell me where to start.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“PacWest Insurance is currently hiring independent sales associates,” said Ro. “Me, Jean, Hazel, Addie, and Magnus have all applied and already interviewed virtually. Pigsty created resumes and backgrounds for us. We’ve allegedly all worked for other ‘questionable’ insurance companies.

“I found it interesting that our entire pay structure is based on the number of new policyholders we acquire, and it’s directly correlated to how low we keep claims.”

“What do you have to do?” asked Hex.

“Well, we’re trained, given a small storefront in different parts of town, and have to meet a certain quota every month. We won’t know anything else until we’re trained.”

“How did they already hire you with just a video interview? Don’t these assholes do background checks, testing, anything else?” asked Luke. Pigsty smiled at the team, shaking his head.

“No on the testing or background checks. Absolutely nothing. On the resumes, let’s just say that I embellished the resumes a bit. Made it look like they hit ridiculous quotas,

especially around patients with cancer, long-term care needs, and geriatrics.”

“Geriatrics?” asked Cam.

“Yea. That’s the other thing we’ve discovered. All three insurance companies have a high population of individuals over the age of sixty-four. What I find particularly interesting is that their plans for this age group are all under the same name. Silver Cloud.”

“You’re shitting, right?” frowned Jean.

“I’m not shitting. These are retirees on fixed incomes and are trying to supplement their social security and Medicare. Alvin Boatright was a seventy-nine-year-old male with high blood pressure and high cholesterol. He was beginning to have issues with his vision, hearing, and mobility. His daughter brought him home to live with her, but she soon discovered he needed more care than she could deliver. He was unstable when walking and just couldn’t manage his care by himself.

“Using his Silver Cloud policy, she tried to get home healthcare, but it didn’t cover it. Then she tried to have visiting nurses. But it didn’t cover it. Finally, she had no other option but to seek full-time nursing home care. The

problem is, unless you're on welfare, you don't just walk in the place and get a room. You need a doctor's referral. In fact, you need all kinds of things.

“Despite the fact that Silver Cloud said it offered nursing home coverage when Mr. Boatright's daughter found a facility that was more than three thousand above his monthly income, they attempted to get help from the plan.”

“Let me guess,” frowned Rory, “the plan gave them no help.”

“It's more than that,” frowned Pigsty. “They told the daughter that her father hadn't paid his premiums in the last year. They stopped coverage and sent a bill for more than twelve thousand dollars for supposed charges covered. Mr. Boatright died four months ago, and his daughter is buried in the debt from PacWest.”

“But that's illegal,” said Katrina. “Children are not responsible for their parents' debts.”

“Correct,” said Code, “except that PacWest puts a teeny, tiny clause in their policies that says otherwise.”

“Are you kidding me?” she gasped. “Where is this policy?”

Code lifted a stack of paper and set it on a table. Everyone stared at it, thinking he was joking with them. Katrina looked at him and down at the papers.

“More than three hundred pages,” frowned Code. “Three hundred pages of some of the most prolific bullshit I’ve ever read.” Georgie stepped forward, grabbing the paper.

“I’ll take this and comb through it. I’ll start to prepare a brief of all the things that we know are illegal. I’ll call if I need you,” she said, nodding at Kat, Katrina, and Kari. Walking past Carl, she kissed her husband. “You could bring me some coffee, handsome.”

“I’ll be there soon, babe,” he smiled.

“I have a list of more than thousand people who have filed complaints with the Washington State Insurance Commission. Some of them have been answered, others have not. If you’d like to split up the list, I’m sure these people would be happy to speak with you,” said Code.

“Alright, Irish and Lucinda, Mo and Ophelia, Bogey and Alice, Hoot and AJ, and HG and Bone. Head back up to Washington. See as many of these people as you can and get their stories. Once we know whether or not our team is permanently hired as the new swindlers of the northwest, we

can try to find who is pulling the strings on this bullshit,” said Cam.

“Any clue yet as to who owns these three companies?” asked Mo.

“Nothing yet,” said Luke. “They’re supposed to disclose all that information, and nothing has been given to the state insurance commission. Our team is digging, but they definitely made it more difficult than it should be. That’s the other part of this mystery, the state insurance commissioner. We’ve contacted his office, and he’s yet to return our calls. We’ve also contacted the federal insurance office to see if we can find out anything on their end.

“Lucinda? See if you can get as much information as possible about their medical conditions. How extreme it was? Were they denied medications or treatments? That sort of thing. Also, if anyone actually spoke to a live human being, get their names.”

“Okay, that shouldn’t be a problem. I might also suggest looking at former employees. Maybe someone who resigned, not terminated. Resignations usually mean people were unhappy with a company. They might be willing to speak.” She nodded, and Irish kissed her forehead.



“That’s a great idea,” said Hex. “Pigsty? Let’s pull a list together of anyone who resigned from the company, especially those in claims processing. I’m going to bet we have some folks with a conscience.”

Everyone seemed to have their hand in on this one, and everyone had a stake in it. The senior team was planning to apply for healthcare coverage to see what they could get, including Irene, Matthew, Ruby, Sven, Chipper, and Teddy. Four furnished apartments were rented, and the elder group was headed up to Washington with the others.

“Luke, I can’t act like this foolishness on the paper,” said Ruby, coming through the door with the others. “I ain’t no invalid, and I damn sure ain’t helpless.”

“Miss Ruby, I know, but we need you to act that way in order to get these people to take advantage of you. They’re fooling people all over the northwest, and we’re going to stop them. Please, just put on those expert acting skills.” She gave him a frown, then nodded.

“Alright, I’ll do my best, but all they need to do is take one look at Sven and know he ain’t handicapped. That man is still a wild man in the bedroom, and all his equipment works

just fine.” Groans and moans were heard as the men shook their heads. Sven laughed, seeing his sons lower their heads.

“Miss Ruby, we really didn’t need to know that,” groaned Cam.

“Now you listen here, Cameron Dougall. When you get to be his age, and all your parts are still makin’ your beautiful wife happy, you’re gonna be proud as a peacock when she talks about it to her friends. She’ll make ‘em all jealous. Well, maybe not the ones here ‘cause I think you’ll all be the same, but anyone outside of here.”

“I think I’m going to ask her to keep my parts out of her conversations,” frowned Cam.

“What for?” smirked Irene. “Matthew’s parts are all just perfect, like the night of our honeymoon. Ain’t nothin’ to be ashamed of there.” Matthew kissed his wife, smiling at the younger men.

“One day, you boys will learn that it’s alright to discuss sex. It’s the most natural thing on the planet besides breathin’,” said Ruby. “Maybe if you talked about it more, your wives would be even happier. They talk about it.”

“Wait? What?” croaked Luke.

“Please, don’t act like you didn’t know,” smiled Irene. “The girls are always talkin’ about sex with one another, and thanks to Gabi, everyone knows the size of your penis. I’m proud of all of ‘ya.” She winked at them, then took Ruby’s hand and left the room.

“Grandpa, please talk to her,” said Luke, shaking his head.

“For what? She’s right. We are incredibly blessed because of this land. We’re all healthy, happy, and functioning just fine. If we were lesser men, we’d be talkin’ about sex in a disrespectful way. Instead of that, why not talk about it respectfully. Think about it.” He nodded at the younger men, then left the room with Sven. Teddy and Chipper smiled at the room.

“We don’t have wives, but I have to say, it’s refreshing to have folks my own age to talk about sex. Nothin’ to be ashamed of,” said Teddy. Chipper followed him from the room, and all eyes turned to Luke, Cam, Eric, and Hex.

“Why are you looking at us?” squirmed Eric. “I’m not starting a Wednesday afternoon book club and sex talk session. What you all do with your dicks is your business, but I’m not discussing mine.”

“Why?” smirked Pigsty. “According to Gabi, you got it goin’ on.” Eric rolled his eyes, turning to the smaller man.

“I’m going to kill you.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Irish and the others boarded the plane to head to Washington. Some slept, others ate snacks from the fully stocked galley, and others just chatted amongst themselves. But Irish noticed one who wasn't saying anything. Hoot.

“Hey, man, you okay?” he asked the other man.

“Yea. No. I'm not sure, Irish. I spoke to Ashley and Calla before I left, but I'm not sure. I've watched a lot of people die in my day. I held a few. Some were brothers. Some were enemies. But holding that little girl while she took her last breath is eating me from the inside out.”

“Brother, that's normal,” said Irish, gripping his arm. “It means you're alive on the inside. She was innocent, completely and totally innocent. A twelve-year-old that should not have died, but you gave her peace in her last moments, Hoot.”

Hoot nodded, looking at his brothers further up the aisle. They kept turning to be sure he was okay, and he tried to assure them that he was, but even he wasn't sure.

“Man, if you can't keep it together, we need to get you back home,” said Irish.

“I’m fine. I promise I’ll keep it together,” said Hoot. “But I’m telling you right now, if I find the man or woman responsible for denying that child’s claims, no one is going to hold me back.”

Irish stared at Hoot, realizing that he was a very big man. Irish was solid, lean muscle. Six-feet-three of red-headed hotness. But Hoot and his brothers were all six-feet-four, wide, thick, and strong as oxen. He wouldn’t want to have to hold him back. Or shoot him.

“We’ll find them and make them pay,” said Irish, realizing that he wouldn’t change Hoot’s mind.

The beauty of flying west was the two-hour time difference in your favor. When they landed, it wasn’t even noon yet, which gave everyone time to get settled and begin their interviews and searches.

Matthew, Sven, Chipper, and Teddy all rented cars to head to their rented apartments, where they would be meeting with their potential insurance agents tomorrow. It gave them time to place family photos around, blankets, anything to make it look like their home.

The others all took their rentals either to the insurance company training or to visit with the people on their list.

Either way, it was going to be a long week.



Irish and Lucinda pulled into the parking space in front of the run-down ranch-style home. The grass was green, thanks to all the rain in Seattle, but it was unkempt. Paint was peeling off the siding, and the drapes were barely hanging on the windows.

“Let’s do this, babe,” said Irish, taking her hand. He intentionally pulled her behind him, just in case, as he knocked on the door. It opened a small gap, the chain still on.

“Can I help you?” asked a woman’s voice.

“Miss Megan Williams? My name is Irish Kelly, and this is Dr. Lucinda Harwell. We’d like to ask you some questions about your claims that were denied by PacWest.”

“Are you with them?” asked the woman.

“No, ma’am. We’re investigating them.” The door shut, and the chain was released. The woman opened the door and waved them into the room. It was dark, and they tried to adjust their eyes.

“Let me open the drapes a bit for some light,” she said quietly. Lucinda stared at the middle-aged woman, trying to see what her condition was. As the light filtered into the room, she knew. Turning, the woman lowered her head, then took a seat.

“You don’t have to be ashamed,” said Lucinda softly. Irish looked at her, then back at the woman. “How did you get it?”

“My ex-husband,” she said quietly. “He was having multiple affairs.”

“I’m sorry,” said Irish. “I don’t understand.”

“I have syphilis,” said Megan.

“But, I thought it was curable,” said Irish, frowning at Lucinda. He looked back at the woman, now seeing her fully in the light. She had open lesions on her face and hands. Dark scars marked her arms and cheeks.

“It is,” said Lucinda quietly, “when it’s caught in time, there are great treatments for it. I’m guessing yours was caught in a late stage, and you’re still having symptoms.”

“Yes, I’m still having symptoms, but no, it wasn’t caught late. I went the moment the first lesion appeared,” she



nodded. “I went to my doctor at the first signs. I knew what it was, or at least I knew I had an STD. My doctor prescribed a regimen of multiple antibiotics, but my claim was denied. I wasn’t working at the time and was still on my ex-husband’s insurance. They said the multiple antibiotics were unnecessary, and they only approved one.”

“Which one?” asked Lucinda.

“Regular dose penicillin, but I needed a powerful penicillin,” she said, shaking her head.

“Benzathine penicillin-G,” said Lucinda. “It’s very aggressive and fast. It would have prevented any scarring and further lesions if you were early stage.” Megan nodded.

“I tried for weeks, months, to get them to fill the prescription. It was very expensive without my insurance card, so I couldn’t afford it on my own. I asked my ex-husband to pay for it since he was the one responsible.”

“Was he suffering as well?” asked Irish.

“More than me,” said Megan. “In fact, he never got treatment and died. I wish I could say that made me happy, but it didn’t.”

“You seem to be in control,” said Lucinda.

“I’m on my way. I just recently was able to get healthcare through my employer. I started a job where I can work at home. I’m barely surviving, but this will help me to get back on my feet and, hopefully, get this under control. Their insurance is terrific, and the prescription was immediately approved.”

“Did you ever speak with anyone directly at PacWest?” asked Lucinda.

“Yes. His name was Evan. That’s all I got. I wrote letters, left messages, all of it, and got no responses. I even wrote a letter to the state insurance commissioner. They wrote me back and said I should be more careful with my health.”

“Are you fucking with me?” growled Irish. Megan smirked at the handsome young man. “Sorry, ma’am. I get worked up.”

“It’s okay,” she said, waving a hand. “I get it.”

“Is there anything we can get for you?” asked Lucinda with kindness. Megan smiled at the pretty doctor, shaking her head.

“No, but thank you. You have no idea how much this has meant to me, just having a normal conversation with

someone. When I go out, I tend to wear a mask over my mouth so they don't see the open lesions. The course of antibiotics has started working, but my mouth was bad.”

Lucinda nodded.

“I'm glad you're able to get treatment. With the right penicillin, it should start having an effect fairly quickly, and you'll see the changes in your body. Stay on them, don't forget one single dose.

“If we bring charges up on PacWest, would you be willing to testify?” Irish wondered if she would be willing to air her dirty laundry in public. STDs still have a stigma attached to them, especially something like syphilis. Megan just grinned at him, nodding.

“I'll bring the gun and the bullets.”



Mo and Ophelia hit the first two names on their list, only to learn that they'd both died recently. Neither had living family members, so there was no one to ask about their experiences. Moving on to their third name, they drove down the rural mountain road toward a large farmhouse back off the road.

“Wow, nice house,” said Ophelia. “Doesn’t that seem strange to you?”

“Very,” frowned Mo. He parked the car and, taking Ophelia’s hand, stepped onto the porch. He rang the doorbell and waited for someone to answer. When no one opened the door, he knocked and thought he heard a faint yell.

“I’m coming!” A few moments later, the door opened, and a man in a wheelchair stared at them. “Help you?”

“Are you Felix Hoge?” asked Ophelia.

“Yes. That’s me,” he said with a skeptical gaze.

“Mr. Hoge, my name is Ophelia, and this is my husband, Mo. We work for a company that’s investigating Alta Healthcare. Would you be willing to answer a few questions for us?”

“Hell yes,” he said, opening the door wider. “Come on in.” Felix wheeled his chair to a spot in front of the television, then reached for the remote and turned it off.

“Mr. Hoge, may I ask, are you in the chair as a result of denial of care from Alta?” asked Mo.

“I’m in this chair because they tried to kill me,” said the man. Mo frowned, Ophelia’s brows nearly disappearing

into her hairline.

“I’m sorry. Say again.”

“They denied my claims. You’re right about that. My doctor wanted me to have a pacemaker. My irregular heart rhythm was causing all kinds of other health issues. I was fainting, having difficulty breathing, all of it.”

“I see, and Alta denied the pacemaker?” asked Ophelia.

“They did. I hired a lawyer.”

“Good for you,” grinned Mo. “How did that work out?”

“You’re lookin’ at it,” frowned Hoge. “We filed a suit against them on a Friday. By Tuesday, my lawyer apparently jumped to his death from a fifth-floor window. On Thursday, I was crossing the street to get to the grocery store, and I was hit by a hit-and-run driver. I’m paralyzed from the waist down.

“Obviously, I was a little distracted from the lawsuit. When I got home, this chair was on the front porch with a note. ‘Accept this as our gift to you. Let us know if you’ll need one for a quadriplegic.’ I took it seriously.”

“Did you keep the note?” asked Mo. He nodded, opening a bible on the table beside him. He handed him the typed note. “May I keep this?”

“Isn’t doing me any good,” he frowned. “I knew they were serious. Needless to say, I ended my coverage with them and went elsewhere.”

“Mr. Hoge, we’re trying to build a case to go after Alta, PacWest, and Washington Healthcare. Would you be willing to testify?” asked Mo.

“I don’t know, son,” he said, shaking his head. “I can’t afford to lose anything else. I’ve still got a business to run and have to rely on my daughter to take me into town when I’m working.”

“I understand, sir. But I can guarantee this, if we say we have a case against them, that means that you and other witnesses will be under our protection. No one will get to you. No one. We guarantee it. And we can guarantee they will go down.”

Hoge stared at the big, dark-skinned man. He was built like a truck, wide and solid. The woman was beautiful with lean, luscious curves. They were a stunning couple, but that didn’t mean they could keep him alive.

“I want to believe you,” said Hoge.

“Sir, my company is the number one security company in the world. Let me repeat that. In the world. Now, I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t tell anyone that we were here, but if we go to trial and need you, I sure hope you’ll agree to testify,” said Mo.

“You know, I’ve been sitting in this house, not doing much of anything since this all happened. I go into the office only when I have to and come straight home. I haven’t been living. I’ve been existing. Barely.” He held out his hand toward Mo. “You go to trial. You come and pick me up.” Mo grinned at the man, shaking his hand.

“Done.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

By seven, everyone was back at the hotel to meet for dinner. The seniors were in their apartments, waiting for their insurance agents to come the next day. As each of the teams told their stories, Pigsty and Hiro recorded them back at Belle Fleur.

“Everyone I spoke to was denied their claims,” said Bogey. “So far, I haven’t encountered one person who had a claim paid.”

“Same,” said Bone. “Even the most minor things were denied several times before they eventually paid a tiny amount. I just don’t understand how this has never blown up in their faces.”

“Well, one of ours, Felix Hoge, was threatened. In fact, they made sure he couldn’t walk into the courthouse and threatened that it could get worse if he did. This is the note they left on a wheelchair on his front porch.” He slid the note across the table, and the others read it, frowning as they did.

“These people are seriously ballsy,” said Lucinda. “You know, in the ER, I didn’t really have to handle anything with insurance unless something was coded improperly. Then



the hospital would want clarification of what I did. But this is criminal. They're acting as doctor and God with these patients."

"Lord help them all if they go up against Mama Irene," smirked Irish. "I hope she can hold it together tomorrow."

"She'll do great," laughed Alice. Her expression sobered, and she shook her head. "All these claims, all these illnesses, deaths, all because someone wants to get rich."

"It's on the news every night, and you don't even pay attention," said Lucinda. She pointed to the television above the bar in the restaurant. "Look. They're talking about approving a new drug for use in patients with hypertension. The side effects are horrific on that drug. Rashes, diarrhea, chest pains, bloody stool, hair and nail loss."

"Bloody stool? Hair and nail loss? Damn, I'll take the hypertension," said Bone.

"That's the point. Patients have all these side effects or refuse to take the medication because of them and then die from the disease. They've been trying to fast-track that drug for almost five years now. It's still not approved." Irish stared at the television, writing down the name of the drug and the company.

“What are you doing?” asked Hoot.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “Lucinda? Do drug companies stick to one area of disease state? I mean, like this company, do they only focus on hypertension?”

“Oh, no. I mean, some do. You’ll find some companies that deal only in dermatology or ophthalmology, but others will diversify their portfolios. Laxton Pharmaceuticals has drugs for hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and thyroid. There might be more, but those are the ones I’m aware of.”

“Wait a minute,” said Bone, staring at Irish. The other man nodded to him. “What if this company was working with the insurance company, trying to force them to use their drugs?”

“Exactly,” said Irish. “We’ve seen patients today with all of these diseases and then some. What if they were connected somehow to this pharmaceutical company?”

“That’s illegal,” said Lucinda. “I mean, I know they probably wouldn’t care, but it’s illegal to have a pharmaceutical company also own, or have interest in, a healthcare company, for obvious reasons.”

“We might have just found another road to research,” said Irish. “It’s going to be a long day tomorrow. Let’s get some sleep.”

Alone in their room, Lucinda stripped and showered as Irish sent a note back to the leadership team. When she emerged in a steamy cloud, he grinned at her pink skin and wet hair clinging to her shoulders.

“Fuck, you look good enough to eat,” he grinned.

“Maybe you should take a bite,” she smiled.

Irish held up a finger, stripping on his way to the shower. Five minutes later, he was out and laid beside her, kissing his way down her body. Her beautiful pink nipple was responding to the caress of his tongue while his fingers explored her crevices.

“Inside, Irish. Inside, now,” she moaned.

Irish spread her knees wide, lining his big purple head up to her lips. Leaning forward, he gently entered her body, filling her completely as she arched her back toward him. Grinding his hips forward, he rolled in and out, in and out. He could feel his balls retracting as his abdominals tensed.

“Fuck,” he moaned. “I gotta let it go, babe”

“Now,” she cried out. “Now!” Irish spilled inside her, the creamy white cum oozing from her sweet pussy. He touched her, then licked his fingers as she smiled.

Lucinda pushed him to his back, straddling his body. She slowly inched upward until her wet juices were dripping on his lips. Irish was more than happy to let his tongue taste their love. The strong muscle poked in and out, in and out, as she writhed against his face. When she exploded again, he rolled her over.

She smiled up at him, their love glistening on his beard. But he wasn't done with her yet. He wanted every part of her, and he was going to have it. Tonight. Using their own love, he lubed her tight hole and gradually allowed one finger to enter. She was tight, but she could take him.

When he let two enter, she gasped but relaxed, allowing him to fill her. His cock was so hard, he was about to explode all over her ass cheeks.

“Please, Irish, do it,” she moaned, wiggling against his hand.

He carefully let his head enter her. Seeing it disappear was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen. When she took him

and finally relaxed, he let a little more enter her. A little at a time, he finally filled her ass completely.

“I’m dying here, babe,” he moaned.

Lucinda smiled as he pushed her thighs further to her chest. She reached between them, rubbing her clit. He felt it. He felt her bringing herself to orgasm and moved as fast as he could. Her sweet pink pussy was dripping with cum, as her fingers rubbed the hard nub. His cock was buried in her ass, and it was about to explode.

Irish’s whole body tensed, then shook with a satisfaction he’d never felt before. As he emptied inside her, she rubbed herself until she jerked with another orgasm. Slowly, he pulled out, watching his cum drip from her sweet ass.

“I think we might need another shower,” he grinned.

“I agree,” laughed Lucinda. She stood, feeling him drip between her thighs, and headed to the shower. Irish watched, feeling the emotions build in his belly. Stepping inside the shower once again, he knelt in front of her.

“Marry me.”

“Wh-what did you say?” she stammered.

“Marry me, Lucinda. I know I said I’d wait, but I don’t want to. I love you, baby. I’ve loved you from the moment you opened the storage closet in that hospital in McAllen. Marry me and make me unbelievably happy.” She pulled him to his feet, staring at him.

Lucinda wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing his lips, tasting their love. He lifted her, wrapping her legs around his waist. He was hard again, and she lowered herself onto him.

“Yes,” she murmured against his lips. “Yes, I’ll marry you because I love you and adore you, Irish Kelly. But also because I can’t live without this beautiful, gorgeous, hard-as-a-rock cock.”

Irish laughed the whole time he was pumping into her. Finally clean, they fell asleep in each other’s arms. Lucinda dreamed of red-haired babies. Irish dreamed of babies with brown hair. Tonight was theirs.

Tomorrow would be another day of questioning.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ruby and Sven were prepared for their agent's visit. She made sure to dress a bit more matronly and let her shoulders slip forward. Sven walked with a slight limp and stooped, making him appear a little older.

When he arrived, he introduced himself as Bob Jones. Ruby smirked to herself. Jones? Really, baby?

“Mr. and Mrs. Norgenson, I'm glad you're considering PacWest as your insurance provider,” he smiled. “May I ask, are you an American, Mr. Norgenson?” Sven frowned, ready to leap at the man's throat.

“Yes, I'm American,” he growled.

“Good, good. We have to ask these things. Any current illnesses?”

“I have a bit of diabetes,” smiled Ruby, “but nothing serious. Sven is good. Healthy as a horse.” Jones stared at the big man, nodding. It was almost as if he were displeased by his good health.

“Well, for your ages, you both look great,” he frowned. “It won't be a problem to cover you.”

“Just like that?” asked Sven. “I mean, don’t we need to take a physical or prove our good health in some way?”

“No, no, not with us,” laughed the other man. “We have quite a bit of paperwork to fill out, but once that’s done, you’ll be fully covered. Well, that and, of course, I’ll need a check from you for the first month’s premium.”

“Yes, you didn’t mention that,” said Sven. “How much will it be for the two of us? We’re on a fixed income.”

“Yes, of course,” nodded Jones. “But can we really put a price on good healthcare?”

“Apparently, you can,” murmured Ruby.

Jones stared at the old woman, and for a moment, Sven thought he might hit her. He wouldn’t live to rob anyone else, but he could attempt it.

“We set our premiums at the beginning of every policy year,” he said, opening his briefcase. He placed a large stack of papers similar to the one that Dan had given the team. “For the two of you, given your age, sex, and general health, it will be three thousand eight hundred eleven dollars and sixteen cents.” He smiled as if he were giving them the best news of their life.



“That’s robbery,” said Sven, standing and staring straight down at the man. He intentionally used his size to intimidate the man. Jones grabbed his briefcase and stood from the sofa.

“It’s my understanding that you two can’t get a policy anywhere else because of Mrs. Norgenson’s diabetes and age. I’m giving you the best option in the state,” he grinned. “Read the papers and sign. I’ll be back in two days to pick up the check. It would be unfortunate if something happened to you before you had the coverage.”

“Are you threatening me?” asked Ruby.

“No,” he said, pursing his lips. “I would never do something so horrible. Just stating the facts. I’ll be back in two days.”

Ruby and Sven watched as the man left the apartment, then turned to see Bodhi and Cade come out from the bedroom, both ready to take off at full speed toward Mr. Jones. He would never know what hit him.

“We got it all,” said Bodhi. “When he comes back, we’re going to have a little surprise for Mr. Jones.”



Matthew kissed the back of Irene's hand as the woman in front of them explained the policy to them. She spoke to them like they were imbeciles. Irene just smiled, nodding her head at the woman. Sheila Brown. What kind of name was Sheila Brown?

"With your advanced ages, we can't expect that your health is very good," said the woman. Matthew felt Irene squeeze his hand and gave a squeeze back. She was about to lose her cool on this poor woman.

"I hardly think our ages are the deciding factor," said Matthew. "My wife and I are in excellent health. We've had no major health issues in the last twenty-five years. We exercise daily, and we eat right. We are no risk."

"Oh, but you're a great risk, Mr. Robichex."

"Robicheaux," said Matthew slowly. "Robi-show"

"Right. Well, you're a great risk. With your ages and the fact that you're retired with no other income, PacWest might be responsible for huge bills if one of you should fall ill. We have to be sure that we cover our costs."

"As we said, we're capable of having an additional insurance plan," said Matthew.

“Well, I’ve written something up for you.”

“Before even meeting us? Before giving us a physical?” asked Irene. “How could you do that? Why would you do that? You have no idea of the additional coverages we might want or need.”

The woman stared at Irene with loathing, and had she been a lesser woman, Irene would have shrunken back. But Irene Robicheaux was not a lesser woman. She sat up straighter, staring at the woman across from her. She recognized a bully when she saw one, and this woman was not only a bully, but her gut was telling her that she was an entitled bully.

“Your policy was written with all of our key features for consumers your age. I’ve included our elite care, Silver Cloud, which allows for home healthcare and nursing home care. You both may need that soon.”

“You are a pretentious, assuming, obnoxious young woman, aren’t you?” frowned Irene. “You come into our home and assume because our birthdates say we’re advanced in age that our bodies and minds are. Well, we are not, Ms. Brown. We are healthy and plan on livin’ a good long while.”

The woman was seething at the old lady. She stood, slamming down the massive policy.

“I suggest you sign it before I return in two days. You never know when something might happen to one of you.” She started toward the door, then turned. “By the way, have a check ready for forty-eight hundred dollars. That will cover the first two months.”

As the door closed, Irene leapt to her feet and tried to follow but felt the firm grip of a large arm she recognized around her waist.

“Now, Mama,” said Gabriel. “You can’t kill the insurance agent yet. Be a good Mama, and we’ll let you kill her later.”

“This ain’t funny, Gabriel. That woman treated us like we were stupid!”

“I know, Mama,” said Gabe, nodding. “We were listening.” Raphael came out of the bedroom as well, staring at his father.

“How many seniors do they get to sign these policies when they can’t afford them? Then they sign and get nothing out of it. How many?” Gabe shook his head at his brother.

“We don’t know, Pops, but we’re gonna find out.”



For Teddy and Chipper, it was the same thing. Sheila Brown visited one of them and Bob Jones the other. Treated like they were demented, crippled, slow-minded, worthless elderly people. No physicals. No health questions to speak of. Nothing except a standard policy. One for Washington Healthcare and one for Alta Healthcare. The companies were working together.

With the seniors all in one place, as well as their bodyguards, Nine frowned at the others.

“You know, if we weren’t at Belle Fleur, that could have been any one of us trying to get additional healthcare coverage. It makes me sick,” he said, staring at Wilson.

“I’ve seen little bits of this from healthcare companies when we treat patients at the clinic. Ms. Bonaventure has diabetes, and they’ll often deny her claim for additional syringes. We always try to give her an extra pack when she comes in, but who the fuck are these people to tell an elderly woman that she’s overusing syringes for her insulin?”

“This is fucked up,” said Gabe, shaking his head.

“I had that woman, Sheila Brown,” said Chipper. “She asked me if my penis still worked.”

“Damn, that’s harsh,” said Cade.

“She was coming onto me, Cade. When I calmly said yes, it still works, she slid her hand up my leg. Told me I could get a discount if I helped her with an itch. I don’t want that woman’s itch!”

“Jesus, so they’re seducing senior citizens as well?” asked Bodhi.

“That woman was so disrespectful to us; I can’t imagine anyone needing insurance so badly they would let her in their home.” Irene shook her head, then looked at Ruby. “But I suppose that’s why we’re here. There are those out there with this problem. Still, how do they afford it?”

“I’m guessing, Mama Irene, that they give up all other things in their lives,” said Wilson. “Retirees who thought they had enough put aside for travel or a hobby, sailing, anything. They suddenly find themselves with nothing in the bank and a healthcare policy that offers no additional supplemental coverage. I’m sure it’s happening everywhere, but what’s happening here is blatant disregard for law and humanity.”

“Then you boys stop ‘em,” said Irene. “Find out who’s doin’ this, and stop ‘em. When those people come back to us in two days, I wanna be here to watch their faces when you arrest them.”

“Same,” said Ruby. The men all nodded, looking at the younger men.

“Let’s get it done.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Hoot knocked on the front door for his next patient interview. AJ was standing beside him. Although at six-feet-four he was taller than AJ, the other man was six-feet-two, lean, wiry, and fast. His speed was well-known with the team, and his keen intelligence rivaled his father's.

“Who do we have?” asked AJ. He stared at the street, seeing the beat-up older model sedan. The windows were knocked out, and the doors looked as if they'd been beaten with a baseball bat.

“Scout Blevins.” He knocked again but heard nothing inside. AJ looked in the front windows and thought he saw something move. Cupping his hands around his eyes, he stared at the lump on the floor.

“Take it down. Someone's on the floor.”

Hoot kicked the door in, adjusting his eyes to the dark room. Wrapped in a large comforter, a lump was on the floor of the small apartment. He kneeled beside the person, rolling them to their back.

“Call 911,” said Hoot. AJ dialed the number as Hoot took the person's vitals. It took him a moment to realize that



the figure was a very young, very small woman.

“They’re on their way,” said AJ, kneeling beside him.  
“Ma’am, are you Scout Blevins?” She nodded, staring up at him.

“Ma’am, what happened?” asked Hoot.

“Chemo-. Chemotherapy made me sick,” she said.  
She pointed to several bottles of pills and curled her knees toward her chest.

“Are you cramping?” asked Hoot.

She nodded, crying, soft, whimpering cries that were slicing at his heart. AJ took the pill bottles and called Riley. Hoot could hear him reciting the endless names of the drugs.

“What type of cancer do you have?” asked Hoot.

“Br-breast. Need bilateral mas- mastectomy, but insurance refuses,” she gasped. Hoot shook his head, then lifted the woman in his arms.

“Where are you going?” asked AJ.

“Cancel the fucking 911 call. We’re taking her to the hospital. Ask Riley where we should go. I’ll pay for everything.”

As AJ spoke to Riley and drove, she told him which hospital to go to and called ahead to let them know what they needed.

Hoot held the bundled woman in his arms. Her hair was gone, her eyelashes and eyebrows gone. Her lips were cracked and bleeding, but her tiny body was what had memories flooding his brain. She was dying, just like the little girl had been. He wasn't about to let it happen this time.

While Hoot carried her into the emergency room and spoke to the doctors, AJ called the others to come if they were available. Two hours later, the doctors confirmed what they already knew.

“She has advanced-stage breast cancer and needs both breasts removed. It's highly unusual for someone so young, but I have to guess from what your doctor back home told me that she's been this way for a while, fighting her insurance company. She's only twenty. The chemo they were giving her was for shit. Literally, it wasn't even right for her disease. We're taking her in now for surgery.

“Once I know how many lymph nodes are affected, I can tell you what her chances are. Then we will begin proper

treatment back at your facility. I understand you're taking her somewhere once we have her stable," he said, looking at Hoot.

Every man and woman in the waiting room stared at the big man. He nodded, not saying a thing.

"Alright. I'll get the surgery done and begin getting her on the right track. I don't think it's too late, but it almost was. She's lucky you found her."

Hoot turned to stare at the others, tears in his eyes.

"I couldn't let another one die," he said, shaking his head. "She's so small. So small and weak. I couldn't let another die."

"Baby, you didn't let Lisa die. Her disease killed her," said Mama Irene. "You get this little girl right, and we'll take care of her. Matthew and I can take her home, and Riley and the others can get her right."

While AJ and Hoot told the others what they'd found, Lucinda reviewed the medications the woman was placed on. She shook her head, staring at the bottles.

"What's wrong, babe?" asked Irish.

"Three of these are for chest congestion. They're drugs you would give someone who has the flu or pneumonia,

not breast cancer. I think they figured she was so young she wouldn't know the difference."

"Who was the manufacturer?" asked Mo. Lucinda stared at the other man, then looked down at all the bottles again.

"Laxton," said Lucinda, shaking her head. "They're all made by Laxton."

"So, we've got two problems," said Wilson. "We have a drug company who is in bed with, or at least holding hands with, three insurance companies to scam people out of their premiums and put them on drugs that don't help their disease. Even if you get sick, the insurance won't provide what you need, but make it look like they did."

"Excuse me," said a man standing in the doorway. He wore blue scrubs and had a hospital badge on. "My name is Darren Stride. I'm a nurse on the oncology floor. We just heard about the patient you brought in. The surgeon said you're trying to help Ms. Blevins."

"That's right," said Hoot. "We're trying to help a number of people."

“Well, I think I have someone that would like to speak with you. One of my patients had something similar happen to her. She’s a forty-three-year-old mother of two who went in for her routine mammogram. The insurance company refused to pay for it. That was her first problem.”

“Go on,” said Wilson.

“The mammogram revealed a lump in the lower quadrant of the left breast. When her doctor suggested a biopsy, the insurance kicked it back. He argued with them for days and then finally decided to do the biopsy at no charge to the patient. She had to pay the lab fees, but that’s all. When it came back positive, he ripped the insurance company apart. They said it was an error and they’d reimburse for the procedure.

“Now she’s recovering from a mastectomy, and the hospital is saying they’re refusing to reimburse for that as well. We already know that they won’t pay for reconstruction.”

“I’ll come up and talk to her,” said Wilson. “I’m a nurse and medic. Lucinda? Will you come with me?”

“Of course,” she said. She turned and kissed Irish’s cheek and then walked away with the big man.

Occupying the entire surgical waiting area, the team was able to discuss plans for what they would do next. The others had visited a few patients, getting the same stories over and over again. Untreated diseases, conditions, or worse, drugs prescribed for conditions that didn't need drugs at all.

When the surgeon came into the room, he wasn't smiling.

"Well?" asked Hoot quietly.

"She's alive, and we may have gotten it in time, but it's criminal what happened to her. She reported the lump in her breast almost two years ago. According to her gynecologist, she's been on her own since she was sixteen. She emancipated herself from her parents, who lived in a hippy commune near Portland. She graduated high school early, put herself through college with student loans, and has a degree in graphic arts.

"Charlie, that's her gyno, said she's the most mature, intelligent young woman he's ever met. He said that she was on top of her own health. When she got the job with her current company, she was only working part-time and didn't get healthcare, so she signed up for a plan with PacWest. He's been fighting them ever since. The good thing is, she's young and healthy other than this. She's got a long way to go, but I

think she'll recover. The thing for her will be breast reconstruction.”

“We'll take care of that,” said Hoot. The doctor nodded, smirking at the other man.

“You know, I suspect you will. Your doctors with your company are very interesting. I don't think I've ever met anyone like them. You're very lucky, and so is that young woman.”

“Can we see her?” asked Hoot.

“She's in recovery, but yes, one of you can come back.”

“Two,” said Hoot, looking at Irene. “Please.”

“Alright. Two of you. Irene took Hoot's big hand, walking with him like she'd done when he was just a boy. For her, it felt like he was still a little boy. When every nurse's head swiveled in their direction, Irene held his hand a little tighter with pride. She didn't give birth to him, but he was hers just the same.

Stepping inside the recovery room, the nurse looked up and smiled at the two people.

“She’s just waking up,” she whispered. “She’s a trooper; that’s for sure.”

Hoot nodded, looking down at the frail bird in the bed. She couldn’t weigh more than eighty pounds. Tubes and hoses were coming out of her body, and she turned to look at him, her big green eyes going wide.

“Hello, child,” smiled Irene, brushing back the young woman’s hair. “My name is Irene, and this is Benjamin.”

“Mama Irene,” he started.

“I know, I know. You go by that awful call name, Hoot. But your mama named you Benjamin, and that’s how I know you. And your name is Scout. It’s a fine, fine name,” smiled Irene.

“Y-you saved me,” she said, staring at Hoot.

“No, the doctors saved you. I just carried you in here. We’re going to make sure you get well, and when you do, we’re going to help you with everything,” he said.

“Wh-why?” she croaked.

“Because that’s what we do.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

With Scout in and out of consciousness, Hoot went back with the others to lay out a plan for the coming days. They still had a long list of patients to speak with, and hopefully, most would still be alive when they got there.

With Wilson and the others back from the hospital, they were able to speak to the new recruits for the insurance companies.

“Well? How was it?” asked Irish.

“I’m not sure how Jean held it together,” said Hazel. “I was barely able to. It’s criminal. I mean, we knew that, but seriously, it’s criminal. They’re actually teaching these agents to sell these ridiculous policies to people who are desperate for insurance with all these strange clauses. With every senior, you’re supposed to sell the Silver Cloud policy.”

“I wanted to break his fucking neck,” growled Jean. “He actually laughed, and the other assholes in the room did as well. For every Silver Cloud policy they sell, they get fifteen percent of the monthly costs. For every other policy they sell, they get twenty percent. They brought in their top salespeople

from last year who each made more than a half-million in sales.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” said Irish.

“I wish I were. As an agent, you are also the ultimate decision maker on approving or denying a claim,” said Jean.

“That’s not legal,” frowned Bone.

“We know,” said Ro. “I actually made the mistake of saying it out loud. Every head turned to stare at me as if I had three eyes. I was a little worried for a minute. These assholes do not care.”

“So, they sell ridiculously high-cost policies with unreasonable boundaries and requirements, and unqualified people get to deny the claims. Is that right?” asked Irish.

“That’s not only right, but the more claims they deny, the more money they make,” said Jean. “We were being trained in a training room at the corporate headquarters for Alta, which coincidentally happens to be sandwiched between PacWest and Washington. One of the other trainees asked if we could get a tour of the building, and we were told, in absolute certainty, we would not be allowed to go to any other part of the building other than the one we were in.”

“What are they hiding?” asked Lucinda.

“I’m not sure, but I did see two people in white coats. Would they have medical personnel working there?” asked Jean.

“In a legitimate insurance company, I would say it’s possible. You might have several medical personnel reviewing claims, researching treatments, that sort of thing. But with this group, I can’t imagine that they have that.”

“Maybe some night recon,” said Irish.

“That’s why we’re here.”

“Holy fuck!”

“Shit!”

“Son-of-a-bitch!”

Trak gave a faint grin to the group, turning to smile at Hiro, Joseph, and Nathan. Ethan stood behind them with a stone-cold expression.

“You four and big foot are going to sneak in?” smirked AJ. Ethan gave him the finger, grinning at him.

“He’s quieter than any of you,” said Trak. “Bone, Mo, and Irish. You’re coming with us. We enter on the roof. Fast

and quiet. Check the floors and just see what the fuck they're hiding in there.”

“You said a bad word,” smirked HG.

Trak stared at the young man as he laughed, then sobered quickly. Trak might be old enough to be his father, but he wasn't about to test his speed or agility. He knew all too well how deadly he could be.

“What do we do?” asked Lucinda.

“I'd say sit tight with the others and keep going through the data we've collected so far. We still haven't been able to verify a connection to Laxton and the three insurance companies. We need to find that,” said Gabriel. “We're gonna head to the apartments. We left one man there, just to be sure no one tried anything stupid.”

“No offense,” smiled Lucinda, “but you'd have to be a fool to try anything stupid with your mother.”

“Honey, I agree, but not everyone knows her the way we do.” Gabriel kissed her cheek, then shook hands with the other men. “Be careful. We'll see y'all tomorrow.”

“I like them,” smiled Lucinda. She turned to face the room. “I like all of you. I like that you take care of one

another and look out for those that can't take care of themselves. Like Scout. She's an amazing young woman. Brave, resilient, intelligent. She's an old soul."

"Let's help her body to become old as well," nodded Mo. He took Ophelia's hand. "While we're gone, why don't you stay here with Lucinda and the others. I'll come and get you when we get back." Ophelia nodded, kissing his cheek.

"I'll stay in the room," said Bogey. "Alice and I can keep everyone company."

Irish kissed Lucinda's cheek.

"I'll be back soon. Stay in the room with the others." She nodded, kissing him sweetly and taking a seat on one of the large sofas in the suite. They turned on the television to watch a movie.

Around ten, Jean discovered that there was microwave popcorn and called down to the front desk for more. Within minutes, the entire suite smelled like a movie theater. Lucinda stared at the handsome man and the sweet way he held his wife.

"What's your birth order?" she asked.

"I'm kind of in the middle," he smiled.

“You don’t act like a middle child at all. Middle children can be very demanding of attention and want everything their way.”

“No one acts that way in my family,” laughed Jean. “When you have fifteen children to watch out for, you have to treat them all equally and hope they learn to do the same in return. My parents were very good at dispersing attention to us.”

“How did they do that?” smiled Lucinda.

“Well, they had these special days where we each got one-on-one time with them. It might be something simple like going to the grocery store with them or church. Or, if we were really lucky, we’d get to go fishing alone with them or exploring. We loved those days, and Mama always knew when we needed one. She’d see us getting annoyed by one of our brothers or sisters, and she’d say it was time for our special date.” He laughed, shaking his head at those precious moments. He knew that one day they’d no longer be there for them, but for now, they’d treasure the memories.

“What about you? Did you have special time with your mom?” asked Jean. Lucinda shook her head, frowning.

“No. She was always so busy I didn’t get a lot of time with her. Then while I was finishing medical school, she got breast cancer. She didn’t even tell me for more than a year.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jean, his big hand covering her own. Lucinda shrugged.

“I won’t do that to my children. I’ll make sure they know I love them and spend quality time with them like your mom and dad did.” Jean grinned, nodding at her.

“Every parent is different, Lucinda. I’m sure your mom did the best she could.”

“He’s right,” said Ro. “My mother raised three kids by herself after forcing our abusive father to leave. Tristan acted like our father most of the time, but the three of us, Tristan, me, and Emma, we stuck together.”

“I didn’t realize Emma was your sister as well. I should have guessed. You all look so much alike,” smiled Lucinda.

“She’s the baby, but we definitely have the red hair and blue eyes. Different shades of red, but red all the same,” laughed Ro.

Just as the movie was ending, the men returned from the op. With somber faces, they stared at the room.

“We have a problem.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Trak stared at the three glass buildings, each with more than twelve floors. Breaking the men into teams, he assigned each a building and gave the instructions. Once the alarm systems were off, make their way through the buildings and find something they could use.

The first building, PacWest, had Irish, Ethan, and Bone. After being dropped on the rooftops by the Osprey, they picked the lock on the roof's door and made their way down the stairwell. On each floor, they went room by room to try and see what was available to them.

“What the fuck?” muttered Irish, staring at the wide-open space.

In the Washington Healthcare building were Nathan, Mo, and Hiro. In the same pattern, they took each floor, opening and closing office doors and combing through each space.

When Trak and Joseph began their search, it felt like a normal office building. Desks with files and folders. Nameplates with agents' names on them. But as they went to the lower floors, it was very different.

“What did you find?” asked Trak to the other men.

“Nothing,” said Irish. “Literally nothing. The building is a dummy.”

“Same,” said Mo. “There is nothing in this building.”

“Then you need to come over here,” said Joseph.

A few moments later, they were making their way toward the two men. On the top four floors were the office spaces for the insurance companies. But on the middle five floors were research facilities and laboratories. Everything in the place was labeled Laxton Pharmaceuticals.

“Shit, they are working together,” said Irish.

“They’re not only working together. They’re one company,” said Joseph. He walked to a whiteboard, pointing to the graph. “Look. They’re pushing different drugs each week of the month. Like a fucking contest. If they’re pushing a diabetic drug, the insurance agents are asked to sign new policyholders that are likely candidates.”

“We need to find who the fuck runs this place,” said Irish.

“Wait, look,” said Mo. He held up several folders and frowned. Each one was labeled with names they knew all too

well. Matthew and Irene Robicheaux, Sven and Ruby Norgenson, Theodore Abbott, and Charles Bush. On the front of each chart was what worried them most.

**SIGN. ELIMINATE.**

“Jesus, they want to sign them for their first few months of payment, then kill them,” said Irish.

“That’s what it looks like,” nodded Trak. “We’ll take care of that. Look for a corporate office. Anything that can tell us who owns this shit.”

Each man took a section of each floor, rifling through desks but ensuring they put everything back where it was. With the top floor eliminated, they were wondering if perhaps the corporate executives officed somewhere else.

“Maybe they’re on the main floor,” said Irish. “I mean, if you wanted to escape quickly, that would be the ideal place. Feds would do what we did, head to the top floors.” Trak nodded, leading them to the lower floors.

Sure enough, on the first floor, there was an entire suite of executive offices. Plush leather chairs, mahogany desks, full bars displayed for guests, a state-of-the-art gym, and a

theater. These guys were living big and fat. But there was still no evidence of names.

“Let’s get back,” said Trak. “We need to change how we approach the agents tomorrow.”

All the way back to the hotel, the men stared at the photos they took from each of the buildings, trying to make sense of it all. By the time they entered the main hotel suite, it was after midnight.

“We have a problem,” said Trak, looking at Jean.

He explained the folders that were found, showing him pictures of the message on the inside. Of all the brothers, Jean was probably the slowest to anger, but once he did, the world better back up.

“We don’t have a problem,” he growled, “they do.” Taking out his cell phone, he called Gabriel, who in turn called the others.

“What will you do?” asked Lucinda.

“Let us worry about that, babe,” smiled Irish. “Did you find anything in the files you were looking at?”

“Yes. I’ve been combing through all the letters that patients received denying them treatment. Two were told they

couldn't have treatment because it was deemed experimental, but it's not. This type of pacemaker and this insulin pump have been FDA-approved for more than three years."

"One of the things we saw was a board that had the drugs they wanted pushed that week. It tied directly to contests they were giving the agents on signing certain health conditions," said Mo.

"Jesus, this is terrifying," said Lucinda, shaking her head. "They're literally attempting to play God with these people. The other thing that's common on all of the letters is that it's signed with just a first name. Like this one, it says, 'Sincerely, Amy.' There's no last name, no title, nothing."

"Do you think the letters are being printed by artificial intelligence?" asked Bogey.

"I don't know," said Lucinda, shaking her head. "You guys would be a better judge of that than me, but I can tell you that it's illegal for them to not print the reviewers' full name. Also, there's usually a line at the bottom that lists the CEO's name. That isn't on any of these letters, nor is there an e-mail, address, or phone number for them to call if there are any issues."

“This just keeps getting better and better, doesn’t it?”  
frowned Jean.

“We can’t solve anything tonight,” said Ro. “We’re all exhausted and need sleep and to be able to think clearly tomorrow. We can meet early for breakfast and go from there.”

“Good idea, babe,” smiled Jean, kissing his wife. “See you guys in the morning. Trak? Will you and the others be leaving?” Trak stared at Jean and gave an imperceptible shake of his head.

“We will be staying.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Now, Trak, what are you boys doin’ here so early?” asked Irene. He smiled at the woman he thought of as his own mother. He kissed her cheek and turned back to the waiting SUV.

“The jet is ready for you all to go home,” he said, nodding at Matthew. Matthew nodded back and grabbed their suitcases. “We’ll be handling the agents this morning.”

“I see,” she said, nodding her head. “Well, you boys know what you’re doin’, but don’t you get hurt or nothin’. Lauren would be some kind of upset if you came back hurt. So would I.”

“I know, Mama Irene,” smiled Trak.

Other than his wife and daughters, he didn’t smile for many people. He kissed her cheek, and she patted his chest. As Matthew carried the bags out, she turned and kissed Gabriel and Raphael, touching each of her boys as she left the apartment.

When Ruby, Sven, Chipper, and Teddy were loaded in, they were taken to the airport and safely on their way home.

“We think the agents were going to gang up on them,” said Joseph. “Their times were staggered just far enough to allow them to walk across the complex and get to the next apartment. They’re going to have a little surprise.”



The incessant knocking at the door told them that their first agent was impatient. Joseph decided to let it go for a few more minutes. When the pounding became nearly violent, Joseph smiled.

“Mr. and Mrs. Robi-chex! It’s Sheila Brown. Open the door!”

Trak’s brow raised, and he nodded to his son. Flinging the door open, the woman was already pushing her way inside with her colleague on her heels. Unfortunately, they met several unyielding objects. When they attempted to back up, it was even worse. Cade and Bodhi stared at them, shaking their heads.

“You got a fucking problem, lady,” said Joseph.

“I-I’m sorry,” she said, staring at the men. “I’m looking for...”



“We know,” said Jean. “Mr. and Mrs. Robi-chex. You didn’t even have the courtesy of getting their name right. It’s Robicheaux, by the way. Pronounced, Robi-show. I’m their son.”

“Me too,” smiled Gabriel.

“Me too,” winked Raphael. Then there was an echo of voices. “Us too.” Besides the men who had been there all along, Antoine, Baptiste, Gaspar, Luc, Miller, and finally Alec.

“W-we’ll leave,” said Jones. “We’ll come back when they’re here.”

“You don’t get it,” smirked Cade. “You’re not going anywhere.”

When Jones attempted to reach for his phone, Bodhi took it, crushing it between his fingers. The man didn’t even bother to try and hide the fact that he’d pissed his pants.

“Sit,” growled Jean. The two sat at the kitchen table, staring up at the men. “You tried to intimidate and swindle my parents. That wasn’t very smart of you.”

“I did not!” said Sheila emphatically. “I told them what the coverage was and the cost. That’s it.” Jean took two

large steps, bending so that his face was inches from her own. She began to shake, and he just stared at her.

“That’s a lie. If you do it again, you will have no other chances.”

“Look, we’re told to do this,” said Jones. “We help those that can’t get insurance anywhere else. It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal?” said Alec, flexing his fists open and closed. Joseph chuckled, shaking his head at the stupid agent. “You’re fucking cheating people out of their money, then not covering their medical expenses. You allow them to die, denying them the care they need.”

“We do...” Sheila started to speak, then thought better of it. “We’re trained to do this. If they choose to buy with us, it’s not our fault.”

“Lady, you’re two seconds from dying by my hands,” said Gaspar, staring down at her. Jones stared at her, then back at the men in front of him. He had no wish to die today.

“Listen, we’re told who to go after and how much to ask for.”

“Shut up!” she snapped.

“Fuck you, Sheila. I’m not going to die for them. This is all bullshit.”

“What were you going to do today?” asked Jean.

“If they didn’t sign and hand over a check, I would use scare tactics. I’d tell one of them that the other didn’t look very good and probably needed to see a doctor. Of course, they would say they didn’t have insurance, and ya da ya da,” she said, casually rolling her fingers.

“Ya da ya da? You bitch, these are human beings,” said Gabriel. “Who fucking runs the company?”

They were met with silence, both agents staring down at their hands. If they spoke up, it wouldn’t just be about losing their jobs. They would lose their lives.

“I’m not going to ask again,” said Gabriel, leaning on his fists over the table. “Who runs the fucking company?” Sheila looked up, smirking at him.

“You won’t hurt a woman.”

The next sound was her insane, piercing scream, quickly muffled by a large hand. She looked down to see a large bowie knife in her thigh, blood dripping on the floor.

Looking up at her attacker, she stared into the blackest eyes she'd ever seen.

“You are not a woman,” said Trak. “You are an animal. Answer his question, or I will begin cutting off parts one by one.”

“Laxton,” she said breathlessly. “Laxton owns and runs it all.”

“They run the insurance companies?” asked Irish.

“There's only one. The other two are just dummy companies. They were developing drugs and couldn't get them to market. When they were finally approved, doctors wouldn't prescribe them because their results were subpar at best. They solved that problem by creating insurance policies with prescription benefits that would only cover their drugs.”

“And you let people die by not giving them the drugs they need? The treatments they need?” growled Irish. He saw him out of the corner of his eye but couldn't stop Hoot fast enough. He gripped Sheila by the throat, lifting her out of her seat.

“You let a little girl die from cancer. A cancer that she could have survived if she'd been given the right treatments,”

he growled.

“P-please,” she gasped.

“You refused the treatments she needed. You let her die because of your greed and insanity.” Irish touched Hoot’s shoulder.

Hoot stared at him, giving her throat one more tight squeeze, then releasing her. She coughed, spewing blood all over the table, her leg still bleeding profusely.

“We were told to do it!” she yelled.

“You had a choice,” said Irish. “You could have found another job, turned them in, called the federal insurance commission, anything. You chose to do this. In fact, according to Mrs. Robicheaux, you enjoyed it.”

“No, no, that old woman is lying!”

“Be careful how you talk about my mama,” said Miller.

The woman just stared at him, then did the craziest thing. She laughed. She started laughing and shaking her head, obviously not understanding the seriousness of the entire situation.

“Sheila,” whispered Jones. “Stop it! You’re crazy. Stop it!”

“They can’t stop them,” she laughed. “None of you can stop them. They’re too powerful. You think the feds care? They’re helping them to control which drugs get approved, even when they haven’t been thoroughly tested. You think they care. They don’t.”

“How do you know that?” asked Irish. “How do you know they don’t care? That they’re approving shit they shouldn’t? How would an agent know that?”

Sheila realized her mistake and looked away from the men. Irish knew who to get to talk, and it only took one move. Alec placed his massive hand over the man’s head, squeezing gently at first, then with more and more pressure.

“Stop! Please, stop!”

“How does she know?”

“Shut the fuck up, Jones!”

“She’s with them! She’s part of their family!” Alec released his hand, letting the man breathe without pain for a moment. “Her name isn’t Sheila Brown. It’s Constance

Laxton. Her father is Montgomery Laxton, CEO of Laxton Pharmaceuticals.”

“You sniveling fucking coward!” she yelled.

Alec grabbed the man by the arms and took him into the other room. Irish, Hoot, Joseph, Trak, and Gabriel moved closer to Sheila, nee Constance, taking a seat at the table.

“You’re going to tell us everything, or you’re going to die right here,” said Irish.

“It won’t matter,” she smirked. “You can’t stop us. You can’t stop my father. He’s the greatest man in the whole world and one of the richest. You won’t bring him down. He knows the president personally.”

“Is that so?” smirked Irish. He turned to look at Gaspar, who was dialing his phone.

“What’s up, bastard?” said the familiar voice of Michael Bodwick.

“Mr. President, do you know a man by the name of Montgomery Laxton?” asked Irish. Constance’s face paled, and she stared at the men in the room.

“I know the prick. What has he done now?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

By the time they were done telling Bodwick about the situation, he was fuming and swearing that heads would roll. He gave the thumbs up to eliminate Constance, but he wanted Jones to testify. If he wouldn't, then he could be eliminated as well.

"I'll take care of her," said Hazel, Addie at her side. The men all stared at Hazel and Addie. It wasn't that they weren't capable of killing a woman, or a man, but they all wanted to kill this woman. Especially Irish.

"Let us do it, Irish," said Addie. "When you see Lucinda, you can tell her that someone else took care of it." Irish nodded, leaving with the others and Jones. They met up in the apartment that Ruby and Sven had shared to speak to the other agents.

Constance stared at the two women, still cocky and full of herself. She was sure that there would be some sort of reprieve for her. There would be nothing. Nothing, including no regret for Addie and Hazel. With her cell phone in their hands, they now had all the contact information for Montgomery Laxton and his board of directors.



“We’re late for our orientation,” said Jean. Ro, Magnus, Hazel, and Addie nodded, following him out the door. Hazel turned to smile at the men.

“We left a present for you in the bathroom. You’re gonna need a clean-up crew.”

She wasn’t kidding. When Nathan saw the mess in the bathroom, he almost didn’t recognize what was left of Constance Laxton. He shook his head, reminded of what a brave man Tiger was for marrying Hazel.

“Get the information about the board to the tech team,” said Gaspar. “We’re headed home to be sure Mama and Pops are okay. You guys be careful.” The others nodded as the big men left the room. Irish turned to the others.

“Let’s get to work.”



“You’re late!” said the instructor as they entered the training room.

“Apologies,” said Jean. “We had car issues this morning, but we’re here now. Ready to learn.”

“Don’t let it happen again,” said the instructor. “We’ve got a new contest starting today, and you’re all going to be included in it.”

The other students seemed excited, some even rubbing their hands together in anticipation of the huge payout.

“This is actually an older drug that we need to have make a resurgence. It’s called MDX-37. It was a drug used in the eighties for breast cancer, but then some other things were found to be more effective and had fewer side effects. We will be pushing MDX-37 back into the spotlight!”

Cheers erupted, and the agents all clapped, nudging one another. All except the five from RP. The instructor glared at them, walking toward Jean.

“What’s the matter? You don’t like to make money?”

“I thought we were selling insurance, not drugs,” said Jean.

“Same thing,” laughed the man. “If you’re selling insurance, you’re pushing drugs. What do you think formulary drug lists are? They’re drugs that insurance companies choose to push and support. We are no different. Now, I suggest you get on board or get the fuck out.”

Jean stood, the table flipping in of front him, he drew back his fist as the man screamed, but nothing came out. Magnus slammed an elbow in his throat, then dropped him to the floor as the other students backed up.

“I think we’re done here,” said Jean. He looked at the other people, now all huddled to the side of the room. “Maybe suggest that he start MDX-37. It might cure what ails him.”

Outside the building, the group got into their SUV and headed out of the parking lot. No one said a word. When Magnus hit the bridge back into Seattle, Jean finally spoke.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I lost it in there. Irish said that was one of the drugs they’d pushed on Scout. It’s obvious it wasn’t right for her disease, and now they’re going to push it to others.”

“No, they won’t,” said Ro. “We’re going to stop this, and we’re going to make sure that they never see the sunlight again. I promise, baby.”

Jean nodded, but he knew that for every Laxton, there were ten more waiting to take its place. There was big business in screwing innocent people, especially those with low income, health problems, and high hopes.

“Hey, brother,” said Magnus. “We’ve got this. We stopped the daughter and the agents that were out there today. The ones in that classroom just might think twice about their career choice. Let’s do what we do. The rest will take care of itself.”

“And if it doesn’t?” asked Jean.

“Then we force it.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Where’s Montgomery?” asked Xavier Andrews. As vice president of the board controlling Laxton, Alta, PacWest, and Washington, he was a man who demanded excellence and answers.

“He’s speaking to the president,” said Comer Laxton. As the only son of Montgomery Laxton, he was sitting in the perfect place to inherit the entire organization. With millions backing them and potentially a government contract that would allow them to expand to thousands of government workers, they would all be multi-millionaires, if not billionaires, by the end of the year.

“That’s good news,” smiled Xavier. “We need to get that contract. Then the government won’t be inclined to do anything stupid since they bought in on everything. We’ll have them where we want them. How many policyholders do we currently have?”

“Last count was close to two million. We’re making excellent profit, but our policyholders aren’t exactly sticking around. We’re losing more than we’re signing,” said Comer.

“Then build another contest,” said Xavier, scanning the sheets before him. “Anyone who signs two hundred and fifty policyholders this month will receive a new car as their bonus.”

Comer nodded, smiling at the older man he considered an uncle. He sent a text to the instructor for the new training group, then to the field managers to get their people motivated.

“Where’s that sister of yours?” asked Xavier with a lascivious grin. Comer couldn’t stand to look at the drool on his lips. He didn’t agree with anything that his sister did, but having an affair with Xavier was career suicide.

With a wife and three grown daughters, Xavier was considered a prime catch for any mistress, but Comer didn’t want his sister to become a mistress. She deserved a husband. Unfortunately, she didn’t agree. With Xavier, they could get kinky, even to the point of brutal. The brutality, however, was all delivered by his sister. According to her, Xavier enjoyed the spankings, the chains, the beatings, and a few other things Comer wished he didn’t know.

“I’m not sure. She went with Jones yesterday to sign a few elderly folks, get the first few months’ policy money, and then eliminate them. They were easy marks. Alone, no

family, no children. I'm sure she's working a few other angles," said Comer.

"I need her here," grinned Xavier, "working my angles."

"She's still my sister, Xavier. Don't be disgusting."

"What's the matter? You don't think a man in his seventies can have an active sex life, a little adventure?"

"Shut the fuck up! She's my sister, and you're married. The only one getting hurt here is your wife and daughters. I wonder what they'd think if they knew all of Daddy's little secrets." Xavier frowned at the younger man, slamming the folder closed.

"Don't threaten me, Comer. You might be the son of my best friend and a fellow board member, but I won't hesitate to eliminate you."

"Not if I get to you first," growled Comer. Just as the two were to begin their pissing match, Montgomery slammed through the double mahogany doors, locking them behind him.

"What's wrong? Was the president in agreement?" asked Xavier.

“In agreement? Are you fucking kidding me right now? No, he wasn’t in agreement, Xavier. In fact, he wants a full investigation by the federal insurance commission of the entire operation. Furthermore, he’s received intelligence that says that Laxton is pushing and selling drugs that have not met the FDA requirements.”

Comer paled, staring at his father. No. No, this couldn’t be happening. They’d had a good relationship with the president, or at least, his father said it was good.

“I thought you said you had him in your pocket,” said Comer.

“I thought he was! We’d met a few times, and he seemed agreeable to hearing about our plan,” said Montgomery.

“That hardly constitutes ‘in your pocket,’ Monty,” smirked Xavier.

“Don’t fucking call me Monty. You know I hate it. Where’s your damn sister? If he’s here, I know she’s not off fucking somewhere. Unless she’s found a new toy,” smiled Montgomery. Xavier sobered, staring at his frenemy. She wouldn’t do that to him. She wouldn’t.



“I don’t know. I told Xavier she went with Jones to sign those old people but never returned.”

“Where is Jones, or whatever the fuck his name is?”

Comer called his sister’s number first, and it went straight to voicemail. The next number was Jones’, and it, too, went to voicemail.

“Neither are answering,” said Comer. “I’ll head to her house to see if she’s there.”

“No, we don’t have time for her bullshit. We need to make sure everything appears as it should. Get with regulatory and legal and tell them if the paperwork doesn’t pass muster, they’re going to lose their heads over it. I want scores of data on MDX-37. Make that shit look like it will cure everything from the common cold to leprosy.”

“Dad, the lab team is doing everything they can, but faking studies like that takes time. If the FDA decides to duplicate the studies in their labs, this will blow up in our faces.”

“Listen to me. Someone got to that prick Bodwick and put a bug in his ear about us. Right now, our plans to blow this shit out of the water and make billions are done! Do you

fucking hear me? Done! We have to salvage something, or we're all going down with this rotten ship."

"Yes, sir," said Comer, leaving his father and Xavier. The two older men were quiet for a long time. Xavier stood, pouring himself a glass of thirty-year-old Scotch. He downed the first one, then poured a second.

"Did you kill my daughter?" asked Montgomery.

"God, no!" said Xavier with shock. "Despite what you think, Montgomery, I love Constance. I'm not sure she loves me, but as we both know, when you get to be our age, you compromise." Montgomery nodded, then poured a drink for himself.

"We have to make this work, Xavier. If we don't, not only will we go to prison, but we'll lose everything." Xavier stared at his friend, raising his glass.

"To smoke and mirrors." Montgomery grinned.

"To smoke and mirrors."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Each pair of team members continued to interview policyholders and gather evidence. When President Bodwick sent FDA and FBI investigators to review the information that was being collected, he was appalled at the mountain of evidence.

Now occupying three large, connecting suites in the hotel, the team was spread from one end to the other, reviewing their findings.

“What about former employees?” asked Lucinda. “Did we ever find anyone?”

“We’ve got three people,” said Mo. “Ophelia and I are headed out to speak with one of them now. AJ and Hoot are on the road to the other. Melissa Gibbons started as a receptionist right out of college and worked her way into what she thought would be a lucrative sales job. She wouldn’t go into any other detail, but she was willing to talk to them.

“She moved from Seattle to Sand Point, Idaho, so they’re going to be gone a day or so. We’re headed out to talk to Grover Mansfield. He was also a salesperson, but just for three months. HG and Bone are taking number three. Holland

DeBerg. And Joseph and Nathan are on their way to the Nez Perce Reservation to speak to Park Winchester. He's on the tribal council and had a lot of nasty things to say about our friends at PacWest."

"Alright," nodded Irish. "It sounds like we've got our jobs to do. Lucinda and I are headed up to see Scout. She might be released into our care today. If so, we'll be getting her on the bird and home with Wilson." The big man leaned back in his chair, staring at the group.

"Someone say my name?" he smirked.

"I didn't know you were here," grinned Nathan.

"I'm six-six, dude. Not like I can hide. I'm here to get our girl and make sure she's taken care of. Lena's already up there giving orders. She makes me nervous, so I'll head up with Irish and Lucinda."

Irish noted the dark expression on Hoot's face. The others followed his watchful gaze.

"We're gonna make sure she's okay, brother. Riley and the others think with the mastectomy done, we can save her. You won't lose this one." Hoot nodded.

"I saw her last night."

“What?” frowned Wilson. “You went up there alone?”

“I needed to see her and make sure she was okay. She was in and out of it, but we spoke for a while. That kid has been through enough for someone so young. She’s incredibly intelligent, artistic, and grounded. She said she knew the insurance company was screwing her over and even tried to cancel her policy.”

“But she couldn’t,” said Georgie, standing in the entryway with Carl. “We got here last night as well. The policies are written so that cancellation can only happen after one full year of premiums have been paid, or the patient dies. They tie them up in all this legal mumbo jumbo that isn’t legal.”

“That’s what she said. She chose to not pay her premiums when they refused her correct chemotherapy, which was only a few days before we found her. Her body was shutting down because of the shit they were giving her, but she said she remembered hearing someone outside her door, telling her next time it would be her.”

“The car. The car on the street that had the windows smashed out and looked like it had been beaten to hell and back. They did that to her car,” said AJ.

“They did that to her car. I didn’t want her to be scared. Alec and Ethan stayed back and are outside her room.”

“She’ll be okay,” said Lucinda. “She’s going to need aggressive treatment, but we believe she’ll survive. We’ll take care of her. You stop the bad guys.” She kissed the man’s cheek and grabbed her jacket, waiting at the door for Irish.

“You heard the lady. Let’s stop the bad guys.”



The drive to Sand Point, Idaho, almost made the back and ass aches, the whole thing worth it. The mountains, lush green valleys, wildlife, and overall scenery were unlike anything either man had seen before.

“I’d love to come back up here and hunt and fish, maybe do a really long trail run,” said AJ, staring at the passing landscape.

“Yea,” nodded Hoot, leaning against the center console. AJ stared at his friend.

“Hoot, she’s not going to die. We’re making sure of it.”

“I know,” he said, staring at the other man. Outside of his two brothers, AJ was probably his best friend. “It’s just this weird feeling that something isn’t right, beyond the obvious.”

“Do you think she’s in danger?” frowned AJ.

“I mean, beyond what we already know, I’m not sure. I’m just overreacting, that’s all.”

“Hoot, I’ve known you my entire life. You’ve never overreacted to anything. This will all be over soon, and we’ll be back at Belle Fleur, where you can check on her yourself.” Hoot nodded, and AJ pointed to the road sign. “That’s our turn.”

“She lives in an RV park,” said Hoot. “That seems odd, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe. There’s a big trend now for people to downsize. Most jobs allow you to work from anywhere, and this way, people can pack up and drive to a new place if they get tired of where they are. Me? I’ve been on the road for the

last sixteen years. I like the idea of having one place to call home, but I understand it's not for everyone.”

The RV park was well-maintained with tree-lined lots, a swimming pool, and parks for kids to play. Searching for her lot number, they finally found it and pulled up in front of the small RV. As they stepped out, a young woman came out of the camper. AJ simply stopped and stared.

The petite woman was in running shorts with lean, muscled legs. Her oversized hoodie sweatshirt covered her torso, but she had long black hair and large blue eyes. Her lips looked as if she'd just been kissed, and for some reason, AJ didn't like that.

“Melissa Gibbons?” asked Hoot.

“That's me. Are you the men who are after Alta and the others?” Hoot waited for AJ to answer, but when he just stared at the woman, he nodded.

“Yes, ma'am, that's us. We can sit out here if you're more comfortable with that.”

“I appreciate that,” she said, nodding toward the chairs around the campfire. “I bought this after I left the company.



They were leaving threatening messages on my voicemail, e-mail, and even in my mailbox.”

“Did you save those by any chance?” asked AJ, finally finding his voice.

“I saved everything,” she said, staring at the man. “When I went to work for them, I was just out of college and not sure what I wanted to do. They offered me a job as a receptionist, and I took it. It was decent money, and I thought it might get me a foot in the door.” She shook her head.

“Not what you imagined?” asked Hoot.

“Nothing like I imagined. About six months in, Mr. Laxton approached me and asked if I would be interested in becoming an insurance salesperson. I’d never really thought about sales, but I thought I’d give it a try. The training was odd. They were really pushing certain policies and talking about drugs. Again, I was young and stupid and thought that this was how it worked.

“My first month, I didn’t hit goal, and they made it very clear that if I didn’t hit my second month, I’d be fired. I tried, really I did, but I just couldn’t force all those old people to buy policies they couldn’t afford. I was able to fake it for a while. Then one day, I was visiting with a policyholder that

hadn't paid their premiums. I was told by my manager that I had to collect the past due amount 'through any method necessary.' I couldn't believe my ears."

"What did you do?" asked AJ.

"I just sat with him and talked. He pulled out the massive policy deck and started reading me things that he'd highlighted. I'd never even read the thing in its entirety. Can you believe how stupid I was?" She had tears in her eyes, and AJ reached over, squeezing her arm.

"You weren't stupid. You were young and naïve. There's a difference."

"I sat there all day reading that policy with him. When I left, I knew I couldn't continue working for them. I went in the next day and resigned."

"What happened after that?" asked Hoot.

"They came after me. Threatened me. Told me if I spoke of any of this, I'd be dead. I called the police, and they confronted them, but the police were told I had company property that I hadn't returned. It was a lie. I had nothing. I knew they would only continue to harass me, so I picked up everything I had, sold what I could, and bought this."

“That was probably smart,” said AJ. “Are you working now?”

“Yes, I’m working for an online custom retailer. It’s fun. I get to talk to people all day who actually want my products and are happy when they get them. I can work as much or as little as I want. It allows me to travel, and I have time to train.”

“Train?” asked Hoot.

“Yes, I’m training for my first triathlon.” AJ grinned.

“That’s impressive,” he smiled. “I’ve done a few while I was in the military. They’re a bitch to get through, but it’s exhilarating when you do.”

“Wow, that’s awesome! Maybe you could give me some tips,” she said, smiling at him. Hoot watched as the blush in AJ’s cheeks crept up his face.

“Yea. Sure. Any time,” he stumbled. “Here’s my card, and that’s my personal e-mail. Just let me know if I can be of help.”

“Thanks,” she smiled. “I’m actually running in a marathon in three months in New Orleans.”

“Is that so?” grinned Hoot. “We’re not far from there. Maybe AJ could run with you. Sort of a buddy system on your first one.” AJ scowled at Hoot, then looked back at the excited expression on the woman’s face.

“Yea,” he nodded. “Running is my thing, so, sure.”

“This is great!” she said, standing. The two men, being gentlemen, stood with her. She leaped at AJ, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Thank you!”

“My pleasure.”

“Uh, Miss Gibbons, if we bring this to trial, would you be willing to testify?” asked Hoot. She released AJ, but her hand stayed on his arm. He felt her tense, squeezing his arm, and reached for her hand.

“We’ll make sure you’re safe.” She nodded.

“I’ll testify, but I’ll need protection. They’ve threatened me enough that I know they’ll follow through. Constance Laxton is a dragon. Fire, brimstone, hell, and fury. She’s evil all the way. The son, Comer, is almost as bad.”

AJ didn’t want to tell her that Constance wasn’t a concern any longer. Comer, they would deal with.

“Well, we have to get back to Seattle,” said AJ. “We’ll be in touch soon.” She nodded, smiling at him as she released his arm.

“Sorry about that,” she said, blushing.

“No bother at all.” Hoot smirked at AJ and then gave a head nod to Melissa, waving at the woman. Back in the truck, he just stared at his friend, smiling. Finally, AJ spoke.

“Shut the fuck up.”



Grover Mansfield looked to be around fifty years old. He lived in a small house near the Sound with his dog, Flipper. He was working in the front yard when Mo and Ophelia pulled up.

“You the folks askin’ about PacWest?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. I’m Moses Baird, and this is my wife, Ophelia.” The man nodded at the couple and opened his front door, waving them inside.

“Coffee?” he asked.

“I’d love some,” said Ophelia. “Your yard is beautiful. I can’t believe how big your flowers are.”

“Thank you,” he smiled. “It’s my passion. Once I quit the insurance game, I decided to compete in flower shows. Not something I ever thought I’d do, but it works for me.”

“Well, it’s beautiful.” He set down two cups of coffee and then took his seat.

“I’m not sure what I can tell you. I only worked for them for three months, and I knew almost immediately I wouldn’t last. I tried to resign after six weeks, and they wouldn’t let me. I laughed at them, told them they couldn’t stop someone from resigning.”

“What happened?” asked Mo.

“I woke up the next morning with my resignation letter stapled to my dog’s body on the front porch. Not Flipper. My old dog,” he said, swallowing. “Penn had been with me for ten years. Best little beagle on the planet. I couldn’t prove it, but they killed him and left that message for me.”

“God, I’m so sorry,” said Ophelia, reaching for his hand. “Did you contact the police?”

“I did, and they filed a restraining order against PacWest. They thought they’d get away with it, but someone saw the son, Comer Laxton, outside my home. It was enough

to make them nervous. That was three years ago. I haven't had any trouble since, but you can bet I don't leave my dog outside unsupervised."

"Mr. Mansfield, what made you want to leave?" asked Mo.

"They were forcing people to buy their insurance policies. Most of my colleagues were getting the geriatrics, but they wanted me to look at cancer and diabetic patients. I tried to convince myself that I was providing a service for these people. Then I read the policy all the way through." He shook his head, cussing. "What a bunch of glorified bullshit. I knew I couldn't keep doing it."

"Were you ever asked to push certain drug therapies?" asked Ophelia.

"Oh, hell, yes. All the time. We would get this list of potential policy buyers that had recently been diagnosed with a disease. We'd have to sweep in and offer to save the day with the policy. No one ever even noticed that the drugs were written into the policies."

"What?" Mo stared at the man. This was the first time they'd heard that.

“Yep. I kept three policy copies. One for cancer, one for diabetes, and one for hypertension. All three mention that if the policyholder should need medication for those conditions, they would be required to use the drugs produced by Laxton.”

“Sir, may we...” He held up his hand, reaching for a large packet of material.

“I’m way ahead of you. These are copies of the three policies. I’ll testify if you go to trial, but I want protection for myself and for Flipper.”

“We can do that, sir,” said Mo. He stood, reaching out his hand. “We’ll be in touch, but you stay safe.”

Back in the truck, Mo looked at Ophelia and the large stack of materials sitting between them.

“Let’s get this back to the others. I imagine Georgie is going to have a field day with this.”



Holland DeBerg stared at the two young men seated across from her. It was clear that they were twins, but they were about the most beautiful men she’d ever seen. At forty-



four, she wasn't old, but she wasn't young. These two would be enjoyable if only for a few hours.

“Ms. DeBerg?”

“Oh, sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “Yes, I worked there for almost a year.”

“A year?” frowned HG. “I'm sorry. I just find that strange. Most of the people we've spoken to left much sooner.”

“I wasn't an agent,” she said, smiling at the young man. “I was a researcher for Laxton. I thought I was saving the world. I'd take older drugs that had FDA approval and attempt to make them better. The problem was the older drugs were bad to begin with. Research isn't something you can figure out in a few weeks or a few months. That's why I was there a year.”

“I'm sorry, I meant no disrespect,” said HG.

“None taken. I'm not sure how Laxton got any of their drugs to market to begin with. The studies were weak and hardly gave support to their claims. His big drug that he was pushing was for cancer. It was designed for colorectal cancer, but they wanted it used for all types of cancers.

“I tried to tell them that it didn’t work that way, but they very politely told me to make it work that way. I thought they knew something I didn’t. I was a year in when I figured it all out. I had lunch one day and met one of the agents. He was struggling with what he was being asked to do. We decided to meet up later for dinner.

“I couldn’t believe my ears. I gathered some documents from him, and we spoke a few more times, then he disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” frowned Bone.

“Died. He died.”

“How?” asked Bone.

“They found him at the bottom of a ravine. They said it was alcohol-related, but it was all a lie. He never had more than one drink. Never. I knew then that I had to leave. Honestly, I was surprised that they let me. I resigned over the phone, and that was it.”

“No one bothered you?” asked HG.

“They called a few times to ask about my research, and I told them it was all on the laptop in the lab. I never took

anything home.” The two men nodded, and she smiled at them. “Can I ask, are you twins?”

“We’re triplets. Our brother is elsewhere right now.”

“I see. I’ve always wondered what that would be like. Being with twins or triplets,” she grinned. HG looked at his brother and back at the woman. She was attractive enough, but now was not the time to wet their dicks.

“We’re flattered, ma’am,” said Bone. “Unfortunately, we’re working and have to get going.”

“Well, if you and your brothers ever decide to let loose, call me.”

“We’ll do that. If we go to trial, will you testify?” She looked the two men up and down, tempted to agree if they would agree to a little deal, then decided against it.

“Yes. I’ll go to trial.”

Safely in the truck, HG pulled out of the driveway and raced back toward the hotel.

“She’s not following us,” laughed Bone. HG shook his head, frowning.

“I need a shower.”



“Park Winchester?” asked Joseph.

“That’s me. You must be Joseph and Nathan Redhawk. I was surprised to get your call,” he said, waving them into his office.

“Why was that?” asked Joseph.

“No one is interested in the fact that an indigenous people were getting swindled. Again.”

“We’re interested,” said Nathan.

“I imagine you are. Comer Laxton approached me himself. I serve on my tribal council here, but I also serve on the national coalition of tribal councils. All of the indigenous populations try to meet and discuss issues facing our people. I suppose you already know that.”

Joseph nodded.

“Comer comes in and says they’re willing to offer us a policy for our entire population that’s specific to us. I’m guessing he thought we were still trading blankets and trinkets.”

“What did you do?” smirked Nathan.

“I sent two of my people to interview for sales jobs. One of them got the job and found out they were putting in clauses that would deny coverage to indigenous people with certain diseases common in our population. I took the paperwork to Comer and nearly killed him.

“He had his security team walk me out, but I made it clear if he ever stepped foot on this reservation, I would kill him.”

“Did you keep the paperwork?” asked Joseph.

“We kept it.” He pulled out a folder at least four inches thick. “We kept the policy and a number of other things my person found in the building. The Laxton Pharmaceutical group was going to try and become the preferred drug and insurance group for the U.S. government. I’ve been planning a trip to D.C. for weeks now, hoping to get some time with the president.”

“Well, if you’ll trust us, sir, we’re going to get this to the president. But I assure you, he is already aware of what’s happening at Laxton, and we’re going to stop it. If we go to trial, will you testify?”

“You can be damn sure I will,” said the big man. “I’ll make sure my team is prepared to testify as well.”

“You’ve got yourself your own investigation team,”  
smiled Joseph. “That’s smart.”

“We take our safety and the safety of our people  
seriously. We have a top-notch police force, investigators,  
firefighters, everything. I won’t have my people fooled ever  
again.”

They shook hands, and the two men headed back to  
Seattle. Between the evidence they’d all collected, there was  
no way in hell the Laxtons or their board would walk away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“How are you feeling?” asked Lucinda, smiling down at the young woman.

“Alive,” she murmured. “That’s the best I can give you right now.”

“I understand. It will get better, Scout. The medication you were on was making you sicker. Once we’ve flushed that out of your system, and we’ve confirmed lymph node involvement or not, we can begin the proper rounds of chemotherapy.”

“They said you’re flying me to another location. Why?” she asked.

“We’re not sure it’s safe for you here, but also, Hoot, our man who brought you in?” She nodded again. “He’s asked that we personally take on your care, and it will be covered by our private fund.”

“I can’t accept charity,” she said, shaking her head.

“It’s not charity. We run a highly successful security company that has multiple funds to help those in need. We run a state-of-the-art medical center with top-notch surgeons,

oncologists, and other doctors. We'll get you well, and then you can decide where you want to go from there."

"Where is it?" she asked.

"Our property is held a secret because of our need for security, but it's in Louisiana. Our entire team lives there," said Irish.

"I-is it, is it like a compound?" she asked. He could see the fear in her eyes and cursed himself.

"No, honey. Not at all. We all have our own homes, we run several businesses on the property, and you are free to leave whenever you like. I promise you, it's not a compound or commune or anything else like that."

"So, you know," she whispered.

"We don't know it all," said Lucinda. "We were told you emancipated yourself from your parents because of them living in a commune."

"It was worse than a commune," she said, staring at them. "It was their excuse to use drugs and have sex with anyone and everyone. Even children."

"Children?" frowned Irish. Scout nodded, then looked away.



“Honey, it’s not your fault,” said Lucinda, taking her hand. “Whatever happened, whatever they did to you, it’s not your fault. We have counselors who can help you deal with this if you like.”

“I-I’m scared,” she whispered.

“It’s okay to be scared,” said Lucinda. “I was scared, and this big red-headed guy saved me.” There was a hint of a smile on Scout’s face, and she nodded.

“Where is the other man? The one that came to see me last night. He kept me company until those two huge bodyguards showed up.”

“He’s catching the bad guys, sweetie, but he’ll be coming back with all of us when this is over. You’ll see him.” Lucinda smiled at the young woman, knowing that she was probably feeling a connection to Hoot since he had saved her.

“Well, young lady,” smiled Wilson, “we’re all ready. Our helicopter is up on the helipad, we’ve got your paperwork, and Lena and I will be taking you somewhere to get you well.”

“C-can she come?” she asked, pointing to Lucinda. Lucinda turned to look at Irish, kissing his cheek.

“I don’t think you need me here any longer. You go with the others, and I’ll go with Lena, Wilson, and our star patient. Tell Hoot I’ve got this.” Irish grinned at her, kissing her again.

He helped to wheel her out of the room and toward the big elevators. They squeezed in, then wheeled her toward the chopper. With a big smile, Chipper jumped out and looked down at the tiny little woman.

“I have the best job in the world,” he grinned. “I get to take beautiful women all over the world.”

“I’m not beautiful right now,” she frowned. Chipper brushed a rough, callused hand over her bald head.

“Baby, you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve seen in a long time.”

“Stop flirting with my patient!” yelled Lena. “You old goat! Get in the chopper and get her ready. We want to be home by supper. Mama Irene has something special planned for our sweet girl.”

Scout smiled at them, then looked at Irish.

“Tell him thank you.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

With the evidence collected, the witnesses lined up, the team and the feds were ready to raid the offices of Laxton and the insurance companies. To ensure that the board would be present, Cam asked Bodwick to call a video-conference meeting with them all.

More than one hundred men were dressed in black gear, ready to burn the entire building down.

“Was she alright?” asked Hoot, staring at Irish in the SUV.

“Brother, for the tenth time, she was fine. They had her stabilized and were planning to begin treatments today. She’ll be there when we get back. It was interesting, though.”

“What was interesting?” asked Hoot.

“When I asked her about the commune she came from, she said it was pretty awful. She said it was an excuse for them to do whatever drugs they wanted and have sex with anyone they wanted, including children.” Hoot’s face darkened, and he stared at Irish in disbelief. “I told her we’d look into it, brother. When we get back. We’ll find out more and make a plan. Luke and Eric agreed.”

Hoot nodded, his brothers on either side of him nodding as well. They would go in as a team.

“I call boardroom first,” they said simultaneously. Irish laughed, shaking his head.

“Creepy as shit.”

“Not as creepy as the pretty girl that had AJ blushing,” smiled Hoot.

“Oh, do tell,” laughed Bone.

“Shut up,” frowned AJ.

“Brother, she liked you. She was a hot little thing. Muscular running legs, big blue eyes, black hair. She was smokin’, and she only had eyes for our AJ.” AJ just looked out the window, ignoring his friend.

Much like his father, AJ didn’t have a lot of experience with women to this point in his life. He wasn’t on the spectrum like his father, but he possessed the same shyness and awkwardness around women. He also wasn’t a virgin, and when he did have sex, he certainly enjoyed it. But he also held no desire to fuck anything that would open their legs.

As the more than a dozen vehicles hid beneath the canopy of trees across the road, they waited for the signal from

Bodwick that the board was present and on the line. Listening in, they waited.



“Mr. President, I’m so glad you’ve decided to reconsider our offer,” smiled Laxton.

“I’ve decided to hear the offer,” said Bodwick. “I’m still not convinced this is the right thing for our government employees. My job is to make sure that they are protected and covered as they should be. To be honest, Montgomery, your policies are far more expensive than some of the others.”

“Well, let me assure you that with our policies, you’ll get the added benefit of having an entire list of drugs that are approved and will be low cost to our fine civil servants.”

“I see Comer and Xavier, but I don’t see your daughter,” said Bodwick. “I asked for the entire board to be present.” Montgomery frowned at the screen.

“Yes, well, I can’t seem to locate my daughter at this time. She’s a bit of a free spirit and often takes off for long periods of time to ‘find herself.’ You know how children are.”

“Yes, I know how they are. But mine is a responsible, intelligent young woman. In fact, she works behind the scenes in my cabinet.” Montgomery felt the pit in his stomach growing. Something was wrong. Something was off.

“I don’t think I knew that.”

“She’s quite an asset,” he said, staring at the screen. “I have a few questions for the board. Your cancer drug, MDX-37, I understand that you’re attempting to bring it back into the market, despite the study results.” Xavier froze, staring at Montgomery.

“I’m not sure where you heard that,” said Montgomery calmly. “We’ve not released any study results, nor have we spoken to anyone about continuing with studies on this drug.”

“I see, so then, why would Scout Blevins, a young woman with breast cancer, have been forced by your policy to use MDX-37, even though it wasn’t indicated for her type of cancer?”

“W-we don’t tell patients what to use. We don’t tell the doctors what to prescribe. It’s totally up to them.”

“No, it’s dictated by your policies. Policies that require the use of your drugs for certain conditions, force excessive

premiums to be paid, and then deny claims for life-saving treatments and surgeries. Isn't that right?"

"Mr. President, is this a meeting or a witch hunt?" he frowned, standing from his seat. The double doors to the boardroom came crashing open and more than a dozen men stood with weapons pointed at them.

"I'd say it's a lynching," said Irish.

He turned to the federal agents, who placed the men under arrest. They nodded at Bodwick as he signed off and then went to work, taking every piece of material, every scrap of paper from the building. When employees tried to scramble, they were stopped in the parking lot, their laptops taken, and their cars searched.

"Who are you!? Who do you think you are?" yelled Montgomery.

Irish started to step forward, but it was Hoot that slammed his booted foot into the man's mouth, dropping him to his knees. Gripping his fine wool suit coat, he lifted him.

"I'm the man that's going to make sure you die in the chair, if not sooner. I'm the man that held Lisa Thompson while she took her last breath because you denied her

treatment. I'm the man that saved Scout Blevins, despite your best efforts to kill her. We are the men that will ensure you never see the light of day."

"It won't stick," he smirked.

"You're an asshole," frowned Irish. "We have more evidence than you can possibly imagine and witnesses willing to testify." Montgomery frowned, turning to his son.

"Where is Constance?"

"Oh, Constance," smirked Hazel. "You mean the bitch that was willing to kill a bunch of old people to get a few thousand bucks? That Constance?"

Montgomery said nothing, just staring at the tattooed woman. She was muscular and definitely looked capable of shooting the weapon in her hand. Leaning forward, she whispered in Montgomery's ear.

"I killed her. I made her suffer just like she'd made all those poor patients suffer. Her body will never be found, or what's left of it. You see, my colleagues might have qualms about killing a woman, but I do not. Especially one born of pure evil. You're done. Monty."



In the end, more than three hundred people were arrested and charged. It took weeks to bring everyone to trial. Comer Laxton killed himself in prison, or at least that's what everyone was told. Xavier Andrews suffered three strokes and was unable to testify on his behalf. He was, however, sentenced to life in a maximum-security hospital.

Montgomery Laxton was tried and convicted on so many charges it took nearly an hour to read them all. Washington did not carry the death penalty, but thanks to Bodwick, he was able to proclaim that Montgomery's crimes stretched across the nation, and therefore he could be given the death penalty.

It wasn't needed. His fellow prisoners determined him guilty and ensured the nation did not incur the debt of his death.

When Dan Thompson heard the news, he wept. Not because he didn't get to see him put to death but because Lisa finally had her peace.

She had moved on.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The team was happy to finally be home and in their own beds. Weeks of evidence collection, trials, and more, had them completely worn out. When they walked into their first morning meeting, it was like old home week.

“We’re happy to have everyone home again,” said Eric. “It’s been lonely around here without you.”

The laughter and groans had them all relaxed. All except Hoot, who still hadn’t been able to check on Scout.

“We’ve got our first wedding in a while this weekend,” said Luke. “Irish and Lucinda will be getting married Friday night, and it will be an all-out party this weekend.”

Lucinda stood and smiled at the room. She walked toward Chipper and held out her hand. The old man stared at her, then stood, shaking his head.

“Chipper? You were so incredibly sweet to Lisa, me, and to Scout. I didn’t have a father growing up. No one I knew, anyway. I kept thinking if I had picked one, I would have picked you. Smart, brave, kind. I’d consider it a huge favor if you’d walk me down the aisle.” Chipper’s mouth

opened and closed, staring at the smiling faces around the room.

“Me? Honey, you don’t want me. I’m just a broken-down chopper pilot. I don’t know how to walk anyone down the aisle.”

“It’s simple,” smiled Lucinda, taking his hand. She linked her arm with his and took a step. He took a step with her, then another. “See. It’s that easy. Please.”

Chipper shook his head, wiping away the tears. He hugged Lucinda, nodding at her.

“You’ve made me very happy,” she sniffed. He pushed back, kissed her forehead, and looked at all the men.

“I can’t believe what you’ve done for me these last few years. I was a homeless man, sitting in that café, having a piece of pie now and then. To think I was led here to meet up with my old friends again is just pure magic.”

“Or voodoo,” laughed Gabriel.

“Or voodoo,” he nodded.

Hoot tried several times to see Scout, but she was always either in her treatments or at the pond. He didn’t want

to interfere with either or catch her in a compromising position, so he avoided the hospital.

The morning of the wedding, Irish spotted him sitting in the gardens. He knew that look. He'd had that look on his face a few short months ago. He wondered if Hoot realized what that look meant.

“Hey, brother, what’s up?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Hoot, standing from the bench.

“Hoot, I’ve been there,” smirked Irish. “It’s okay if you have feelings for Scout.”

“No, it’s not. She’s sick, and she’s just a kid. I’m thirty-four fucking years old. Very old.”

“Dude, you’re not very old. And in case you missed it, which you obviously did, she turned twenty-one last week. The entire medical team threw her a party.”

Hoot muttered under his breath. They’d asked him to come up there, but he didn’t know why and didn’t want her to see him. Instead, he’d been fucking miserable and couldn’t put his finger on it.

“She’s still just a kid,” he mumbled.

“You keep telling yourself that, and you might just believe it. Look, Hoot, I’m not an expert, brother, but I know that women like Scout and Lucinda and all the others here, they don’t just drop from the skies every other week. They’re intentionally placed in front of us by something, or someone.”

“I barely know her.”

“Get to know her. She’s going to be here a while. Get to know her, Hoot. She’s a mature, intelligent young woman. Get to know her.” Irish squeezed his shoulder and then disappeared between the hedges. Hoot just stared at the fountain, watching the water slowly trickle downward.

“I barely know her.”

He was repeating those words in his head the entire wedding, even when Irish and Lucinda kissed, running back down the aisle toward the tent. When he and his brothers filled their plates with food, he started to feel a bit more normal, although the idea of getting to know Scout Blevins was definitely in the back of his head.

It had been more than two months since he’d seen her. Two months since he’d seen the big green eyes staring at him in pain. The big green eyes that he now saw staring at him from across the room.

HG and Bone grinned as Hoot stood, walking toward the tiny figure in the pretty dark green dress. She'd put on a few pounds, and her skin was definitely looking better. Her cheeks had color, but it was the glowing green eyes that nearly knocked him to his knees.

"You look better than the last time I saw you," he smirked. She nodded, smiling up at him. Her hand passed over the peach fuzz on her head.

"Almost. I've got a ways to go. It's nice to see you. I haven't been able to thank you for saving me."

"The doctors did that. I just carried you," he smiled.

"I haven't danced in a while, but I think I have the energy," she said, nodding toward the dance floor. Hoot gave a nod, taking her hand. She was like a little bird.

"Are you hurting anywhere?" he asked.

"No. Between the stellar care and your magical pond, I'm healed. I'll have my reconstructive surgery in a few weeks."

"That's good," he said, smiling down at her. "I'd forgotten how small you were." She frowned, looking down

at her feet. Hoot gripped her waist with one big arm and gently lifted her so that she was looking eye-to-eye with him.

“Better?” she asked.

“Better,” he smiled.

They danced like that for almost the entire night. Every person in the place was watching them, carefully judging Scout’s health and Hoot’s state of mind. When the night was done, he offered her his arm and walked her back to her cottage.

“I had a lovely time, Hoot.” She shook her head. “Do you have another name?”

“Yes,” he laughed. “Benjamin. But there are other Benjamins here. We’ve got Benji Pechkin, Benjamin LeBlanc, and me.”

“Well, if you don’t mind, I’ll call you Benjamin when it’s just us. I like Hoot, but Benjamin is strong, like you.” He nodded at her, smiling.

“You can call me whatever you like, Scout.” He started to walk away, then turned. “Scout? I’m thirty-four. I was a MARSOC Marine for fourteen of the last sixteen years. I’ve never been married, not even close. I have no children.

All of these people are my family, and this is my world.” She swallowed, staring at him.

“Wh-why are you telling me all of that?” she whispered. He took a step toward her and reached for her hand.

“Because I want to get to know you. All of you. If you feel the same, that was a good place to start.” He kissed her cheek and turned to walk away.

“Benjamin?” Hoot took a deep breath and closed his eyes, then turned to face her. “I feel the same.”

As she disappeared inside the cottage, he stood frozen on the path, just watching her. When his two brothers slapped the back of his head, he cussed, then followed them to the dock to take the boat to the island mansion.

“Well? Is she the one?” asked HG and Bone together.

“She’s the one.”



## EXCERPT from HOOT

It seemed creepy to be watching her, but he didn't want to frighten her either. She received her chemotherapy at the same time on the same day every week. She took it like a trooper, then proceeded to vomit for hours on end. The entire time, Cruz or Kelsey would hold her shoulders, wipe her mouth, and feed her ice chips.

It should have been him. He should be there helping her, but he was terrified. She looked like a little girl, making him feel weird about wanting to be near her.

With nothing else to occupy his mind, he decided to do a little research on her background.

Scout Park Blevins was born by a midwife to Moon and Willow Blevins, although they denounced the use of their last name. There was no recorded weight, nor was there a recorded hospital or home address. Just that she was born in the commune called the Rising Sun near Granite, Oregon.

Twice, the commune had been raided for drugs and for alleged lewd acts against children. One of those times, Scout was taken and placed in foster care. Three months later, she was released back to her parents' care.

Although he couldn't trace the event, he knew that the day she turned sixteen, she marched into the local courthouse and declared her emancipation from her parents. She held a high school diploma in her hand and enough money in student loans to start college on her own.

“Good for you,” he grinned.

Within a month, the commune had been raided again, and multiple arrests were made, including that of Moon and Willow. There was no record of what happened after that to either one of them.

All Hoot knew was that he found Scout dying on a floor, and now she was here. She was here, and she belonged to him.

## SERIES AND FAMILY GUIDE

**Key:**

RS = Reaper Security

SP = Steel Patriots

MSB = My SEAL Boys

RP = REAPER-Patriots

(d) = deceased

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<i>RS 1</i>	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
			Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
<i>RS 2</i>	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
			Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
			Nathan	Katrina Santos
			Joseph	Julia Anderson
<i>RS 3</i>	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
<i>RS 4</i>	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
			Julia	Joseph Redhawk
<i>RS 5</i>	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
			Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
			Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
<i>RS 6</i>	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn
<i>RS 7</i>	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker
<i>RS 8</i>	Adele Robicheaux	Clay Duffy		
<i>RS 9</i>	Gabriel Robicheaux	Tory Gibson		

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<i>RS 9</i>	John "Gibbie" Gibson	Dhara	Dalton	Calla Michaels
<i>RS 9</i>	Antoine Robicheaux	Ella Stanton	Ryan Holden Robicheaux	Paige Anderson
<i>RS 9</i>	Gaspar Robicheaux	Alexandra Minsky	Luke	Ajei Blackwood
			Carl	Georgianna Jordan
			Ben	Harper Miller
			Adam	Jane Wolfkill
<i>SP 19</i>			Violet	Striker Michaels
<i>RP 6</i>			Lucy	Alex "Sniff" Mullins

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<b>RS 10</b>	William "Bull" Stone	Lily Bennett		
<b>RS 11</b>	Luc Robicheaux	Montana Divide		
<b>RS 12</b>	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		
<b>RS 13</b>	Jasper "Jazz" Divide	Gray Vanzant	Virginia	Wes Jordan
<b>RS 14</b>	Baptiste Robicheaux	Rose Ellis	Elizabeth Irene "Liz"	Kiel Wolfkill
<b>RS 14</b>	Alec Robicheaux	Lissa Duncan	Keith	Susie Redhawk
<b>RS 15</b>	Stone Roberts	Bronwyn Ross		
<b>RS 16</b>	Suzette Robicheaux	Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco		
<b>RS 16</b>	Max Neill	Riley Corbett	CC	
<b>RS 17</b>	Titus Quinn	Olivia Baine	Lane	Frank Robicheaux
			Dominic	Leightyn Dooley
<b>RS 18</b>	Axel Doyle	Cait Brennan	Corey	
	Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
<b>RS 19</b>	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	Crow Foster			
<b>RS 19</b>	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
<b>RS 20</b>	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ("Kiel")	Liz Divide
			Jane	Adam Robicheaux
<b>RS 20</b>	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		
<b>RS 20</b>	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		

<i>RS</i>	Chad Taylor			
<i>RS</i>	Woody "Doc" Fine			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Tony Parks			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Alan Haley			
<i>RS</i>	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
<i>RS</i>	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
<i>RS</i>	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
<i>MSB 1</i>	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
<i>MSB 2</i>	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		
<i>MSB 3</i>	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<i>MSB 4</i>	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		
<i>MSB 5</i>	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		
<i>MSB 5</i>	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		
<i>MSB 6</i>	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		
<i>MSB 7</i>	Chris Paul	Elizabeth Broussard		
<i>MSB 8</i>	Luke O'Hara	Lucia Salvado		
<i>MSB 8</i>	Rory Baine	Piper Colley		
<i>MSB 8</i>	(d) Anthony Garcia			
<i>MSB</i>	Eric & Anna Tanner			
<i>SP 1</i>	Eric "Ghost" Stanton	Grace Easton	(d) Faith & Hope	
			Jack Tyran "JT"	
			Eric Ryan	
<i>SP 2</i>	Jack "Doc" Harris	Aubrey "Bree" Collins	Eva Irene	
<i>SP 3</i>	Wade "Whiskey" English	Katarina Krevnyv	Juliette Rose	
<i>SP 4</i>	Quincy "Zulu" Slater	Gabrielle London	Wade Eric	
			Tyler Gunner	
<i>SP 5</i>	Gunner Michaels	Darby Greer	Calla	Dalton Gibson
<i>SP 5</i>	Tyler "Tango" Green	Taylor Holland	Chase Maxwell	
<i>SP 7</i>	Diego "Razor" Salcedo	Isabella "Bella" Castro		
<i>SP 8</i>	Alex "Ace" Mills	Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor	Alexander John "AJ"	
<i>SP 9</i>	Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal	Tinley Oakley	Tyran Eagle	
			Hawk Gunner	
			Benjamin Scott	

<b>SP 9</b>	Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal	Keegan Oakley		
<b>SP 10</b>	Scott "Skull" Crawford	Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O'Connor	Mathew Scott	
			Kevin Alexander	
<b>SP 11</b>	Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
<b>SP 12</b>	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	
<b>SP 13</b>	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
<b>SP 14</b>	Ivan Pechkin	Sophia Lord	William	
			Benjamin	
			Celeste	
			Cassidy	
			Carrie	



<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<i>SP 15</i>	Griffin "Griff" James	Amanda Nettles		
<i>SP 16</i>	Bryce Nolan	Ivy Brooks		
<i>SP 17</i>	Kingston Miles	Claire Evers		
<i>SP 18</i>	Grant Zimmerman	Everly "Evie" Johnson		
<i>SP</i>	Molly Walker	Asia	boy	
<i>SP</i>	George Robert Williamson	Mary		
<i>SP</i>	(d) Axel "Axe" Mains	(d) Decker "Ice" McManus		
<i>SP</i>	James Scarlutti			
<i>SP</i>	Chen Wu		Choi Wu	
<i>SP</i>	Ian Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	Conor Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	Vincent Scalia		(d) Isabella	
<i>SP 19</i>	Strikers Michaels	Violet Robicheaux		
<i>RP 1</i>	Dexter Lock	Marie Robicheaux		
<i>RP 2</i>	Jean Robicheaux	Rose "Ro" Evers		
<i>RP 3</i>	Jackson "Jax" Diaz	Joy "Ellie" Dougall		
<i>RP 4</i>	Hunter Michaels	Megan Scott		
<i>RP 5</i>	Carl Robicheaux	Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan		
<i>RP 6</i>	Alex "Sniff" Mullins	Lucy Robicheaux	Caroline Willa	
<i>RP 7</i>	Cameron "Cam" Dougall	Kate Robicheaux	Ian William	
<i>RP 8</i>	Keith Robicheaux	Suzette "Susie" Redhawk	Joseph Alec Keith (JAK)	
<i>RP 9</i>	Eric Bongard	Sophia Ann Redhawk	Billy Joseph	

<b><i>RP 10</i></b>	Joseph Redhawk	Julia Anderson	Joseph Billy (JB)	
			Tobias Franklin	
<b><i>RP 11</i></b>	Ryan Robicheaux (Holden)	Paige Anderson	Dan Antoine	
<b><i>RP 12</i></b>	Nathan Redhawk	Katrina Santos	Nathan Luke	
			Michael Douglas	
<b><i>RP 13</i></b>	Ben Robicheaux	Harper Miller		
<b><i>RP 14</i></b>	Sean Liffey	Shay Miller		
<b><i>RP 15</i></b>	Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill	Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux	Everett Baptiste	
			Eastman Matthew	
			Ethan Ezekiel	

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<i>RP 16</i>	Ian Robicheaux	Aspen Bodwick		
<i>RP 17</i>	Adam Robicheaux	Jane Wolfkill		
<i>RP 18</i>	Marc Jordan	Ela Wolfkill		
<i>RP 19</i>	Wes Jordan	Virginia Divide	Patrick Jasper	
			Christopher Luke	
			Sadie Allison	
<i>RP 20</i>	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
<i>RP 21</i>	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
<i>RP 22</i>	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
<i>RP 23</i>	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn		
	Jake Fornet	Claudette Robicheaux		
<i>RP 24</i>	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
<i>RP 25</i>	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
<i>RP 26</i>	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
	Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
<i>RP 27</i>	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Alistair Thomas	
<i>RP 28</i>	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
<i>RP 29</i>	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
<i>RP 30</i>	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
<i>RP 31</i>	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
<i>RP 32</i>	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
<i>RP 33</i>	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Forrest Pierre	
<i>RP 34</i>	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
<i>RP 35</i>	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	

<b><i>RP 36</i></b>	Magnus Bridges	Addie Patterson		
<b><i>RP 37</i></b>	Hex Vernon	Gwen N'hana	Sebastian Tadzee	
<b><i>RP 38</i></b>	Wade Slater	Hannah Evers	Patrick Garr	
<b><i>RP 39</i></b>	Sam Cooper	Mia Rogers		
<b><i>RP 40</i></b>	Tiger Slater	Hazel Bream		
<b><i>RP 41</i></b>	Jalen Carson	Stormy Rainwaters		
<b><i>RP 42</i></b>	Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton	Rachel Davis	Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia	
<b><i>RP 43</i></b>	Matthew Robicheaux	Irene Hebert	Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachelle, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec	

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<i>RP 44</i>	Milo Abbott	Lia Goodwin		
<i>RP 45</i>	Nic "Torro" Torres	Melanie Fairfield		
<i>RP 46</i>	JT Stanton	Kennedy Rice		
<i>RP 47</i>	Chase Green	Maeve Korhonen		
<i>RP 48</i>	Will Pechkin	Brooke Ford		
<i>RP 49</i>	Benji Pechkin	Annie Lott		
<i>RP 50</i>	Will 'Bogey' Humphreys	Alice Evans		
<i>RP 51</i>	Tanner Sung	Micaela Vonn	(preg)	
<i>RP 52</i>	Moses 'Mo' Baird	Ophelia Baldwin		
<i>RP 53</i>	Connor 'Irish' Kelly	Lucinda Harwell		

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Ian

Noa

Carter

Lars

Trevor

Fitz

Chris

O'Hara

**Steel Patriots**

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

Tristan – Book Thirteen

Ivan – Book Fourteen

Griff – Book Fifteen

Bryce – Book Sixteen

King – Book Seventeen

Grant – Book Eighteen

Striker – Book Nineteen

**REAPER-Patriots**

Dex – Book One

Jean – Book Two

Jax – Book Three

Hunter – Book Four

Carl – Book Five

Sniff – Book Six

Cam – Book Seven

Keith – Book Eight

Eric – Book Nine

Joseph – Book Ten

Ryan – Book Eleven

Nathan – Book Twelve

Ben – Book Thirteen

Sean – Book Fourteen

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](#)

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[Magnus – Book Thirty-six](#)

[Hex – Book Thirty-seven](#)

[Wade – Book Thirty-eight](#)

[Sam – Book Thirty-nine](#)

[Tiger – Book Forty](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to two beautiful grandsons. She works full-time at a job she loves, and writing is her creative outlet. She lives in Texas and enjoys traveling, reading, and cooking. Her passion for assisting veterans and veteran causes comes from a strong military family background. Mary loves to hear from her readers and encourages them to join her mailing list, as she'll keep you up-to-date on new releases at <https://insatiableink.squarespace.com>. You can also join her Facebook page at Insatiable Ink.

Dear Readers,

I love hearing from you and encourage you to visit my website [insatiableink.squarespace.com](http://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.

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