

Mary Kennedy

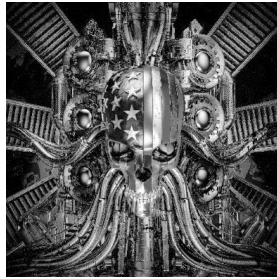
MO

REAPER-Patriots:
Book Fifty-TWO

MO

REAPER-Patriots

Book FIFTY-TWO



Mary Kennedy

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MAP of Belle Fleur and Cottage

Assignments

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

G1-8 = Garçonnière

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

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



COTTAGE Assignments

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

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|------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----|
| | | | | | Charlotte | | |
| <u>16</u> | Max & Riley | <u>51</u> | Wilson & Sara | <u>G6</u> | Magnus & Addie | <u>112</u> | |
| <u>17</u> | Stone & Bronwyn | <u>52</u> | Mac & Rachelle | <u>G7</u> | Chipper | <u>113</u> | Mo |
| <u>18</u> | Jazz & Gray | <u>53</u> | Nine & Erin | <u>G8</u> | Teddy | <u>114</u> | |
| <u>19</u> | Vince & Ally | <u>54</u> | Clay & Adele | <u>81</u> | Aiden & Brit | <u>115</u> | |
| <u>20</u> | Phoenix & Raven | <u>55</u> | Trak & Lauren | <u>82</u> | Callan & Juliette | <u>116</u> | |
| <u>21</u> | Noah & Tru | <u>56</u> | Lars & Jessica | <u>83</u> | Sean & Shay | <u>117</u> | |
| <u>22</u> | Griff & Amanda | <u>57</u> | Ian & Faith | <u>84</u> | Wade & Hannah | <u>118</u> | |
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| <u>25</u> | Skull & Avery | <u>60</u> | Dexter & Marie | <u>87</u> | Bodhi & Viv | <u>121</u> | |
| <u>26</u> | Axel & Cait | <u>61</u> | Hunter & Megan | <u>88</u> | CC & Eva | <u>122</u> | |
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| <u>28</u> | Noa & Kelsey | <u>63</u> | Jax & Ellie | <u>89</u> | Michael & Miriam | <u>124</u> | |
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CHAPTER ONE

“Moses Elijah Baird! Come into this house, please,” called his mother from the front porch. She stared at her son playing with some of the neighborhood children. Frowning, she paced back and forth, ready to address the issue again with her only child.

Moses turned toward his house, frowning. Not again. He looked at his friend, Ophelia, and her sister Cordelia. Their father was an English professor at the local college and obsessed with Shakespeare. He’d named his daughters after two female characters. Although, Moses couldn’t figure out why since both characters died tragically.

“I’ll be back later,” he said, smiling at the two girls. There were other neighborhood children playing as well, but Moses and Ophelia always stuck together. Like peanut butter and jelly or peas and carrots. They were a team. He ran back to his house across the street, and his mother led him inside.

“Moses, how many times have we told you that we don’t like you playing with those Baldwin girls?” she said.

“But why?” he asked. “I like them. They’re nice, and Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin are really nice. We’re not doing

anything wrong.”

“I know you’re not doing anything wrong, Moses. But you should be playing with your own kind,” she said, staring down at her son.

“My own kind?” he asked with a confused expression. “You mean only play with boys? There were tons of boys over there.” He pointed to the empty field that served as their playground, frowning. His father stood from his chair. His big body seemingly filled the space, sucking the oxygen from the room with his presence.

“What your mother is trying to say is that we think your friends should only be friends of color, like you. Black boys. Black girls. Brown boys. Brown girls.”

“But, Dad, isn’t that being racist?” he asked innocently.

“Call it what you like, Moses, but this is something your mother and I feel strongly about. We would like for you to date within your own culture.”

Elijah knew that it wasn’t about that at all. This was his wife’s issue, not his. The Baldwin girls were lovely children, and their parents were good, hard-working, friendly

people. But a smart man keeps peace in his house, and that starts with his wife.

“Dad, I’m eleven. I’m not dating Ophelia or Cordelia. I’m playing tag with them. That’s all.”

Elijah looked at his wife. Her face scrunched in a way that told him she still didn’t like it. But the reality was their son went to a school with children from all races and walks of life. He couldn’t ignore them.

“Having them as friends is appropriate,” he said. “Just know that as you get older, Moses, we’re going to ask you to limit your time with them.”

“Can’t I know why? This doesn’t make sense. You teach kids of all races, Mom. Dad, you do landscaping and lawn work for people of all races. This is silly!”

“Don’t argue with me,” said Alfre with a venomous glare. “I won’t have my son dating white girls just because you’re curious.” Moses scrunched up his nose.

“Curious?” he asked. “About what?”

“Never mind,” said Elijah. “Go play with your friends.”

Moses left the house, looking back at his parents as he crossed the street once more. His mother could be angry all she wanted. He wasn't going to end his friendship with Ophelia and Cordelia just because she thought he should only be friends with black or brown kids.

"He doesn't understand," said Alfre.

"He doesn't understand because he's right. It doesn't make sense, Alfre. I know you're worried that he'll marry a white girl, but what would be so bad about that? Don't we just want our son to be happy? Falling in love isn't easy, and if he falls in love with a white girl, so be it. The Baldwin girls are both nice girls. They're polite, well-mannered, good students. He could do a lot worse. The Jones girl and the two sisters down the street, what're their names?"

"The Petersons," she said quietly.

"Yes, the Peterson girls and the Jones girl are both black, and they're the most ill-behaved young girls I've ever seen. The oldest Peterson girl is just fourteen, and I saw her pulling her skirt up for the Madison boy."

"Not all black girls are like that," said Alfre, trying to defend her irrational thoughts with what she thought was logic.

“And not all white girls are evil, Alfre. You realize that what we’re doing is reverse racism, right? I wouldn’t have loved you any less if you’d been white. I would have moved heaven and earth to be your husband, no matter the color of your skin.”

“But I’m not white. You know why I don’t want this, Elijah. My father left my mother and all us kids because he got an itch for a white woman in the next town over. He left us, went and played house with her for a year. Then she dumped him for a rich white man.”

“That was one person, Alfre. One person, and it wasn’t only the white woman at fault. Your father had responsibility in this as well. You’re gonna push that boy away.”

Elijah stood, heading to the bathroom to shower after a long day outside. Their son was a good boy. Big, tall, strong, and smart. He’d make good decisions, even if they weren’t decisions his wife liked.

He knew she was still hurting over what her father had done. But the truth was, he left her mother because she nagged him to death. Constantly yelling at him about doing things around the house, making more money, cleaning up

after himself, taking care of the children, he couldn't stand it. The truth was Alfre's mother was lazy, and her father had enough.

Yes, the other woman was white, but that had little to do with their situation.

"Is everything okay, Moses?" asked Ophelia.

"Yea, everything is cool. I can play for a while longer," he said, smiling at the pretty girl. He didn't tell his mother, but he'd had a crush on Ophelia Baldwin since second grade. She was two years younger than him, but she was the prettiest girl in school.

She had long brown hair that was wild with corkscrew curls. Her sister had the same hair, just a few shades lighter. Her eyes were a bright blue, and he wasn't sure why he noticed it, but she had the prettiest mouth he'd ever seen.

After the incident with his mother, Moses made sure that he played with the Baldwin girls either in a big group or out of sight of his mother. Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin invited him for dinner a lot, and he always had to tell his parents he was going somewhere else. He hated lying to them, but he wasn't about to let them interfere in his one true friendship and, quite possibly, his one true love.

In middle school and high school, he wanted to ask Ophelia to every dance, every event, for any opportunity to spend time with her. But he knew his parents wouldn't approve. Instead, he chose not to go.

When he decided to join the Navy, he asked Ophelia to meet him by the swings at the old playground they used to go to.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he said, staring at her. She'd gotten taller and prettier than she was when they were young. Her hair was nearly to her waist, and her big blue eyes had tears in them.

"I know," she said, nodding. "Your mother told everyone at church, and my mother told me."

"I'm sorry you found out that way," he said, gently swinging back and forth. "My mother had no right to tell everyone. Will you write to me?"

"Do you want me to write?" she asked. He stopped the swing and turned to look at her.

"There's no one I'd rather have write letters to me than you. Maybe, maybe after you graduate, you could come and see me wherever I'm stationed."

“I’d love that,” she smiled. They were quiet for a long moment, the summer sun beating down on them. “Moses? Why didn’t you ever ask me out on a date?”

Moses’s head snapped up, and he stared at her.

“I wanted to,” he whispered. “Really, I did.”

“Why didn’t you?” she asked again.

“I guess...”

“Moses!” yelled his mother from the car window. He looked up to see her angry face and shook his head. He’d get a lecture tonight, but honestly, he didn’t care. He’d had alone time with Ophelia. “Time for dinner with the family.”

“I have to go, Phe. My whole family is coming over to say goodbye. Write to me. I promise I’ll write back.”

“I promise,” she smiled. “Moses? Be careful. I’ll be thinking about you.”

“I’ll think about you too,” he smiled.

“Moses!” yelled his mother again. He jogged toward the car, getting into the passenger seat. “How many times have I said you cannot have a relationship with that girl?”

“Mom, I love you, but I’m eighteen years old. I’m going into the Navy, and I will make my own life choices from here. You cannot tell me who to date, who to kiss, or who I can sleep with.”

Alfre gasped, staring at her son.

“I haven’t slept with anyone, Mom. But you can’t keep treating me like a six-year-old. I like Ophelia. She’s a good person, smart, fun, caring, and her family has been wonderful to me.”

His mother pulled the car into the driveway. Cousins, aunts, and grandparents were swarming the yard.

“You listen to me, Moses. If you choose to date that girl, don’t you come back to this house. You won’t be welcome in my home any longer if you want to play footsie with that white girl.”

“Well,” he said, swallowing hard, staring at his mother. “That’s a shame. I’ll have to make sure Dad knows how to reach me.”

Moses didn’t speak to his mother again the rest of the day. In the morning as he gathered his gear and walked to the car with his father, his mother stared at him from the kitchen.

“Take care of yourself,” she said calmly.

“I’ll be sure to do that,” he said.

The long ride to the airport was quiet. His father didn’t say much until they unloaded his bag at the curbside check-in.

“She just wants what’s best for you, Moses,” he said.

“She doesn’t know what’s best for me, Dad. She wants what’s best for her. She doesn’t want to have to look at me and see her father. I’ve known Ophelia my whole life, and in that entire time, I’ve never looked at another girl. Never dated anyone. She was the girl I wanted to date, and I didn’t, out of respect for you and Mom. But now, I’m a grown man, and I can date who I want, and I will. If that happens to be Ophelia, then so be it. I hope you’ll respect my decision. If you don’t, then that will make me sad, but it won’t change my mind about her.”

His father nodded, gripping his shoulders and hugging him tightly to his chest.

“Write and call when you can,” he said, looking up at his son. “I’ll tell Ophelia that you said goodbye.” He gave his son a wink and smiled.

“Thank you, Dad.”

It was weeks of training and then being deployed for months on end. He received letters from his parents weekly, but never once did he receive a letter from Ophelia. When he asked his parents about her, his mother was evasive. His father simply said he waved at her when she was going to and from school.

He didn't understand it. He thought they'd agreed that they both felt something, but maybe not. He tried calling her a few times, but she was always busy with activities at school or off visiting colleges.

Almost four years into the Navy, he made the choice to become a SEAL. He never thought he'd succeed, let alone end up on Chase Green's team.

He used his free time to finish college and get a degree in criminal justice. Although the women were plentiful, he never found one that could keep his attention for more than a few hours. Now, as a member of RP, he was exposed to the love express every single day. He tried to avoid Mama Irene, knowing that she was constantly thinking about an appropriate woman for him.

When they stormed the manufacturing site in Jakarta, he never expected to see the one woman that he couldn't get

out of his brain.

By the time they entered the building, there were seven dead men on the floor, and the women and children were huddled together, crying. Mo was trying to keep the children calm but also make sure there were no tangoes in the rafters or hidden in the side rooms.

“It’s alright,” said Tanner, trying every language he knew. “It’s alright. Get dressed. Hurry. Get dressed.” They ran toward their clothing, dressing as quickly as possible.

“Do you have homes? Families?” asked Max.

“Some of them do,” said a young woman stepping forward, speaking English. “Some were taken off the streets. Most of the women were tourists or working in low-paying jobs at bars and restaurants. They kidnapped all of us and made us work here.”

“Where did you sleep?” asked Tanner.

“There’s another warehouse walking distance from here. Every morning they woke us at five and then walked us back at seven. This is all of us for now, but I know they were going to get more soon. I heard them speaking about it.”

“You’re American,” said Tailor.

“Yes, sir,” she nodded. “I can take the children to an orphanage I know of, and they’ll find their families if they have them. They’re legit and will make sure they get home. The women can most likely find their own way.”

“We’ll get you all on buses,” said Max. “Robbie, Remy, Antoine, Jazz, you four take the women and get them to taxis, buses, whatever they want. Mo, Irish, and Bogey help this lady get the kids to the orphanage.” Mo pushed through the mountain of men in front of him, nodded at Max, then looked at the young woman.

“Ophelia?” he gasped.

“Moses? Moses Baird, is that you?” she cried. She wore a simple cotton shift, her panties and bra destroyed by the men who’d taken her. Slowly walking toward him, she fell into his arms, crying uncontrollably.

“Ophelia, what are you doing in Jakarta?” he asked, attempting to comfort her with awkward pats on the back and small hugs. He hadn’t seen her in more than a decade, so seeing her now, in this place, was beyond belief. He was hurt that she’d never answered his letters or calls.

“It’s a long story, Moses.” She pulled back, smiling up at him, her blue eyes filled with tears.

“It’s just Mo these days,” he grinned.

“I take it you two know one another,” grinned Max.

“Ophelia lived just two houses down from my folks in Pine Bluff,” said Mo. “Let me get you to safety, and then we can talk.”

After getting the children to the orphanage, calling parents who were in the area, and then the authorities, Mo and Ophelia headed toward the team’s hotel.

“I can’t believe I’ve found you after all these years,” he smirked. “How are your parents?”

“They’re gone now, Moses. I mean Mo. It’s a story for another time. And yours?”

“They’re retired and living in Florida now. I don’t talk to them much, at least not my mom.”

She nodded, not saying anything as he parked and took her up to the room. They sat awkwardly for a few moments, and just as Mo was about to ask her why she hadn’t written, the other men all entered.

When the men came into the room, Ophelia knew her moment to ask him was over.

“I can’t thank you all enough for getting us out of there,” she said, shaking her head.

“How did you end up here?” asked Antoine. “Sorry, my name is Antoine.”

“I was looking for my sister,” she said with a sad expression. “Valez DeSoto convinced her to take a job with him as his personal assistant. She was working for a major accounting firm in Malaysia. He walked in and asked her to dinner. Her boss convinced her it was a good idea.”

“Shit, I’m sorry,” said Tanner.

“She told me all about it, all about him. I did some research and found out he wasn’t what she thought. By then, she was already hooked on his drugs and willing to do whatever he wanted. I came here to find her.” Ophelia wasn’t telling the whole truth, but she wasn’t quite sure who all these men were yet.

“Did you?” asked Mo. “Did you find her?”

“Yes,” she said, swallowing, nodding her head. “She was in the morgue. They were getting ready to cremate her.”

“I’m so fucking sorry,” said Mo. She shook her head, her brown curly hair corkscrewed to her mid-back.

“Right now, I need a shower, and then I’m going after DeSoto,” she said.

“Wait, what?” screeched Mo.

“Ophelia, I don’t know you, honey,” said Max, “but DeSoto is not a man that you’re going to be able to take down alone. He’s a grade-A drug lord of the highest variety and doesn’t take kindly to Americans sticking their noses in his business.”

“I’m well aware of that,” she said, nodding her head. “I’m with Homeland Security. I’m hoping to get my boss to take this on.” Mo stared at the woman, then back at Max, a pleading look in his eyes.

“Fuck,” muttered Max. “Listen, if your boss won’t help you, call Mo. We’ll talk more after this is all over with.” Mo handed her a piece of paper with his phone number on it, then walked her to the door.

“Here’s your room key,” he said, handing her the card. “We arranged to have some clothes brought up for you. Let us know if you need anything else.”

“I’m good now,” she said, smiling. She kissed his cheek, squeezing his arm. “It’s so great to see you, Mo. You

look amazing. Don't be a stranger." The door shut, and Mo turned to see shit-eating grins on the faces of two dozen men.

"It's not like that," he frowned. "We never dated, not that I didn't want to."

"Well, it's not too late," said Antoine. "She didn't have a ring on that finger. Maybe this is your second chance." The others began talking, and Mo just stared at the door.

"Maybe."

CHAPTER TWO

Ophelia stared out her bedroom window, watching Moses cut the grass. His dark skin was glistening with sweat, his muscles moving effortlessly back and forth as he moved across the lawn. He was getting ready to leave in a few days, and she would miss him. She would miss him more than he could possibly know.

Friends since they were just little children, she'd always had a secret crush on him. But for some reason, he never even tried to kiss her. She'd tried flirting with him, tried getting him to notice her as more than just a friend, but nothing seemed to work. The good news was he wasn't dating anyone else.

"When are you just going to tell him how you feel?" said her sister behind her.

"It's not that easy, Cord. I don't even know if he likes me." She turned to stare out the window again. *Please let him like me. Please let him like me.*

"He likes you. You can see that. He doesn't ask any other girls out, and he never hangs out with them like he does with you. You need to let him know how you feel."

“Then why doesn’t he ask me out?” she said, looking at her sister.

“Personally, I think it’s his stuck-up mother,” said Cordelia. “His father at least waves at you and smiles. She doesn’t say two words to anyone.” Ophelia shrugged, watching as Moses finished the grass.

“He’s just so handsome, Cord. I mean, his body is beautiful.” Her sister smiled at her. “He’s smart. He’s athletic. He’s polite. He’s everything a girl would want.”

“You need to let him know how you feel before he leaves.” She kissed her sister’s forehead and left the room.

She’d tried to speak with Moses. Lord knows, she tried. Just seconds from professing her feelings to him, his mother interrupted as always. Watching him leave was the worst feeling in the world, but not hearing back from him was even more painful.

“Hi, Mrs. Baird,” she said, smiling at the woman through the screen door.

“Oh. Hello, Ophelia,” she said without a smile.

“I, uh, I was wondering if you’d heard from Moses. I mean, how is he doing?” she asked.

“He’s doing well. He’s finished his training and is being deployed.” Ophelia’s face fell, her stomach dropping, realizing that she wouldn’t be able to see him any time soon.

“Well, he asked that I write him when he left, but I don’t have an address. Would you mind sending my letter with yours?” she asked.

Alfre looked down at the letter, taking it from the young woman’s hand. She should have just told her no. She should have burned it.

“Of course,” she nodded.

“Thank you, Mrs. Baird. Have a wonderful day. If you ever need anything, any help with anything, just let me know.” Alfre gave a small smile to the young woman and nodded. Taking the letter, she thought of tossing it but instead opened it.

It seemed innocent enough, other than Ophelia telling her son that she cared deeply for him and she hoped he would return home safely. She shook her head. No. No, this could not get to her son. Instead, she ran it through the shredder in her husband’s office.

Fourteen letters. Fourteen times over a period of almost four years, that young woman walked across the street with a letter for her son. She didn't take hints very well, although, in fairness, Moses wasn't giving her the hint. She was.

When she realized that Moses might be sending letters to Ophelia, she convinced her mail carrier to notify her when she saw the letters. Thankfully, the women were longtime friends, and she would 'inadvertently' put the letters for Ophelia from Mo in Alfre's mailbox.

When Ophelia left for college and then decided to move to Washington, D.C., Alfre felt as though the possible crisis was done. She was wrong.



"Baldwin? I heard you're taking off for a few days," said her partner.

Jake McKenzie was tall, blonde, blue-eyed, and strikingly handsome. He was also gay, married, and the father to two little girls. He was a good man and an even better partner. He didn't care that she was a woman, and she didn't

care that he was gay. They were always in sync with one another.

“Yea, I’m headed to Jakarta to see if I can find my sister,” she said, shoving her laptop in the bag.

“Hey, that’s not a good idea,” he frowned. “Let me see if I can take some time off and come with you.”

“Jake, I love you for worrying about me. But I’m an agent just like you. I know what I’m doing, and I’m going to find my sister and bring her home. I know her place of employment, but she’s not been to work in a few weeks, and she’s not answering my calls. I just need to know that she’s okay. If I get into any trouble, I’ll call you.

“Honestly, I’m just pissed that Myers is forcing me to use my vacation to find her. I know this has something to do with DeSoto, but he doesn’t seem to care. I’ll be back soon.”

She kissed his cheek, waving as she left the office, heading toward Dulles. The flight was a brutal twenty-seven hours with one stopover. By the time she reached her hotel, she was exhausted, hungry, and smelled like fish and sweat. She showered, ordered room service, ate half of it, and crashed.

When she woke in the morning, she put on her tourist attire and headed out to find her sister. Her employer said she no longer worked for them, something about her not giving notice and not returning their calls. Her apartment said she hadn't been there in weeks, but they'd boxed up her things, and they were in the storage room in the basement. Becoming more and more concerned, she called hospitals and then morgues.

“That’s her,” she whispered, looking down at her sister.

Her once luxurious hair was cut above her ears, the color a dull brown. She was extremely thin, the needle marks on her arms telling Ophelia why. But Cordelia would have never taken drugs. It just wasn't in her DNA to do something so stupid.

“We were just getting ready to cremate her,” said the coroner. “She’s been here for three weeks, but we had no identification.” Ophelia nodded.

“Where was she found?”

“The police found her in a hostel on the other side of town. She wasn't wearing any clothing, and she had overdosed on heroin. There was nothing with her. No purse

or wallet, no ID. Nothing.” Ophelia nodded her head, staring down at her sister.

“Will you go ahead with the cremation, please? I’ll take her remains back home with me.”

“Of course,” said the man. “I’ll make sure all the paperwork is taken care of and notify you when you can pick up her remains.” Ophelia walked outside the morgue and looked at the police officer.

“Where is this man, Valez DeSoto?” she asked.

The officer only shook his head, pretending not to understand her. Ophelia went back to her sister’s office but found that her boss had suddenly decided to take a two-week vacation. Thinking all hope was lost, she was surprised when another woman stepped forward.

“She went out with that man because our boss made her,” said the woman. “He’s evil.”

“Do you know where I can find him?” asked Ophelia.

“Try down by the docks. He was working with another man, building a manufacturing plant.”

She should have known that the information came too easy, too fast. She didn’t get two hundred feet from the plant

when she was taken, stripped, and put in a see-through linen tunic. Each day she looked for a way out of the plant, and each day she was led back to the dormitory with the other women and children.

When the doors came crashing down and three men killed the guards with speed and accuracy, she knew they were going to be okay. She just never thought that one of her saviors would be the man that haunted her dreams.

When Moses handed her the key to her own room, she wanted to scream at him to join her. She wanted to yell, ‘meet me there later,’ but couldn’t muster the courage. He’d chosen to never return her letters. The letters filled with her most intimate thoughts and feelings. The letters expressing her love and devotion to him. The last one proclaimed, ‘I’ll wait for you forever.’

What a bunch of schoolgirl bullshit, she thought, chastising herself. With her sister’s ashes in hand and heading to the airport, she was surprised to find Moses in the lobby early the next morning.

“Ophelia, I just wanted to make sure you were okay,” he said, taking her hand.

“I’m fine, Mo. Listen, I have to go. You look great. I’m glad your life turned out the way you wanted. Don’t be a stranger.” She pulled her hand from his, knowing that if she didn’t, she might never be able to leave.

Walking away from Moses was the hardest thing she’d ever done. Looking back was the dumbest.

CHAPTER THREE

“Any word from your girl in Jakarta?” asked Antoine one morning at breakfast.

“She’s not my girl,” he frowned. He thought she was. Somewhere in his brain, he thought they would find one another again. But he was wrong.

“Sure looked like she was your girl,” smirked Tailor. “We told you, brother, don’t let that bullshit with your parents get in your head. You make the choices now. Not your folks. She works for Homeland. Call her and find out where she is.”

Mo quietly stood, excusing himself from the breakfast table. He’d had Pigsty get her information for him. Living and working in D.C., he couldn’t believe he hadn’t run into her somewhere in all the times he was there. Taking out his phone, he decided he’d call her office first.

“Agent McKenzie,” said the baritone voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry, maybe I have the wrong office. I’m looking for Ophelia Baldwin,” said Moses.

“Who is this?” asked the agent in a gruff tone.

“My name is Moses Baird. I’m an old friend.”

“Are you the guy she bumped into in Jakarta?” asked the man.

“Yea, that’s me,” he said, frowning into the phone.

“Hold on.” Mo could hear the man moving, then a door opening and closing. “Are you still there?”

“Yea, I’m here,” said Mo.

“Listen, I’m not supposed to tell anyone this, but Ophelia is missing. She told me about bumping into you, but she didn’t tell me your name. She and two other agents were sent to El Salvador to look for DeSoto. Communication stopped a few days ago, and we’ve been trying to find them since then. I’ve been trying to head that way, but my supervisor won’t approve it.”

“Where were they?” asked Mo. There was silence on the other end, and Mo wasn’t going to let anything stop him. “Listen to me. I’m a retired Navy SEAL, and I now work for REAPER-Patriots. I want to help. Where were they?”

“This is such a clusterfuck. I was supposed to go with her, but one of our kids was having her tonsils out. She was outside of Sesori, following a trail that she hoped would lead her to him.”

“Anything else?” asked Mo.

“No, nothing. There’s been zero communication for the last forty-eight hours. We heard a rumor that two agents were killed, but that hasn’t been verified.”

“I’ll find her, and when I do, I’m going to spank her ass so red she won’t be able to sit for a week.” He ended the call, and McKenzie stared at the phone.

“Lucky girl.”

Mo ran inside the cafeteria, searching for the faces of his friends. When he landed on Eric, he walked to the table.

“Eric, I need to go to El Salvador,” said Mo.

“El Salvador? What the fuck for?” he asked.

“My friend, the girl from Jakarta? That’s where she was headed with two other Homeland agents to find DeSoto, and no one has seen her since. I just need forty-eight hours.”

“We’ll send a few guys with you,” said Eric. Mo nodded as Eric stood, grabbing a few of the men. When his phone rang, Mo stared at the unfamiliar number, thinking he would ignore it, then thought it could be important.

“Yea?”

“Mo?” came the soft voice.

“Phe? Phe, is that you?” he asked.

“Yes, stop yelling,” she whispered. “Mo, I’m in trouble. DeSoto and his men took me, and I’ve gotten away, but I’m hiding in a little town, Carolina. A farmer and his wife are letting me use a shack to hide in, but I’m not sure how long it will be safe to stay here. Can you call someone and have them come and get me?”

“Don’t move,” said Mo. “Do not fucking move from that place. Send me your exact coordinates, and we’ll be there in a few hours.”

“O-okay. Thanks, Mo.”

“Of course,” he said, his voice softening.

“I’ve got quite a few guys out on small details right now,” said Eric. “Take Irish and Forrest, the new guy. He needs to get out and spread his wings, or he’s going to fucking blow. Watch him, but he should do fine.”

“Great. That was her. She was taken by DeSoto but escaped. She’s hiding out in Carolina.”

“The chopper is ready,” said Eric. “Evie will take you down and bring you back. Call if you need extra help. And

Moses? Try not to blow up the whole fucking country, and do your best to stay out of sight.”

The three men grabbed their gear, meeting Evie at the helipad and then heading southwest. Mo’s only thoughts were getting to Ophelia and holding her. He wanted to see her beautiful face, look into those incredible blue eyes, and just be with her one more time.

Evie circled the small area several times, then landed in a clearing with the stealth options engaged.

“I’ll be right here. Don’t be too long.”

Mo texted Ophelia that they’d arrived, and she waited until she heard them at the door before finally opening it.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, limping backwards.

Mo looked down to see the cuts and bruises on her body. Irish pushed him into the shack, nodding at Forrest to watch the door. Irish took the first-aid kit from his pack and pulled a stool toward the small table. He patted the top of the table, and she gave a weak smile, sitting down.

“Why didn’t you call me sooner?” he frowned, staring at the woman. She had lacerations on her legs and arms,

bruises on her neck.

“That’s your response to me? Why didn’t you call me sooner? In case you missed it, Mo, I wasn’t able to call sooner. I was being held against my will by DeSoto’s men. They got so drunk and high two nights ago I was able to get away. But clearly, I wasn’t having a fun time with them.”

“Okay, sorry. But answer the question. Why didn’t you call me sooner?” Irish just shook his head at his friend.

“Listen, Mo, I get that you were a big, badass SEAL, but I do have training. I’m an agent with Homeland, and I’m damn good at my job.”

“Apparently not,” he frowned.

“Mo,” murmured Irish, not even looking up at his friend.

“What? Fucking taken captive by DeSoto’s men! You’re fucking lucky they didn’t rape you or murder you! Don’t sit there and tell me you’re a professional. A professional doesn’t go into a place like that alone.”

“I wasn’t alone!” she yelled. Irish and Mo stared at the woman. “I wasn’t alone. There were two other agents with me. They killed them. The only reason I’m alive is one of

them said I was his wife, and we were there vacationing. But those men knew that they were American agents. They stuck me in a holding cell and enjoyed taking swipes at me.”

Mo walked toward her, Irish still wiping the cuts on her legs and dressing them. He was on a rickety, three-legged wooden stool that looked like it was going to collapse under his weight. She balanced on the top of a table in front of him. Mo sat on the table beside her, touching her hand.

“I’m sorry,” said Mo. “I just couldn’t stand the thought of something happening to you, and when your partner told me that you’d disappeared, it was too much.”

“Why? Why would you care?” she scoffed, trying to pull her hand away.

“Because we’re friends, Ophelia. We’ve been friends since we were kids. We went to school together, played together, grew up together, lived across the street from one another for years.”

“Have we?” Mo jerked back as if she’d slapped him. “Have we been friends? How have we been friends for years, Mo? I wrote dozens of letters to you after you enlisted, and you didn’t return one of them. I mean, I know I’m two years younger than you, but is that such a big deal?”

“Wait, what are you talking about?” asked Mo, looking at her with genuine confusion.

“Letters. I wrote dozens of letters to you professing my feelings for you. I didn’t have your address, so I gave them to your parents to mail. I stopped after about three years of not hearing from you. Your mom just said it was probably for the best.”

Mo let out a long slow breath, shaking his head.

“I didn’t know about the letters, Phe. My folks never sent them. The only time I was home on leave, you were in college and your folks were on vacation. I didn’t get to speak to anyone.”

She opened her mouth to give a smart reply, then realized what had happened. Ophelia nodded, giving him a smile. She knew that his mother never liked her but wasn’t sure why. She’d never done anything to the woman, but apparently, that didn’t matter.

“You called me Phe. I haven’t heard that in ages.” He looked at her, and she leaned forward, moving toward his lips. Irish cleared his throat, smiling up at them from his stool.

“Maybe save the mushy shit for when I’m out of the room.”

“Maybe look the other way,” grinned Mo. One big hand cupped her jaw, pulling her toward him. His lips melted into hers, tasting the saltiness of her tears. There was a big bruise along her cheekbone, and his thumb pad gently brushed over it. They never even heard Irish leave the room.

Mo stood, forcing himself between her legs as he pulled her closer to him. His hands gripped her waist, squeezing the firm, soft flesh beneath her t-shirt. He pulled back, staring down into her blue eyes.

“That was perfect,” she said with a tear.

“It was better than perfect,” he said, grinning at her. “I’m so sorry, Phe. My parents, mostly my mother, they didn’t want me to date white girls. I should have told you that sooner, but I was embarrassed. I think she took your letters, and most likely mine. I wrote to you as well.”

“Oh, wow,” she said, shaking her head. “I never thought she would do that. I wrote so many letters. I just wanted you to know that I would wait for you.”

“Damn glad to hear that,” he grinned. “Because I’ve been waiting for you.” He pulled her against his chest, taking her mouth once more. He felt her perfectly proportioned breasts press against his body and moaned into her mouth.

“Mo,” she said in a sexy moan. “Mo, I need you.”

“Me, too, baby, but not here. Let’s get us home.”

There was a pounding on the door, and Mo gripped the handle of his sidearm.

“When you two are done sucking face, Evie is ready to leave,” said Irish. Mo grinned, opening the door.

“Asshole. Phe, these are my teammates Irish and Forrest. This is Ophelia, although I call her Phe.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Forrest in a deep, guttural voice. She smiled, nodding at the man.

“We met in Jakarta for a hot minute,” said Irish. “Nice to see you again. Let’s get going.”

“Wait! The farmer and his wife. I want to thank them,” she said.

“All taken care of,” said Forrest. “We gave them a cash reward for finding our friend and told them they’d be safe.” She smiled, nodding at the other man. They jogged

back to the chopper, Mo getting her buckled in beside him.

When it took off, Irish focused on her wounds again.

“This cut looks infected,” he frowned. “Evie? Call home and have the medics ready.”

“Roger that,” she called back.

Mo held Ophelia against his body as she drifted off to sleep. Irish smiled at him, Forrest just staring like he always did. He knew part of the man’s story and understood why he showed so little emotion. When they landed, Doc and Cruz were ready.

Mo gently laid her on the stretcher as they took her into the clinic.

“She okay?” asked Eric.

“I think she will be, but we have two Homeland agents dead in El Salvador. We need to call her supervisor and let him know if they don’t already. I spoke to an Agent McKenzie, so maybe start with him. She said they were taken captive, and one of the agents told them she was his wife, innocent in everything.”

“Damn,” muttered Eric. “What did she find down there?”

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

CHAPTER FOUR

Mo sat in the small office inside the clinic, the door ajar as he dialed the number he rarely called. He was trying to control his temper, but he knew this wasn't going to end well. It felt like the ultimate betrayal of his mother. In truth, he was cursing himself as well for not reaching out to Phe sooner.

“Moses! It's great to hear from you, son,” said his father.

“Hi, Dad. Nice to hear your voice. Is Mom there?” he asked coldly. He heard his father move the phone closer to his mouth, then speak again.

“Yes, is everything okay?” asked Elijah.

“Put me on speaker, Dad. Everything is definitely not okay.”

“Okay. You're on speaker,” he said with some concern.

“Why, Mom? Why the fuck did you take her letters?” He was met with complete silence, nothing except soft breathing. “You intentionally intercepted dozens of letters

from Ophelia, knowing that I was waiting to hear from her.

Knowing that she was hoping to hear back from me.

“Did you think I would never find out? Did you? You interfered in my personal life. You intentionally hid private letters from Ophelia to me, and if I had to guess, you somehow intercepted my letters to her. This is the most deceitful, underhanded thing you could do to me. You thought you could fuck with my life!”

“Moses,” said his father quietly.

“No, don’t Moses me. I’m a grown fucking man, and you don’t get to tell me how to speak to a deceitful, evil woman. Did you know?” he asked his father.

“No. I didn’t know she took any letters from Ophelia, but I knew that she refused to give her your address.”

“Then you’re as guilty as she is. What did you do with my letters, Mom? How did she not get my letters?” Mo waited but didn’t hear anything except shuffling, most likely by his father.

“I’m not sure how your mother got them, Moses,” said his father. “But it looks as though she did take those as well.”

“I will never forgive either of you for the years we’ve lost because of you. Your little scam backfired, Mother. I ran into her recently under the worst possible circumstances. Ophelia and I are together, and no one will tear us apart now. No one.”

“Don’t bring that girl home,” said Alfre, suddenly finding her voice.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that. I won’t be coming home. Not now, not ever. And when the day comes that we have children, and we will have children, I will make sure that they know what their grandparents are.”

Mo ended the call, breathing heavily, his chest rising and falling from the anxiety and exertion, the emotion of the call. Standing in the doorway were Zulu, Tailor, and Eric.

“You okay?” asked Zulu with some concern.

“No. How the fuck does a parent do that to their only child? My father is as guilty as she is by not telling me that she wouldn’t give Ophelia my mailing address. All those letters, all the years of us being apart because of her racist views! Do you know how many times I ran to the mail, hoping, praying that there was a letter from her?”

“Did you write to her?” asked Tailor.

“Yes. And somehow, probably by bribing the mailman, my mother got those letters as well.”

“Don’t be too hard on her, Mo,” said Zulu. “My sister was kind of in the same boat. Her husband left her for another woman, who happened to be white. When I married Gabi, she cut me out of their life entirely. I was sad about it but prepared to let it just lie. Hell, Gabi sent birthday and Christmas cards and gifts for years to my nieces and nephews. I didn’t! She did! Still, my sister didn’t even acknowledge it.”

“People get hate in their hearts, and they can’t wash it out, Mo,” said Eric. “I was lucky that Trak saw me, the man I am, not the color of my skin. But then again, Trak is a different kind of man.”

“Lena didn’t have any family other than Ajei when we got married. But believe me, plenty of people stared at us like we were some sort of freak show. Grant has been through the same thing with Evie. Hell, think about what Doug and Miguel or Asia and Molly go through,” said Tailor.

“I know. I just never thought my mother would do this to me. I waited those first few years, praying that Phe would

send me a letter. Little did I know that she was writing them and giving them to my bitch of a mother.”

“She’s still your mama,” said Mama Irene, pushing through Eric, Tailor, and Zulu. “She made a mistake. A big one. But she’s still your mama. Don’t stoop to her level. One day, not today or tomorrow, but one day you’ll be ready to speak to her again and forgive her.”

“She won’t forgive me, Mama Irene. If I marry Phe, and believe me, I have every intention of marrying her. If I marry her, she won’t ever speak to me again.”

“Well, baby, that’s her loss,” she said, patting his cheek. “Come on. Doc is ready to speak with you now.”

“Thanks,” he said, nodding to the three men in front of him. “Sorry I lost my shit.”

“Brother, if ever there was a reason to lose your shit, it would be because of that woman,” smiled Tailor. Mo walked down the hall and then into the triage room, where Phe was lying on the stretcher. She was attached to an IV and was now clean and in a hospital gown.

“Is she okay?” he asked Doc.

“She’ll be fine. She was dehydrated, and Irish was right. One of the cuts was becoming infected, but we’ve taken care of that.”

“Did you give her something to sleep?” he asked, staring at her peaceful face.

“No, brother, she was just exhausted. She didn’t sleep much and finally felt safe enough to do so. They tried to get her hooked on their shit. She was able to fight them and break the needle. One more try and she would have been too exhausted to fight them off.”

Mo brushed back the wild curls around her face, shaking his head. So much time lost. So much of their lives spent apart.

“Mo?” He turned to see Pigsty. “I got her supervisor and her partner, McKenzie. The supervisor knew that the other two were dead. They were just trying to figure out where she was. Needless to say, her supervisor was a bit pissed that she called you and not him to come and get her, but Cam smoothed that one over. We got her leave for the next month until we figure this shit out.”

“Thanks, Pigsty,” said Mo, nodding. He turned, looking down at her face. Pulling the chair behind him closer,

he sat down, holding her hand.

“Mo, she’ll sleep for a while, brother,” said Cruz. “Get showered and changed, and come on back. By the time you do that, the IV will have run out, and she can go to your cottage. I won’t leave her alone.” Mo looked like he was going to argue, then thinking better of it, nodded.

“I’ll be back in twenty minutes,” he said.

“Mo, brother, it will take you twenty minutes to get to your cottage. I’m not going anywhere.” Cruz gripped the younger man’s shoulder, smiling at him as he nodded. He took off out the back doors, and the others all just grinned.

“He’s a big bastard,” smirked Zulu. “I mean, we’re all big, but he’s thick, muscular, tall, and wide. I’d hate to go one-on-one with him.” Eric nodded, frowning.

“Yea, but that’s exactly what DeSoto is going to do.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Mo took the fastest shower he'd ever taken in his entire life. He pulled on a pair of jeans, his boots, and a warm hoodie. Taking one of the ATVs, he went back to the clinic and found Phe awake, talking softly to Cruz.

“We’ve known one another since we were little,” she smiled. “I was in love with him the minute I saw him. It had nothing to do with the color of my skin or the color of his. He was always so nice to everyone. He was bigger than any kid in class and usually bigger than those two grades above him, but he never once abused that. He fought for the underdog. He fought the bullies and made them stay away.”

“He’s been a great teammate since he got here,” said Cruz. “He’s a helluva SEAL and knows how to handle himself.” She nodded, frowning.

“I used to worry about him so much. It broke my heart when I didn’t get any letters after giving mine to his mother.” Cruz nodded at her.

“Yea, I heard about that. I’m sure sorry she did that to y’all. He said he sent letters to you, and somehow, she got them out of your mailbox.”

“It doesn’t surprise me. I tried so hard to be nice to her. When I gave her that first letter, I told her that if she ever needed anything to call me. I would have loved for her to get to know me, the real me. I would have loved to develop a relationship with her, but she hated me from the moment she saw me.”

“What about your folks?” asked Cruz.

“My parents adored him!” she laughed. “My father thought he was one of the finest men he’d ever known. He used to say that Moses was an old soul at ten. He would say ‘that Baird boy is going places.’ When he announced that he was going into the Navy, my father thought that was the most honorable thing in the world. Then when we heard he’d become a SEAL, well, Dad gushed about him as much as Mr. Elijah did.”

“Your folks sound wonderful,” said Cruz.

“They were,” she frowned. Cruz stared at her. “Mom died about five years ago. Breast cancer. I think Dad just sort of gave up after that. Then Cordelia moved to Asia to work for that firm. I was in D.C., but I couldn’t get home very often. He went to sleep one night and just didn’t wake up.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” said Mo, coming into the room.

Cruz gave the man a grin, squeezing his shoulder.

“She’ll be ready to leave shortly. I’ll be back.”

“I’m so sorry, Phe. I had no idea about your folks.”

“It’s been a few years now,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s why I felt so strongly about finding Cordelia. She was all I had left.”

“You have me,” he whispered, taking her hand, and leaning forward on his elbows. “I know you didn’t think you did, but you do. I will never be able to apologize enough for what my mother did to us, but we both know that we’ve loved one another for a long time.”

“We haven’t seen each other in over a decade, Mo. We’ve changed,” she whispered.

“No. No, we haven’t. Time has moved on, but we haven’t changed. I’m still in love with the daredevil with the corkscrew curls who liked to hang upside down on the swing. I still see your face, and my stomach does flips. My love for you hasn’t changed, Phe.” She stared at his beautiful face, running her fingers across his lips.

“Do you know what my last letter said?” he smiled. She shook her head. “It said, ‘this will be the last time I attempt to reach you. If you get this, please just let me know you’re happy. But know this. I will never be happy until I have you by my side. As my wife. I will love you for a million years. Mo.’”

“Moses,” she said, pressing back the tears with the heel of her hand.

“I love you, baby. I should have defied my mother sooner, and I owe you an apology for that. But I won’t let another day slip by without you as mine.”

“I have a job, Mo. I work in D.C.,” she said.

“Transfer here. Hell, quit and come to work for us. Lots of couples work here at RP. I don’t care. If I have to, I’ll leave RP and move to D.C.”

“You would do that?” she asked, staring at him.

“I would do anything to be by you for the rest of my life.” Phe leaned forward, wrapping her arms around his neck, then kissing him. Her lips seared his skin, her tongue dancing playfully as his big hands lifted her onto his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing closer.

“I love you, Ophelia. I always have.”

“Mo, I love you, too,” she cried against his lips.

“When you two are done molesting one another,” grinned Cruz, “she can leave. Drink plenty of fluids over the next forty-eight hours, get a hot meal tonight, and plenty of rest.”

“I need to call D.C.,” she said, standing from Mo’s lap.

“Our team called to let them know you were safe,” said Cruz. “Your supervisor and partner were happy that you were safe, although your supervisor was a little peeved that you called us, not him. Cam negotiated a month’s leave for you.”

“Wow! Really? I can’t believe that. They never give leave. I tried to take leave to look for my sister, and my supervisor wouldn’t let me. I had to use my vacation days.” Cruz gave a quick glance at Mo, exchanging a silent message.

“There are some clothes over there. Mama Irene brought them up for you. It’s cold out, so wear the coat. Anything else, just have Mo call us. We have a full medical team on call twenty-four-seven.”

“Thank you, Cruz,” smiled Phe. “You guys have been amazing.” She grabbed the clothes and stepped inside the

bathroom to change. Cruz jerked his head for Mo to step into the hallway.

“Does it bother you that her boss wouldn’t give her time off to look for her sister?” asked Cruz.

“Damn right it does,” said Mo. “We’ll get her settled into the cottage and meet all of you for dinner. If she’s up for it, we can talk about what she found down there. I say it’s time we got rid of DeSoto.”

“Amen to that, brother. Amen to that.”

“I’m ready,” smiled Phe. She was dressed in tight blue jeans, a navy-blue turtleneck sweater, and worn cowboy boots. “I don’t know who your stylist is, but she’s got a job permanently with me.”

“All the women on the property have great taste. Years ago, we started a closet with all sizes of clothing, toiletries, just about anything you could imagine for the women and children we rescue,” said Cruz.

“How many people are here?” she asked timidly.

“Well, why don’t you wait and see for yourself at dinner,” smiled Mo. “Come on, let me show you our home.”

Phe smiled, nodding at him.

“Our home.”

CHAPTER SIX

It had turned bitterly cold just in the short time Phe had been in the clinic. The wind was whipping across the property, dropping temperatures quickly. The little bit of rain was turning to sleet, peppering the windshield like knives of ice.

Mo parked as close to his front door as he was able, then ran around to the other side and grabbed Ophelia and her new wardrobe. Stepping inside, she stared at the beautiful space, turning slowly. The fireplace was lit, warming the entire space to a toasty, comfortable temperature.

“Mo, this is beautiful,” she said softly. He smiled, nodding.

“It’s part of our pay. We all get a cottage, meals, great pay, everything. I was staying out at the island mansion with a few of the other single guys but just recently decided to move into a cottage.”

“Lucky for me,” she grinned.

Mo nodded, laughing, but in the back of his mind, he wondered if it wasn’t more of Belle Fleur’s magic. His

decision to take a cottage surprised him as well. It seemed he just woke up one morning and said, 'I want a cottage.'

"Do you have a house in D.C. or an apartment?" he asked.

"Oh, I couldn't afford a house. I've been renting since I arrived, and even that is killing me. Obviously, I didn't sign on to Homeland to be rich," she grinned. "I make a decent living, but my apartment is small. I keep saying I'm going to find something bigger, but, well, I just haven't."

"Maybe this was all perfect timing," he grinned, settling his hands on her hips. She looked up at him, her big blue eyes wide with love and adoration.

"You were always a beautiful young man, Moses, but you've grown into an unbelievably handsome man. You're taller, wider, more muscular. Everything about you is just... perfect." He laughed, kissing her nose.

"I'm not perfect, Phe. We all work hard here to maintain our physical fitness. Some of the seniors, the guys that started this place, are thirty years older than me and could kick my ass. We take pride in that, but as you know, it's for the job. Besides, you're more beautiful now than you were fifteen years ago."

“We’re just older,” she smiled. “Fuller.”

“I like fuller,” he grinned. “Everything about you is perfect, Phe. God, you’re so fucking beautiful.” He gripped her face, tasting her once again. Phe wrapped her arms around his waist, finally in the arms of the only man she’d ever loved.

“We should head to dinner,” he smiled.

“Can I ask you something?” she said bashfully.

“You can ask anything you like.”

“Have you ever been married? Engaged? I mean, do you currently have someone in your life?”

“Phe, sit down,” he said, pulling her toward the bar stool. She slid onto the stool and waited as he smiled down at her. “Ophelia Baldwin, there has never been a woman I pictured spending my life with except you. Did I have women in my life? Yep. Were they long-term? Nope. Never married. Never engaged. No children. I couldn’t marry someone that wasn’t even a fraction of the image of the woman I truly wanted.”

“Thank you, Mo,” she said, kissing him.

“Fair is fair,” he grinned. Ophelia nodded.

“Dated. Only one guy lasted more than three dates. We dated for about six months, and we both agreed it wasn’t going anywhere. No chemistry. Never engaged. Never married. My partner at Homeland is my once-a-week date.”

“Really?” frowned Mo. “How big is this guy?” Phe grinned at him.

“He’s big. Probably close to your size.”

“I see,” he frowned.

“Mo? He’s married. To a man. They have two beautiful children and are quite happy. He refers to me as his work-husband,” she laughed. Mo smirked, nodding.

“Sorry, that was my ugly side coming out.”

“No man has ever compared to you, Mo. I used to sit at my bedroom window and watch you mow the grass, take out the trash, rake the leaves. Anything to see your beautiful body without a shirt.”

“I know,” he laughed. “I took the shirt off for a reason.”

“I should have known,” she chuckled. “You were a beautiful boy, but nothing compares to the handsome man in

front of me. I'm sad we've lost so much time, but I'm so happy we've found one another."

"Me, too, babe," he said, kissing her again. "Let's go eat."

"Mo? I have to find DeSoto." He nodded, grabbing her hand.

"I knew you were gonna say that."

Pulling his coat on, he handed her a scarf to wrap around her neck. Stepping into the frigid air, they took the ATV to the cafeteria.

"There are so many cottages," she said, looking around. "They're beautiful. I think they're called Acadiana cottages, right?"

"Yea," he nodded. "This whole property is the family home of the Robicheauxs. They generously build these homes and provide a lot of the backing for RP. Mr. Robicheaux has made his fortune in oil and gas, but he's definitely not shy about sharing it with his family or those he believes need it."

"Robicheauxs? Like the Robicheaux Rangers?" she asked wide-eyed.

"That's them," he smiled. "How do you know them?"

“Everyone in D.C. knows them and RP. I guess I just never connected the two. I look forward to seeing all of this during the day.”

Mo stopped the ATV in front of the glass atrium of the cafeteria. The sleet was pelting the windows, making a distinctive sound. Racing toward the door, he opened it for Phe, and she stepped inside to the most amazing smells in the world.

“Oh, my God, is this heaven?” she whispered.

“Close,” laughed Mo. “This whole place is run by some of the most amazing people on earth. You met Mama Irene, but George and her run the cafeteria with the help of staff. The food is top-notch, like Michelin quality.”

“What is that smell?” she asked, inhaling.

“Hello, darlin’, I’m George,” said George, walking toward her. He gripped her shoulders, pulling her in for a hug. “I’m damn sorry to hear about your sister, sweetheart. You let me know if you need to talk.”

“Oh,” she choked. Suddenly she was in tears. George nodded at Mo as if he knew that’s what she needed. It seemed

George always knew what the women needed, even before their husbands.

“There, there now, child. It’s alright. We’ll make sure to figure all this out, and then we’ll get your sister a proper burial.”

“I’m s-sorry,” she said, pulling back, wiping her eyes. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“You’re tired. You’re hurt. You’ve been through it all,” he said, waving his hands. “You needed to let it out, and now you have. You sit, and I’ll have Mo bring you some of Mama Irene’s famous red beans and rice, andouille, cornbread, and some warm bread pudding with whiskey sauce. It’s just what the doctor ordered.”

“Thank you, George,” smiled Phe.

“I’ll be right back,” said Mo, kissing her temple. She took a seat at the long table and then noticed a few couples walking toward her, smiling.

“Hello,” said a beautiful woman with blonde hair. “I’m Brit. I’m married to Aiden, and this is Mila. She’s married to Bron.”

“Oh, hello. I don’t think we’ve met yet. I’m Ophelia, but Mo calls me Phe.”

“What do you want us to call you?” smirked Bron.

“Phe is fine,” she said, laughing, shaking her head.

“We grew up together, literally lived across the street from one another.”

“That’s so sweet,” said Mila. “Did you guys date?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head with a frown. “His mother didn’t approve of me. I was still in love with him, and I think he was in love with me too, but she destroyed our letters to one another when he went into the Navy.”

“That fucking sucks,” said Aiden. “Believe me. We all have our stories. My parents had it all, upper-crust New Englanders who stole from their friends and business accounts.”

“God, I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head.

“No need to be sorry,” smiled Brit. “I think Aiden’s point is we all have a story here, and we typically share. Don’t be overwhelmed by it. There are more than a hundred couples here and a dozen or so single people, plus the children. It’s a lot.”

“I never imagined so many people,” she said, looking around, suddenly realizing what a crowd there was. “We knew about RP at Homeland, and everyone spoke highly of you, but we didn’t know a lot about you.”

“That’s by design,” smiled Cam, walking toward them. “My name is Cameron Dougall, and I’m part of the leadership team.”

“Oh, it’s nice to meet you,” she said, extending her hand. He gave it a firm shake, then gave her a sly smile, nodding as he walked away.

“You might take that back after we meet in the morning.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

By the time they made it back to the cottage, Phe was exhausted. Mo puttered around the kitchen, making her a cup of hot tea. When he turned, she was sound asleep. He gently lifted her, placing her in the guest room. He covered her with the warm quilt and then kissed her forehead. Hopefully, she would sleep until morning.

Either way, Ophelia Baldwin was in his home, sleeping in his guest room, and if he had his way, she would be in his bed by tomorrow night and never leave it. That should piss his mother off.

Sitting at the bar, he opened his laptop and began searching for any information on DeSoto. In Mexico and Central America, he was seen by the government as a fine upstanding businessman, but the public had begged for his arrest multiple times. Each time, the unrest met with murders and disappearances of large numbers of people.

The U.S. had requested joint task forces to bring him to justice in the states, but the Mexican government refused, saying he was an honest businessman. DeSoto was clearly paying off the authorities.

Educated in the states, he attended the University of Texas and then got an MBA from Arizona State.

“Okay,” whispered Mo, “you’re educated, attended universities close to Mexico, probably for fast escape. But why? Why go to all that trouble for a formal education if you were just going to sell drugs and kill people?”

He started looking for all of the businesses owned by DeSoto. He certainly wasn’t trying to hide anything. Dozens of furniture manufacturers popped up all over Mexico and Central America. Three electronic component manufacturers in Asia and two garment manufacturing sites outside of Mexico City. He definitely wasn’t hiding where he was doing business.

The newspaper clippings showed him as a devoted husband who’d lost his beloved wife to a terrible accident. He was a loving father and son. Photos of him with his family were all over the front pages. Again, he wasn’t trying to hide anything. The civil unrest in the area was creating chaos with the government, police, and military. Yet nothing seemed to touch DeSoto.

“He’s going to run for office,” whispered Mo. “Shit. He’s going to run for the presidency of Mexico.”

Mo sent a long message with what he'd found and said they could discuss it more in the morning. He closed the laptop, turned up the heat, and checked on Phe. She was sound asleep, her soft breathing the cutest thing he'd ever heard.

In his own room, he pulled on warm pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, then reached to plug his phone in. When he heard the vibration of a message come through, he expected it to be one of the team. It wasn't.

Moses, your mother and I are sorry for what happened. We love you and only want what's best for you. We hope you're happy.

He was fuming as he typed his response.

Are you happy? You, Dad. Because you wrote this, not mom. Stop covering for her.

He laid the phone down and covered his eyes with his forearm. When he heard the vibration again, he let out a long slow breath.

I'm trying Moses. I do hope you're happy. Your mother will come around.

He didn't have the energy to respond, so he turned the phone off and rolled over, hoping to fall asleep. It didn't come easily. The last time he looked at the clock, it was 0150. When the alarm went off at 0500 for his run, he nearly made the decision to ditch it.

But that wasn't the RP way. Dressing in his warm running gear, he left a message for Phe and took off out the door to meet up with the team. Irish, Bogey, Chase, and Tanner smiled at him as Luke, Eric, Hex, and Cam came toward them.

"You're running with us today?" asked Bogey.

"Yep," said Eric. "Thought we could chat as we run, so don't do anything stupid like try to keep up with Trak and his group. They're not normal." Eric felt someone smack the back of his head and turned to see Trak, Nathan, Joseph, Clay, Cruz, and Hiro.

"I am normal, and so are they. If you weren't so much like your father, making your big feet slap against the earth, you'd pick up speed as well." Eric smirked, nodding.

"I have other skills," he laughed as the men took off. Their team began the slow jog around the edge of the property,

hoping to also get a gauge for the water levels since all the rain.

“We read what you sent last night,” said Cam. “We all think you’re right. Cortez is in disfavor with the military and police because of his cooperation with the U.S., Canada, and her allies. He’s doing all the things right, but that doesn’t mean the drug dealers of his country appreciate it.”

“There have been three attempts on his life,” said Hex. “For the last month, he’s been hiding in the presidential residence, not making any appearances at all. Unfortunately, that’s been giving DeSoto and his minions the opportunity to make a lot of noise.”

“Everything I read said that DeSoto was the devoted family man. If he’s a devoted family man, what the hell did he do with Phe’s sister?” asked Mo.

“You must not have read about his only son,” said Luke. “Martin DeSoto is thirty-five years old, has a master’s degree in chemistry, which I’m sure helps Daddy a whole lot. He’s never been married but is considered one of Mexico’s most eligible bachelors. I don’t think she was seeing Valez DeSoto. I think she was seeing his son.”

“That makes perfect sense,” said Mo.

“What do you know about the sister?” asked Hex.

“They looked a lot alike, except Ophelia has blue eyes, and Cordelia had green eyes. She was a bit shorter and a lot thinner, almost sickly thin. When they were kids, they were thick as thieves, but I’m not sure what happened as they grew up. They were both good students, funny, nice kids. But just like with Phe, I hadn’t seen Cordelia in fifteen years.”

“Her sister said she went to work for an accounting firm in Jakarta and that her boss convinced her to go on a date with DeSoto. I wonder if this accounting firm has some sort of tie to him,” said Eric.

“It’s definitely a possibility,” said Mo.

They slowed as they rounded the corner near the old sharecropper shacks. Adele and her team had been busy trying to rebuild them and preserve them for generations to come. They were a huge part of the history of Belle Fleur. Unfortunately, the water was coming dangerously close to the structures.

“Shit,” muttered Cam. “Call everyone in. We need sandbags immediately.”

Within twenty minutes, the ATVs were pulling up with dozens of sandbags in the back. It took the men two hours to place enough of them in front of the shacks to ensure that they didn't float away.

"I'll have to get with Grandpa and see if we can either build a levee here or add to the land," said Luke. "I know we don't want to lose these."

"We keep adding land, and we're going to own Mexico," grinned Hex.

"Maybe that's not a bad idea," smiled Mo. "Hey, wait. Maybe that's not a bad idea."

"What do you mean?" asked Gaspar.

"I mean, what if we put a team together to help Cortez win his election? We could do it under the radar. Maybe send some people down there to turn the tide with the people."

"It's not the people that we have to worry about," said Luke. "It's the military and police. We can't send a team down there to fight the entire government." Mo nodded. Luke was right.

"But," smirked Cam, "we can certainly create waves from a distance. Sort of an underground campaign to help

Cortez. We can ask Michael to reach out to him and find out how we can help. In the process, we try to find DeSoto and his son.”

“Ophelia thinks she’s going to go after DeSoto,” frowned Mo. “I can’t let her do that.”

“Mo, she’s a Homeland agent. She’s been trained with some of the best. She’s smart. She’s physically fit. She’s capable...”

“And she’s mine,” said Mo. “Mine. Just like Sophia Ann is yours, and Kate is Cam’s. None of you would be happy about this, and neither am I.”

“We get that, brother,” said Tanner, “but in our experience, if you attempt to stop her, she’ll only do it anyway. Find a way to make her a part of this. She has a right to find her sister’s killer.”

“Says the man with a pregnant wife who can’t go anywhere without him following her,” smirked Mo. The men all chuckled, nodding their heads. Chief stepped forward, gripping his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, brother. Your day will come.” Mo stared at the men as they walked away. He started to laugh,

then realized Chief was the father to quadruplets.

“Hey! Hey! That’s not funny!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ophelia woke to silence inside the cottage. Walking into the kitchen, she saw Mo's note and smiled. She started the coffee, then retreated to her room to shower and change her clothes. She'd been so exhausted the night before; she must have fallen asleep, not remembering how she got to the bedroom.

With another pair of donated jeans and a warm sweater on, she twisted her hair up in a topknot, the corkscrew curls escaping around her face. As a kid, she hated those curls. They were unruly, uncontrollable, and just a pain in the butt. As an adult, she'd learned to straighten them now and then and, more importantly, live with them.

Staring into the mirror, her bruises were starting to fade, but her pale skin only emphasized the blue eyes. She touched her throat, closing her eyes and thinking of Mo. She flushed just with the thought of his touch. Jolting as the doorbell rang, she walked into the living room and saw several women through the glass on the door.

"Hi," she said, smiling as she opened the door.

“Good morning,” smiled Erin. “The guys were on their run when they discovered that the water was rising near one of the historical parts of the property. They’re busy placing sandbags, so we thought we’d bring breakfast.” Sara held up a pan of cinnamon rolls while Lauren had a casserole in a long baking dish.

“Oh, you’ve become my best friends,” she laughed, waving them inside. “Breakfast is the one thing I have to have, or I get hangry.”

“Girl, I can’t miss any meals,” said Sara. “I’m a chef, and food is my love language. Thank God my husband loves my curves, or I’d be a lonely, curvy, not hungry woman.”

“You’re beautiful,” smiled Phe. “You all are. I can’t believe you have children my age.”

“See, that earns you a lot of extra points,” smiled Lena. “My husband is Tailor, and my son is Eric.” Phe opened her mouth in the form of an ‘O’ then closed it.

“Sorry, I just, I mean, they’re both so... large, and you’re so... not large.” The women all chuckled.

“Honey, you don’t have to tell me,” laughed Lena.

“He’s got a huge dong, too,” said Gabi. “So does Eric.” Phe nearly spit her coffee across the room, choking as she coughed.

“Gabi! Really?” said Lauren. “You’ll have to forgive her. She suffers from overactive say what’s on your mind disease.” Phe laughed, shaking her head.

“It’s okay,” she smiled. “My sister and I used to talk about sex and boys all the time. I really miss that. I miss her.”

“We know, honey,” said Mia, gripping her hand. “We’ll find the man that did this.”

“I want to be a part of it,” said Phe, taking a bite of the cinnamon roll. She moaned in satisfaction, rolling her eyes. “God, that might be better than sex.”

“That’s disappointing,” said Gabi. “With a man built like Mo, I expected fireworks, screaming, and moaning coming from the cottage.” Phe’s eyebrows raised in a questioning gesture.

“She does all the physicals,” said Lena. “Although I’m thinking we need to put someone else in charge of them. She enjoys it way too much.”

“Oh, my God, you guys are too much,” laughed Phe. “The truth is, I’ve never seen Mo naked. We didn’t date in high school, thanks to his mother, apparently. When he never got my letters while in the Navy, and I never got his, we thought we’d misread one another. Seeing him in Jakarta was a total accident. A happy one, but still, I can’t believe what a wonderful accident it was.”

“Ophelia, one thing you’ll learn here,” said Camille, “is that nothing is an accident or coincidence at Belle Fleur. We’re not sure how our mother does it, but every man and woman here has met the love of their life or rediscovered him or her, no matter where they were. Now, some people think my mother is a voodoo priestess. Others just think she’s a witch. But she always seems to have some sage advice about how to find love, where it is, or she just plain puts it in front of you.”

“But we all know the truth,” smiled Erin. “There’s just magic here. Including ghosts.” Phe looked up at the women with a disbelieving smirk.

“Ghosts?” she smiled.

“Hello,” said Claudette, then Martha.

“Oh, shit,” said Phe, scooting her chair back. “D-do you guys see them?”

“Yes,” smiled Marie. “Claudette and Martha are distant relatives of my father. They both died here on the property and have been kind enough to allow us to see them, hear them, and speak to them. They’ve been invaluable with finding the secrets of Belle Fleur, and I personally enjoy having long talks with them.”

“Holy shit,” muttered Phe.

“There are men as well,” said Camille. “Claudette is in a relationship with Tony, a young man who was part of our team and died protecting my sister, Rachelle, and my sister-in-law, Alexandra.”

“How sad,” frowned Phe, not taking her eyes off the specters. They all nodded.

“Martha has quite the romance happening with Nathan Redhawk, the grandfather of Trak.”

“He died here?” she asked.

“No, but we’re not sure why he’s able to be here. Hiro’s grandfather, Yori, is also here, and Grip, a former member of the team as well.”

“You can communicate with me?” she asked Martha. The woman nodded, smiling, and Claudette did the same. “Can you communicate with other ghosts?”

“I’m afraid not always, child,” said Martha. “Your sister passed in a land very far from here, and we don’t feel any connection to her.”

“Thank you for trying,” said Phe. She let out a long, slow breath. “Any other surprises I need to be aware of?”

“Oh, honey,” laughed Gabi, “this may take a while.”

It was more than an hour later when Mo walked in the door, smiling at the group of women. He was covered in mud and soaked to the skin.

“Well, I have to say this is the prettiest my cottage has ever looked,” he grinned. Erin stood, kissing Phe’s cheek.

“We’ll see you at lunch, honey.” She kissed Mo’s cheek and patted the other. “And you, handsome, that’s some girl you’ve got there. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know it,” he grinned. Each of the women kissed his cheek as they left, the last being Gabi. He gave her a fearful look, and she just laughed.

“Don’t worry. I didn’t give her measurements.” She walked out, the other women giggling as Mo shook his head.

“Dear God,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry. I should have warned you about her.” Phe laughed, shaking her head.

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’s fabulous! First of all, that hair and those eyes, holy cow! She couldn’t commit a crime if she wanted to. They’d find her in a heartbeat. Top all that with the fact that she’s a brilliant surgeon, and she says what’s on her mind. I love her!”

“She’s pretty special,” said Mo. “She just likes to talk a lot about sex and the size of, well, all the men.”

“Yes,” blushed Phe. “I learned about some of them.” Mo rolled his eyes, shaking his head. There was no controlling Gabi’s mouth, but her heart was always in the right place.

“You look beautiful and rested this morning,” he said, smiling at her. “Give me ten minutes to shower, and I’ll be ready for us to head over to the auditorium.” Phe nodded, watching as he walked down the hall, peeling off the wet shirt.

Nibbling on her lip, she wondered if she should be bold as the girls suggested or play it cool.

“No woman ever got what she wanted by playing it cool, Ophelia,” she whispered to herself.

His bedroom door was closed, but Ophelia undressed in her room and then walked into his. She could hear the shower running, his head beneath the hot spray when she entered the bathroom. Quietly, she slid in behind him, her hands resting at his waist.

“Phe,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

“It’s been a long time coming, Mo. I don’t want to wait any longer.”

He turned, lifting her, and slamming her against the wall as his stiff cock drilled into her. Phe gasped, the invasion more than her body had ever encountered before. Gripping his head, she covered his soft lips with her mouth, nibbling, tasting, devouring the man she’d dreamed of for more than two decades.

“Fuck, you feel good,” he moaned.

“God, so do you,” she cried. “Mo, you’re huge! Gabi wasn’t lying.” He laughed, shaking his head.

“I’m the right size for my body,” he smiled. “You, however, are fucking perfect. This ass is perfect.” He slapped

the cheek, driving into her again.

“These tits are perfect,” he said, squeezing one as she moaned against him.

“Your face is perfect. You are perfect,” he said, thrusting in again and again. He trailed kisses down her neck, tasting the salty-sweet perfume on her skin.

“Mo,” she cried out. “Mo!” He let her orgasm settle, then he pulled out, rubbing his cock until his cum spewed on her abdomen.

“That was close,” he said, breathing heavily. “I realized I wasn’t wearing a condom.” She nodded, smiling at him.

“I know, Mo. I’m on birth control, so we’re good for next time if you’re okay with bare. I’m clean and haven’t been with anyone in about two years.”

“I am more than okay with bare, babe. God, you feel so fucking good,” he moaned, rubbing his body against her. “I could stay like this all day, but there are two problems. One is that we’d be seriously wrinkled and out of hot water soon. Although I really don’t give a shit about hot water right now. I’d take a freezing cold lake as long as you were in my arms.

“But the second problem, and probably more pressing, is that the team will come looking for us sooner or later, and most of them aren’t shy about just walking in. No one is going to see my baby naked but me. No one.”

Phelicia laughed, kissing him again.

“I love you, Moses. I will love you for all time.”

CHAPTER NINE

Phe couldn't believe the number of people crammed into the auditorium. It wasn't just the men. There was an entire girl squad that she was praying she could be a part of. Hazel, Piper, Lucia, Evie, Kate, Addie, Tori, and Faith were all part of what they referred to as the girl squad team. She couldn't think of anything more badass.

Mo led her to a seat next to Hazel, Irish and Forrest seated behind her. While the men prepared for the meeting, Irish leaned over, smiling at Phe.

"We're glad you're here and okay, Phe," he said.

"Thank you, Irish," she smiled. "I appreciate both of you for helping me to get out of that hellhole. Thank you, Forrest." He nodded, a solemn look on his face. She stared at him thinking the name didn't suit the man.

"He's not much of a talker," smirked Irish.

"It's okay," she smiled. "Sometimes we don't need to talk, do we?" Forrest gave a half-smirk, shaking his head. There was something sad and sobering about the man, but also something that she liked.

“Are you feeling okay?” asked Irish.

“I’m great, thank you. I know you were on Mo’s SEAL team. What about you, Forrest?” He looked down at the woman, then toward Irish.

“Oh, Forrest’s team was different,” said Irish. Thankfully Cam motioned for everyone to give attention up front. On the screen were DeSoto and his son.

“This is Valez DeSoto and his only son, Martin. The intel that the CIA and Homeland have shared with us says that although Valez is a drug-dealing piece of shit, his son is the real psychopath.”

“A son,” whispered Phe. “I thought he had little children.”

“This is the only son we know of, the only child we know of,” said Hex, smiling at the young woman, “but he appears to be a problem child. We know that DeSoto is smuggling drugs out in furniture, and we know that he’s sending messages to the Chinese and Russians via the electronic components, but Martin is the real problem.”

“Real problem?” frowned Cruz. “We don’t think smuggling drugs and messages to our enemies is a problem?”

“That’s not what he meant, Cruz,” said Luke. “Martin is enslaving women and children to work in his father’s businesses. If he sees one that he wants, woman or child, he takes it. He’s surrounded himself with men that have a similar appetite.”

“I can attest to that,” said Phe. “I didn’t see the son, but the men that had me were as strung out on drugs as they attempted to make me. It’s why I was able to escape them.”

“But you never saw Martin or Valez?” asked Luke.

“No, never. We went down there with the intent of gathering information and finding DeSoto’s location. I was given intel from my supervisor, Greg Myers, that he was seen in this remote town. Two agents and I went down, pretending to be tourists.

“We overheard some people talking in a cantina one night that Señor DeSoto was in town, and he would be there for dinner. Brian Tucker and Tim Weathers were seasoned Homeland agents. They started with the bureau and then moved over. They knew what they were doing.

“DeSoto never arrived, but those men did. They dragged us out of there, beating Tucker to death in the street while the people just watched. Tim kept saying, don’t hurt my

wife, don't hurt my wife. They just laughed and shot him, dragging me away. I fought, but not so much that they would suspect what I was. Honestly, I was hoping they'd take me to DeSoto."

"Do you know how dangerous that was?" said Mo, staring at her. She looked at him and nodded.

"I know, Mo. But I'm trained like you. Well, not like you, but you know what I mean." He smirked but shook his head. "They tied me to a tree, but I was able to free one arm. I watched them shoot up, and then they were coming toward me, hoping to get me hooked as well. Whatever they were taking took hold fast. They were weaving and bobbing as they walked, not able to focus very well. I was able to get the needle from the one man and injected him with whatever was in it, then broke off the needle. The other two kept coming, but they were really out of it.

"When I got my other arm free, I kicked at them and fought until I was able to knock them out. I didn't realize until later that there was broken glass everywhere, which is how I got so cut up. Then when I ran, I was torn up by thorns and bushes. I didn't stop until I saw that farm. They knew I was in trouble but didn't ask anything, just pushing me toward the

shed. He had a cell phone, and that's when I was able to call you."

"Okay, so chances are pretty good that neither Valez or Martin never saw your face," said Eric.

"I don't think so," said Phe. "His men took me in Jakarta, and I was hoping to find my sister. Then in El Salvador, it was just his men again."

"But they were alive, and that means they could identify you," said Mo.

"I know where you're going with this," said Phe, "but I'm going to do this with you, whether you like it or not."

"Phe, we'll welcome your help," said Luke, "but we won't risk his men seeing your face again. If you go with us..."

"Luke," started Mo.

"I said, 'if' you go with us, your face will be covered at all times, and your hair needs to be tied up and hidden."

"I understand," she said, nodding.

"You'll be given a necklace and bracelet that will allow us to track you wherever you go," said Eric, nodding at Code. He stepped forward, handing the jewelry to the young

woman. “Don’t take them off. Ever. If you’re in danger, depress the button on the back, and we’ll immediately know that you’re in trouble. Once it’s depressed, we’ll be able to hear you as well. You won’t hear us unless you’re wearing comms, but we can hear you.”

“Okay,” she nodded, putting the bracelet on. She fumbled with the necklace, then felt someone behind her lock it in place. Turning, she smiled. “Thank you, Forrest.” He nodded, no expression on his face at all.

“Your supervisor believes you are on leave to mourn the death of your sister and to recover from losing two agents on the op,” said Luke. “We’re not going to tell him anything differently. If he knows you’re working this case with us, it could risk your career, Phe.”

“I know,” she nodded. “It doesn’t matter anymore. They should have come to find me sooner. That’s why I called Mo. I mean, I know that McKenzie was trying, but Myers wouldn’t send anyone else.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hex.

“They knew that we were in trouble. When we heard the people in the cantina say that DeSoto would be there, Tucker called the home office to say we were close. When

they didn't hear from me or one of the guys, they should have known there was a problem.”

Hex looked at the other leaders, frowning. Someone at Homeland might be feeding information to DeSoto.

“Your partner said he couldn't be there because one of the kids was having their tonsils removed, right?” asked Mo. She nodded. “Can we verify that?”

“I already did,” said Pigsty. “Ashley McKenzie had her tonsils removed and was in the hospital during the time of the incident.”

“Okay, so it helps to clear him,” said Mo.

“Wait, did you think that Jake had something to do with this?” asked Phe.

“We look at all possibilities, Phe,” said Cam. “It's been our experience that many of our own agents, brothers in arms, and others, have betrayed their country and us for a piece of the pie. We look at everyone.”

Phe nodded, frowning as she looked down at her clasped hands.

“Phe? Is there someone you think we should look into?” asked Hiro, staring at the young woman.

“I don’t know. I mean, I didn’t even think about it until you said something. Now, suddenly, everyone seems suspect to me. I was promoted to Senior Agent four months ago, above two male peers who had more time than me. They weren’t happy about it and joked that I was the token female promoted above more competent men.”

“They’re assholes,” growled Mo. Phe smiled at him, nodding.

“I know, but maybe they’re really angry assholes,” she replied.

“Make sure to give their names to Code and Sly,” said Cam. “Anyone else you can think of?”

“Cordelia’s ex-boyfriend,” said Phe. “He worked with her at the accounting firm in Pine Bluff. When they broke up, she said she had to get away, which is why she took the job in Jakarta. When she disappeared, he was the first person I called.”

“What did he say?” asked Cam.

“He said he hadn’t seen her in a few years, and things ended as well as could be expected with them, which I already knew. They were better friends than lovers. When I told him I

thought she was in danger, he said she should have never gone and should have never left Pine Bluff. I just thought it was sour grapes, but now I'm not so sure," she said, shaking her head.

"What's his name?" asked Hiro.

"Harry Furman."

"Okay, Phe, we'll take a look at some of these folks and see what we can come up with. Right now, why don't you head out to G.R.I.P. with Forrest, and we'll get you outfitted with our gear," said Luke.

"Sure," she said, standing. "Let's go, chatty Cathy." Forrest frowned at the young woman, looking at Mo, who only chuckled. He kissed her as she left with Forrest. The new guy was about to get baptized by a prize-winning interrogator.

"I'll see you at lunch, babe."

CHAPTER TEN

Forrest Panchek was about the quietest human Ophelia had ever met. And his name. It sounded like a made-up name and did not suit the man at all. He said nothing as they walked toward the dock. She followed obediently, never saying anything. When they reached the boat, he held out a hand to steady her as she got on the boat.

“So, Forrest, you never really answered me when I asked which division you were in,” said Phe. He looked at her and shook his head.

“No, I didn’t.” She nodded, realizing that he wasn’t going to offer anything up to her.

“Mo said that you were injured in the line of duty. Are you okay now?” she asked.

“As okay as I can be,” he said quietly.

“Listen, I’m sorry if I pried,” she said, reaching for his forearm. He stilled, not saying anything. “I didn’t mean to touch on something painful. I’m just a naturally curious person, and you were great when you rescued me with Irish and Mo. I’m really sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Ophelia. I’m still sensitive about everything.” He pulled up to the dock at G.R.I.P. and led her inside to the waiting team. “I’ll be on the boat waiting for you when you’re done.”

“Okay. Thank you, Forrest. I hope we can be friends,” she said, walking away.

He stared at the young woman and turned toward the water. The frigid wind was sweeping across the murky waters of the bayou. He felt a hand at his back and turned.

“You have to speak to someone sooner or later, Forrest,” said Doug. Forrest nodded. He saw Kegger walking toward him and knew the ‘I’ve been there’ speech was about to start.

“Don’t look so damned terrified,” he smirked. “I’m just gonna sit with you until Ophelia is done inside.” Kegger took a seat on the bench beneath the canopy. Matthew had built beautiful benches on the docks, covered for sun and rain protection. In the winter, clear vinyl could be attached by hooks to block the wind.

Kegger plopped back, stretching out his new prosthesis. The team had developed something that was

making his life a little more normal. That, combined with the pond, and he almost felt SEAL-worthy again.

Forrest frowned at the man, shaking his head. He took the seat beside him but said nothing. Forrest wasn't even his real name. Cam and Luke knew that, but no one else. Hell, Pork's real name was Forrest, so sooner or later, he was going to have to tell them who he really was. For now, only Cam and Luke knew.

Silence stretched between them as the clock ticked by. Unable to contain his curiosity, he turned to Kegger.

"How did you lose the leg?" he asked.

"Annie's father," smirked Kegger. "Bastard was my team lead at the time. Called in a strike. While I was checking out the vehicle, he called the strike on. Blew my leg off and had to put a steel plate in my head."

"Fuck, I'm sorry about that," said Forrest.

"Can't do anything about it now. Doug and the team made a bionic leg for me," he chuckled. "Feeling better than I have in years."

"Yea, well, there's no bionic leg for me," he frowned. Kegger just nodded. They sat again for what seemed an

eternity, Forrest not saying anything. Kegger gripped the younger man's arm, feeling the steely fibers flex beneath his fingers.

“You're surrounded by people that can help, son. Don't lose this chance.” Kegger stood and walked back inside G.R.I.P., leaving Forrest to his thoughts. As the big steel doors opened and then closed behind Kegger, he stared at the black steel. When the doors closed tight, he finally spoke.

“It's Ethan,” he whispered. “My name is Ethan Dunvegan.”



“Phe! It's great to see you,” said Sophia Ann. “I guess you're out here to get your equipment.”

“Yes, they said I should see all of you for the things I might need.” She looked behind her, frowning at the sullen man she left on the dock.

“Is something wrong?” asked Sophia Ann.

“No, not really. Just what's with that guy? Forrest. He barely said a word to me.” Sophia Ann nodded, smiling at the other woman.

“We have a lot of men here who have been through more than you or I can possibly imagine. Forrest is one of those men,” said Sophia Ann. “We don’t pry. We don’t push. He’ll tell someone his story in due time. Right now, he’s one of the best men we have here. He does whatever we ask, whenever we ask, and goes above and beyond. He’s insanely strong and has helped on a few occasions with materials we needed moved or put in place. Don’t push him, Phe. He’s been through a lot. We just don’t know what that is yet.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right,” said Phe.

“No need to be sorry. Our facility is unique in that we have so many men and women who have had trauma in their lives. With the right coaching and therapy, they can overcome it, but we all have to be patient and realize that they will do it in their own time.”

“Of course,” nodded Phe.

“Okay, let’s get to the fun stuff.” Sophia Ann pulled back a black tarp, revealing several handguns, knives, and communication devices. Phe picked them up, tested them in her hands, and chose the ones that fit her best. When they were done, she was fitted with a stealth vest and a backpack that would hold all of her gear.

“This is great!” she smiled. “I had to beg and plead for new equipment at Homeland.”

“Which is surprising,” said Sophia Ann, “since we provide most of their equipment. They probably save it for the guys sitting at the desks. Let us know if you need anything else.”

“Thank you, Sophia Ann. Not just for the equipment but also for the talk about Forrest. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem, sweetie. See you later!” She waved at the woman and made her way back toward the dock. Her big, silent protector was still sitting there.

“Thank you for waiting,” she said, walking toward him. “I’m ready now.” He nodded, standing to help her onto the boat.

“I’m sorry about earlier, Ophelia,” he said quietly. “I’m just not much of a talker.” She nodded, smiling at him.

“And I talk too much. No apologies necessary.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“We had a long conversation with President Bodwick,” said Luke. He smiled, shaking his head. “I still have trouble saying that, but I’m damn glad I can. Anyway, he said that DeSoto has made his intentions known to run for Mexico’s presidency. As we suspected, there hasn’t been a U.S. strike on his compounds, simply because the Mexican and Central American governments all see him as some sort of Robin Hood.”

“So, drugging their citizens, kidnapping their women and children is something that Robin Hood would do?” frowned Eric. He shook his head, holding up a hand to indicate that the question was rhetorical. “Never mind. Kids, man. He’s using fucking kids.”

Gabi knocked on the doorframe, entering the room as they waved her in.

“Hey, Gabi, what’s up?” asked Luke. Her usual bright smile and mischievous expression was replaced with sadness and anger. It made all of them feel concerned for Gabi, so much so that Luke sent a message.

“Luke, I just a call from the daughter of a friend of mine who’s a surgeon in McAllen, Texas. She called me because she knew that my husband worked in security.”

“I don’t understand,” said Luke.

“She just operated on an eight-year-old little girl who’d recently had an abdominal surgery in Mexico. Her mother said that she took her in for a belly ache, she thought from eating too much candy. The doctor said she had a tumor, but they had a generous benefactor who would pay for the surgery. When the surgery was done, the mother was told to take her to a specialist in McAllen. Except the little girl was in a lot of pain, and the mother took her to the emergency room.

“My friend said at first she thought it was a wound infection or bad operation. When she opened up the child, she found five balloons of cocaine in her belly. One had burst.”

“Fucking hell,” muttered Eric.

“Before she died,” said Gabi, looking down, then looking up at the men in front of her, “she said that her friends had died before crossing the border. Six friends. All had surgery like her, all generously paid for by Señor Martin DeSoto. Her mother was told she had a tumor but never told

what kind, only that they needed to operate immediately and send her to a clinic in McAllen. She never made it to the clinic. Instead, as I said, she went to the ER where my friend saw her.”

“She’s in danger now, Gabi. Your friend is now smack dab in the middle of this bullshit. We need to send someone for her and get her back here for a while,” said Luke. Gabi nodded.

“I told her that’s what you would say. She said she would cooperate. I know she’s terrified. When she finished her residency, I told her McAllen was a dangerous place to be, but she wanted trauma room experience. Her mother nearly died when a patient in the ER stabbed her. She’ll come.

“This is how they’re doing it now, Luke. They’re putting balloons of drugs in the bellies of children, promising their parents better lives across the border. Any parent would think it’s okay because it’s a better life.” Luke nodded, looking at Eric.

“What’s your friend’s name?” asked Eric.

“Dr. Lucinda Harwell. I told her I’d let her know who we send for her.” Eric nodded again.

“What about the little girl’s mother?” asked Eric.

“I don’t know. I don’t think Lucinda knew what happened to her. When the little girl died, the mother disappeared.” Eric nodded, then yelled for Irish.

“Yea, boss?” he grinned, coming around the corner.

“Don’t be an ass. I’m not your boss. Well, I am, but... never mind. Listen, I need you to take full gear and one of the new cars that Melanie just finished. It’s bullet-proof, has weaponry, tracking, everything.”

“What the fuck am I doing?” frowned Irish.

“You’re going to McAllen, Texas, to pick up a surgeon who’s found herself in the middle of this bullshit with the DeSotos. She just operated on a little girl that had a belly full of drugs and died. The drugs were turned over to the DEA, but DeSoto or his men will come for her sooner or later.”

“Fuck, give me an easy one, eh?”

“It’s about a ten-hour drive, Irish. I need you to do it non-stop. Too many men will be suspicious. Just walk in, pretend you’re seeing a patient, and get the fuck out of there,” said Luke.

“No worries. I’ll get my gear and head that way now. Tell your doctor friend I’ll be the good-looking guy with the red hair.” Gabi tried to smile but just couldn’t muster it.

“You okay, Gabi?” asked Luke. She shook her head, staring at the young men that were her sons’ best friends.

“She was a baby, Luke. Eight-years-old. They took that little girl’s body and used it as if it meant nothing. They filled her with drugs, knowing it would kill her, but their drugs would survive. They didn’t care.”

“It meant nothing to them, Gabi. You know how this works. It’s why we do this.” She shook her head again.

“It doesn’t mean I have to get used to it. You guys ever wonder why I joke about your bodies? Everyone’s bodies? Because if I didn’t, I’d cry. If I didn’t find something to laugh about, I’d sob because of the bullet wounds and stabbings, the sexual abuse and beatings. I’m sick of the meanness. I’m sick of it all.” She felt a presence behind her and turned to see Tiger and Wade. She smirked at Luke. “Tattletale.”

“They were worried about you, Mom. Dad is on an assignment today. Are you okay?” asked Tiger.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t think I am. Can you guys take me to Ashley, Rachelle, and Bree? I need to talk some things through.”

“Gabi? Take a break for a while. Don’t see any more cases at the clinic for now. Maybe focus on how we can help Forrest,” said Luke. She nodded.

“Thank you, and I’m sorry,” she said, taking her sons’ hands. Luke, Eric, and Cam watched as she walked down the hall with her sons. For a moment, she looked old.

“That fucking scares me more than drug dealers, abusers, terrorists, or any other form of bad guy. Gabi breaking down tells me that we all need a break,” said Luke.

“We keep talking about this,” said Eric, “and every time we try to take a break, something else comes along. We think we need more men, so we add more men, and we get more cases. It’s never-ending.”

“When you find a solution, let me know,” said Nine, standing in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest. “We’ve been battling this for more than thirty years. It doesn’t end. When you’re the best, they call on you all the time. It’s hard to say no, but we do have to find ways to take breaks. Big breaks and give our people some rest.”

“We ran into Gabi on her way to the clinic,” said Gaspar. “Fucking scariest shit I’ve seen in two decades. She’s really struggling with this one. Maybe we send her and Zulu on vacation for a few days, even if it’s a staycation.”

“I agree,” said Cam. “We’ll talk to Zulu when he gets back.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mo and Phe took a moment to enjoy the evening meal with their friends. Laughter filled the cafeteria, even Gabi laughing with her husband and sons with their families. It was good to see and good to hear. She told Mo about going out to G.R.I.P. and getting her new gear. He nodded, unsure if he should be happy about that or bothered by it.

In truth, he was a little of both.

When George, Hannu, and Jake wheeled out huge carts with plain white plates on them, they all stared at the three men, then watched as Ashley, Calla, Rachelle, Bree, Wilson, Doc, and Cruz walked toward the plates.

“Can we have everyone’s attention, please?” called Wilson. Everyone turned to stare at the group. “Tonight, dinner will include a group therapy session. No jokes. No hidden messages. No hidden agenda. We all need to get a few things off our chests.”

“We are all overwhelmed every single day with what we see, what we do, what we hear,” said Bree. “Although we encourage all of you to come in for monthly chats, if not more

frequent visits to the counseling team, sometimes it doesn't happen."

"So," said Gabi, standing and stepping forward, "tonight I'm going to begin this exercise. No jokes about penises. No inappropriate outbursts." The serious expression on her face had everyone concerned, standing to form a huge circle around the carts full of plates.

"Earlier today, I had a call from a colleague about an eight-year-old girl who was filled with balloons of drugs and died." She stopped, swallowing, and shaking her head. "I'm sick of it. I'm sick of the evil and the hate and the abuse. I'm sick of it!" she screamed. She grabbed a plate, smashing it to the floor. Letting out a long, slow breath, Bree smiled at her friend, nodding. She picked up another and smashed it against the floor.

"God, that felt good," she said, shaking her head.

"I'm next," said Wilson. He grabbed two plates, holding them high above his head. "For all the abused children I've seen over the years. The ones I've saved and the ones I couldn't. I hate this!" The plates came crashing to the floor, shards flying in every direction.

“My turn,” said Faith. Picking up a plate, she held it above her head. “For all the ones we lose. I hate this!”

One after another, the team stepped forward as a part of the exercise. Some things were repeated, others were different, but each plate smashed was representative of letting the stress go. Mama Irene stepped forward, grabbed a plate and held it above her tiny white head.

“For all the pain this world causes my babies. I hate this!” She smashed the plate, a tear trickling down her face as Matthew stepped forward.

“For the pain this world causes my wife. I hate this!” He smashed his plate, then hugged Irene to his body, kissing the top of her head.

Ashley and Bree looked around the group, making sure that everyone had a chance to break a plate. Irish wasn't there, Dom, Callan, and Bron on a job, as well as Baptiste and Antoine.

Then she spotted the one left. Forrest. He stared at the group, unsure of what to do. He didn't want to say anything. He didn't want to do this stupid exercise. He wasn't ready.

“You don’t have to do this,” said Gabi empathetically. “It’s not a mandatory thing. We did it hoping it would make people feel better. It helped me. Maybe it will help you.” Gabi handed him a plate, and he nodded, standing in front of the silver-haired, translucent-eyed woman. He was big. Much bigger than she was. He took the plate and walked to the center of the circle, holding it above his head.

“I-I hate it all,” he whispered. The team watched him carefully. “I hate it all!” He smashed the plate, then reached for another.

“I hate it all!” Another plate smashed. “I hate it all!” Tears streaming down his face, he shook his head as Gabi, Phe, and Bree stepped forward. They touched his arms, grabbed his hand as he sobbed. Gabi hugged the young man, the same age as her sons.

“It’s alright, Forrest. It’s alright,” she whispered. “I’m going to help you. I’m going to figure this out.” Ophelia was hugging his waist, Bree gripping his hand. Cam stepped forward, touching his shoulder, giving an approving, brotherly love gaze. Forrest nodded, turning to the room.

“My name is Ethan. Ethan Dunvegan.”

“Holy fuck,” muttered Bogey.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” said Mo.

“I’ll be damned,” said Nine. He walked toward the young man, pulling him for a fatherly, brotherly hug. He slapped his back, gripping the back of his head. “Fucking glad you’re alive, Ethan.”

“I’m not sure I am,” said the young man, crying. Trak stood in front of Ethan, looking at the sadness and pain in his eyes. He placed his hands on the side of his face, kissing his forehead.

“Naabaahii,” said Trak. Nathan smiled at the man.

“He said...”

“I know,” said Ethan. “Warrior.” Nathan frowned, staring at his father, then back at Ethan. He didn’t appear to be Navajo, but he apparently knew the language.

Luke stepped into the circle and turned toward the men and women in the room. He slowly turned, knowing that most of the men knew exactly who Ethan Dunvegan was. Others did not.

“You all know that we come from the Special Forces community. We are SEALs, Rangers, Delta, Green Berets, Coasties, CIA, FBI, Homeland. We are the best the

government has to offer. There is only one better. Only one who is all.” The men all stared at Ethan, the women frowning.

“Ethan has been trained and passed all. He is a SEAL, Ranger, Delta, and Green Beret. These last five years, he was a lone wolf sent into countries to destroy or kill their leaders. By himself. His story is not mine to tell. We will respect his right to hold that close to his chest until he is ready. We allowed him to come under an assumed name because he needs us. And we need him.

“We are going to give him time to heal, and hopefully, Gabi and Riley can help him. In the meantime, respect his privacy, respect his need to be hidden, and for fuck’s sake, just respect the man.” Ethan stared at his friend, shaking his head.

“I don’t deserve that,” he said. “I’ve been a reclusive ass since coming here. I’m sorry.”

“Brother, we all have our demons,” said Mac, stepping forward. “We’re here for you, no matter what.” Mac grabbed another plate, then handed one to Ethan. Turning, he encouraged everyone to reach for one more plate until they were gone.

“For all of us,” said Mac. Plates shattered to the floor as the team yelled.

“We hate this!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ophelia and Mo were curled up together on the sofa, watching a documentary on TV. She pushed back, looking up at Mo.

“What happened to him?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, babe. Besides, it’s not my story. He needs to tell it when he’s ready and not before. I won’t betray him like that.”

“And I admire you for that,” she said, kissing him. “I didn’t want you to betray him. It’s as if I can feel how much pain he’s in, and it hurts my heart for him.” Mo nodded.

“We’re still working on how to handle DeSoto and his son,” said Mo, desperately wanting to change the subject. “I just want you to know we’re not leaving you out of it, but we haven’t figured everything out yet. Irish went to McAllen to pick up the doctor that worked on that little girl.”

“That must have been awful to see,” said Phe. “While you guys were busy today, I finally got through to Harry, Cordelia’s ex-boyfriend. He said they ended on an agreeable note. They both knew it wasn’t going anywhere, but he just didn’t want it to end. But he did say that she went to work for

the firm in Jakarta because of something that happened at the firm in Arkansas.”

“I’m not going to like this, am I?”

“Well,” smiled Phe, “maybe. Most likely not. Harry said that the firm she was with in Pine Bluff had a few global clients. Not many, but a few. Mostly small businesses that were exporting goods. He said she came home one night and said something was wrong with the paper trail for a vendor that led to SV Industries.”

“Damn. I knew I wouldn’t like this,” frowned Mo. “Let me call a few of the guys over. Hold that thought.”

Within fifteen minutes, their cottage was filled with team members waiting to get caught up.

“So, she found something with her firm in Pine Bluff that was related to SVI?” asked Tanner.

“Yes. He said she wouldn’t let it go and kept digging. She took two weeks leave, telling him she wanted time away for a holiday.”

“Let me guess. She went to Jakarta?” asked Luke.

“No. She went to Mexico City,” said Phe. Groans and moans filled the air, heads shaking. “He said she came back,

and they decided to end their relationship. They were still friendly and spoke frequently. A few weeks later, she called him and said she'd taken a job with the firm in Jakarta."

"How did he react to that?" asked Mo.

"He was worried. He said he tried to get her to reconsider, but she kept saying it was something she had to do."

"She found something important," said Luke.

"Something that linked SVI, DeSoto, and the accounting firm in Jakarta. We need to find out what she saw."

"I don't understand why she wouldn't have called me," said Phe. "We weren't terribly close these last few years, but we called each other at least once a month." Hiro cleared his throat, stepping into the middle of the room.

"I appreciate the warnings lately," smirked Cam.

"You're saving my heart."

"You're welcome," he grinned. "I think I might have found something that would have prevented your sister from calling you. Greg Myers."

"That was, is, my supervisor at Homeland. What about him?" she asked with concern.

“He made three trips to Jakarta in the last nine months. Two of those had photographs of him with DeSoto and Vonn. The last one, he accepted a check for eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“I don’t understand. Are you telling me my boss was in on all of this?” Ophelia’s face blanched, staring at the other man as if he had three heads.

“I’m telling you that he was in bed with DeSoto and Vonn. They were paying him. There were other checks, but I think this is the one that triggered your sister because it was boldly made out directly to him. I can see other large deposits, just not with direct checks.”

“So,” she said, swallowing with a whisper, “my sister saw that my boss was getting paid by these men and thought she’d protect me?”

“I’m not sure,” said Hiro, “but she obviously thought it would be dangerous to bring you into the mix. I’m going to guess that they figured out who she was.”

“Damn. My photo.”

“What photo?” asked Mo.

“On my desk, I have this photo that Cordelia and I took about two years ago. Greg stopped by my desk a few weeks back. He was sitting on the corner and turned and picked up the photo. He just stared at it for a minute, and I said, ‘oh, that’s me and my sister.’ God, I was so stupid.”

“He probably thought she was with some sort of agency as well,” said Cam. “It’s not your fault. Most likely just a stroke of bad fucking luck that he saw her in Jakarta and knew who she was.”

“He helped to kill my sister,” she said, shaking her head. She picked up her phone, dialing a number.

“What are you doing?” asked Mo, reaching for her phone. She pulled it out of his reach, and the others all stared at her.

“McKenzie,” said the voice.

“Jake, it’s Ophelia.”

“Hey, how the hell are you? We’ve been worried sick about you.”

“I’m okay. Recovering with some friends for a few weeks.”

“Yea, Myers was fucking pissed about that. He said you went around Homeland by calling in your friend to come and get you. I have to be honest, Ophelia. I spoke to him and gave him some information about what you were doing down there. Myers found out, and I’m on administrative leave now.”

“Where is he?” asked Phe.

“I wish I knew,” said Jake. “I’ve been trying to get a meeting with him for days now, but he’s dodging my calls. I called the information desk, and they said he hadn’t been in for a few days. Do you know something I don’t?”

“Maybe,” said Phe. “Listen, Jake, my friend that you spoke with is here with me, listening to our conversation. We think Myers might be involved in all the shit that happened with SV Industries and may be involved with Valez DeSoto.” They heard a slow whistle and several profanities.

“Man, you don’t mess around, do you, Ophelia?”

“Jake, I need you to watch your back. Stay away from the office for as long as you can. If you hear from Myers, find a way to let me know. I think he gave away my sister to Vonn and DeSoto.”

“Damn, Ophelia. I’m sorry, honey.” They heard a crash in the background and then crying. “Shit. I have to go. Ben’s working late tonight, and the kids are slightly overactive.”

“No worries. Take care, Jake.” She hung up the phone, frowning at the floor. “I don’t like this at all. Jake is a good man, and he’s got a husband and two kids to worry about. If Myers is playing both sides, he knows that and might use him to find me.”

“We’ll send two men out to watch his place,” said Hex. “Mac? Clay? Feel like a little light duty?”

“Sounds like fun,” said Mac, leaving the team.

“This is the worst part of the job,” said Ophelia. “Never knowing who to trust. We hear it all the time, especially in the bureau and the agency. People complain about not trusting those they work with. I hate that it’s crept into Homeland as well.”

“What would Myers have to gain by teaming up with DeSoto other than money?” asked Luke.

“I’m not sure,” said Phe, shaking her head.

“I have a thought,” said Ethan from the back of the room. Most of them didn’t even know he was there.

“Please, brother, enlighten us,” smiled Luke.

“Maybe he’s hoping for a high-ranking position with the Mexican government if DeSoto is in office.”

“Huh,” said Cam. “That might be true. He wouldn’t have to wait until someone dies or retires at Homeland. He could become director of an agency down there now. Fucking stellar thought, Ethan.” The man nodded but didn’t smile or show any signs of emotion.

“Ophelia, we can’t send you down there. Not right now. We will, however, send down a team to El Salvador and see what we can find out about the younger DeSoto. I’ll send a few men to Mexico City to check on the older one and see what he’s up to. When we can figure out this clusterfuck, you’ll be brought in on it.”

“Thank you,” she said, nodding. “If Myers is involved, the only thing I want is the privilege of putting a bullet in his brain.” She excused herself, walking back toward the bedroom, and they heard the door softly close. All eyes turned to Mo.

“What?” he asked, staring back at them.

“Get up and go to her, you idiot,” smirked Hex.

“Geez, I swear to God, sometimes you guys are just stupid about women.” Noa stood from his spot on the floor, smiling at Mo.

“Go to her, brother. We’ll let ourselves out.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mo opened the door to their bedroom and watched as Ophelia dried herself off from her shower. He'd pattered around the kitchen, starting the dishwasher and then locking the doors, checking them twice. He wasn't sure what to say to her.

She pulled the towel from her hair, letting the curls naturally spring to life down her back.

"Phe? Are you okay, babe?" She turned, nodding.

"I'm as okay as I can be. I mean, I just learned that my boss may have been the one that got my sister murdered." She pulled the towel from her body, her flushed, naked skin glowing in the dim light of the room. Mo raised his brows, slowly taking off his own clothes.

"We'll figure it all out, honey." She nodded again, sitting back against the headboard, still completely naked.

"I want to make love to you," she said.

"That's the plan," he grinned, crawling toward her on the bed.

“No. I want to do this. You don’t get to do anything. I want control. I want permission to do what I want to do.” He stared at her a moment, then nodded.

“Okay.”

Lying on his back, he spread his arms wide, unsure where she wanted them. His cock was already hard, thinking about her naked body beside him. Ophelia straddled his body, slowly running her hands across his arms until their fingers were linked. Her chest was plastered against his.

She nibbled on his jaw, kissing her way around to the other side, tugging on one earlobe. All the while, she held his hands firmly to the side, outstretched. Her tongue lapped across his lips, then with her own mouth, she pried his open, tasting him.

Leaning forward, she could feel his cock at her opening and pushed back, gradually feeling the penetration into her body.

“Fuck, Phe,” he growled.

“Slow,” she moaned against his lips. She’d rock forward, then back hard. Slowly, she’d move her body up, his

cock almost falling out of her. Just before the head was released, she'd slam down again, filling her body.

"I've dreamed of this so many times," she whispered into his ear. Her hot breath brought goose bumps to his arms and chest. "Lick my nipples. Suck on them."

"Happily," he smiled. Taking one at a time, he tugged with his teeth, then flicked with his tongue.

"Wow, yes," she moaned, moving faster against him.

Taking their linked hands, she brought his arms around her body, then lay his big hands flat against her ass. The heat of his touch seared her skin.

"Do what you want," she panted. "Anything!"

Mo didn't need to be told twice. He rolled her over, pushing her knees high as he jerked his hips into her body. The slick sounds of their wetness made him crazy as he kissed his way down her body, tugging on her nipples again.

"Phe? Baby, I'm not wearing a condom," he panted.

"I told you. I'm good. I'm clean. Birth..." She never got the rest out as he spilled inside her. Their joint screams of climax filled the room. He felt her body shudder beneath him, shaking with satisfaction. Ophelia was his. Finally.

Before he could even get up, she was licking her way down his body, taking him in her mouth. Her delicate fingers rolled his balls in her hand, tasting the salty mixture of their passion. The big black head was covered in her rosy-red lips, and he nearly came early just watching her.

Crouching between his thighs, her ass was raised as her lean back curved downward, her head hovering over his groin as she sucked and stroked him to climax.

Gripping a handful of curls, he jerked his hips up, filling her mouth with his love. When the last drop was gone, he rolled her to her back and opened her legs, returning the favor. His thick, strong tongue moved in and out, up and down, making her writhe with desire and need.

She grabbed his head, holding him against her body, his magical mouth sending her into convulsing joy. He smiled up at her, wiping his mouth, then kissing his way up her belly until he reached her mouth.

“You are the sexiest fucking woman I’ve ever met,” he groaned. She could feel him already getting hard again and smiled up at him.

“I love that you get hard so fast,” she smiled.

“You make me that way, Phe. Do you know how difficult it was growing up and trying to hide my hard-ons every time I saw you? Shit, I was walking around with a boner my entire junior and senior year because of you.”

“Really,” she smiled, kissing him.

“Really, baby.”

“Well, you should know I was wet all that time thinking about you. I’d figured out how to satisfy myself, but you were what I wanted.”

“That’s damn good to hear,” he smiled.

“I want you again, Mo. Now.” He laughed, shaking his head.

“You’ve awakened a beast, Phe. I want you again, too.” She pulled him to her, opening her legs as he let his cock slide into her wet, hot opening.

“No, Mo. You’re the one that’s awakened the beast. So, tame me, Mo. See if you can.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

By the time Irish got to McAllen, it was nearly 2200. He sent a message to Gabi that he'd arrived, asking for the doctor's phone number. Sitting in his vehicle in the emergency room parking lot, he called the phone, but no one answered. He tried texting, then calling two more times.

"Gabi? Your friend isn't answering. Should I go in?" he asked her.

"Hold on, Irish. Let me try to call her, and I'll call you back." She hung up, and he waited patiently, then received a text from Gabi.

She's in trouble. Call her now.

"Fuck," he mumbled, dialing the number again. The ringing stopped, but no one responded. "Dr. Harwell?"

"Shush," she whispered. He listened intently, hearing footsteps and someone speaking in Spanish. It sounded as if she were hiding behind a door or beneath something. A few seconds later, she came back on. "Help me. They're here."

"Where are you?" he asked.

“I’m in a linen closet on the fourth floor at the end of the hall.”

“Stay there. I’ll knock three times softly. Don’t open it for anyone else.” Irish ran inside, finding the stairwell and taking the steps two at a time. When he got to the fourth floor, he casually opened the door and looked both ways. At one end, he could see men looking into rooms. Grabbing a white lab coat, he pulled it on over his Led Zeppelin t-shirt and made his way in the opposite direction.

Finding the linen closet, he tapped three times. He heard the lock disengage. Then someone slowly opened the door. A pair of terrified brown eyes stared at him, and he swallowed, feeling the fear.

“It’s alright. I’m Irish, Gabi’s friend,” he said. She nodded, then leaned forward, wrapping her arms around him. “Hey, it’s okay. Let’s get you out of here.” Looking down the hallway, he saw the men staring back at them, then walking their way.

“We gotta go. Now,” said Irish.

He grabbed her hand, pulling her toward the stairwell and racing down the steps. By the time they hit the second floor, someone was already firing at them. The doctor

screamed, and Irish lifted her, running for both of them toward his vehicle.

Once inside, he knew they'd be safe. As he pulled out of the parking spot, the men were coming out of the emergency room, firing directly at them. Lucinda screamed, but when the bullets only bounced off the exterior, Irish grinned.

"It's okay," he said, reaching for her hand. "We're going to be okay now."

"N-no. No, we're not," she said, breathing heavily.

"Hey, you're having a panic attack. I need you to take a deep breath and hold it. Good, now let it out. There you go. Just breathe. Listen to me. This vehicle is an armored vehicle. It's even equipped with weapons. They can't stop us in this."

"We have to go back," she said, shaking her head. He looked at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"I don't think so. In case you missed it, they were trying to kill us. We won't be welcome in McAllen again any time soon."

“No, listen to me,” she said, gripping his hand. Irish looked down at the lean hand. She wore no jewelry; her nails were filed short without polish.

“I am listening,” he said, turning his attention back to the road. “We are not going back there.”

“We have to!” she yelled.

“Why?” he yelled back. “What the fuck is so important back there?”

“Drugs.”

“What?” he asked, staring at her with confusion.

“Drugs. They brought in another child last night, and the ER doctor took the drugs out of her. He was going to give them to those men, but I hid them. Those drugs will tell us a lot about what they’re doing.”

“Fuck me,” he muttered. “Where are these drugs?”

“I-I hid them,” she said tentatively. Irish looked at her, waiting for more, but she didn’t give him any more details.

“Listen to me, Doc.”

“Lucinda. Just call me Lucinda.”

“Fine, listen to me, Lucinda. You cannot go back to that hospital. They will shoot you on sight. There are security cameras everywhere, and my guess is they’ve paid the hospital security team.”

“Look, I understand how dangerous it is, but there’s something in those drugs that’s different. It might help you and your team get these men.”

Irish swerved around the cars in front of him, then took the next exit off into a residential area. If they were following them, they’d most likely think they were headed out on the highway or toward the police station. He pulled the vehicle into a parking garage for an apartment building and turned off the lights.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Trying to decide if I want to risk my life for a bag of drugs,” he frowned.

“Listen, I know it probably doesn’t make any sense to you, but there is something in those drugs beyond the normal shit,” she frowned.

He stared at the huge brown eyes. Her hair was in between blonde and brown, pulled on top of her head in a tight

bun. She had a cute little upturned nose, her lips full and wide to accommodate her huge smile.

“Fuck me,” he growled.

“Excuse me?” she smirked.

“Nothing. Let’s go.” Irish knew he would regret it, but if she knew something was different about the drugs, maybe it would help to end DeSoto.

Driving the backroads toward the hospital, he depressed a button on the vehicle that changed out the license plate and the color of the vehicle. The paint, a special design by G.R.I.P., allowed you to change the color by using underlying lighting. The once black vehicle was now a dark silver. He saw the hospital up ahead and searched for a location to safely park.

He settled for the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant within walking distance of the hospital. She would be in plain sight, and no one would suspect the car of anything.

“Stay here,” he said, handing her the keys. “If you need to leave, just keep driving east until you get to New Orleans and call Gabi. Don’t wait for me.”

“I’m not leaving you!” she screeched. He reached for her hand, gave it a light squeeze, and smiled.

“Where are the drugs?” he asked.

“I hid them in the ceiling tiles in that storage room. It’s the third tile from the back.” He nodded, grabbing a stocking cap from the backseat. He pulled off his t-shirt, his muscles rippling in the light from the street lights. From his bag, he grabbed a black long-sleeved t-shirt and pulled it over his head.

“D-do you always have extra clothes?” she asked.

“Yep,” he smiled. “Stay here, Doc. If I’m gone longer than fifteen minutes. Leave.” She started to argue, but he disappeared across the parking lot and toward the hospital.

Pulling out his phone, Irish sent a message to Pigsty back home.

Brother? Disrupt the cameras at the hospital. ASAP.

He waited a few moments then got a ‘done’ response.

Irish entered through the front entrance, not looking up at anyone. He took the elevator to the fourth floor and exited, heading back toward the storage closet. Once inside, he

climbed up the shelving and reached inside the ceiling tile, finding the balloon of drugs.

Carefully, he put it in the thigh pocket of his cargo pants and then replaced the tile, climbing back down. He opened the door and looked both ways, then left the way he'd entered. As he crossed the parking lot, he could hear three men behind him speaking in Spanish. Not wanting to look to see who it was, he kept moving, ignoring them.

When he got to the fast-food parking lot, the doctor was still sitting in the passenger seat, looking terrified. She unlocked the vehicle, and he got in, starting the car and pulling out once again.

“Anything else you forgot?” he asked. She smiled at him, shaking her head.

“No. Nothing.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Phe was fairly certain her body would never be the same after last night. She'd never had sex more than once in a night with a man, but then again, there had never been Mo. They couldn't seem to get enough of one another. He even woke at three a.m. hard as a rock, and she wasn't about to waste it.

When she rolled over this morning to a pup tent in their sheets, she just rode that pony all the way to happy town. After a hot shower and breakfast, her body was feeling the pain and stiffness of muscles she had never used before.

"Morning," smiled Juliette. She was walking toward her with Eva and Carsen.

"Good morning," smiled Ophelia. "My fellow Shakespearean namesake, right?" Juliette laughed, nodding.

"That's me. This is Eva and Carsen."

"Yes, we met the other night at dinner," smiled Ophelia.

"How are you feeling? Are you settling in here at Belle Fleur?" asked Juliette.

“I think so,” she nodded. “It’s all a bit overwhelming. I mean, just finding Mo again was something I never thought would happen, but wondering if my boss was responsible for killing my sister has me really on edge.”

“Well, one thing we know for sure,” said Eva, “is that the men here will leave no stone unturned until they find the men responsible.” Ophelia looked around the property, the sun out for the first time in days. The ground was still wet, but the fresh smell of rain and cypress moss was hanging in the air.

“It’s so incredibly beautiful here,” she whispered.

“I used to come out here with my grandmother all the time,” said Carsen, smiling at the other woman. “My grandmother is Ruby.”

“Is she a friend of Matthew and Irene?” asked Ophelia.

“Let’s just say Matthew and Irene were my grandmother’s only true friends.” Phe tilted her head inquisitively to the side. “My grandmother is a self-made woman, Ophelia. She was left with six babies to provide for when my grandfather left her. She had no skills, no education, nothing.”

“That’s awful. How did she survive?” asked Ophelia.

“On her back,” grinned Carsen. Ophelia stared at her, then wide-eyed, nodded. “She’s not ashamed of it, and neither am I. She did what she had to in a time when women were giving their babies over to orphanages. A few years after she started, she was able to afford a house. A few years later, she bought a business. A strip club. Then it was another, and then a lingerie and adult toy store. She created an empire.”

“That’s amazing,” said Ophelia. “You should be incredibly proud of her.”

“Oh, I am. Believe me, I am. No one really wanted to speak with her, despite the fact that she was one of the most generous people in the community. She supported the church. She donated regularly to charities. She was always there for a neighbor in need. It was Matthew and Irene that supported her fully. They made sure she was seated beside them in church. They made sure others included her in on things, and they always invited all of us out here for holidays and parties.”

“Did you marry one of their grandsons?” asked Ophelia.

“Oh, no. I married Fitch. He came down and rescued me in Mexico ironically,” she grinned.

“Seems all things lead south,” smirked Ophelia.

“Yes, it does. Juliette is the daughter of Whiskey and Kat, and Eva is the daughter of Doc and Bree.”

“Oh, wow, that’s great. Juliette, you’re married to the guy that owns the tattoo parlor, right?”

“That’s right. Callan is an amazing artist. We fell in love when we were on a cruise together for my law class. Although, it got hijacked, and we were in a shitstorm.” She laughed, shaking her head. Ophelia looked at Eva.

“Oh, don’t think my story is any better. A dentist at my university inseminated me without my permission. CC offered to marry me anyway. He’s quite a bit older, but we knew we loved one another.”

“Everyone has a story here,” smiled Ophelia. “It’s like this massive book with different chapters to it, each of you filling a chapter.”

“I never thought of it like that,” smiled Carsen, “but you’re right. I suppose Mama Irene and Matthew were chapter one, then the rest of us came along.”

“It’s just such a magical place,” smiled Ophelia.

“It is that,” grinned Eva. “A lot of us have known one another since we were children, but several more met when they were in trouble or needed help.”

The big black SUV came barreling toward them from the front gates. Gravel and dust spewed behind it as it pulled up, someone slamming the brakes. A woman stepped out, yelling for someone to help. Eva, Carsen, Juliette, and Ophelia ran toward them, her, while several men came running out of the office building.

“Who are you?” asked Eva.

“I-I’m Dr. Lucinda Harwell. P-please, help him,” she said, pointing to the passenger seat.

“Fuck, what the hell happened?” asked Eric, looking at Irish. There was blood on his chest, a large gauze pad covering the wound.

“We stopped for gas, and he stepped out. He took that thing off, that shirt with the net thing in it,” she said, pointing to the vest on the backseat. “There were two men at the gas station, and they shot him. He got us away from them but was about to pass out. I was able to get him to stop and got him patched up, but he’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Didn’t you see the fucking clinic you passed?”
growled Tanner.

“Tanner, brother, not now. She’s scared and isn’t familiar with this place.” Riley came running toward them with Gabi.

“Get him into the triage room in the office,” said Gabi.
“Nice to see you, Lucinda. Let’s see what kind of work you do.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mo and the others waited in the waiting room for word on Irish. The fool took off his vest, not even thinking about what might come his way. Tanner paced back and forth. Bogey chewed on his fingernails. When Gabi and the new surgeon appeared, they all stood, waiting to hear the news.

“Lucinda did her job,” said Gabi, looking back at the woman. “She got the bullet out, dressed the wound, and kept him alive. We’ve given him some blood and cleaned the wound, but he’s good. He was lucky.”

“What happened?” asked Mo. Lucinda stepped forward, wringing her hands with the hundreds of eyes on her now.

“They came looking for me, probably wanting to know where the drugs were. Yesterday, after I spoke to Gabi, another little girl was brought in, and I got the drugs out. The ER doctor said he would turn them over to the DEA, but there was just something odd about it all. He didn’t lock it in the medicine or evidence lockers, which is where we’re required to put things like that. Instead, he put it in his own locker.”

“What did you do?” frowned Luke.

“Well, I thought I was doing the right thing. I hid it in a ceiling tile. Then those men came and asked for me. I was able to hide until your man, Irish, got there. He got me out, but in all the excitement of running and them shooting at us, I forgot the drugs. So, we went back for them.”

“Shit,” muttered Cam. “Why? Why go back for them?”

“Because there’s something different about them,” said the woman. “I’ve seen this before, especially so far south near the border. Usually, the drugs are placed in small latex balloons and either ingested or inserted in the rectum or abdomen.”

“What was different?” asked Luke again, slowly losing patience.

“These were in latex balloons, but it was not just a powder. It was lumpier. When I took the first balloon out of the little girl, the DEA agents opened it on-site. There were individually wrapped latex carriers inside the big one. They were lumpy with sharp edges, so he opened the internal ones. In some, there were blocks of crystal-like things. I have to assume it was heroin or crack cocaine.”

“You said in some,” said Eric. “What about the others?”

“These,” she said, pulling the items from her pocket. “They look like computer chips to me, but I’m not sure.” She started to hand them to Luke, but Code stepped forward, taking them, inspecting them as he turned them over in his hand.

“I think they’re chips for firing weapons, bombs more specifically,” said Code. “I need to look at them more closely. But why? Why mix these up with the drugs? If the drugs were to burst, they’d destroy the computer chips.”

“I have to guess that’s why they used a double-latex technique,” said Lucinda. “Listen, I don’t know about any of this. All I know is that they came back demanding that I give them the drugs. I told them the DEA had taken them, but they didn’t believe me. Security was able to get them to leave peacefully, but I was terrified, which is why I called Gabi. I never anticipated a second little girl to come into the ER.

“I’m sorry your man got hurt. I really am. If I’m creating more problems here, I can leave,” she said.

“No,” said Luke. “You need to stay on-property, or this may not end well. No one knows where we are or who we

are.”

“And just who are you? I have no clue where I am. I followed the GPS, which was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen since it didn’t announce cities or specific streets. What kind of system says, ‘300 feet turn at paved road,’ ‘200 feet turn on dirt road’?” she asked.

“I’ll let Gabi tell you the details,” said Luke. “For now, we can always use extra help at the clinic. Stay out of sight, and don’t make yourself seen by anyone other than the staff. They don’t know where you went, so they’ll be searching in McAllen.”

“Irish made me press a button in the car. He said it would change the plate and the color on the car,” she said. Sly nodded.

“That’s right. It’s something of our own invention. You did good, Lucinda. You probably saved his life and yours.” She nodded at everyone, then hugged Gabi.

“I’ll go sit with my patient for a while. He’ll be awake in a little while, and you can see him then.” She smiled at Gabi and walked swiftly to the back of the clinic.

“Did she really do well, Gabi?” asked Cam.

“She did. That bullet was lodged in his chest, damn close to his heart. That’s why he was bleeding so much. She got it out, got it dressed, and kept him alive for the entire drive. I’m hoping to convince her to stay. Her mother and I were good friends before throat cancer took her. Lucinda is brilliant.

“She entered medical school at just twenty. Finished her residency, and I tried to get her to take something at a teaching hospital, but she wanted trauma experience. Lord knows, she got enough of that in McAllen. Gangs, knives, guns, she saw it all, which is probably what helped her save Irish. I’d like to keep her here, Cam. I want to offer her a job.”

“Do we need another surgeon?” asked Luke. Riley and Suzette rolled their eyes at the man.

“We’re stretched thin, Luke. You know that. We need someone who can take shifts. Riley, me, Janie, all of us are tired. Kennedy is at least three years away from graduating medical school.”

“Alright,” nodded Luke. “We need to do the backgrounds and everything but make her the offer, and we’ll

get started on that.” Gabi smiled, exhaling as her shoulders slumped.

“Thanks, Luke.” She walked back toward the recovery rooms as the others took their seats.

“A few of you stay. The rest, let’s figure out our next move on DeSoto.”



Lucinda sat next to the man on the stretcher, checking his vitals and watching as the blood was being pumped back into his body. She double-checked the rate at which his IV was flowing and then sat back down next to the bed.

Looking down, she stared at the veiny hand against the stark white sheet. Despite being a redhead, he had a healthy tan going on. His long, strong fingers were spread out, the calluses itching her fingers. She slid her own hand beneath his, softly touching the back of his hand.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, shaking her head. “I’m sorry I made you go back.”

“Not your fault,” came the strained voice. He squeezed her hand as she tried to pull away, but even in a

weakened state, she couldn't extract it away from the much stronger man. "Not your fault."

"It was my fault," she said, sniffing back her tears. "I shouldn't have made you go back."

"Doc, it was my fault. I took my vest off," he said, turning, his eyes fluttering open.

"You didn't have a vest," she said with a confused expression. "You took a black shirt off. That's it."

"Doc."

"Lucinda. Please, just call me Lucinda."

"Lucinda, that black shirt was the vest. It's a special material we make ourselves here at our facility. That shirt was my protection. When we stopped to get fuel and food, I thought it was safe, and I changed. This is on me. But saving me? That's all you, Lucinda. Thank you," he smiled, squeezing her hand.

"When you two are done flirting, I'd like to talk to Irish," smirked Eric. Lucinda laughed, nodding at Irish as she stood, turning to leave. She looked back at him, then up at Eric.

“Are you guys taking steroids?” she asked with a frown.

“No, ma’am,” laughed Eric. “We just grow ‘em big around here.” Lucinda laughed again, leaving the two men alone.

“What happened?” asked Eric, wanting to confirm the story. Irish repeated the story, almost verbatim to what Lucinda had told them. “Why didn’t you see them coming?”

“Honestly?” asked Irish with a smirk. “I was watching the hot doctor get out of the car. I took the vest off and thought I’d put a t-shirt on. We saw how that worked out for me.”

“You took your vest off to impress a woman?” growled Eric.

“Yep.” Eric started laughing, shaking his head.

“You dumb ass.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Listen up,” said Hex. “We got information from the POTUS. DeSoto is planning a rally outside the capitol in El Salvador in two days. He’s hoping to create disruption and riots in the street. They think he’s going to announce that his son will run for the presidency in El Salvador.”

“Why? I thought he wanted the presidency in Mexico,” said Mo.

“He does, but he wants his son to take over El Salvador. If they have control of those countries, it’s going to be a fucking mess. They’ll own the drug markets, the routes in and out of the U.S. It’s going to be a nightmare.”

“What do you want us to do?” asked Mo.

“We want you to go down and turn the crowds,” said Luke. “You all speak Spanish, some just a little, but it’s passable. Each group of four men will have a fluent speaker with them. We have no idea what he’s going to say, but whatever it is, say the opposite. Make sure the crowds don’t react the way he wants, let him leave, and get the fuck out of there. But we do what we do best. We create chaos and disruption.”

“And if we get caught?” asked Mo. “Is our president going to deny our existence?”

“You know how this works, Mo. We go down there. We go down on our own.”

“We’re going, too,” said Kegger. Luke started to speak, and Kegger held up his hand. “I’m not ancient, Luke. Thanks to all of you, we’re all feeling better than before. They’ll see us just as a few old guys hoping to drink some tequila and pick up a few señoritas.”

“May I suggest something?” asked Gwen.

“Honey, you can always speak up,” smiled Hex.

“What if I made a few modifications to your vest shirts?” she smiled.

“What do you mean? We can’t risk what happened to Irish happening again,” said Cam.

“No, that’s not what I mean. You guys are always so obsessed about your workouts and believe me, my fellow wives and I appreciate it,” she grinned. “But you make yourselves more noticeable. What if we padded your vests? Gave you the middle-aged-man paunch. The tourist with too much money for street tacos and beer.”

“That’s a great idea!” said Avery. “I can actually do a few prosthetics that would be easily applied and make your wrinkles more prominent.”

“More prominent?” frowned Luke.

“You know what I mean,” laughed Avery.

“I’d like to go with you,” said Ophelia, “but no one panic. I know that it’s not a good idea. Although, I do have another suggestion in conjunction with Avery and Gwen’s great ideas. I was in an amateur radio club in high school. El Salvador is still considered a developing country. They rely on old-fashioned radio for most of their news.

“What if a few of us tapped into a radio station and created some turmoil?” Luke and Cam smiled, nodding at Mo, who seemed relieved.

“I think we have a bunch of ideas, all from our wives, that are exceptional,” said Cam. “I wish you all would come to more meetings. Gwen? How quickly can the suits be ready?”

“I can have them ready by tomorrow if I have help,” she said. “I’ll text Mama Irene and get the church ladies in

here to help me, and I know a few of the other wives will help as well.”

“Fantastic. Avery?”

“I just need about thirty minutes with each of you. Some of you will need latex, but others I can just paint it on, so it will need to be closer to when you take off.”

“Will it sweat off?” asked Mo.

“No,” she grinned. “I’ll have to use something special to get it off your skin, but believe me, it will survive hot sun, hot lights, water, everything.”

“Alright,” said Cam. “Phase I of bringing down the DeSotos starts now.”

Assembly lines were set up to pad the vests, as well as some of the pants. Although the men found them uncomfortable, there was also an added value they had never considered before. All the padding allowed them to hide more weapons.

By the time they left for El Salvador, they looked like a bunch of overweight has-been athletes with wrinkles and sad faces. Cruz looked in the mirror, frowning.

“I do not like this look on me,” he said, shaking his head. “This is going to make me want to run more, not less.”

“You’re still perfect, baby,” said Camille, kissing her seriously aged husband. “You just use those amazing language skills of yours and get everyone home safely. Then later, you can use that tongue for something far more productive.” There were soft chuckles around the room as Cruz laughed, shaking his head at his beautiful wife.

“Listen up,” called Luke. “These are the teams. Ophelia, Pigsty, and Code will handle the radio situation. They’ve already been able to tap into it and will control the signal when you tell them.

“On the first team, Mo, Tanner, Chase, and Bogey. Team two, Cruz, Fitch, Remy, and Robbie. Team three, Dunc, Garrett, CC, and Noa. Team four, Bodhi, JT, Eric Ryan, and Wade. Team five, Sam, Eli, Phoenix, and Rory. Rory? Stop touching your stomach. We both know it’s not real. You’ll have your eight-pack back soon enough.” There were soft chuckles until the big man growled at the group.

“Team six, Milo, Jalen, Tiger, and Torro. And much to my chagrin, team seven will be Kegger, Otto, Pork, and Doug.”

“Doug? You don’t have to do this,” said Cam.

“Yes, I do. You need a variety of males, and I’m your token senior citizen. Between Kegger’s prosthetic and my gray hair, we’ll look like prime targets.”

“Carry all the weapons, Doug,” said Luke. “Stay close to Mo’s team. Alright. Let’s go, children. Everyone comes home.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Martin, are you ready?” asked Valez, turning to stare at his son. He’d forced him to put on a suit coat, which he was tugging on in the mirror like a ten-year-old child.

“I don’t need a coat, Father. These people don’t care what you look like. They care what you say. They want money. They want food. They want drugs. That’s it. They’re a bunch of uneducated farmers who wouldn’t know a political statement if it slapped them in the face. Just let me do my thing.”

“That’s not it at all,” said Valez with a frustrated expression. “You need to listen more. It’s you who only want drugs and money. These people are smarter than you think, and they value their heritage and families more than anything.”

“Don’t forget women,” he grinned. Valez slapped him hard enough that he stumbled backward, touching his face.

“You will not fuck this up for me,” said Valez. “I’ve tolerated your games and you doing shit behind my back for too long.”

“I haven’t done anything,” said Martin, still holding his cheek.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know? Drugs in balloons inside children. Electronics for the military. Drugging and using women who could otherwise be making us money!”

“You do it!” he yelled at his father. “I’ve seen you. You do it as well.”

“I do it discreetly. Use a whore. No one cares. If you like her, keep her. You used one of our accountants in Jakarta. Did you even bother to ask her about her family? Did you ask any of the men to do a background check on her?”

“Why would I?” he smirked.

“Because her sister is with Homeland! You fool! You don’t think,” said Valez, tapping the side of his son’s head.

“You don’t ever think. If you continue to use children and kill them, the people won’t trust us. There are other ways.”

“Like your furniture?” he smirked. “Please, Father, that takes forever, and now the factory in Mexico City is burned down.”

“We have others,” he said, staring at the young man.

“We need these people to trust us. To trust you. If you go too

far, they will rebel and riot. All our men will not be enough to push them back. We need El Salvador and Mexico to make our plans come to life.”

“Fine,” he said, shaking his head. “But I won’t be your puppet, Father. If I’m put into office here, I will not be your puppet. I will run this country as I see fit.”

“You will run this country as I tell you!” he screamed. “If you disobey me, Martin, son or no, I will end you.”

Martin watched as his father left the room. He was fuming on the inside but knew that if he didn’t do this, his chance would be gone. If he could prove himself here, he would run this country the way he wanted and then declare war on his father.

“Martin?” called his bodyguard. “What do you want us to do with the woman?”

“Is she still tied up in my room?” he asked.

She’d been a delightful little surprise when he arrived. One of the house managers, she made the mistake of delivering extra towels to him in his room. Sweet, soft skin the color of almonds. Her long black hair was silky and smooth. She’d been enjoyable, although initially, she fought

some. A little touch of the needle, and she was already begging for more.

“Keep her there. I may have need of her when this is done.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“They’re gathering in the square,” said Mo, looking at his teammates. “Stay together. Watch for DeSoto’s men.” The men all nodded at one another. Then they heard Remy in their ear.

“Brothers, is anyone else noticin’ that we’re all at least a head taller than the average male in the audience?”

“I’m noticing,” frowned Chase. He stared at the teams around the crowd. “Slouch. You’re all standing like you’re at attention. Slouch like the overweight tourists that you are.”

Each man attempted to slouch, some taking two or three times to get it right. Mo shook his head, wanting to laugh at the sight. It had been drilled into the heads of these men to stand straight. Now, they were being asked not to stand straight. It was like telling a right-handed person to only use their left hand. It wasn’t easy.

“Look at the signs,” said Cruz. “Not everyone is happy to have the Señors DeSoto in their country.”

Fuera traficantes de drogas! Get out drug dealers!

“We need to play off that,” said Mo. “Let’s mingle, boys.”

Speaking only in Spanish, the men moved through the crowds, circulating with hundreds of the locals. They could hear them rumbling about the drug dealers coming in to take over the country and knew that this might turn out to be a great idea. People were afraid for their children, their jobs, everything!

“I hear the father wants to take over Mexico and let his son ruin our country,” said Cruz.

“I heard the son steals women and children, trafficking them or filling them with drugs and using them,” said Mo.

“He killed my daughter.” Mo stopped in his tracks, looking around him to see who had said that. An old man stood in the crowd, staring at the stage. His eyes were sad, almost glazed over with hate and despair.

“I’m sorry,” said Mo. The others could hear the conversation on comms.

“He killed my daughter, and my wife died of a broken heart. He is evil. He sells the history of my country. The history of its indigenous people. The Lenca, the Nahua Pipil,

and others. He sells our pottery from the museums, our jewelry found in tombs and historic sites. He bribes the soldiers and the police. I will kill him,” said the old man.

Mo started to speak, then realized his Spanish might not be as good as was needed for this conversation. He looked around, searching for Cruz or Torro. Torro was moving closer to him, nodding.

“Sir, I need you to speak with my friend,” he said. Torro shook the man’s hand, asking him if they could speak about the DeSotos. He led him away from the crowd, and as they spoke, the home team recorded the entire conversation.

“Keep milling about,” said Mo. “Torro will get the information we need.”

“Welcome, Señors DeSoto!” yelled the man on stage. He tried to get the crowd to applaud and cheer, but only a few bothered to even raise their hands in a meek clap.

Cover your ears. We’re about to blast the radio station from drones flying nearby and sitting on the buildings across the street.



“Are we ready?” asked Ophelia, staring at her two handsome radio partners. All her nerdy energy flowed through her body. It had been years since she’d touched radio equipment and forgot just how much fun it really was.

“I’m ready,” smiled Pigsty.

“I’ve wanted to do this my whole life,” said Code. He cleared his throat, smiling at her, and flipped the switch, speaking in Spanish. “Good afternoon! We’re broadcasting live from YKXE radio in San Salvador. Many of our people are listening to the lies and filth spewed from Martin DeSoto and his father, Valez. Do not believe them.”

“That’s right, Juan,” smirked Ophelia. “We’re covering the despicable display of lies and manipulation by this man and his son. They think we’re ignorant farmers and trades workers. They think we don’t know what they really want, what they really do. Do not be fooled!”

DeSoto and his son froze on stage, looking around, trying to find where the broadcast was coming from. The crowd quieted, listening to the voices.

“They are despicable, Maria,” smirked Pigsty. “We’ve learned that this father and son are responsible for hundreds of women and children disappearing. They are being sold into

slavery and sex trafficking, filled with drugs and dying. Is this the kind of family we want in our country? Is this what we want for the future of El Salvador?”

“No, Pedro, it’s not!” yelled Code. “We don’t need men who steal, lie, and cheat their own country. We don’t need men who sell our heritage and kill our women. We don’t need men who make a living out of getting our children hooked on their drugs. We know that Martin DeSoto killed Avara Martinez. He raped her. He beat her, and he filled her with his poison, leaving her on the side of the road for her grief-stricken parents to find.”

“Where is that coming from?” growled Valez, staring at the bodyguard behind him.

“We’re trying to find it, sir, but we can’t locate the source,” he said nervously.

“Find it!” yelled Valez. His son looked at the crowd, trying to find someone in the crowd that might be doing this, but he only saw locals. He grabbed the microphone, his father trying to stop him.

“I will make you all rich!” he yelled, smiling at the crowd. Cruz smirked, lowering his head and yelling above the crowd.

“And how will you do that? By forcing us to sell your drugs? Or perhaps forcing our women into prostitution?”

“Who said that?” he screamed. The crowd only stared at him. “Who said that?” Valez covered the microphone, pushing it away from his son.

“We need to leave. Someone has sabotaged our efforts here. You will not win,” he said to his son.

“I will find out who did this!” he yelled at his father, grabbing the microphone again. “One million dollars to the person who tells me who is broadcasting these lies!”

The crowd only stared at him as the men moved slowly, weaving through the onlookers. The few women who were there slowly began to leave, shaking their heads at the men on the stage.

“He believes he can buy anyone,” said Remy.

“They are Satan and his son,” said Rory.

“How many women and children must die before they are put to death?” asked Garrett. “How long will we allow for the corruption of our officials? How long before we come for you as well?”

Slowly the crowd began to disperse, leaving the humiliated father and son on stage. As backs turned to them, Valez knew they would have to fight another day, but Martin was angry. The radio station blasted again.

“It appears the father and son have lost,” said Ophelia. “There is no love for you in this country. You might buy our soldiers and our police, but you will not buy our people.”

“Perhaps the soldiers and police should know that they pay the Mexican federales twice what they pay our pathetic troops,” said Code. The police and soldiers stared at the two men, their eyes boring into them.

“Get us out of here,” said Valez.

“Show your face!” yelled Martin. “Cowards! Show your face!”

“Martin! Enough!” howled Valez. It was so loud he didn’t need a microphone. The entire crowd heard him, and his son stared at him with contempt. Valez looked at the bodyguards. “Get him out of here even if you have to carry him. If I find out that either of you have been helping him to get women, I will end your lives very slowly.”

“Yes, sir,” said the men, pulling Martin off the stage. Valez looked at the nearly empty square, people still slowly moving away. He grabbed the microphone, staring out at nothing.

“I believe you’ve made your point,” he said. “We will fight another day.”

When the DeSotos were gone, the RP men moved toward the extraction site, removing their padding and prosthetics. By the time they reached the choppers, they were back to their usual selves. The last to arrive was Kegger and his team. The men all smirked at them, the older group carrying bottles of beer.

“You stopped for beer?” asked Mo.

“What? You told us to fit in. People all around us were drinking, so we thought when in El Salvador and all that bullshit. It’s still our first one,” said Kegger. Pork nudged him. “Fine. It’s our third one.”

“Did anyone else notice that Papa didn’t put up much of a fight?” asked Mo.

“Yea, it seemed like he wasn’t keen on his son running the country after all,” said Cruz. “What did the old man say,

Torro?”

“He said that Martin came into their village one day, and he and his men seemed to cause trouble wherever they went. The police were called but never showed up. His daughter worked at a local restaurant where Martin and his men ate. They dragged her from the restaurant, stripped her in the street, and shoved her in their car.”

“Jesus,” muttered Dunc.

“She was found a few days later about forty miles from their village. She’d been beaten, raped, and pumped with so many drugs she wouldn’t have survived anyway. The village threw a real stink, forcing the police to answer for ignoring the calls. They said they were threatened by DeSoto. Two days later, four officers were dead, and eleven children were missing.”

“How the fuck is this guy getting away with this?” asked Mo. “I mean, I realize he’s bribing anyone and everyone, but not everyone can be that easily bought. What the hell is going on?”

“His father,” said Rory. “His father must have more power than we think. You saw him. He controlled the son on that stage. When he said they were done, they were done. He

was threatening his bodyguards, and they looked terrified.
The son might be a psychotic drug dealer, but Daddy holds all
the cards.”

“Yea,” nodded Mo, “but what hand is he playing?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“That was fun,” smiled Ophelia, looking at both the men. Code laughed, shaking his head at the beautiful young woman.

“It was fun,” he smirked. “I’ve always wanted to be on the radio. I just never thought my first time would be in Spanish foiling the attempts of a drug lord and his son.”

“They were both pissed,” said Pigsty. He stared at the control screens for the drones and smiled. “I have an idea. I mean, we’re already there.”

“That’s true,” nodded Code with a big smile. “Let’s follow them.”

Maneuvering the smallest drone, they followed the DeSotos to their vehicles and then used the magnetic hold on her belly, attached to the underside of the car. They couldn’t see exactly where the cars were headed, only that they went from being on paved roads to dirt roads rather quickly. When it stopped, he disengaged the drone, bringing it back up again.

“You nearly ruined everything!” yelled DeSoto at his son.

“I did what we spoke of,” he frowned, leaning against the car door. “I was telling them what they needed to hear. What they wanted to hear! You were caving in, as you always do when things get difficult. You let Vonn take the fall for your mistakes, your errors that caused us to lose the factory in Mexico.”

“Shut up,” spat his father. “The factory was destroyed by fire. I did nothing to cause that to happen. You’re the one jeopardizing everything by using children to bring your drugs into America. You fool! There are a million other ways to do it. Ships, trucks, tires, luggage. No one cries when a truck is blown up with drugs. Everyone cries when a child dies from carrying drugs.

“Use your brain! You are bringing attention to us. You are making the world look right at us, and they will come for us sooner or later. They will send someone for us, especially after you killed the Homeland agent’s sister.”

Ophelia gasped, holding her hand over her mouth. She shook her head, finally getting confirmation that it was Martin, not Valez, that killed her sister.

“She was nothing. She was a stupid whore who worked for that firm. Trust me. She enjoyed every moment

we spent together.” He grinned at the men standing next to his father, but this time, they did not smile back. Turning to his own men, he nodded, giving a sly smile, but they said nothing as well.

“Oh, I see how it is now,” said Martin. “Fine. You want to be my father’s whipping boys, go ahead. I don’t need you. I don’t need any of you.”

Martin started to walk away, but the men gripped his upper arms, holding him in place. He tried to kick out, but the men were bigger, stronger.

“Does he have any women he’s holding now?” asked Valez.

“Yes, sir. He has one in his room. She’s not too far gone. She can be saved.”

“You coward! You turncoat!” yelled Martin.

“You have disgraced me for the last time,” said Valez. “You are no longer my son. I no longer have a son. Tell your mother I love her.” Valez pulled the pearl-handled pistol from his waist and fired three shots into his only son. Martin’s eyes grew wide with disbelief, staring at his father. He tried to

speak, but there was nothing there. Nothing left. As he fell to the ground, Valez tossed the pistol onto his chest.

“Take him out to sea and make sure he’s never found,” said Valez. “I’ll be in Mexico City tomorrow. Meet me there.”

They heard the crunch of gravel and then watched as Valez drove away. His men loaded the body into the second vehicle and went in the opposite direction.

“Holy shit,” muttered Pigsty. “Did we just see that?”

“We just saw that,” said Ophelia. “He robbed me of killing my sister’s murderer, but I can’t say that I’m sad about it.” Code stared at the screen.

“What is this show? Why have a rally, announce that your son will run for the presidency, then kill him over things you’ve known he was doing for years? Why is Valez doing this?” asked Code.

Ophelia and Pigsty stared at him, then back at the screen.

“We’re missing something. We need to follow the lead with my supervisor and figure out how he’s involved,” said

Ophelia. Pigsty nodded, stood, and headed out the door.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“Coffee,” he yelled back. “We’re gonna need a lot of coffee.” Ophelia gave a smirk to Code.

“I think he’s had enough coffee,” she smiled.

“Probably,” laughed Code, “but he’s right. This is going to take a while, and once we get on a roll, we usually don’t stop. Don’t think you have to stay up with us, Ophelia.”

“Phe. Just call me Phe,” she grinned. He nodded as they started to lay out all they had on DeSoto as well as his son and Vonn.

“So, you and Mo went to school together?” said Code.

“Yea. From the time I was in second grade on. He lived just across the street and one house over. Man, I had a crush on him from the time I was old enough to know what a crush was. My parents adored him, but his parents weren’t very keen on me.”

“That sucks,” said Code. “I had a terrible crush on Hannah, but she was the sister of a brother. You don’t just start making moves on a brother’s sister. I wanted to ask

Angel permission to date her, but things go hectic and crazy, and before I knew it, she was gone.”

“Something must have worked out,” she grinned.

“Yea, it definitely did, but it took a while. We called her in to help with a case we were working on. Man, she was spewing venom at me. See, when we first met, she was heavier. It didn’t matter to me. She was beautiful, smart, funny, and man, she had the best lips.” Ophelia laughed.

“She had attended one of the weddings, and I didn’t recognize her. She’d lost a bunch of weight, cut her hair, highlighted it. The girl I fell for was gone, and I wasn’t looking at the girl in front of me. She thought I was ignoring her.”

“Oh, ouch,” said Ophelia.

“Yea, we kind of had it out, but part of what saved us was that we were trying to save Mary for Angel. She’d do anything for her brother, and so would I. We realized we loved one another. We had since the first kiss.”

“She worked with the forensic accounting team, right?”

“Yep. She’s one of the best,” said Code with pride.

“Maybe she can help us,” said Ophelia. “There are thousands of spreadsheets that we’ve obtained from hacking into Vonn and DeSoto’s files, but it will take months, maybe years, to decipher them.”

“It’s a good idea. I’ll call in Jean, Charlotte, and Ro as well. Maybe between the four of them, we can figure this out.”

“Hey, Code?”

“Yea.”

“I’m glad it worked out for you and Hannah.” He smiled, nodding at the young woman.

“It will work out for you and Mo, too. Don’t let his mother get to you, Phe. Her hate isn’t on you. It’s on her. She’s mad at the woman that her father left her mother for. The problem is, she’s associating that hate with color.”

“But she’s a big part of his life, Code. That’s his mother. I don’t want him to have to choose between the two of us.”

“He won’t have to. She’ll make that choice for him,” he said, touching her hand. He sent a text to Jean, Hannah,

Charlotte, and Ro, then a text to George for plenty of food and more coffee than Pigsty could carry.

Ophelia watched the handsome man moving about the room. His silvery blonde locks fell over his forehead and into his eyes, and he pushed them back. He was incredibly good-looking, like all the men at RP, but there was also something innocently sweet about him.

“Hey, Code? Thanks for letting me be a part of YKXE radio.” She smiled at him as he cleared his throat and then, in his best radio voice, spoke.

“It’s been my pleasure! Thank you for calling in to YKXE, the number one radio station of El Salvador!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mo thought for sure Phe would be anxiously awaiting his return. He was a little hurt and a lot proud to see her working in the war room with Code, Pigsty, Jean, Ro, and Hannah. He stood, leaning against the doorframe for a few moments, just watching her.

“Look, here’s another entry from DeSoto to Myers almost five years ago. It’s always a different amount of money,” said Phe. “What was he paying him for? Information?”

“I’m not sure,” frowned Hannah. Jean was standing at a board writing notes, then looked down at the spreadsheet once again.

“Code? Remember the op we did in Hungary? We went in because the military was missing shipments of the new communication devices we created for them.”

“Yea, I remember that. There should have been no way that anyone knew about those. We made a thousand for the military and agencies to test in the field, but the shipment was literally stolen off their dock. We tracked it to a ship that

went to eastern Europe, then trucks that headed into Hungary.” Jean nodded.

“Yea. This payment for Myers coincides with that date. The date it was stolen from the docks,” said Jean.

“Oh, fuck. Where are those electronic components that Lucinda found?” Ophelia turned to the bookcase behind her and grabbed the small plastic dish. She handed it to Code, watching as he examined the pieces.

“They’re not for weapons, are they?” she asked.

“No. Someone is trying to copy our work. That’s why I couldn’t figure out what this was. It didn’t look like our stuff, but it’s someone trying to make it.”

“We need to find out if there are others like this,” said Ophelia. “Shipments that you sent that might have been weapons or...”

“No weapons,” said Jean, shaking his head. “We learned a while ago that we develop the weapons for us, but we don’t share with the government any longer. Some things, yes. Not our weapons. But we did have some stealth vests stolen two years ago.”

“That’s right,” said Hannah, nodding at the team. “We shipped them to Quantico, and they said they never arrived. I remember because we had to write it off as a business loss. Doug and Nine carried replacements to them by hand. We never found the missing shipment, though. After that, we put trackers in our shipments.”

“Jesus,” muttered Ophelia. “Is Myers stealing things from RP for DeSoto?”

“Maybe,” said Jean, staring at the screen. “He would have known that we wouldn’t sell them to him, and Myers would know that as well. He would have been privy to our shipments coming in. But what is DeSoto doing with them? I mean, he’s obviously trying to recreate the communication components. Is he doing the same with the others?”

Mo stepped into the room, kissing Phe’s cheek. She smiled at him, then stared back down at the spreadsheets.

“You said that you all had tried to close down Vonn and DeSoto’s shops before. But every time you got there, they were already gone, right?” asked Phe.

“Yea. That’s right,” said Code.

“If Myers were telling him when you were coming or that you were planning to come, that would have given him time to pack up and leave. And then if he told them about the shipments, he gets your stuff.”

“Right,” said Mo.

“What if DeSoto isn’t just attempting reverse engineering? What if he’s trying to ship your products with drugs, making it look like you did it? I mean, you looked at those components and thought it was something it wasn’t. If someone without knowledge looked, they might think it was something you developed,” said Ophelia.

“What does he gain by that?” asked Ro. “I mean, his word against all of us isn’t exactly going to discredit G.R.I.P. or RP. No one is going to believe that we’re transporting drugs.”

“That’s true,” mused Phe. She leaned her chin into the palm of her hand, still staring at the numbers, the canceled checks, and invoices. “So, maybe this is all about DeSoto trying to copy your work. I mean, what if he wants out of the drug trade and into weapons development? He doesn’t exactly have the background, but he might be copying what you’re doing.”

“Code? Are there any weapons engineers missing? Good ones that could copy what we’ve done?” asked Jean.

“Well, there are a few from China and Russia that are really good, but their governments have restricted what they can work on. Their focus has been missile systems, anti-missile systems, nuclear weapons, and nuclear tracking. They aren’t as focused on saving anyone,” smirked Code.

“What about a disillusioned Russian or Chinese engineer? Someone who got connected to DeSoto through another business associate? I mean, he’s got all these factories where he’s trying to get creative, hiding his drugs, building the guns that would have killed U.S. soldiers and their allies. We need to find out what he’s doing in those other factories.”

“Oh, fuck no,” muttered Mo, shaking his head. “We are not going to knock on doors and inspect factories. This will not end well.”

“Mo, listen to me,” said Ophelia, grabbing his hand. “DeSoto seems all but convinced that he will be the next president of Mexico. Why? He has no political experience. The people don’t want him. He has to bribe the police and the military. How does he think this will work out for him?”

Because he's going to start manufacturing something other than drugs.

"I'm going to lay odds that he's going to convince the people of Mexico that they will never have to rely on the U.S., Canada, or any other ally again. That they will be the next superpower by producing their own arsenals. Then he could bring the drugs back in, saying that the income will help to create a new Mexico."

"That's a big leap, Ophelia," said Jean. "I mean, it's not that I don't think it's a possibility, but I'm trying to figure out why. He already makes billions on drugs and trafficking every year. He has the people he needs in his pocket. Now his son is gone, so he can do whatever he wants."

"It's not him," said Hannah, looking up at everyone. "It's not him doing this. It's Myers. He's the one trying to destroy RP. He gave the information on the shipments. He told him about your sister. Myers has something on DeSoto. That's why we're seeing so many payments. He's getting him to do his dirty work."

"Holy shit," muttered Phe. "You're brilliant!" Code smiled, kissing Hannah, remembering the feel of those lips from their very first kiss at Nine and Trak's weddings.

“That’s my wife.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“We need everything we can find on Myers,” said Hex. “Dig into his Homeland file and find out what you can from that but go beyond. Where was he before Homeland? Ophelia? What can you tell us about him?”

“I honestly don’t know much. He took over the division about three years ago from Hal Thompson. He retired after almost thirty years with the government.

“Myers is insanely private. He never asked any of us about our families either, yet he obviously knew things about me. I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “When he first got to Homeland, everyone said he was a real asshole to work for. He was tough, but I didn’t find him unreasonable.”

“Maybe having more money in his bank account helped to improve his mood,” smirked Jean.

“Probably,” nodded Phe. “I don’t remember seeing a wedding ring, but then again, he could have chosen to not wear it. He was in the field a lot, although I’m now questioning whether he was actually in the field. He was also a big fan of flexible work hours. He didn’t care if we worked from home or the office as long as we worked.”

“Okay,” nodded Luke. “Let’s allow the tech team to work their magic and see what they dig up on Myers and DeSoto. They’re connected, and we need to know why and how. For now, let’s go eat.”

They left the office, and Mo grabbed Ophelia’s hand, smiling down at her. She looked across the property toward the gardens and grinned.

“Is that Chipper with a woman?” she asked, staring across the grounds.

“Oh, yea,” smirked Mo. “Mama Irene got him a blind date with one of the church ladies. Apparently, they’re a thing now.”

“Good for him,” she laughed. “I love that he’s finding love after all these years. He deserves it. I had a great conversation with him a few days ago. It just seems like fate that he was eating in the café, Matthew walks in and starts talking to him, and they figure out that he’s someone that helped to save Erin. I mean, that can’t be coincidence, can it?” Mo just shook his head, laughing.

“We definitely have some amazing people here,” smiled Mo. “I think sometimes even we don’t recognize it,

but new people see it and remind us of how lucky we are.”

She nodded, a frown on her face.

“Mo? I don’t want you to have to choose between me and your parents. I wouldn’t want to have to do that if my folks were alive.”

“Phe, it’s their choice. Not mine. I’d love for them to be a part of our lives, but I won’t let them dictate who I marry and who I love. Not now. Not ever.” She smiled up at him as he kissed her again.

“I know,” she nodded, “I just don’t want you to look at me one day and be bitter about the fact that your parents are no longer in your life.”

“Baby, I will never be bitter at you for anything. It’s them I feel the bitterness for. Not even so much my mom. I mean, I expected it from her. I’m so disappointed in my Dad, though. I mean, he knew I had feelings for you. We didn’t openly speak about it, but he knew.”

“Why?” He looked at her, confused by the question. “I mean, why didn’t you openly speak about it? You must have known that talking about it would make them disapprove even more, but you hid it instead of trying to talk it out.”

Mo didn't say anything for a few minutes, just holding her tightly to his chest.

"I didn't want to disappoint my parents. Not ever. I knew if I told them I had a crush on you, my mother might do something desperate like make us move. She was crazy about the whole situation with her own father. The idea of her forcing us to move made me panic, so I just never said anything to them. I know my father saw it, though. He could tell by the way I said your name or looked at you across the street."

"I feel so sad for her," said Phe. "I wanted to be there to help her feel comforted while you were gone. I used to dream about being able to sit and have lunch with her, just get close until you got home. God, I was so naïve. She just looked at me with such hatred, and I had no clue why."

"I'll never be able to apologize enough, Phe. I wish I could make up for all those lost years, but I can't. I should have given you an e-mail address or found a way to write to your sister or something." He laughed, shaking his head. "Of course, I have all the good ideas now that I don't need them."

"Mama Irene said we're exactly where we're supposed to be at exactly the right time," smiled Phe. "If we'd been

together when we were younger, then maybe things wouldn't have worked out. You might have still been timid to speak to your parents. I was in college. You were deployed. It might have been too much for us."

"No, it wouldn't have been too much," said Mo, staring up at the night sky. "I used to look up at the sky when I was overseas and wonder what you were doing, who you were dating and then plotting to kill them. I would see the stars and know that somewhere in the world, you were seeing them as well. I would have done anything to have you in my life. Anything."

"Well, I'm in your life now, and I'm not going anywhere," she said, nuzzling her nose into his neck. She kissed the hollow of his throat, running her tongue up to his sweet lips. She tasted the saltiness of his skin and moaned with desire.

"We could skip dinner," he smiled, grinding his hips into her stomach.

"Oh, no," she laughed. "You're not going to get me in trouble with Mama Irene. That woman likes all her 'children' at dinner, and I am not going to be the one to disappoint her or take that away from her."

“She’s amazing, isn’t she?” said Mo with a chuckle.

“This whole place is amazing, and the people are unlike anyone I’ve ever met. They’re smart and funny, sweet and kind, beautiful and soulful. I’m so glad you brought me here,” she said, smiling.

“Me too, babe.”

“Oh, I visited for a while with Irish this morning. He’s doing much better. They hope to take him to a pond or something tomorrow. I’m not sure how a pond helps, but everyone seemed pretty keen on the idea.”

“Ah, yea,” smiled Mo. “You met our ghosts. Let me tell you about a few other things.”

All during dinner, Mo and the others explained the secrets of Belle Fleur. From her ghostly residents to the mysterious pond. They told her of the abnormal amounts of oil and gas found on the property, the hidden treasure from the civil war, the plethora of unusual and rare plants in her gardens.

“All on one property,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s just so remarkable.”

“Believe me,” smiled Bron, “we’re reminded of that every single day. Rachel, Lindsey, and Stormy study everything here, from the soil to the water to the rain and everything in between. They’re determined to save this land, preserving it for generations to come.”

“I’ve never known anyone who loved their home, their land, as much as this family,” said Ophelia. “It seems lost on most of the world.”

“It’s easy to get lost in this world,” smiled Matthew. “Folks move from town to town, house to house. They move to jobs paying more, bigger houses, bigger mortgages. Then they’re miserable. They moved for the all the wrong reasons. Bought bigger to keep up with their neighbors. Then they find themselves in a place where they don’t get to enjoy anything.

“I can walk out on my property and hunt, fish, hike, swim, boat, and a million other things without anyone bothering me. I can take long walks with the love of my life. I can build treehouses and swings for my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. But they got no idea what was on their land a hundred years ago. Who lived there? Who walked the dirt they’re livin’ on?”

“I know what was here. Everything but these cottages and G.R.I.P. Everything. This land has seen famine, disease, war, peace, hate, racism, love, and so much more. Generations of Robicheaux children have been born and raised here, and if I have my way, generations more will be raised here.

“My great-great-great-great-grandchildren will know that I did everything in my power to preserve their heritage. Everything.” He nodded at the table, smiling.

“Matthew, you’re the most amazing man I’ve ever met,” smiled Ophelia. “I want to be you when I grow up.” Matthew laughed, shaking his head.

“No, honey. Be you. You’re the perfect you, and no one else can be it. Just be you.” Irene took his hand in hers, smiling at the table.

“Y’all eat all your dinner. There’s beignets, caramel sauce, and vanilla ice cream for dessert. Enjoy.” She gave them a wink, and they walked outside with Ruby, Sven, Mary, and George. Already in the grove, seated around the fire, were Hannu and Teddy, along with Chipper and his new girl, Florence.

“Can we be them when we get old?” asked Ophelia.

“I think that’s what we all strive for,” smiled Mo.
“They’re remarkable, and I’m not sure what we’d do without them. They’re the moral compass for everyone here. It’s like having your own teacher, preacher, and parent all in one.”

“Looks like maybe another one is falling,” smiled Ophelia, nodding toward the door.

Lucinda was wheeling Irish into the cafeteria. He was wearing a Go NAVY sweatshirt, and she had an IV attached to a pole on the chair. Across his lap was a quilted blanket to keep him warm. She gently touched his shoulder, pointing to a table, then walked toward the food to fill their plates.

Mo walked over to Irish, giving him a fist bump.

“Hey, brother. I thought they said you were doing better,” he frowned. Irish held his finger to his lips.

“Shhh,” he smiled. “I don’t want the pretty doctor to know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“She’s going to be very pissed off when she finds out he’s faking it,” said Ophelia.

“Well, he’s not really faking it. He’s just milking it for all it’s worth,” smirked Mo. “It’s interesting. I’ve never seen Irish outwardly show so much interest in a woman.”

“It could be because she saved him.”

“No, I think it’s more than that,” said Mo. “It’s hard being the only man without a woman on a team. First, it was Chase, then Bogey, then Tanner, and now me. That only leaves him.”

“Yes, but they just met,” she frowned. “I want him to be sure before he leads her on and she gets hurt.”

“Baby, I promise if he’s interested in her, she’ll know it, and he’ll do everything in his power to ensure that she’s not hurt.”

As everyone finished their meal and waited for dessert, Phe’s phone pinged with a message from her partner.

Myers is fuming that you aren’t back yet. He keeps calling me asking where you are. Ben was uncomfortable with

the tone of the messages, so we're away for the week.

She read the message, frowned, then looked up, seeing a dozen pairs of eyes on her.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “It’s from Jake. He says that Myers has been blowing up his phone, wondering why I’m not back yet. Ben didn’t like the tone of the messages, and they decided to get away for a while. He didn’t put the location in the text, but I’m going to bet that they went to Ben’s family’s cabin in upstate New York.”

“He’s panicking because he’s worried,” said Cam. “I wonder if DeSoto is tired of playing whatever game they’ve been playing. He killed his own son. Maybe Myers was making him do that as well, and that was the final straw for him. If he loses DeSoto, he loses his bad guy to take the fall for him.”

“The boys got back some of the information from the spreadsheets that Jean analyzed,” said Hex. “It looks like your hunch was right. There were six shipments. Three of which were our merchandise that were lost or hijacked. On all six shipments, there was a payment made to Myers within twenty-four hours ranging from six hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand.”

“What happened to the shipments?” asked Ophelia.

“The one that we went after in Hungary was found,” said Cam. “But we got lucky. The trucks that took it off the ships were old and had to refuel often. We got to them at one of the fuel stops, but the drivers confessed that they were taking them to Russia. The vests that were to go to Quantico were never recovered. They’re still out there somewhere.”

“You said there were three shipments,” said Ophelia.

“What was the third?”

“I’ll have to let someone else explain it,” smirked Hex.

“I can explain,” smiled Hiro. “It was a tracking software that could be placed on a phone or laptop without detection. It was supposed to go to the DOD, but again, the shipment was intercepted and never made it to them.”

“Yes, it did,” said Ophelia.

“What? No, it never made it. We spent hours on the phone with them arguing about it. We ended up replacing it, but we made sure that we delivered it ourselves.”

“I’m telling you. We got it,” said Ophelia. “Or we got something that was like it. I burned out three phones by them inserting that into my cell. I had four laptop replacements.

They gave it to us to download, but every single time it caused meltdown in our equipment.”

“No way,” said Sly, shaking his head. “We tested that system on everything, android, tablet, laptop, all of it. It was perfect. They did something to it to make it fail like that.”

“But why? I mean, if you already sent the replacements, why risk putting in something that they screwed with or developed themselves as a knock-off?”

“I think we go back to the point you were making in the war room,” said Jean. “Myers is trying to make RP look incompetent. But why? What does he gain by doing that, and what the hell does DeSoto have to do with it?”

“Y’all aren’t gonna like my suggestion,” smirked Remy, “but I’m gonna make it anyway. I think we need to have a sit-down with DeSoto. He’s the only man that knows what’s goin’ on with Myers and why he’s hot on our heels.”

“You’re right. I hate the idea,” frowned Luke. “But you might be right.”

“We have to find out where DeSoto is,” said Ophelia. “We need to talk to him.”

“We?” frowned Mo, shaking his head. “Nope. No way. You’re not going to sit in front of the man who tried to kill you.”

“Mo, I told you from the beginning that I wanted to be a part of this. I’ve figured out that it was Martin that killed my sister, but now I want to know what the hell is going on with Myers. I have this sick feeling that he’s responsible for everything.”

Mo stepped forward, wrapping her in his arms. He feathered kisses along her forehead, then on her mouth.

“I won’t lose you again.”

“You won’t lose me at all,” she said, looking up at him. “You won’t let that happen, but we need to sit across from DeSoto and speak to him.”

Someone cleared their throat, and Luke turned, smiling at Hiro.

“You know, your little warnings really are saving my heart. At the very least, they’re saving me from putting a bullet in you,” he grinned.

“You’re welcome. I think. Hey, uh, look, if anyone is interested, I know where DeSoto is.”

“Yes!” yelled a dozen people.

“Oh, okay. Just checking,” he grinned. “He said he was going to Mexico City, and that’s where he is. It was all over the news that he didn’t show up with his son but wouldn’t answer questions as to where he was. He’s staying at the St. Regis in Mexico City. The presidential suite.”

“Seems fitting,” frowned Cam. “Alright. We send a team down to speak with him. Get into the room without anyone knowing, speak to him, and get the hell out of there. Don’t let the authorities see you or identify any of you.”

“Sounds to me like you could use some drunk senior citizens,” smirked Kegger.

“Brother, we appreciate it, but...”

“Don’t insult me, Eric. I’m not too old or crippled that I can’t kick your ass. Chipper will take us down there for a boys’ getaway. Draw attention away from all of you. We’ll make some noise in the hotel bar. Nothing that warrants arrest.” He laughed, then sobered. “But, uh, if we do get arrested, make sure you get us the hell out of there. I think Otto still owes a bar bill somewhere down there.”

“Okay,” nodded Cam. “The senior citizen team, Chase, Tanner, Bogey, Mo, Ophelia, and Ethan. Take Hiro and Trak. They’re the best climbers.”

“The presidential suite has a long veranda,” said Hiro. “We can go up the stairwell to the roof, rope down onto the grass terrace and get in through the glass doors without anyone knowing. The bodyguards will be with him at his event, so as long as they don’t come back before him, we’ll have access to the suite. He’s got a fundraiser tomorrow night, that’s about five miles from the hotel. We can keep an eye on the event and watch when he leaves. He comes back, and we’ll be waiting for him, so that seems the ideal time.”

“Alright,” nodded Mo. “Let’s get this down. We’re coming home with everyone.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DeSoto stared at the men and women in the room, pushing the dry fish around his plate. He didn't have much of an appetite, and he definitely didn't want to chance eating the poorly prepared food. You would think for what they charged for the plate, it should have been the best food in the city.

Every person in the room had paid an exorbitant amount to eat shitty food and hear him speak about Mexico's future. The truth was he didn't give a shit about Mexico's future. He didn't care if it failed, succeeded, died, fell to another country, or simply slid into the ocean.

What he really wanted was to return to his home, have his own cook prepare a meal that could actually be consumed, turn on some music, and fall asleep. That's what he really wanted. This entire clusterfuck was because of something Vonn had done. The man was dead and still causing shit in his life.

He heard the loud applause and looked up to see people standing. He smiled, nodding to them, and made his way to the podium. For twenty minutes, he spoke about a future Mexico. A future where they were secure and safe. A

future where they didn't have to rely on the United States or Canada, or any other country.

Forced to stop every few minutes to allow for the applause to die down, he wanted to scream at them and tell them they were all fools, but he didn't dare. When he spoke the last words of the prepared speech, the entire room stood, applauding.

He couldn't wait to get out of there. He just wanted to go to sleep and leave in the morning. Standing, he excused himself, saying the fish didn't agree with him. Nodding at the bodyguards, they moved him toward the vehicle and drove through the streets toward the hotel.

The night could not end soon enough.



“He’s just left the fundraiser,” said Hiro, staring at the view on his tablet from the drone. “We need to get down to that terrace.”

Trak nodded at the younger man, connecting the ropes to the HVAC units. Carefully lowering to the grass below, he stared over the edge, down twenty-three flights. Heights never

bothered him. They made him feel free and alive. When Hiro quickly followed, they waited for the rest of the men.

One-by-one they came down, with Mo and Ophelia last. She looked like a pro, despite all of Mo's worries. Dressed in the same gear as the men, she was every bit the professional.

"He's pulling up," said Hiro, staring at his phone.
"Kegger? You guys do your thing."

"On it," he smirked, standing from his stool at the bar. He weaved a few times, laughing with his buddies, then backed into the bodyguard as he walked through the door of the hotel lobby.

"Oh, shit! Sorry, buddy," he laughed.

"Watch what you're doing," said the man.

"Sure, sure, no problem," laughed Kegger.

That got their attention. Now the hotel would be watching them, and if the police were called, they could contain them in the lobby, ignoring any calls from above.

"They're on the way up," said Chipper into his comms unit.

The team nodded at one another, waiting for the door to open. It was dark inside the room, only one bedside lamp on in the bedroom. They heard him tell the bodyguards that he wanted to be alone. They agreed, telling him they would leave one man outside the room if he needed them.

Opening the door, DeSoto tossed his jacket on the sofa, then kicked off his shoes. Still in darkness, he slumped onto the sofa, staring at the black screen of the television. He hit the on button and turned on an old movie, raising the volume.

Ophelia reached for the lamp by the sofa and turned the light on, holding a finger to her lips. DeSoto stared at her, then saw the men around the room and felt the hand of one of them behind him.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” she said.

“I didn’t kill your sister,” he said calmly.

“I know. Your son did.” He tilted his head, staring at her.

“Who are you? Who are you really?” he asked.

“My name is Ophelia Baldwin. That’s my real name, and that’s who I am. I’m an agent with Homeland, but you already knew that.”

“And your friends?” he smirked.

“Our names aren’t important,” said Mo. “We are with RP.”

“Mi Dio,” muttered DeSoto.

“We’re not here for you,” said Mo. “We’re here for information. Greg Myers.”

DeSoto let out a long, slow breath, nodding his head. He turned the television up again, then waved them toward the veranda. Stepping outside, the breezes caressed their skin. DeSoto sat in one of the lounge chairs, waving them to do the same. Only Trak, Mo, and Ophelia took a seat. The rest of the men stood, watching for any signs of the bodyguards.

“He is your boss, sí?” asked DeSoto.

“Yes. He is my boss,” said Ophelia. “Why are you working with him? We know that he’s stealing shipments from RP and trying to duplicate the technology. Why?”

“You know a great deal,” nodded DeSoto. “I won’t deny that I have made, sold, and profited from drugs. I won’t deny that, on occasion, I have trafficked women. But I do not involve children. My son did.”

“We know that,” said Mo. “What about Myers?”

“You’re an impatient young man,” smirked DeSoto. Trak stared at the other man, glaring at his face.

“I am an impatient old man,” frowned Trak. “Why are you sleeping with Myers?” DeSoto looked as if he’d been slapped, then continued.

“Vonn.” DeSoto leaned back, frowning. “Everything is because of Vonn. He and Myers were ensuring that the shipments got through to the U.S. without any problems. Myers would call Border Patrol or the DEA and tell them the shipment was a fake, being used to draw us out. It worked. For a while. Then he wanted to find other ways. Vonn thought of the idea of the furniture.

“Then Myers suggested we heist your shipments and see if we could make what you were making, only better, selling it to your enemies.” He shook his head, staring at the men. “No one could make what you’re making, let alone make it better. Myers was pissed, but he kept doing it just to make you angry.”

“He succeeded,” said Bogey. DeSoto nodded again, staring up at the huge men around him. If his bodyguards were half as good as these men, he’d live forever.

“Myers had the idea of me running for office here, ensuring that Mexico would never cooperate with the United States. He wanted to be appointed Secretary of National Defense, complete with mansion, armored car, and women.”

“What about Martin? Why make him run for president of El Salvador?” asked Ophelia.

“Once again, that was Myers’ idea. My son is, was, too much of a risk to ever be president. The people would have never allowed it to happen. Someone disrupted the rally where we were going to announce his intentions, which was a good thing.”

“You killed your own son,” said Hiro, staring at the older man. He nodded, never looking away from Hiro’s face.

“Yes. But he was no longer my son. He was a puppet for Myers. He was addicted to the drugs we manufactured, took risks that would be detrimental to our business, and was beyond help.”

“Why not just walk away?” asked Chase. “You don’t need Myers. Your business was doing fine before. Why?”

“There is a code, even among drug dealers, murderers, and thieves,” started DeSoto. “There are certain rules that you

don't break. I've broken them all. I killed my father to take his business. I killed my wife to get her money. I killed my son to avoid humiliation. Ironically, none of that is seen as a problem.”

“Are you going to get to the fucking point?” growled Tanner.

“I fell in love with an American.”

“Why in the world would that be seen as breaking a rule?” asked Ophelia. He stared at her a moment, then gave a shy grin. The men looked from one to the other, unsure of what DeSoto was saying. “You're in love with Myers.”

“And you are a very astute young woman,” said DeSoto. “I thought he loved me as well, but as it turns out, he loved what I could do for his bank account and career. He and Vonn connected on business first, and then I came into the mix.

“He knew I was attracted to him. He knew and played right into it. I didn't know that everything we did, he filmed or recorded. Whether it was a business meeting or a personal meeting,” he said, looking down at his lap. “He showed Martin the videos, which is when our problems began. Martin was out of control and thought he couldn't trust me any

longer. Myers had him doing crazy things. Sending drugs inside of children.”

“We’re aware,” growled Bogey. DeSoto nodded.

“If I don’t do what he asks, he will expose me to all of my associates. I know that means nothing to you, but it’s more than them just no longer doing business with me. They will kill me. Slowly. Deliberately. Not for being in love with another man. But for being in love with an American who works for Homeland. It won’t matter that he’s a traitor to his country.”

“We found deposits of large sums of money to Myers. But it doesn’t seem like the kind of money that might be generated from a relationship like yours,” said Ophelia.

“Again, you’re a very smart young woman. It’s why he was afraid of your sister being in Vonn’s business. She saw one of the payments and knew it was a problem. He insisted that she be killed. When you said you were coming to Jakarta to find your sister, he ordered for you to be taken. The larger sums of money were funneled into two business accounts.

“One is under the name of North Industries. The other is under the name of Island Mechanical. They’re fronts. There is no business, but that’s where his money is.”

“And the men who took me in El Salvador? Who were they?”

“They were my son’s men. Not mine. Myers’ ultimate goal is to be the inside man in Mexico, feeding them all the secrets of the U.S., and ultimately, I believe he’ll attempt to overtake southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, working his way north from there.”

“Why Mexico?” asked Mo. “He’s not of Mexican decent.” DeSoto nodded, not able to look the men in the eyes.

“No, but his uncle is.”

“Oh, God,” muttered Ophelia. “It’s not just about him showing the videos to your colleagues or to your son. He’s your nephew.”

“His mother was my sister. I never once had an impure thought of him while he was growing up. It wasn’t until he was a grown man and approached me. I had no idea of the level of evil in his heart.”

“Where is he?” asked Mo.

“He knows that you’re slowly figuring out he is at the core of this problem. Last week, he asked for leave due to a medical problem. It was granted. I am supposed to meet him

in three days' time in Detroit. He has a new connection for bringing goods across the border. Both ways.”

“Where are you to meet him?” asked Ophelia.

“At the entrance to the tunnel to Canada. There is a restaurant on Bagley. We know the owner. We're to meet there at two p.m. in three days.”

“Will you help us?” asked Ophelia. “We can protect you from Myers.”

“And what happens to me afterwards? Do you cart me away in chains?” he smirked.

“No,” said Trak. “We don't agree with your businesses. But if you help us stop Myers, we will let you walk free for now. You have our word.” He nodded, looking at all of them once again.

“One thing I know is that you're all worth your word and then some. I will help you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Mo said nothing as they returned to Belle Fleur, ready to take a shower and go to bed. But he knew he'd have to have a conversation with Ophelia about Detroit. She deserved to face her boss, but the idea of her going head-to-head with him, considering all he'd done, seemed too much for him to imagine. She would be placing her life on the line once again, unnecessarily, in his opinion. He didn't want to deny her the chance to face him, but he preferred she does it in a courtroom or with him behind bars.

Each man made their way to his cottage, not even bothering to wave. Most of the property was sound asleep. Mo kicked off his shoes and watched as Phe went to their bedroom.

She stripped, stepping into the shower first. Pulling the elastic from her hair, he grinned at the curtain of bouncy curls unfurled down her sleek back. Undressing, he stepped in behind her.

“Are you ever going to talk?” she asked, turning in his arms. He chuckled. The rumble of it shaking against her cheek.

“I know you want to face Myers, but I’m terrified, and I don’t know what to do,” he said. “I know that you’re a Homeland agent. I know that you’re capable. I know that you’re qualified. It’s that I just found you again, and I couldn’t survive losing you.”

“Thank you for saying that,” she said, smiling up at him. “I don’t want to go, Mo. I want to face Myers eventually, in a courtroom, but I don’t want to go. I’m not sure I could think clearly if I saw him.”

Mo let out a long, slow breath, tears filling his eyes, he was so emotional.

“I can’t believe how relieved I am to hear that,” he said, kissing her.

“I want to face him in court. I want ask why he killed my sister. I want to ask all kinds of questions, but I don’t want to do that and potentially jeopardize an op. I’ll wait here. Patiently,” she grinned.

“I love you, baby. I love you so much.” Mo lifted her slowly, curling her legs around his waist. He pressed her back against the wall, his cock already finding the warm, wet home it wanted. Gripping her ass cheeks, he drove inside her as she tightened around him.

“God, that feels so good,” she moaned, taking his bottom lip between her teeth.

He grinned at her, rubbing his evening whiskers down her neck to the hollow of her throat. Pressing one foot against his rock-hard ass, she lifted her hips, angling in such a way that she immediately cried out with relief, Mo shaking as his knees struggled to hold them in their bliss.

Twice more, they made love before finally falling asleep. When Mo woke for the morning run, he was working on about three hours of sleep but not complaining. His usual group of early morning runners were ready and waiting, stretching out. Bogey smirked at him.

“Looks like we all had a welcome home party last night,” he smiled.

“Nothing better in the whole fucking world,” said Mo. “I never thought I’d say that, but I couldn’t be happier that Phe is in my life to stay.”

“I know what you mean,” smiled Tanner. “I thought I was helping a homeless red-headed kid, and it turned out I was falling in love with the other half of my soul.”

“Is Irish ever gonna tell that doctor that he thinks she’s hot?” smirked Chase.

“He needs to tell her that he’s almost completely healed, thanks to the pond. Gabi wants her to stay and be a part of our clinic. If he screws that up, he’s going to have her to answer to,” said Bogey.

“Not our problem today,” said Mo. “Our problem is running on almost no sleep. Let’s get this over with.”

They knew the crew with Trak, Clay, and the others was already way ahead of them. They saw glimpses of them across the dark property but had no intentions of catching them. This morning’s run was simply to check the box that it was done and be able to move on to the next task.

As the sun began to rise over the bayou, the pink and purple of the winter morning sky cast its shadow on the murky waters. The gators skated over the surface, bullfrogs hitching a ride to their final destinations. A sharp wind cut across the water, and the men all felt the chill deep in their bones.

Standing in front of the office was the first team, walking out and stretching from their earlier run. When the older team members walked up in their running gear, the younger men smiled at them. It wasn’t that they didn’t run

every day, but it was usually later and not quite as far as the rest of the team. Only Trak still ran the distance of the younger men. He frowned at his friends.

“Why are you here?” he said in a serious tone.

“Don’t be an ass, Trak,” growled Nine. “I’ve put on six pounds in the last month thanks to Mama Irene’s cooking. I need to start running more.” Trak stared at his friend, nodding.

“You could have run with me.”

“And kill ourselves?” said Gaspar. “No, thanks. I’ll just suffer the usual heart attack while running as an older man.” Trak looked at Nine, Gaspar, Ghost, Ian, Wilson, Tailor, and Miller.

“You won’t die. Not yet.” He casually walked toward his cottage, and the men all flipped him the bird. His back was to them all, but even not seeing it, he knew. He raised his hand above his head and saluted them back.

“Sometimes I hate that he’s so good,” frowned Tailor. “Other times, I’m glad he’s on my side.” He laughed at his friends and took off, his big feet slapping against the crunchy, wet gravel.

“So, who all is going to Detroit?” asked Cam, walking toward them.

“I think we send the same team from last night,” said Mo. “Maybe a few more if he’s meeting with someone big. DeSoto just said that it was someone who could help him with getting things across the border. What if it’s more than one person? What if it’s someone who brings an army?” Luke stared at the other men.

“Then I guess we need to bring an army.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DeSoto waited for the call to come from Myers. He already knew that he'd left his job at Homeland, not giving any reason for his exit. He simply told his superiors he would not be returning and that he would take his talents elsewhere.

The meeting with the team members of RP was a long time coming. Honestly, he thought they'd come to kill him, and they had every right to do so, considering his history. Instead, they only asked for information from him about Myers. They promised to let him go when it was all done, and for some strange reason, he believed them.

He'd heard the stories of Miguel Santos turning over a new lease on life, and although it was admirable, he had no intentions of doing the same. He would, however, change the avenues on which he conducted business, avoiding men like Myers and Vonn. A man like himself belonged in his own country.

The tablet began to ring, and he thought about just declining the call, pissing Myers off a little before taking it. But he needed this to go smoothly if he were to survive.

“Greg, nice to see you,” he smiled. He wanted to be sick. He’d let his own nephew fool him into believing they were in love.

“Hello, Uncle,” he smirked. “I understand that Mexico City was a huge success. I hope you’re getting ready to announce me as your new Secretary. I’m looking forward to getting our men in shape for the new Mexico that the world isn’t prepared for.”

“Why are you so keen on this, Gregory?”

“Don’t call me that. It’s just Greg,” he frowned.

“Fine. Greg. Why are you so keen on this? Why not attempt to take over your own country? Why not force yourself into a higher position in America?”

“It’s not possible at this time,” he said, frowning into the screen. DeSoto stared at him, then nodded.

“I see. The new president, Michael Bodwick. He can’t be bought. He can’t be bought because he was an exemplary Navy SEAL and a member of REAPER-Patriots if I remember correctly. You have no way of winning against him.”

“Shut. Up. He’s a gimp has-been. He was lucky to get into that office by some freak, backwoods law that

everyone missed. Believe me. It won't happen again. I can make my mark just as easily in Mexico. Maybe more so. Besides, we've got friends in Canada now."

"Friends? Men like us don't have friends, Greg."

"These men are our friends. They work with the Canadian truckers' union but are a little unhappy with their leadership. They haven't received a pay raise in four years, and their benefits are for shit. I've offered them ten percent of the profits from any shipment. One out of every ten shipments they can keep and sell themselves."

"Why are we running things to Canada, Greg? That's not where our market is," said DeSoto.

"We're running things from Russia and China through Canada," grinned his nephew. His stomach roiled at the sight of his smile. It was a smile that just a few short years ago brought him taboo pleasures. Now, it made him sick.

"So, you're stealing from my business to give to the Chinese and Russians?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Valez," he said, smiling. "We're just going to run some things to them that they don't currently

have. They believe they can take the things from RP and recreate them.”

“I thought we disposed of those,” asked DeSoto.

“No,” laughed Greg. “Vonn and I agreed that we should keep them for potential future use. And what do you know? We have potential future use. We’re going to be immensely wealthy, Uncle. Tomorrow at ten a.m. The restaurant will have a closed sign on the door, but they’ll open the doors for us.”

“Where are you staying? I’ll book a room at the same hotel,” said DeSoto.

“I’ll fly in early that morning and meet you there. I’ve got some things to take care of this evening. I need to ensure that my things are transferred to my new home in Mexico without issue. You go ahead, and I’ll meet you tomorrow. Have a lovely evening, Uncle.”

“Yes, you as well,” he smiled. Ending the call, he pulled out the phone that the RP men had given him. He quickly sent the text message, then removed the chip as instructed and crushed the phone beneath his heel, tossing the pieces into the trash.

He then called for his private jet and asked that a reservation be made for him in Detroit. Hopefully, by this time tomorrow, he would be rid of his problem and begin a new life. Alone. But new.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“We’ve received the message from DeSoto. He’s meeting Myers at the restaurant at ten a.m. That means we need to get there tonight, post some men outside the restaurant early, and get inside. We promised him that he would walk away, and I’d like to make good on that promise,” said Luke. Miguel smiled at his young friend.

“Luke, he is not a man to turn as I did. He has nothing to want to turn for. He has no children, no wife. He only has the life and business he’s built.”

“I know,” he nodded, “but we keep our word. If he fulfills his end of this bargain, I’ll let him walk. It may not make a difference today, but who knows what it might do in the future.”

The men nodded as they grabbed their weapons, packed their bags, and preparing for the trip north. It was cold in Louisiana, but there was snow on the ground and more expected in Detroit. Their cold weather gear was definitely needed for this trip.

“If the truckers are truly on his side,” said Hex, “they’ll fight dirty. They won’t have military training, but that doesn’t

mean they're not deadly. Last spring, they staged a work stoppage on the bridges into Canada, effectively halting any trade. When police moved in, the truckers beat them with baseball bats, despite the police attempting to end the standstill peacefully. Watch your backs. We'll be bringing a large crew, including Team Big."

"Awesome," grinned Noa.

Gear was loaded, and when the wives and family members came out to say goodbye, Mo was struck by the fact that he had someone there that would be waiting for him upon his return.

"Come back to me, Moses Baird," she whispered, hugging him. "If you don't, I swear I'll curse on your grave and marry someone that I know you'd disapprove of." He laughed, pulling back to see the tears in her eyes.

"I'm coming back, babe. We will always come back. I think Mama Irene has a secret connection to the man upstairs. Stay close in case we need any additional information."

"Actually," smiled Hazel, walking toward them, "we're headed to Virginia to see what we can find in Myers' home. His landlord said he packed everything up and has it sitting in

the driveway in one of those pod things. We're going to take a look and see what we can find."

Mo wanted to say, 'hell no,' but he knew how well that might go over. Instead, he nodded, kissing her again.

"Don't worry, big guy," said Kate. "We're taking Otto, Kegger, and Pork. They'll be watching our backs, and we'll be looking for evidence. You guys just get the bad guys."

Mo kissed her once more, following the other men to the jets. When they were out of sight, she turned, smirking at Hazel and the women.

"Please tell me this is going to be fun," she smiled.

"So much fun," laughed Hazel.



Detroit had experienced a resurgence in the last few years. New homes built in areas that seemed as if they'd emerged from worn-torn countries were popping up everywhere. People were moving back into the city instead of trying to get out.

Even their sports teams had left the suburbs and moved back into downtown. The new stadiums hosting the Lions, the

Tigers, and Pistons allowed them all to play right in the middle of the city, the faithful Redwings having never left their beloved Joe Louis Arena.

There was Greektown, Wayne State University, casinos, and hotels, and corporations had moved back in. All of this made Detroit a booming town once again, vibrant and full of life, ready to welcome her visitors to the old Fox Theater and the Detroit Symphony.

“Cool hotel,” remarked Bogey, staring up at the red brick of the structure.

“It’s very cool,” said Hiro. “It has a long history in this city.”

“No time for history lessons,” said Cam. “Let’s find our restaurant and see what’s happening there now.”

Taking the rental SUVs, they trudged through the snow and toward the restaurant sitting in the shadow of the Ambassador Bridge. The parking lot was packed, noticeably with trucks. Not pickup trucks but haulers and semis.

“If we go in there, someone may take notice, and if they’re with Myers, they’ll call him,” said Bogey.

“Well, then try to blend in,” smirked Luke.

They opened the door to the smoky, raspy voice of Bob Seger playing on a jukebox and the smell of stale cigarette smoke and beer. Tables with chairs were pushed against the walls, high tops with stools brought out at night to make it more of a bar. The menu was posted on the wall.

Burgers, Tacos, Hot Dogs, Wings, Fries. No bitching. No salads. No substitutions. Welcome to Detroit.

“I kinda like this place,” said Ethan with a straight face. Mo looked at the big man beside him. He would become a member of Team Big in time. He just had to get his shit straight before he could do that.

“Not a lot of room for us, Luke,” said Cam.

“Never stopped us before,” he grinned. “Find a space and blend in.”

“Blend in?” frowned Tanner. “I’m not sure we blend in. Besides, have you noticed all the waitstaff are male? This is a place used to bar fights and trouble, not drunks picking up chicks. There’s not one woman here.”

Ethan and Rory stood at the bar, waiting for the bartender to serve them. He seemed to ignore the men,

passing them quickly as he moved from one end of the bar to the other. That is, until Rory reached across the bar with one hand, gripping the man's neck.

“It's not nice to ignore paying customers.”

The bartender thought he was going to be smart, gripping a baseball bat beneath the bar and swinging it toward Rory. Before it ever even hit its mark, Ethan had it in his hands and snapped it like a twig.

“Hey! That was signed by Al Kaline!” he yelled.

“Al who?” frowned Ethan. He knew damn well who Al Kaline was. A great Detroit Tiger in the sixties and seventies, he was a local hero and icon.

“Don't ignore your customers,” said Ethan. “All we want is a beer. For everyone.”

“Everyone? As in the whole bar?” asked the man, confused.

“I said everyone,” said Ethan. “Pour the fucking beer.”

The bartender stared at him, then nodded, placing fifty clean glasses on the bar. He began pouring, sliding the beers to the end of the bar for his patrons.

“Four burgers,” said Tailor, staring down at the man. He looked up, and up, and up, finally settling on the dark face of the giant.

“You the new defense for the Lions?” he smirked. Tailor leaned forward, grinning.

“Yep. Four burgers. For me. And get whatever my friends want. We’ve been on the road all day, and we’re hungry. When we get hungry, we get antsy, and when we get antsy, well, things never work out well for us.”

They all ordered their food, finding seats where they could. There was a lot of chatter about the restaurant not being open until two the next day but for a good reason. Their Canadian brothers were going to be using the place to broker a deal that would change their lives.

Ethan lay down a wad of cash and turned toward the rest of the bar with Rory, leaning their backs against the railing. He admired the shit out of the other man and respected his fighting ability. More than that, he respected him for being able to admit that his wife was a better fighter. Ethan nudged him, nodding toward a big, barrel-chested man speaking with Mo.

“Hey, who’s yer best fighter?” he asked.

“Dude, you don’t wanna go there,” laughed Mo. The man let out a roar, the entire bar quieting.

“Tiny, no fighting tonight,” said the bartender tentatively.

“I’m just gonna see what the lads have,” he grinned. Rory nodded, staring at Ethan.

“Well, it’s time for you to get back in the saddle. You wanna take this one?” he asked. Ethan gulped the beer, slamming the mug onto the bar.

“Order me another one. I’ll be right back.” Ethan tapped the man on the shoulder, smiling. “You asked who the best fighter in the room was.”

“Aye, I did, laddie. See, no one comes into my bar and starts orderin’ beers for everyone without me sayin’ it’s okay.” Ethan continued to stare at the man. He was tall, probably six-three or four, but he was big. Close to three-twenty. He would be slow. His Scottish accent told him that he was a man who enjoyed fighting, a brawler. He probably rarely, if ever, lost. After tonight, he’d reconsider picking fights.

“Well, see where I come from that’s a friendly gesture by a stranger. I ordered the beers, and people seem to be enjoying them. You don’t want to drink yours, don’t. Otherwise,” said Ethan taking a step toward the man, shortening his swing distance, “shut the fuck up.”

The room quieted, and all eyes turned to stare at the two men. The RP men continued their conversations, barely giving any look to what was happening. The others seemed confused by it all. Weren’t they going to help their friend?

“Ye’ve fecked up, boy,” said Tiny. He hauled a big fist back, ready to drill the younger man. He failed to judge the height difference, missing his jaw by at least three inches as it flew by him. Angry at having missed, he pulled back again, swinging at the big man, only this time he gripped his fist in his massive paw and twisted.

The sound of cracking bones and tendons filled the air. Tiny screamed, dropping to one knee as Ethan twisted the still-fisted hand, bending his arm in an awkward position. Another man started to step forward, but Mo gripped his arm, shaking his head.

“One-on-one, brother. Step off, or you’ll get the same,” he said. The man stared at him, obviously thinking

about what his next move might be. In the end, he decided he wanted to keep his bones where they were.

Ethan bent at the waist, whispering in the other man's ear.

“I had no intentions of embarrassing you this evening. I just wanted my friends and I to enjoy a beer together. You caused this. You started the fight. All for what? Ego? You won't forget this night because your hand won't be the same for months. I would strongly encourage you to seek medical attention soon. There are at least four broken bones in your wrist and hand, strained ligaments in the wrist, elbow, and shoulder, and your tendons are torn in multiple locations as well.”

He only stared at the face of the victor, the man who'd bested him for the first time in his life. Who the fuck was this guy? Boss needed him to be present and healthy tomorrow, not in a cast.

“Are we clear, Tiny?” asked Ethan.

“Aye. We're clear.” He released the man's hand and helped him to stand. Slapping his back, he turned to the bartender.

“Get Tiny a beer, please.”

Ethan looked toward Cam and Luke, wondering if he still had a job. Both men were smirking, shaking their heads back and forth. What he’d just done was effectively bring down a three-hundred-plus pound man with one hand. One hand and he was disabled. He walked toward the bar and picked up his beer.

“Impressive,” smiled Rory. “You’ve still got your edge.” Ethan let out a slow breath, nodding at the other man.

“I can’t lie. That was fucking fun. It’s been a while since I let it loose.”

“Ethan, nothing has affected your fighting skills,” said Rory. “Nothing.”

The food was delivered, and the men sat around eating and drinking for a few hours. Several of the truckers asked them where they were from, but they all replied in the same way. They were just passing through on the way to a job up north. It was kind of true.

“We’ll be back tomorrow,” smiled Luke. “This was fun. What time do you open?”

“We’re closed until two tomorrow,” said the bartender.
“Open later because of a meeting.”

“No worries,” smiled Luke. “See you boys at two.”

When they pulled away, the men watched behind them in the parking lot as some of the semi-drivers loaded up into their cabs for a good night’s sleep. They weren’t going anywhere.

“Making sure no one screws with the building,” said Bogey. “We can get in there if you need us to.”

“No,” said Cam. “Let’s just make sure we’re here in the morning. We’re about to give Mr. Myers a surprise.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

At 0500, Hazel, Kate, Piper, Lucia, Addie, Tori, Faith, and their newest girl squad member, Ophelia, entered the former home of Greg Myers. Otto, Kegger, and Pork stayed outside, sifting through what they could reach in the large storage containers. Most of it was furniture, but the drawers were empty.

Inside, each woman took a room and began searching what was left behind. The cabinets were empty, the closets cleaned out, and most of the furniture was gone except for a few built-ins.

“He’s already been here,” said Ophelia. “He’s moved everything.”

“Check the drawers,” said Piper. “They always leave something behind.”

Digging through the drawers, they found scraps of paper. Old coffee receipts, restaurant order forms, and a few blank sticky notes. In the upstairs bathroom, there were two old razors left behind, both of which could provide DNA evidence if they needed it. Ophelia tucked them in her pocket.

There was an old sideboard in the hallway of the federal-style home, and she pulled the top drawer out, feeling all the way to the back. Her fingers hit the edge of a piece of paper, and she frowned, trying to see inside the drawer. Unable to reach it, she pulled the drawer out, watching as the paper fell to the floor.

Beltway Storage.

Two units paid for in full for one year. The year wasn't up for another two weeks. With any luck, there would still be merchandise inside those lockers.

"I think we need to take a drive," she said, coming down the steps. "I might have found something."

An hour later, the team pulled up to the storage lockers. There were two huge industrial locks on the doors. It seemed excessive, given that the entire facility was gated and under security. Lucia just smiled and shrugged, taking out her small kit and picking the locks.

With both doors opened, they shoved them up and stood back, staring at their find.

"Are those..."

‘Yep,’ smiled Kate. “Those are the stealth vests. And those crates are the comms systems. It’s our shit. All of it.”

“We have to get it out of here,” said Tori. “It’s not going to fit in our vehicles.”

“Well,” smiled Piper, “let’s see if we can get some help.”

In less than an hour, massive moving trucks came through the gates with a dozen Marines climbing down out of them. Kegger, Pork, and Otto grinned at the young men, giving a knowing head nod.

“Ma’ams. President Bodwick said you were in need of help.”

“We need a little help loading this stuff into the trucks,” said Piper. “We need to get it to Quantico.”

“I think we can do that, ma’am,” said the Marine. “Load it up!”

Less than an hour later, they followed the moving trucks out of the storage facility and toward Quantico. But before hitting the highway, Piper, Ophelia, and Sgt. Major Brent Godfrey stood on the roof of the next building, watching as two other trucks pulled in.

“I think they’re about to be surprised,” smiled Ophelia.

“I love surprises,” smiled Piper.

“I don’t think they’re gonna love this surprise,” smiled the Marine, looking at the two beautiful women. He’d learned from the President that one of them was the wife of Rory Baine. No fucking thank you.

They watched as the men opened the doors to find nothing. Not even a speck of dust. Panicked, they called the number on their phones.

“Boss? We got a problem.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Hidden in the alleyways and on the roofs around the bar, the team watched as the truckers slowly made their way inside the next morning. At 0930, Myers showed up and went inside. At 0940, DeSoto entered the building.

“I’d love to be a fly on that wall,” smirked Tanner. He heard someone clear their throat and grinned.

“Just be quiet, and you’ll hear everything,” said Hiro. “I left a few things last night that I thought might help us.”

“Greg, it’s nice to see you,” said DeSoto. “You’re looking well. Have you lost weight or perhaps done something to your hair?”

“What did you do with it?” he fumed.

“What did I do with what?”

“The shit from the storage lockers! The RP merchandise! Where the fuck is it?” he screamed.

“Greg, I had no idea where you put that merchandise. You only told me about it yesterday. How in the world would I have touched this merchandise? I left Mexico late last night, arrived here in Detroit after midnight. That’s it. If you’ve

misplaced our merchandise, perhaps you should explain to these men how that happened and how they'll be paid."

"Don't fuck with me, Valez! You did this, not me."

"I did nothing," he said firmly.

"Hey, does it really matter?" said an unidentified man.

"I mean, whatever that shit was, can't we just get more of it? We can transport it wherever you want it to go."

"It's not that easy," growled Myers. "These men are the best in the world and don't easily allow things to slip out of their hands. I got lucky with what I had. I won't get lucky again."

"No, you won't, will you?" said DeSoto. "If you were still working for Homeland, you'd have access to the information."

"Homeland? What the fuck?" grumbled the men in the room.

"I don't work for them any longer," he yelled. "I work with Mr. DeSoto and the Mexican government."

"This is fucking bullshit," said another man. "You're working with the Mexicans but want us to put our lives and

our jobs at risk to run shit through Canada? I don't think so, asshole.”

“Tiny!” They heard shuffling and a few chuckles, then the sound of Myers roaring his disapproval. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“A laddie that was here last night. I ‘spose I underestimated him,” he said.

“A laddie? One man did this to you?” asked Myers.

“Aye,” he said, nodding at the other man.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck! They were here. They were here in this building, and none of you even knew it. Get me the hell out of here,” he said, moving toward the door. They heard the men trying to open the doors, but nothing was happening.

Cam looked at Hiro, and he laughed beneath his hand.

“What did you do?”

“Well, there’s this really cool new device we have...”

“Hiro?”

“Fine. It causes a magnetic force to hold the door closed. They can’t get out until we say so.”

“Thank you,” grinned Luke. “Was that so hard?”

“Actually, yea.” The other men just shook their heads, smiling at him. Cam directed the men to get into position, then turned toward Hiro with a smile.

“Let the locks open,” said Cam.

Hiro nodded, releasing the magnetic link on the locks. As he did, five men spilled into the snow. They immediately stood, looking for their offenders. Finding no one, they raced toward their trucks and left.

“Stop!” yelled Myers. “You fucking cowards!”

“We’re not cowards, Mr. Myers,” said one of the men. “But we’re not stupid. If you expected us to run your shit so Mexico could be powerful, you asked the wrong truckers.”

The RP team waited, watching as every man left, leaving only Myers and DeSoto in the parking lot with their bodyguards. Slowly, Luke, Cam, Bogey, and Mo walked across the street. The bodyguards stood in front of the two men, but DeSoto pushed them back, nodding.

“You fucking traitor! You hooked up with RP and thought you would turn me in?”

“No,” said DeSoto. “I didn’t hook up with anyone. You are playing too many sides, Greg. I don’t want the presidency of Mexico. You did, but you can’t have it.”

“Why did you have Cordelia Baldwin killed?” asked Mo.

“Because the fucking bitch figured it out,” said Myers. “She stuck her damn nose into Vonn’s business files and figured out I was getting paid. This was my idea. Mine! Sending your shit to China and Russia was going to make us all rich. When I figured out that she was Ophelia’s sister, I knew I could find her and then get Ophelia too. Neither one of them could let it go.”

“You didn’t count on us,” said Mo, stepping forward. Cam looked at DeSoto and nodded.

“You’re free to go, Mr. DeSoto. I hope we don’t see you again.”

“That makes two of us,” said the man, walking toward his car. Mo shoved Myers into the bar with his bodyguards, the rest of their men already having entered from the rear of the building.

“I won’t do a day in jail,” he smiled. “I know too much about Homeland for them to risk it.”

“That’s true,” said Luke. “Lucky for you, the president realized that as well. You won’t have to do a day behind bars.”



In other news tonight, the bodies of three men were found in a horrific restaurant fire in downtown Detroit. One of the men has been positively identified as former deputy supervisor Greg Myers of Homeland. Obviously, there will be a complete investigation to determine if this is related to Homeland cases.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

When the jet landed at Belle Fleur, Mo looked down at his phone, seeing the messages from Phe that they were safe and waiting for them in the cafeteria. There was also a voicemail message from his father.

Hi, uh, Moses. I'm not sure if you're not taking my calls or if you're away. I just wanted to let you know that I've left your mother. I'm going to be spending some time for myself over the next few weeks. I'll let you know where I am and how to reach me. I, uh, I guess I should tell you that I left her because she was seeing someone else. A white man, Moses. Your mother was seeing a white man.

“Holy fuck,” he muttered.

“Everything okay, brother?” asked Tailor.

“No. Everything isn't okay. My father left my mother. He found out she was seeing someone else. A white man.”

“Holy shit,” said the entire team. Mo laughed, shaking his head.

“I shouldn’t laugh. I know I shouldn’t. I mean, I feel terrible for my father, but what the fuck was she thinking? Did she do this intentionally to prove some sort of point?”

“I don’t know, man, but I’m guessing your Mama is all kinds of screwed up.”

“Yea, I guess she is,” said Mo. “All I know is that my girl is safe, and we’re home where we should be.”

“Amen, brother,” said Tanner, gripping his shoulder. “Amen.”

The men were in good spirits as they walked toward the cottages, their gear slung over their shoulders. As they neared the offices, Lucinda came crashing out of the doors, screaming at someone behind her. It didn’t take long to figure out who it was.

“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 said.

“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.”

“Irish, brother,” started Mo.

“No. Never mind,” he said, storming off toward the docks. No doubt, he was headed out to the mansion to mope for a while.

“Leave him be, brother,” said Noa. It seemed everyone was in a hurry to tell someone something. Ani came running toward her brother. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Noa, we have to go home.” She’d been crying, and Noa frowned, taking her hand.

“What? We are home,” he said, trying to smile.

“No. Mom died, Noa. They’re trying to take the house and the land. We need to go home. You’re the oldest.”

“Shit,” he muttered.

“We can go with you, brother,” said Luke. Ani looked pleadingly at Noa, Carter standing behind her with his hands on her shoulders.

“Noa, we might need them,” she whispered. He nodded, seeing Kelsey walking his way. She obviously knew already, her face red from fresh tears.

“Alright. I guess we’re getting that vacation we all wanted. Pack up. We’re going to Hawaii.”



With nearly the entire team loaded onto the jets, Ophelia laid her head on Mo's shoulder, just happy to have him beside her once again. They spoke about possibly doing a beach ceremony for the wedding while there but wanted to be respectful of Noa and his family.

He told her about his mother and father, and given the good, pure heart that she was, she cried for him. Maybe one day, his father would come and see them. Maybe.

"Is everyone going to be there?" asked Phe.

"Almost," nodded Mo. "We left a core team behind. Mostly the seniors and their wives. Some of the teams with little ones stayed behind as well. Noa and Ani haven't spoken to their parents in years. They were angry with them for leaving the island and leaving them. His father died years ago, but their mother was holding on."

"She said something about someone trying to take their home and their land," said Ophelia.

"Yea. No idea what that's about. But we'll find out soon enough." She kissed Mo, closing her eyes. He nodded, whispering to no one.

“Soon enough.”

EXCERPT from ETHAN

Ethan tried to stay on the outskirts of the conflict. This was a family issue from what he could see, but Noa and Ani were really angry with the man standing in front of them. He'd watched him these last few days acting like a total asshole to everyone around him, including his beautiful daughter.

“You have no right, Akua,” said Noa. “This land doesn't belong to you. It belonged to my sister. She died, so it belongs to Koana now. It's our way.”

“She's my daughter,” growled the older man. “That makes the house and land mine.”

“No,” said Ani, “that's not how it works, and you know it. The land belonged to our mother, and it would have belonged to her mother, and it passes to her, the blood of Lim. Our other siblings are gone now. Noa and I live stateside. The land will be taken care of by our niece, not her father.”

“This is my home,” he growled, flexing his fists at his side. “You two have no rights here. You deserted the family. You left your home, the islands, for these people. Nothing

belongs to you any longer.” Ethan stared at the man, worried he might do something stupid, and he was right.

“Father,” said the beautiful woman stepping forward. She looked to be around twenty-five or twenty-six, her long silky black hair sweeping across her back. She wore white shorts and a floral tank top, highlighting her golden tan and finely honed muscles. “Father, please. Let’s speak about this inside. Ani and Noa have a right to speak here.”

He moved so quickly no one could stop it. His arm raised, and he backhanded his daughter, her body flying across the room. Kelsey and Carter knelt beside her.

“God, Koana, are you alright?” asked Carter.

She looked up at her uncle and shook her head, blood coming from her already swollen nose. They turned, expecting to see Ani or Noa kicking Akua’s ass. Instead, Ethan had the man by the throat against the wall. His bulky body barely breathing from the grip around his neck.

“Ethan!” yelled Noa.

“If you ever lay a finger on that woman again, I’ll kill you.”

SERIES AND FAMILY GUIDE

| (#) Book in Series | <i>Name of Series</i> | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Joe "Nine" Dougall | Erin Richards | Joy Elizabeth "Ellie" | Jackson "Jax" Diaz |
| | | | | Cameron | Kate Robicheaux |
| 2 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Joseph "Trak" Redhawk | Lauren Owens | Sophia | Eric Bongard |
| | | | | Suzette | Keith Robicheaux |
| | | | | Nathan | Katrina Santos |
| | | | | Joseph | Julia Anderson |
| 3 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard | Cholena "Lena" Blackwood | Eric | Sophia Ann Redhawk |
| 4 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Dan "Wilson" Anderson | Sara MacMillan | Paige | Ryan Holden Robicheaux |
| | | | | Julia | Joseph Redhawk |
| 5 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Luke "Angel" Jordan | Mary Fitzhugh | Marc (Luke) | Ela Wolfkill |
| | | | | Georgianna | Carl Robicheaux |
| | | | | Wesley | Virginia Robicheaux |
| 6 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Peter "Miller" Robicheaux | Kari LeBlanc | Frank Gaspar | Lane Quinn |
| 7 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Rachelle Robicheaux | Frank "Mac" MacMillan | Danielle (Dani) Marie | Dev Parker |
| 8 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Adele Robicheaux | Clay Duffy | | |
| 9 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Gabriel Robicheaux | Tory Gibson | | |
| 9 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | John "Gibbie" Gibson | Dhara | Dalton | Calla Michaels |
| 9 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Antoine Robicheaux | Ella Stanton | Ryan Holden Robicheaux | Paige Anderson |
| 9 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Gaspar Robicheaux | Alexandra Minsky | Luke | Ajei Blackwood |
| | | | | Carl | Georgianna Jordan |
| | | | | Ben | Harper Miller |
| | | | | Adam | Jane Wolfkill |

| (#) Book in Series | <i>Name of Series</i> | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--|--------------------------|----------------------|
| | <i>Steel Patriots</i> | | | Violet | Striker Michaels |
| 6 | <i>Reaper Patriots</i> | | | Lucy | Alex "Sniff" Mullins |
| 10 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | William "Bull" Stone | Lily Bennett | | |
| 11 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Luc Robicheaux | Montana Divide | | |
| 12 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Raphael Robicheaux | Savannah O'Reilly | Ian Luke | Aspen Bodwick |
| | | | | Katherine Gray "Kate" | Cameron Dougall |
| | | Doug Graham | <i>Deceased partner – Grip</i> Current partner – Miguel Santos | | |
| 13 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Jasper "Jazz" Divide | Gray Vanzant | Virginia | Wes Jordan |
| 14 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Baptiste Robicheaux | Rose Ellis | Elizabeth Irene "Liz" | Kiel Wolfkill |
| 14 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Alec Robicheaux | Lissa Duncan | Keith | Susie Redhawk |
| 15 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Stone Roberts | Bronwyn Ross | | |
| 16 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Suzette Robicheaux | Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco | | |
| 16 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Max Neill | Riley Corbett | CC | |
| 17 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Titus Quinn | Olivia Baine | Lane | Frank Robicheaux |
| | | | | Dominic | Leightyn Dooley |
| 18 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Axel Doyle | Cait Brennan | Corey | |
| | | Vince Martin | Ally Lawrence | Christian Martin | |
| 19 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Phoenix Keogh | Raven Foster | | |
| | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Crow Foster | | | |
| 19 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal | Aasira "Sira" Al Aman | | |
| 20 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill | Noelle Hart | Ezekiel ("Kiel") | Liz Divide |
| | | | | Jane | Adam Robicheaux |
| 20 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Elias Haggerty | Janie Granier | | |

| (#) Book in Series | <i>Name of Series</i> | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 20 | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Russell "RJ" Jones | Celia Granier | | |
| | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Chad Taylor | | | |
| | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Woody "Doc" Fine | | | |
| | <i>Reaper Security</i> | (d) Tony Parks | | | |
| | <i>Reaper Security</i> | (d) Alan Haley | | | |
| | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Michael Bodwick | Miriam | Aspen | Ian Robicheaux |
| | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Miguel Santos | Doug | Katrina | Nathan Redhawk |
| | <i>Reaper Security</i> | Luke Robicheaux | Ajei Blackwood | Garrett | |
| 1 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Ian Shepard | Faith Gallagher | Kelsey Gallagher | Noa Lim |
| 2 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Noa Lim | Kelsey Gallagher | | |
| 3 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Dave Carter | Ani Lim | | |
| 4 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Lars Merrick | Jessica Fisher | | |
| 5 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Trevor Banks | Ashley Dalton | | |
| 5 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | John Cruz | Camille Robicheaux | | |
| 6 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry | Zoe Myers | | |
| 7 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Chris Paul | Elizabeth Broussard | | |
| 8 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Luke O'Hara | Lucia Salvado | | |
| 8 | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Rory Baine | Piper Colley | | |
| | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | (d) Anthony Garcia | | | |
| | <i>My Seal Boys</i> | Eric & Anna Tanner | | | |
| 1 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Eric "Ghost" Stanton | Grace Easton | (d) Faith & Hope | |
| | | | | Jack Tyran "JT" | |
| | | | | Eric Ryan | |
| 2 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Jack "Doc" Harris | Aubrey "Bree" Collins | Eva Irene | |

| (#) Book in Series | <i>Name of Series</i> | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 3 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Wade "Whiskey" English | Katarina Krevnyv | Juliette Rose | |
| 4 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Quincy "Zulu" Slater | Gabrielle London | Wade Eric | |
| | | | | Tyler Gunner | |
| 5 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Gunner Michaels | Darby Greer | Calla | Dalton Gibson |
| 6 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Tyler "Tango" Green | Taylor Holland | Chase Maxwell | |
| 7 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Diego "Razor" Salcedo | Isabella "Bella" Castro | | |
| 8 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Alex "Ace" Mills | Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor | Alexander John "AJ" | |
| 9 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal | Tinley Oakley | Tyran Eagle | |
| | | | | Hawk Gunner | |
| | | | | Benjamin Scott | |
| 9 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal | Keegan Oakley | | |
| 10 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Scott "Skull" Crawford | Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O'Connor | Mathew Scott | |
| | | | | Kevin Alexander | |
| 11 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc | Suzette Doiron | Benjamin Alfonse | |
| 12 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Noah Anders | Tru Blanchard | William Rush | |
| 13 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Tristan Evers | Emma Colvin | Hannah Ivana | |
| 14 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Ivan Pechkin | Sophia Lord | William | |
| | | | | Benjamin | |
| | | | | Celeste | |
| | | | | Cassidy | |

| (#) Book in Series | <i>Name of Series</i> | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|----------------|-----------------------|
| | | | | Carrie | |
| 15 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Griffin "Griff" James | Amanda Nettles | | |
| 16 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Bryce Nolan | Ivy Brooks | | |
| 17 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Kingston Miles | Claire Evers | | |
| 18 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Grant Zimmerman | Everly "Evie" Johnson | | |
| | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Molly Walker | Asia | boy | |
| | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | George Robert Williamson | Mary | | |
| | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | (d) Axel "Axe" Mains | (d) Decker "Ice" McManus | | |
| | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | James Scarlutti | | | |
| | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Chen Wu | | Choi Wu | |
| | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Ian Laughlin | | | |
| | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Conor Laughlin | | | |
| | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Vincent Scalia | | (d) Isabella | |
| 19 | <i>Steel Patriots MC</i> | Strikers Michaels | Violet Robicheaux | | |
| 1 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Dexter Lock | Marie Robicheaux | | |
| 2 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Jean Robicheaux | Rose "Ro" Evers | | |
| 3 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Jackson "Jax" Diaz | Joy "Ellie" Dougall | | |
| 4 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Hunter Michaels | Megan Scott | | |
| 5 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Carl Robicheaux | Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan | | |
| 6 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Alex "Sniff" Mullins | Lucy Robicheaux | Caroline Willa | |

| (#) Book in Series | <i>Name of Series</i> | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 7 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Cameron "Cam" Dougall | Kate Robicheaux | Ian William | |
| 8 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Keith Robicheaux | Suzette "Susie" Redhawk | Joseph Alec Keith (JAK) | |
| 9 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Eric Bongard | Sophia Ann Redhawk | Billy Joseph | |
| 10 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Joseph Redhawk | Julia Anderson | Joseph Billy (JB) | |
| | | | | Tobias Franklin | |
| 11 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Ryan Robicheaux (Holden) | Paige Anderson | Dan Antoine | |
| 12 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Nathan Redhawk | Katrina Santos | Nathan Luke | |
| | | | | Michael Douglas | |
| 13 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Ben Robicheaux | Harper Miller | | |
| 14 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Sean Liffey | Shay Miller | | |
| 15 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill | Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux | Everett Baptiste | |
| | | | | Eastman Matthew | |
| | | | | Ethan Ezekiel | |
| 16 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Ian Robicheaux | Aspen Bodwick | | |
| 17 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Adam Robicheaux | Jane Wolfkill | | |
| 18 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Marc Jordan | Ela Wolfkill | | |
| 19 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Wes Jordan | Virginia Divide | Patrick Jasper | |
| | | | | Christopher Luke | |
| | | | | Sadie Allison | |
| 20 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Aiden Wagner | Brit Elig | | |
| 21 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Devin Parker | Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan | | |
| 22 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Dalton Gibson | Calla Michaels | | |
| 23 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Frank Robicheaux | Lane Quinn | | |

| (#) Book in Series | <i>Name of Series</i> | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|---|-----------------------|
| | | Jake Fonet | Claudette Robicheaux | | |
| 24 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Hirohito Tanaka | Winter Cole | | |
| 25 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Dominic 'Dom' Quinn | Leightyn Dooley | Conor Dooley Quinn | |
| 26 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Bron Jones | Mila Lambton | | |
| | | Thomas Bradshaw | May Wong | | |
| 27 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Patrick Fitch | Carsen Benoit | Alistair Thomas | |
| 28 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill | Eva Harris | | |
| 29 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Callan Battle | Juliette English | | |
| 30 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Duncan Adams | Lindsay Pollard | | |
| 31 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Remy Robicheaux | Charlotte Guthrie | | |
| 32 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Garrett Robicheaux | Celeste Pechkin | | |
| 33 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Robbie Robicheaux | Carrie Pechkin | Forrest Pierre | |
| 34 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Cade Norgenson | Cassidy Pechkin | | |
| 35 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Bodhi Norgenson | Vivienne Green | Walker Sten | |
| 36 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Magnus Bridges | Addie Patterson | | |
| 37 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Hex Vernon | Gwen N'hana | Sebastian Tadzee | |
| 38 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Wade Slater | Hannah Evers | Patrick Garr | |
| 39 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Sam Cooper | Mia Rogers | | |
| 40 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Tiger Slater | Hazel Bream | | |
| 41 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Jalen Carson | Stormy Rainwaters | | |
| 42 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton | Rachel Davis | Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia | |
| 43 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Matthew Robicheaux | Irene Hebert | Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachelle, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec | |

| (#) Book in Series | <i>Name of Series</i> | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 44 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Milo Abbott | Lia Goodwin | | |
| 45 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Nic "Torro" Torres | Melanie Fairfield | | |
| 46 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | JT Stanton | Kennedy Rice | | |
| 47 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Chase Green | Maeve Korhonen | | |
| 48 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Will Pechkin | Brooke Ford | | |
| 49 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Benji Pechkin | Annie Lott | | |
| 50 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Will 'Bogey' Humphreys | Alice Evans | | |
| 51 | <i>Reaper-Patriots</i> | Tanner Sung | Micaela Vonn | (preg) | |

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|--|--|--|

Trevor

Fitz

Chris

O'Hara

Steel Patriots MC Series

Ghost – Book One

Doc – Book Two

Whiskey – Book Three

Zulu – Book Four

Gunner – Book Five

Tango – Book Six

Razor – Book Seven

Ace – Book Eight

Hawk & Eagle – Book Nine

Skull – Book Ten

Blade – Book Eleven

Noah – Book Twelve

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

Bodhi – Book Thirty-five

Dark Visions

Dark Medicine

Dark Flame

Magnus – Book
Thirty-six

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to two beautiful grandsons. She works full-time at a job she loves, and writing is her creative outlet. She lives in Texas and enjoys traveling, reading, and cooking. Her passion for assisting veterans and veteran causes comes from a strong military family background. Mary loves to hear from her readers and encourages them to join her mailing list, as she'll keep you up-to-date on new releases at <https://insatiableink.squarespace.com>. You can also join her Facebook page at Insatiable Ink.

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