

Mary Kennedy
CHRISTIAN

Voodoo Guardians:
Book Ten

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Book TEN



Mary Kennedy

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Contents

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

[COTTAGE Assignments](#)

[Map of Belle Île & Cabin Assignments](#)

[CABIN Assignments for Belle Île](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CHAPTER THIRTY

EXCERPT from BILLY (BJ)

[SERIES AND FAMILY GUIDE](#)

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MAP of Belle Fleur and Cottage

Assignments

G1-8 = Garçonnière

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

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



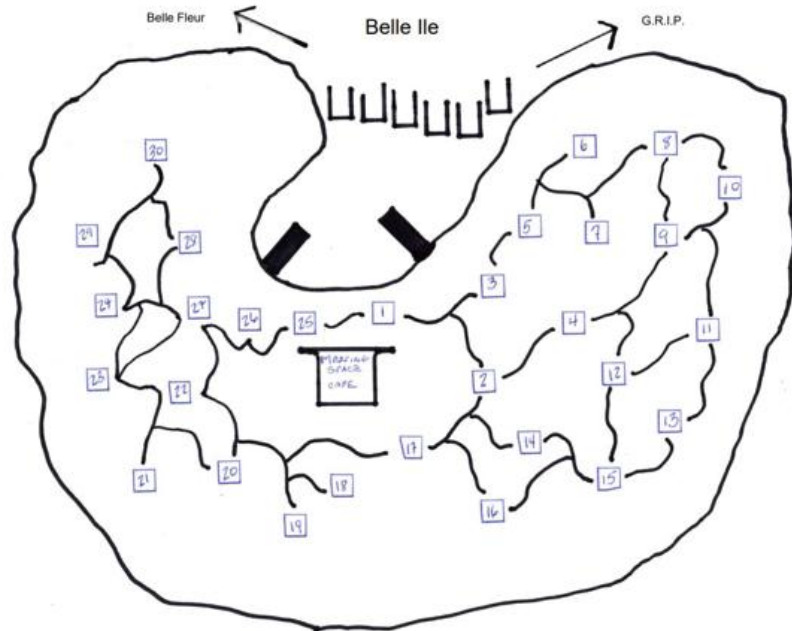
COTTAGE Assignments

<u>1</u>	Matt & Summer	<u>36</u>	Gunner & Darby	<u>G3</u>	Pork	<u>97</u>	Jalen & Stormy
<u>2</u>	Alec & Lissa	<u>37</u>		<u>G4</u>	Hex & Gwen	<u>98</u>	Chase & Kennedy
<u>3</u>	Gabe & Tory	<u>38</u>	Zulu & Gabi	<u>69</u>	Kiel & Liz	<u>99</u>	Sam & Mia
<u>4</u>	Kev & Tila	<u>39</u>	Doc & Bree	<u>70</u>	Joseph & Julia	<u>100</u>	Milo & Lia
<u>5</u>	Raphael & Savannah	<u>40</u>	Paul & Elizabeth	<u>71</u>	Wes & Virginia	<u>101</u>	Hiro & Winter
<u>6</u>	Jak & Mattie	<u>41</u>	Luke & Ajei	<u>72</u>	Dalton & Calla	<u>102</u>	Ryan & Paige
<u>7</u>		<u>42</u>	Fitz & Zoe	<u>73</u>	Nathan & Katrina	<u>103</u>	Chase & Maeve
<u>8</u>	Ivan & Sophia	<u>43</u>	RJ & Celia	<u>74</u>	Keith & Susie	<u>104</u>	Duncan & Lindsay
<u>9</u>	Tristan & Emma	<u>44</u>	Carter & Ani	<u>75</u>	Marc & Ela	<u>105</u>	JT & Kennedy
<u>10</u>		<u>45</u>		<u>76</u>	Cowboy & Autumn	<u>106</u>	Torro & Melanie
<u>11</u>	King & Claire	<u>46</u>	Trev & Ashley	<u>77</u>		<u>107</u>	Bron & Mila
<u>12</u>	Sly & Suzette	<u>47</u>	Frank & Lane	<u>78</u>	Ian & Aspen	<u>108</u>	Fitch & Carsen
<u>13</u>	Rory & Piper	<u>48</u>	Tailor & Lena	<u>79</u>	Doug & Miguel	<u>109</u>	Bogey & Alice
<u>14</u>	O'Hara & Lucia	<u>49</u>	HG & Maggie	<u>80</u>	Dom & Leightyn	<u>110</u>	Irish & Lucinda
<u>15</u>	Titus & Olivia	<u>50</u>	Bryce & Ivy	<u>G5</u>	Remy & Charlotte	<u>111</u>	Tanner & Mic
<u>16</u>	Max & Riley	<u>51</u>	Wilson & Sara	<u>G6</u>	Magnus & Addie	<u>112</u>	AJ & Skylar
<u>17</u>	Stone & Bronwyn	<u>52</u>	Mac & Rachelle	<u>G7</u>	Chipper	<u>113</u>	Mo & Ophelia
<u>18</u>	Jazz & Gray	<u>53</u>		<u>G8</u>		<u>114</u>	
<u>19</u>	Ham & Sadie	<u>54</u>	Clay & Adele	<u>81</u>	Aiden & Brit	<u>115</u>	Ethan & Koana
<u>20</u>	Phoenix & Raven	<u>55</u>		<u>82</u>	Callan & Juliette	<u>116</u>	Bone & Londyn

<u>21</u>	Noah & Tru	<u>56</u>	Lars & Jessica	<u>83</u>	Sean & Shay	<u>117</u>	Hoot & Scout
<u>22</u>	Griff & Amanda	<u>57</u>		<u>84</u>	Wade & Hannah	<u>118</u>	
<u>23</u>	Gibbie & Dhara	<u>58</u>	Kiel & Noelle	<u>85</u>	Parker & Dani	<u>119</u>	
<u>24</u>	Blade & Suzette	<u>59</u>	Jean & Ro	<u>86</u>	Eric & Sophia Ann	<u>120</u>	
<u>25</u>	Skull & Avery	<u>60</u>		<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>	Moose & Ece
<u>27</u>	Sniff & Lucy	<u>62</u>	Cam & Kate	<u>88</u>		<u>123</u>	
<u>28</u>	Noa & Kelsey	<u>63</u>	Jax & Ellie	<u>89</u>	Michael & Miriam	<u>124</u>	Red
<u>29</u>	Eli & Jane	<u>64</u>	Adam & Jane	<u>90</u>	Robbie & Carrie	<u>125</u>	
<u>30</u>	Grant & Evie	<u>65</u>	Ben & Harper	<u>91</u>	Cade & Cassidy	<u>126</u>	
<u>31</u>	Hawk & Keegan	<u>66</u>	Carl & Georgie	<u>92</u>	Garrett & Celeste	<u>127</u>	
<u>32</u>	Eagle & Tinley	<u>67</u>	Striker & Lucy	<u>93</u>	Tiger & Hazel	<u>128</u>	
<u>33</u>	Ace & Charlie	<u>68</u>	Molly & Asia	<u>94</u>	Eric Ryan & Rachel	<u>129</u>	
<u>34</u>	Razor & Bella	<u>G1</u>		<u>95</u>		<u>130</u>	
<u>35</u>	Tango & Taylor	<u>G2</u>	Kegger	<u>96</u>	Will & Brooke	<u>IM</u>	Ham, Sadie, Christopher, Ramey, Patrick, Margo

Map of Belle Île & Cabin

Assignments



CABIN Assignments for Belle Île

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

CHAPTER ONE

Christian Martin knew what a fortunate young man he was. He had parents that adored him, loved him, and gave him every opportunity a child could have. His father was in his forties when he met his mother while undercover with a biker gang.

Vince Martin was a retired FBI agent turned freelancer for Miquel Santos. He'd had a few interactions with the men of REAPER during previous missions. While undercover, he realized they were after the same man in the biker gang.

When he took a beaten, raped, and abused young girl to a late-night clinic, he met the gorgeous Ally Lawrence. Gorgeous and young.

But Ally was not going to be deterred. She'd never met a man like Vince before. He was a mix of kindness and sultry sexiness combined with danger and badass. Her experiences with men were similar to the poor young girl lying on her examination table. When Vince had to return to the REAPER compound, he discovered he couldn't do it without Ally. Not only was she the love of his life, but she would become a valuable member of the medical team.

Now, Christian was watching them as they laughed, holding one another on the porch swing of their cottage at Belle Fleur. As he scanned the property, he saw similar images. Rory and Piper were kissing beneath one of the massive live oak trees. Antoine and Ella, Baptiste and Rose, and Stone and Bronwyn were in the garden laughing and talking.

It seemed everyone was laughing and talking today. Everyone. Except him. Why was he so miserable? Shouldn't a seventeen-year-old boy, a good-looking teenager, be out with girls having fun?

That's what the NBFs at school said. NBFs were non-Belle Fleur kids. For the most part, it was all kids from Belle Fleur who attended the school, but there were others in the immediate area of the bayou who attended as well.

Christian's problem was his singular focus when working on things. Whether it was school, sports, or training at home, whatever he was doing at the time was all he thought about. The good part of that was that if you were his focus, you were his sole focus. The bad part was if you weren't his focus, he often forgot that there was anything else other than what was right in front of him.

At least, that's what Heather Jackson said as she was screaming at him, humiliating him in front of his friends. She dumped him after just three weeks of dating.

"You never call when you say you will!" she'd screeched at the bus stop for all to hear. Christian tried to use the methods his father taught him, lowering his voice, hoping she would do the same.

"I've apologized, Heather. I had football practice, and then I had to study for finals. When I was done, it was time for dinner with the family. That time is sacred for my family. It's important to us to eat our meals together because my parents are so busy. I'm sorry, I just couldn't call you."

"You could have found time to call in between there!"

"Stop yelling, please. There's no need to yell. If you don't want to date me, I understand. But I didn't ignore you intentionally and I certainly never meant to hurt your feelings or ignore you. When I'm with you, you're my focus. One thing at a time is how I live my life."

"Awesome, you can live that life with someone else," she said, flipping her ponytail at him and walking away. Within two days, she was hanging all over Arch Bolling.

Christian could only shake his head, saying a silent prayer for Arch. He was going to need it.

When others needed quiet time, they would go into the gardens or the maze. Some would just hide out in their cottage; others would take one of the boats for a ride on the bayou. For Christian, his thinking place was in a rocking chair, just outside the French doors of the big house library.

When the weather was nice and the doors were opened, he could smell the leather of the books. The sometimes musty smell of the old leather would make him sneeze, then smile. The scent of ink and paper filled his senses, and it always calmed him. Sometimes, he would grab a book and just sit with it on his lap. It wasn't that he expected to absorb it via osmosis. But it always allowed him time to think.

“Good morning, Christian,” said Matthew stepping out onto the porch behind him. “Mind if I sit with you?”

“Good morning, sir. No, I don't mind at all. It's your house, after all,” he grinned.

“It's everyone's house, son. My ancestors built this house to welcome all who needed rest. This library was always a special place for me and my children, and of course

my wife. In fact, when I expanded this library, it was for my beautiful wife,” he said, smiling.

“Have you always loved her, Mr. Matthew?” he asked staring at the stoic older man.

“Always, Christian. There was never another woman for me. Never. Now, I’m not saying there weren’t a few that tried to distract me,” he chuckled. “But Irene was my girl. I knew it and she knew it. She went through a hard time after Alec was born. He was just a little one himself, when we lost a baby, and it devastated her.”

“But you had fifteen,” he frowned. Christian didn’t understand how having sixteen children would make anyone happy. To him, fifteen was way too many, although the would never tell Mr. Matthew that.

“That’s true, but if God was gonna give us sixteen, we were ready,” he smiled. “Turns out, it wasn’t meant to be. At least not that way. Instead, we got two hundred babies, big and small.” He laughed, shaking his head.

“I guess you did.”

They were quiet for several moments, neither saying anything. Matthew wasn’t about to push him. In his

experience, young men would open up when they were ready to open up. Their minds worked differently than the young women on the property. They had to think long and hard and try to avoid distractions. Yes, sir. Young men were vastly different than the young ladies.

“Girls require a lot of attention, don’t they, Mr. Matthew?” he asked the older man.

“Sometimes. So do boys, sometimes. If she’s the woman for you, your focus will be on her twenty-four-seven, Christian. You won’t be able to think or breathe or eat or sleep without her being near you, or at least in your line of sight.”

“That sounds awful,” he said, scrunching up his nose. Matthew laughed, shaking his head.

“Not awful, son. It’s the most wonderful thing in the world. You’ll find yourself working and suddenly feel a pain in your gut. You just want to speak with her, talk to her. The need is so great you can’t breathe.

“You’ll see her from across the room or on the other side of the street, and your heart will beat faster. Whatever you’re doing in that moment no longer matters. Only she matters.”

“But, isn’t that bad? I mean, if I’m doing something important, I should finish it.”

“If it’s truly important work, then yes. But if she’s the right woman for you, she’ll understand that it’s truly important work. A casual distraction isn’t love, Christian. Casual distractions can get men killed. But when it’s true. Honest and true, there is nothing that can prevent the two of you from being together.” Christian stared at him and nodded.

“A girl at school dumped me because I didn’t call her. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to call her, but I was at practice, then I had to study for exams, then it was family time at dinner. I just didn’t get to stop, but she didn’t understand that at all. She was awfully mad at me.”

“That all sounds important to me,” said Matthew. “So, what does that tell you about the woman?”

“Maybe she wasn’t the right woman,” smirked Christian. Matthew slapped his leg, nodding.

“Christian, women are fine, beautiful creatures. They are made to attract men with their physical attributes. But what makes men stay is their heart, their soul, their mind. No doubt Irene was beautiful. Still is. Beauty fades, son. Her heart has stayed pure and wondrous, loving and giving. Her

soul is the match to my own. We knew we wanted the same things in life. And her mind is always moving in a million directions, right beside my own.”

“That’s pretty cool, Mr. Matthew,” smirked Christian.
“I think Mom is like that for Dad.”

“Oh, she definitely is. Your father went through a pain that no man should have to endure, losing his first wife and your sister. Violently. It nearly broke him. But he’s a strong man, and he found a way to make his mind right and do good for the world. We were happy when he found his way to all of us.

“Finding your mama wasn’t just luck, Christian. It was fate. I put your daddy and Skull in the same bucket. They found love once and were lucky enough to find it a second time, which tells me it was meant to be.”

They rocked a while longer, and Christian turned to Matthew.

“Do you think I’ll find love one day?” he asked.

“I know you will. I have it on good authority that you’ll find the woman that’s meant for you.” He looked down at Christian’s lap, seeing the book he was holding. “*Romeo*

and Juliet. Not exactly the way you want a love to end, but it's a great read.”

Christian stood, handing the book back to the older man. He kissed his cheek, turning with a smile.

“Thanks, Mr. Matthew. You keep the book. I'll wait until my true love comes around.”

Matthew touched his cheek, smiling at the young man. He was a good one, like all their boys. Watching as he walked back toward his own cottage, Matthew felt the hand of his beloved on his shoulder.

“I love you more every day, Matthew Robicheaux.” He kissed her hand, pulling her around to sit on his lap.

“Woman, it will never compare to what I feel for you. What do you say we take a boat ride to our favorite spot?”

Christian turned as he reached his cottage, smiling at the older couple as they walked toward the docks. He would remember that time with Matthew for years afterwards.

He was particularly remembering it today as he confronted his soon-to-be ex-girlfriend, Jean.

“You're crazy, Christian! I'm not stealing from anyone,” she said, laughing nervously.

“I caught you, Jean. I’ve suspected something for a while and put cameras up in Bo’s place last week.” Her face stilled, turning ashen. “That’s right. I’ve got you on camera.”

“That’s bullshit! How dare you violate my rights!”

“Your rights?” he laughed. “You were in his home, Jean. His fucking home!” She wisely took a step back, not wanting his anger directed at her.

“Look, I’ve been going through a rough time lately. That’s all.”

“That might explain the cash and the watches and jewelry, but what about the clothes? The Marine ribbons and medals. What were you doing with those? The electronics. What were you doing?” He took another step toward her. “What!?” he screamed.

“Stop! I swear I’ll call the police and tell them you attacked me!”

“Do it,” he said, holding out his phone. “I fucking dare you. Do it because I’m going to hand over these tapes to them when you do.”

“You’re such a dick, Christian. Do you know that? You think you’re something special because you’re MARSOC, but you’re not! You’re just another fucking jarhead. Maybe if you paid attention to me, I wouldn’t be looking for attention elsewhere.”

“Don’t give me your bullshit, Jean. You’re a kleptomaniac, pure and simple. You’d be stealing no matter how much attention you received from anyone. You’re going to give everything back, or I swear to God, I’ll file charges against you.”

“I-I can’t,” she stammered. “I mean, I’ve spent the money.”

“Where are the fucking medals and ribbons?”

“I have those. They’re at home,” she said, reaching for the door.

“You have two hours to get them and bring them to who they belong. Apologize while you’re at it. I’ll pay back the cash, but if you don’t pay me back, I’ll file charges.”

“Just so you know, Christian, you’re fucking terrible in bed.”

“So are you,” he smirked.

She slammed the door, and Christian thought he might feel something other than anger. But he didn't. It was relief. Shooting a text to the guys involved, they all gave him a thumbs-up emoji. They didn't blame him. It wasn't his fault, but they wanted their shit back.

A few hours later, he headed to Bo's to make sure everything had gone well. He never expected to see Jean fucking one of Bo's friends while sucking Bo's dick. Bo just laughed.

"She said she could pay us back a different way," he chuckled. "Didn't think you'd mind me taking it out of her like the whore she is."

"No," he frowned. "I don't mind. But just so you know, you guys fucking suck as friends." What was the saying? Bros before ho's [\[PC1\]](#)? I guess they didn't get that memo.

They really did suck as friends.

Christian slammed the door, leaving the men behind him. A week later, he was standing in his commander's office.

"Martin? We have something unique that we'd like you to do."

“Unique, sir?”

“Unique.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Skinny Winnie! Skinny Winnie!” called the boys from across the road. She wanted to punch them in the nose, but she wasn’t allowed to cross the street by herself. She also wasn’t allowed to use curse words, so she bit down on her tongue, hoping she didn’t break that rule.

“Just ignore them, Winnie. When boys tease you like that, it means they like you,” said her older brother. He intentionally was louder than he needed to be so the boys would hear him and shut up. At fifteen, he couldn’t touch the younger boys, but if they dared to lay a finger on his sister, he damn sure would.

Michael Pasko looked down at his sister and knew she was about to explode. At only eleven years old, she looked much younger because she was so skinny. It wasn’t her fault. Their folks had no money at all. None. Their father received a disability check from the mines, and their mother got food stamps, but it was barely enough to feed two people, let alone four.

“Come on,” he said, taking her hand. “Let’s go inside.”

Winnie looked up at her big brother and nodded, taking his hand. Before they entered, she pulled back on his arm.

“I’m hungry, Michael. Like really, really hungry,” she said with tears in her eyes.

“I know you are,” he nodded. “I brought some leftovers from the Chicken Shack. There’s plenty, and Mr. Woodruff said I could bring home whatever was there. Must be thirty pieces of fried chicken. I even got green beans, cole slaw, mashed potatoes, and biscuits.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyes so big they seemed to cover her entire face.

“Really,” he smiled. Sitting his sister at the table, he made her a plate, and she immediately dug in.

“Slow down. You don’t want to make yourself sick,” he said. She nodded, trying to slow down, but it was so good.

“Where are Momma and Daddy?” she asked. Her brother didn’t turn around to look at her. Instead, he wrapped up the rest of the food and placed it in the empty refrigerator. That chicken sure looked lonely.

“I’m not sure, Winn,” he answered honestly. “They were headed to Elkins on the other side of the Monongahela

Forest. Daddy needed to appear before some sort of council to get his disability extended.”

“But that was two days ago,” said Winnie quietly.

Michael turned to look at his little sister, shaking his head.

“Three,” he corrected. “I don’t know, Winn, but you can count on me, that’s for damn sure.”

“What if they don’t come back, Michael? They mighta thought it would be easier without us.”

“They would never think such a thing,” he said, shaking his head. “Finish your dinner and then take a bath. If they don’t get back tonight, we’ll hitch a ride and see if we can find them.”

It was nearly three a.m. when someone pounded on the front door. Michael didn’t have his own room, so he slept on the sofa. Jumping up in his sweatpants and sweatshirt, he grabbed the baseball bat by the door and peeked through the torn curtains.

“No,” he whispered. Opening the door, he stepped back, seeing Deputies Franks and Morgan. “Sirs.”

“Michael, is your sister here?” asked the man.

“She’s sleeping, sir. I’d like to keep it that way,” he said bravely. The two deputies nodded, waving him out onto the front porch.

“Michael, your momma and daddy were found in their car early this morning. Were you aware they were taking drugs?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I mean, Daddy had to take them for his back, I think, but Momma never took anything that I saw.”

“I think she may have started to take them, son. They had enough opioids in their system to kill a rhino and three sacks of them in their trunk. I think they were taking them and running them.”

“No way,” he said calmly. “Daddy would have never. He always said he’d skin me alive if I ever took drugs. Winnie too.”

“I know how hard this is, Michael, but it’s what we know. Your grandma died two years ago, right?” Michael nodded. “So, y’all don’t have anyone to care for you.”

“We won’t go into the system,” he said defiantly, standing and backing up toward the door. “I won’t be

separated from my sister. I won't. I have a job. I can take care of us."

"Son, you need to finish school."

"The house is paid for. Grandma made sure of that. I just have to keep water and power on and buy food. I can do that."

"And when Winnie needs clothes because she's growing out of what she has? What then? And when she needs girl's things, you know, feminine things, how will you handle that?" he asked.

"I'll take care of her. I do it now. Please. Please, I'm begging you. I'll follow any rules you have, and I'll make sure we're okay, that we get to school every day and we eat like we should. Please don't turn us in."

The deputies stared at one another and moved toward the car to whisper among themselves. In a big city, this wouldn't be possible. But in their tiny mountain town in West Virginia, no one would care one way or another. Just another miner dead. His family left with nothing. Michael was mature, and Winnie was a good kid. If they checked on them regularly, they could probably keep this quiet.

“I need to work on a few things, Michael, but let me see what I can do,” said the deputy.

He was true to his word, even getting a twenty-thousand-dollar life insurance policy from the mining company. It was enough for Michael to stash and keep them going.

Winnie became withdrawn and didn't want to leave the house without Michael. So, he convinced her that it would be okay if he took her to school, and he would wait outside for her. When she had to head to class, he ran to the school down the street and attended his own classes, knowing he had to finish to get out of this little town.

Those years weren't easy, but Michael was determined to care for his sister and ensure they were both safe and well cared for.

“The Marines? Why the Marines, Michael?” asked Winnie. She was fourteen now and had definitely left the skinny kid vibe behind her.

“Because they're the best, Winn. I've spoken to the recruiter, and he's made arrangements for me to be close to base so you can finish high school. Once you're done, I've

agreed to another four years, but I'll be deployed. By that time, you'll be in college."

"Michael! I can't afford to go to college, and you can't be deployed!"

"You can afford to go with my benefits," he said, hugging her. "We've made it this far, Winn. We'll make it all the way. I promise you. I'll have a career in the Marines, and you'll go off to college and be whatever you want to be."

"But you'll be away from me," she sniffed. He laughed, kissing the top of her head.

"That won't be for another four years. Once you're eighteen, I may be deployed, or I may not. This is the only way, Winn. It's the only way you get to go to college, and I can continue to support us and eventually get my degree."

She hugged him, linking her fingers together at his back as if she could prevent him from leaving.

"Hey. Hey, look at me, kid. Have I lied to you through any of this?" She shook her head, looking up at him. The watery blue eyes were killing him. "I have never lied, Winn. I've taken care of us, and I've done a pretty good job. We

have to get outta West Virginia, and this is a good way for us to do that.”

“Wh-what about that man? The one that said you had to work for him ‘cause Daddy stole from him.”

“I don’t believe him, and neither does Deputy Morgan. He thinks the man is making it up, and we both know he’s trouble. He won’t get to me in the Corps, Winn. We have to do this.”

It wasn’t that she cared about leaving her friends. She only had two real friends. She didn’t care about leaving West Virginia. Although, in fairness, it was the only place she’d ever been in her entire life. It was that if they left this house, they would never return.

“What about the house?”

“I’ve sold it, Winn.”

“You sold it!” she yelled.

“I had to, hun. We got no more money, and honestly, my mind is made up about this. Now, before you go crazy on me, if you’re determined to stay here in this place, Deputy Morgan said he and his wife would keep you while I’m away.”

“No! I don’t like her. She’s weird, and he’s got a girlfriend.” Michael knew that as well, but he didn’t know that she was aware of it. “No. You’re right. I’ll go with you, and we’ll be fine.”

“That’s my girl,” he said, hugging her.

Parris Island, South Carolina, wasn’t much better than West Virginia. It was hot, humid, and there seemed to be no one other than Marines and their families in the area. Once he was finished with basic, he was assigned to a clerk role at the base until his sister turned eighteen.

It wasn’t nearly as bad as Winnie had led herself to believe. They had a small apartment off-base, and her brother made enough money to provide for the two of them. She worked babysitting jobs and a part-time job at the pharmacy, rounding out their cash flow.

The night she left for college, he told her he was being shipped out. She was truly on her own.

Determined to have an occupation that would provide for them both, Winnie decided to attend the school of pharmacology. As a pharmacist, she would make good money and be able to help her brother pursue his goals. Things were going to be wonderful.

She'd been so naïve.

CHAPTER THREE

“This doesn’t seem like something the Corps would get involved with, sir,” said Christian.

“Normally, no. You’re right. But the DEA and Homeland are overwhelmed right now, and this opioid crisis has everyone on edge. The drugs are coming in faster and being distributed more quickly than you can possibly imagine. I figured since your old man was once FBI, some of it rubbed off on you,” he grinned.

“My father was with the bureau before I was born. He doesn’t talk much about it,” said Christian.

“Listen, we’ve lost three of our own from this shit, Martin. The latest is Michael Pasko.”

“Pasko? No way, sir. He would never touch that shit. His parents died from an overdose years ago, leaving him to care for his kid sister. I know he wouldn’t do this.”

“Men do strange things when they’re addicted, Martin. He asked for leave to take care of some family business, and I granted it. When he didn’t return, I asked local law enforcement to look for him. They found him dead in the

backyard of his parents' old home. He was so full of the shit, there was no way he'd survive."

"And I'm telling you he would have never taken that shit willingly. It seems more than a little obvious that they would put his dead body in the backyard of his childhood home."

"You think someone forced him?" asked the commander.

"No other explanation, sir. Where's the kid sister?"

"I'm not sure. We've been trying to find her to notify her of what happened, but she hasn't returned our calls. I'm sending two officers out to her place of employment this afternoon."

"Fuck. Excuse me, sir." The other man smirked, waving off the profanity. "He was a good Marine. Solid."

"So are you, Christian. You're a man that can keep focused on a mission, especially when you're by yourself."

"By myself?" he frowned.

"You can't go in there with support. You're already going to look suspicious walking in looking like you stepped off the football field. In fact, that's part of your cover. You

were injured and forced to retire. Now, you're in pain all day, and the only thing that helps are the pills."

"Shit," he muttered, shaking his head. "And what exactly am I hoping to do?"

"There are two main dealers in that region, but they are not the supplier. The supplier is someone much bigger."

"How big?"

"The manufacturer of the drugs," said the older man.

"What? Are you fucking with me? Why doesn't the FDA just go in and shut them down? If they know they're providing the pills, close them down."

"It's what would be logical, but this shit isn't logical, and the president wants everyone to fall for this. He wants the CEO on down to be charged with the distribution of the opioids, and every death related to the drug. We're talking about thousands of people, Martin."

"Shit, he doesn't want much, does he?"

"Well," he smirked, "he is the president."

"Yea, I get it. What's my cover again? Injured baller?"

“Yes. We have an agreement with a professional team on a fake resume for you. You were a linebacker, tore your ACL, and never recovered. While in the hospital, you got hooked on the shit and now want it for yourself but also want to sell to other players. It’s their ticket to huge sales.”

“God, this fucking sucks,” he muttered. “I don’t drink, and I don’t do drugs, so I’m unsure of how to act.”

“We’ve got our team putting together some videos and photos for you. The only thing that will be hard is explaining your size and muscle mass. They think if you tell them you’re taking steroids as well, it will fly.”

“That’s a lot of drugs for one man, even a man my size,” he frowned.

“Just do what you can, Martin. Losing one of our own makes this personal.” He looked down at his desk, then stood, closing the door. “Look, I know who your family is, and if it were up to me, I’d be asking them to do this for us. But the POTUS wants us to handle this one internally.”

“Why?” asked Christian.

“He thinks the big pharma companies are in on this together, and they have too many irons in the fire, people they

can reach out to to get intel. We're worried that someone could break your cover. These are the same big pharma companies who give donations to senators, lobbyists, and so on."

Christian shoved his hand through his beard, cursing under his breath.

"What do I need to do?"

For the next four days, he was inundated with videos of individuals hooked on opioids. He watched their behavior and realized that some of it wasn't as extreme as he originally thought. He could still pretend to have his wits about him and get the job done.

Given a bag of cash, a beat-up pickup truck, and directions to rural West Virginia, he set out on a cold October morning. Halfway there, the rain began coming down. He'd made contact with someone willing to sell him the drugs, now he just had to find out where he was located.

Driving into the mountain community, he pulled off into a small roadside rest stop and diner. Grabbing a sandwich and cup of coffee to go, he made the call to the contact.

"Who is this?" asked the man.

“My name is Chris Martin,” he said. “I was told you could help me out with something.”

“Is that right? And why would I help you?”

“Because I’ve got more than a hundred potential clients waiting on orders, and I can make you a very rich man.”

“I’m already rich.”

“Not rich like this. I’m talkin’ big money from elite athletes.” There was a long silence on the other end of the line. “Fine. I can take my business elsewhere.”

“No. No, I’ll meet you. Fireline Road. Follow it to the end. There’s a house with a gate. I’ll be there by seven.”

“Just so you know. I’m not some hick kid stupid enough to just walk into a setup. If you’re a cop, I’ll kill you,” said Christian, tasting the bitterness of the words. “I played in the NFL for seven years. I know how to handle myself.”

“Good for you,” laughed the man. “Just be here at fucking seven.”

He hung up the phone and hated himself for saying yes to this damn mission. Thinking about shooting a text to the boys back home, he decided against it for right now.

Christian found the small roadside motel and wished like hell he'd brought his tent. Whatever the fucking sticky shit was on the dresser, it made him want to vomit. Walking back out of the room, he grabbed some gloves, cleaning liquid, and clean sheets and towels from the maid's cart.

“Hey, I just cleaned that room,” said the woman.

“Then you suck at your job,” he growled. “It's disgusting in there.”

She shrugged, and he went back into the room wiping everything down again. Although the sheets did appear to be clean, he changed them again, spraying the mattress with disinfectant.

The safe in the room could have been picked by the average ten-year-old, so instead, he shoved the cash into a piece of the stealth netting from home and hid it behind the seat of his truck.

At 1730, he headed toward the meeting point. It was easy enough to find in the small town. There were a few small homes along the way, but at the end of the road was the house with the fence, just like the man had said.

He stopped the truck in front of the gate and sat for a moment, wondering whether or not he should get out. Just as he opened the door, someone opened the gate for him.

Driving through, he parked and got out, noticing a man on the front porch.

“Evening,” said Christian. “I’m Chris.”

“I figured,” said the old man. He was at least seventy, maybe older. He appeared to be in good health and didn’t seem to be addicted to the drugs he was selling.

“I’m here to do business,” said Chris.

“Then let’s do business.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“This isn’t possible,” she whispered, staring up at the two men in front of her. “My brother was an honorable Marine. He would have never taken drugs. Never. Our parents died from that stuff.”

“We’re sorry, ma’am,” said the Marine. “We’ve been told to advise you that the Marine Corps is investigating his death, and we will get to the bottom of it.”

“Where is he?”

“He was found in the backyard of your old home,” said the man.

“No,” she said, shaking her head back and forth. “No way would he have returned there. Someone did this to him. Someone who wanted him. He was protecting me.”

“Protecting you from what, ma’am?”

“The man that got my parents involved in drugs wanted Michael to sell for him. He refused, and that’s why he joined the Corps and got us out of there. He didn’t want anything to do with it.”

“Did the man contact him recently?” asked the Marine.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure,” she said, feeling the emotions bubble up in her chest. “If he was threatening me, Michael would have gone out there to stop him.”

“Maybe that’s what happened,” said the Marine. “I’ve got his personal effects in the car. Where would you like them?”

“Inside,” she said, opening the door wider.

“We tried to contact you earlier, but you weren’t available,” said the other Marine.

“I was at a conference for pharmacology,” she said, shaking her head. “A stupid conference to learn about drugs. How twisted is that?” The other Marine set the box on her table and then turned to leave.

“His body will be available for burial in the next few days. Just call this number, and they can arrange to bring him wherever you like.” She nodded, not sure where she wanted to bury him.

“We’re very sorry for your loss, Miss Pasko,” said the young Marine. She could only nod, holding back the tears that were threatening to spill.

Once they were gone, so was she. Distraught at the loss of her brother, the senseless, ridiculous notion that he took opioids, she collapsed onto the floor and cried herself to sleep.

When she woke the next morning, she opened the box on the table, carefully removing all of her brother's things. There were uniforms, t-shirts, some personal hygiene items, and a small notebook.

The first few pages were just lists of things to do. He appeared to be trying a new workout regimen that included eating certain foods. Then there was a name and number. *Questions about regimen or food call SgtMjr [\[PC2\]](#) C Martin.*

Why on earth would someone who is allegedly taking opioids be concerned about health? Because he wasn't taking opioids.

Flipping through the pages, she finally got to the page she'd hoped for. A West Virginia phone number and a name.

Winnie called the pharmacy to let them know she would need to take some family leave due to her brother's death. They were more than understanding, giving her all the time she needed. Packing a small bag, she took only the necessities that she would need for the weather in the mountains.

Dressed in jeans, a sweatshirt, and her hiking boots, she threw the pack in the backseat, then went back inside for the second bag. Opening the zipper, she stared at the two rifles and three handguns that Michael left at her place. He'd taught her to shoot years ago, and she was comfortable with a weapon in her hand. With plenty of ammunition in the bag, she was ready to go.

The drive was miserable. Cold with constant sheets of pouring rain, she took her time winding through the mountain roads. Not wanting anyone to know she was there, she rented a small house under an assumed name, paying cash for two weeks. The old woman didn't seem bothered by that at all and, in fact, gave her a discount for paying cash up front.

It didn't take long to pick up on what was happening in the community. Two dealers who owned the opioid market in the area were arguing about something big. The residents seemed concerned, and the police seemed completely overwhelmed.

"We've got everything under control," said the deputy seated at the counter. He sipped his coffee like it was a potluck after church.

“How do you think it’s under control when we got five boys dead just in the last two weeks?” asked an older woman. “It’s gotta be fixed!”

“I’m fixin’ it, Ruth,” he said calmly.

“You ain’t fixin’ nothin’,” said an older man. “We know them boys are meetin’ up there at the ridge. They go up there, make their big deals, and somebody always dies.”

“I said I was takin’ care of it,” he replied. He drank the last of his coffee and pushed back from the counter, tipping his hat at the people.

“Piece of shit is what he is,” said the old woman. “I’d bet my life he’s gettin’ a cut of the pie. Lazy little asshole.”

“Them boys is always up at the ridge,” said the old man. “I know that’s where they make their deals. We’re losin’ young men left and right. You’ll never convince me that Pasko boy came all the way back here to die in his old backyard.”

Winnie stiffened, trying to listen more intently. She didn’t want to appear too curious, but she needed to know where to find these men.

“He didn’t come back for drugs,” said the woman called Ruth. “I heard he came back to kill Fred ‘cause he threatened his sister. Jenni said she overheard him sayin’ if Pasko didn’t sell drugs on-base, they were gonna find the sister and do awful things to her.”

Winnie could feel the emotions rising in her chest. She was in danger of losing it. Her brother did this to save her. Like always.

“Well, hopefully, someone will stop them, or we’ll all be leavin’ town,” said the old man.

Winnie laid down a twenty-dollar bill and left the diner. She knew where the ridge was located, but she wouldn’t be driving up there. She would be hiking. If she could leave her car hidden in the turn-off at the bottom of the mountain road, she could hike the rest of the way, find a place to hide, and kill that bastard.

Fred Hitchkiss. He’d been her tormentor years ago. They always knew that his brother was a drug addict, so it made sense that Fred took over for him. She had no idea who the second dealer was, but it didn’t matter.

She was going to kill Fred.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Damn, you’re a big boy,” smirked the young man leaning back in the chair on the porch. “You should come work for me.”

“I thought that’s what we were talking about,” said Christian. “I buy from you. I sell to the players. We all get rich.”

“Yea, yea, I know what you mean, but I was thinkin’ you could be my muscle. You know, strong-arm folks who owe me money.”

“I’m not an enforcer,” growled Christian. “Are we doing this deal or not?”

“You’re in a hurry, friend. Have somethin’ to drink. Eat a little somethin’. We got girls. You need some pussy?”

“I don’t like strange pussy,” snapped Christian. “I wanna know what my dick is going into.” The men all laughed, but Christian didn’t even crack a smile.

“You’re one serious boy,” smirked Fred. “Look, here’s the deal. I give you a bag of a thousand pills. They cost you two bucks a pill. You sell ‘em for three bucks. I keep half.”

“I already bought them from you. I keep all of it,” said Christian.

“No. That ain’t the way it goes.”

“It’s the way I go, or I take my business elsewhere,” he frowned. Fred straightened in his chair, giving Christian the first look of aggression since he’d arrived.

“You try and do fuckin’ business with anyone else, and I’ll kill ‘ya,” he growled.

“You kill me, you get none of the business.”

“You’re a might uppity, aren’t you, boy? You think you’re special cause you were a football player? Ain’t nothin’ special about that. I mean, look at ‘ya now. You’re a drug addict, just like all the other vermin around here.”

Christian wanted to break the man into little tiny pieces, but he knew that now was not the right time. He needed to get to the big dogs before killing this little insignificant asshole.

“I buy the pills for a buck fifty and sell for three, splitting the profit,” he said, staring at the man. He hoped he wasn’t smart enough to figure out that he was getting the better end of the deal on the whole thing.

“Okay. Okay, fine,” he nodded. “You asked for a thousand pills for the first round. That’s fifteen hundred. Cash.”

Christian nodded, reaching into his back pocket for the money. He should have stayed home in bed.



Winnie climbed over the fallen tree, her pants soaked through from the rain. Inside the pack, she had the rifle with the scope and a handgun. If she were right, Fred would be sitting there like a fat cat with a dozen drug addicts around him, guarding him.

His brother had been a real piece of shit. They’d been told that he’d convinced their father to sell drugs to the miners for extra money. The way they convinced him was by getting him hooked on the shit himself. According to Fred, when he described the heavenly feeling to his wife, begging her to join him, she couldn’t refuse.

And just like that, her parents were dealers and addicts. Fred’s older brother, Fulmer, was killed by a rival dealer, leaving their father as the gatekeeper for the entire business and Fred the man up front.

Seeing the bonfires in the distance, she slowed and stepped off the trail, taking the thickly wooded area away from any prying eyes. Checking her bag one more time, she looked at the two hand grenades and wondered if she'd gone a bit overboard.

“Nope,” she whispered to herself.

As she approached the property, she saw Fred on the front porch, angry with a very large, very muscular man. Inching closer, she heard the conversation.

“You’re a might uppity, aren’t you, boy? You think you’re special cause you were a football player? Ain’t nothin’ special about that. I mean, look at ‘ya now. You’re a drug addict, just like all the other vermin around here.”

“I buy the pills for a buck fifty and sell for three, splitting the profit,” he said.

“Okay. Okay, fine,” he nodded. “You asked for a thousand pills for the first round. That’s fifteen hundred. Cash.”

She watched the interaction, but something about it wasn’t right. This man was too physically fit, too calm and cool. He wasn’t a drug dealer, but he wasn’t a cop, either.

“Who are you?” she whispered to herself. She watched as he pulled out the wad of cash and shook her head. “No. No.”

When Fred saw the wad of bills, his eyes went wide, and he snapped a finger. The man with the cash knew it was coming. He stepped behind his truck, blocking the barrage of bullets being fired at him. Two of the men shot out his tires as he grabbed something from the truck.

Making his way around the back, he fired back at them, tucking something into his sweatshirt.

“Shit,” muttered Winnie.

Taking out her rifle, she lined up to the two men on the porch next to Fred. Taking a deep breath, she slowly released it and fired at the first man, hitting him square in the chest. Turning to the second man, he was so drugged out he didn’t even move when he saw his friend fall. She lined up the shot once again, then fired, hitting him in the abdomen.

But Fred was long gone.

“Damn.” Searching the area, she saw the big figure moving toward her and cursed again. This was going to be a

long night. Stumbling toward the woods, he appeared to be trying to hide, but something that big wasn't easy to hide.

With all the chaos under control and two dead men on Fred's porch, she would need to come back another time for him. But what about the stranger? She couldn't leave him out there to bleed to death.

Making her way around the fallen tree again, she saw him stumble and roll face down the ridge. Sliding on her backside, she knelt beside him and turned his body over. He had a beautifully handsome face. Strong with a full beard.

"Shit," she muttered, seeing the blood oozing from his thigh. "You need to get up. Come on, get up."

He moaned but rolled to his side, using her shoulders to stand. It was only a few hundred yards to her car, and if she could get him inside, they would be able to get him to a hospital. No. She couldn't go to a hospital. Too many questions.

Opening the passenger side door, she shoved him inside, folding his legs into the vehicle. Making her way back toward the rented house, she was happy to finally be away from the ridge.

“Let’s go, big boy. We have to get you inside,” she said, pulling him from the car.

He didn’t respond except to fall flat on his face. Winnie tried to roll him over and get him up, but she just wasn’t strong enough. With all the rain and the slick grass, she decided she’d have to drag him. She couldn’t pull him by his legs because of the bullet in the thigh, so she figured out another way.

Pulling him by the sweatshirt, she got him to the door and inside, far enough to shut and lock it. Now, the trick would be how to get him on the sofa.

“Son-of-a-bitch, you’re heavy,” muttered the woman above him. She had him by the hood of his sweat jacket, dragging him across a floor. How the fuck did he get on the floor, and more importantly, where the fuck was he?

She leaned him against a sofa, then straddled his thighs. Putting her arms beneath his armpits and using her butt and thighs, she lifted him high enough to push him back on the sofa. When she started to remove his jacket, he gripped both her arms and twisted her beneath him.

That’s when he knew what she was doing. His thigh screamed at him in pain. The searing heat of a bullet wound

reminded him of where he was and what was happening.

“Who the fuck are you?” he ground out between his teeth.

“I guess I’m the dumb-ass woman who was trying to do a good deed for the idiot who got himself shot!” she fired back. He stared down into her blue eyes and shook his head.

“How did I get shot?” he asked, feeling confused.

“You were in the middle of a drug deal, or did you forget that you needed your fix,” she frowned. He loosened his grip, and she wrestled her arms free. “Let me get the bullet out of your leg, I’ll wrap it, and you can leave and go buy your fucking opioids.”

“I wasn’t buying them. I mean, I was, but I’m not here for that.”

“I think you’re delirious. You were buying them. You had a roll of cash bigger than anything I’ve ever seen. That’s how you got shot. You were stupid enough to actually pull it out and show them.”

“And why were you there? Are you an addict?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then why?” She took the scissors and cut the denim from where the bullet had gone through all the way to his boots. Pouring the whiskey over the wound, he winced, and she couldn’t help but smirk at him. “Why?”

“I was going to kill the man that shot you. I have my reasons, and they’re not important to you or you leaving my home.”

“Who are you?” he asked, tilting his head sideways.

“Winnie. Winifred, but my friends call me Winnie. Who are you?”

“Nope, you’re not done. Winnie who?” She stared at the man, not believing his audacity. He was in her home, shot, and she was helping him. How dare he demand anything of her.

“Winnie Pasko.” Christian closed his eyes, shaking his head. What in the fuck was happening here. “Fair is fair. Who are you?”

“Christian. Christian Martin.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Christian Martin,” she repeated, staring at him. “Sgt. Major C Martin.”

“That’s me,” he nodded, hissing as she poured more whiskey on his wound.

“Sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re a user?”

“No. I’m investigating this for the Marine Corps. I’m here to find out who killed your brother,” he said, looking at her.

“You found him. Fred killed my brother. I’m certain of it. Him or his father.”

“I’ve met them both. Lovely people,” frowned Christian. “The old man seems to assess the buyers and then refers them to the son. He must have seen me as an easy mark.”

“It was a test,” she said, digging for the bullet. The big man didn’t move. When she had the bullet, he held out his hand, and she dropped it into his palm. “Let me get this stitched up and dressed.”

“What did you mean, a test?” he asked.

“He was seeing if you were legit. A man with all that cash and a gun, they probably figured you to be for real. He’ll come find you and ask for your business,” she said.

“Why were you there? Really.”

“Really, I was going to kill him. I know that he probably killed my brother. I heard someone in the diner saying that Fred threatened my brother. Told him that if he didn’t sell on-base, they’d hurt me. Michael would have never allowed that to happen.” She tied the last stitch and wiped away the excess blood. Grabbing some gauze, she taped it over the wound, then wrapped it tightly around his thick thigh. The heat of his skin was sizzling her fingertips.

“You need to leave,” said Christian, staring down at the woman.

“No.”

“It wasn’t a request,” said Christian.

“And I wasn’t asking for your opinion. I’m staying. I’m going to kill Fred and stop this madness. It robbed me of my parents and my brother. I’m staying.”

Christian stared at the woman. She had dark brown hair that was tied back in a braid, hitting between her shoulder

blades. Her bright blue eyes looked tired but alert. There was an intelligence and kindness in her face that made him want to get to know her. But now was not the time.

“He’ll kill you,” said Christian.

“He’ll do worse than kill me if he gets to me,” she said, taping the gauze. “I don’t intend on getting close enough for him to do any of that.”

“You had a rifle. With a scope,” he frowned.

“Yes. Michael taught me to shoot when we were kids. Our folks died when he was fifteen and I was eleven. We only had each other, and so he taught me how to protect myself. Protecting myself from Fred was one of the many things on the priority list.”

She picked up the wrappers and gauze, tossing them into the trash. When she turned, he was standing, leaning against the wall.

“He was all I had,” she said quietly. “I’m alone.”

Christian moved slowly toward her, pulling her in for a hug. Her shoulders heaved forward, and she began to cry.

“You’re not alone, Winnie. I won’t let you be alone. Brothers don’t leave brothers behind or their families. I’m

here for you.”

“You don’t even know me,” she said, shaking her head.

“You’re right. I don’t,” he said, smiling down at her.

He pulled out a chair and pointed. “Take a seat. Let’s get to know one another.”

“You first,” she grinned.

“Okay. I’m Christian Martin, Sgt. Major, United States Marine Corps, MARSOC. I’m the only child of Vince and Ally Martin. My father is a former FBI agent, and my mother is a nurse. We live and work with our, uh, extended family in Louisiana. I work out every day so I can eat whatever I want.” She laughed at that, shaking her head as she wiped the tears.

“Winnifred, Winnie, Pasko. I’m a registered pharmacist, and I work at the local pharmacy. Michael was my only sibling. He joined the Corps so that he would have enough money to send me to college. When I got the job at the pharmacy, I thought I’d finally make enough money so that he wouldn’t have to work so hard. I wanted to pay him back.”

“He didn’t want that,” smiled Christian.

“I know. I don’t work out, hardly ever,” she grinned.

“I watch what I eat, but I’m not obsessive about it. I like food.”

“That’s good,” said Christian. “Because I’m hungry.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Wait! We can’t go out, not now. They’ll see you,” she said.

“That’s the idea, honey. They’re gonna know that they can’t stop me. Will anyone recognize you?”

“I doubt it. I left here when I was just fourteen. I don’t look anything like I did back then. Why?”

“Because we’re going to call you something else,” he said.

“Okay. What about your mom’s name?”

“Uh, no.” He wasn’t sure why, but that seemed wrong on a bunch of levels. “We’ll call you Trish.”

“Trish? I don’t like that name,” she frowned.

“Okay,” he laughed, “then think of something.”

“Bella. I always liked that name,” she said, staring at him.

“Good. Alright, Bella, let’s go get some food. Someplace public where everyone can see us,” he said. She nodded as they moved toward her car. He took the keys from her and led her to the passenger seat.

“Hey! That’s my car,” she scoffed.

“I know that,” he said, “but no one will believe that I’m letting a woman drive me around.”

Winnie nodded as he helped her into the passenger seat. She knew he was going right back to that damn diner, but she didn’t agree with it.

It was far more crowded than it had been earlier in the day. He nodded toward a small booth to the left, and she walked over, taking her seat.

“You should have changed,” she whispered. “You’re soaked to the skin, and your pants are torn.”

“It doesn’t matter. I need to look desperate, and this is doing it.” As he looked around, he stood and took the seat next to her on the same side of the booth.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re a couple, and I’m a drug addict. I would be hanging all over my girl,” he said, looking around the room.

“Y-your girl?”

“Yes. You’re going to have to go with me on this,” he said, wrapping a big arm around her.

The waitress came over, dropped two glasses of water, and took their order. When the door opened once more, it was no surprise to see Fred standing in the opening with three other men.

Four tables immediately stood, dropping cash on the table, and left. Christian locked eyes with the man, squeezing Winnie's shoulder.

"Don't say a word," he murmured. She didn't even nod.

"You shot my boys," said Fred, walking toward him.

"You shot me and tried to rob me you piece of shit. So don't get sanctimonious on me. You wanna play old-west style, fine. Let's play old-west style. I was asking for a fair deal, but never mind. I can take my business elsewhere."

"We have a deal," said Fred, staring at the man.

"Had. Had a deal. You trying to rob and kill me sort of negates that deal."

"Stop usin' big fuckin' words," he snapped. Fred stared at him, then looked at the woman seated beside him. He knew all the women in this area, and she didn't appear to be familiar at all. Yet there was something about her.

“You keep staring at my woman, and I’m gonna feed you your own dick,” said Christian calmly.

“Look. We got off on the wrong foot,” said Fred. “My old man trusts you, so I’ll trust you. I’ve got the pills. You give me the cash, and we’ll see how this first deal will work.”

“My price has gone up,” said Christian. “A buck fifty per pill, I sell for three, and I keep it all.” Fred chewed on his bottom lip, muttering curses.

“Fine.” He tossed the paper bag onto the table, and Christian handed him the stack of bills.

“Nice doing business with you,” he smiled.

“Sell those and come back for more. I can get all you need.”

“Pure?” he said with a questioning gaze.

“The purest. However much you want. Just come back, and we’ll work a real deal,” said Fred. He started to leave, then turned, staring at Winnie. “I could use her. Make a killin’ off them tits.”

“She isn’t for sale,” growled Christian. He shrugged his shoulders and left the diner, the other men following him.

“Why didn’t you just kill him?” she said, turning to stare at him.

“Because he is not the head of this snake,” said Christian. “There is someone above him, and someone above that person, and so on. All the way up to the CEOs of the manufacturers. We’re going to find out who those people are, and we’re going to take them down.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Christian and Winnie went back to the house to shower and sleep. She took the bedroom, and he stayed on the sofa, wanting to be close to the door. Waking early the next morning, he decided it was time to get the family involved.

“You asshole, where are you?” said Clay.

Clay Duffy was married to Adele Robicheaux. After losing his leg, he came to Kari for help with the VA and the Corps. As one of his many mentors and friends, Christian relied on him for sound advice.

“Back atcha, asshole,” he grinned to himself. “I’m in West Virginia.”

“West Virginia? What the fuck are you there for?” asked Clay.

“It’s a long story, Clay. Are you in the morning meeting yet?”

“Just arrived. I’ll get them to put this call on speaker.” He heard the shuffling and murmurs, then the telltale sound of a phone being connected to the speak system. “You’re on, Christian.”

“Good morning, everyone,” he said. He heard the familiar chorus of voices and wanted to cry. He missed them all so much. He should be back already. Why the fuck was he still here?

“Christian, what’s wrong, son?” asked Vince.

“Hey, Dad. Listen to me. This is a long story.” It took him thirty minutes to go through the entire thing. When he was done, he told them about Winnie being in the next room.

“We need to help you with this,” said Luke.

“I agree, but the POTUS can’t know. He wants this done internally. I don’t want to screw with your relationship with him.”

“You’re not screwing with anything,” said Eric. “We’ll send a team to you. Do you have space in the house that you’re in?” Winnie was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, looking delicious. She smiled at him, nodding, holding up three fingers.

“Uh, yea. There are a few extra bedrooms here.”

“We’ll be there by this afternoon,” said Eric. “Stay safe, Christian.” He hung up the phone and looked up at Winnie, swallowing.

“That’s quite a family you have,” she grinned. “You want to tell me the truth now?”

“I did tell you the truth. I just didn’t tell you what business my family was in. My family runs a security agency. The biggest, most prolific, and sought after in the world. We handle international cases, things for the military and government, and many others.”

“I see. And are they all former military?” she asked.

“Yes. Mostly. Some, like my dad, were FBI or CIA.” She nodded, still staring at him.

She was so fucking beautiful this morning. Her hair hung loosely down her back, a sexy, messy wave of sable hair. Those blue eyes sparkled in the daylight. Thick, luscious lips grinned at him as she shook her head.

“You’re really full of surprises. They’re going to help?” she whispered. He nodded again, standing to walk toward her. He limped, grimacing at the pain. “H-how is your leg?”

“Fine,” he said, moving closer to her. She unfolded her arms, standing straighter as he got closer. “You’re fucking beautiful in the morning.”

“Just in the morning,” she smiled.

“No. Not just in the morning.”

Gripping her neck, he kissed her, passionately tangling his tongue with her own. Winnie wrapped her arms around his neck, nibbling on his beautiful mouth. The fine hairs of his beard tickled her face, and she thought it was the sexiest thing she'd ever experienced. Everything about this man was big and hard. Definitely big and hard.

His large hand rose up her side, cupping the side of her breast. Catching her breath, she looked up at him.

“Wait,” she panted. “Wait. I'm sorry. This is moving a little fast for me.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I'm sorry. I got carried away by that beautiful mouth of yours. We can slow down. I won't stop all the way, but I'll damn sure slow down and wait for you.”

“I just don't want this to be something we both regret. I mean, the conditions aren't exactly ideal for starting something long-term.” Christian laughed, shaking his head.

“Oh, Winnie, if you knew my family, you'd understand exactly how ideal these conditions really are.”

“What do you mean?” she frowned.

“My father was undercover with a one-percenter biker club when he met my mother. She was working as a night nurse at a rapid clinic. He had to bring in a girl who’d been raped, beaten, and abused. He fell in love with her right then and there.”

“That’s beautiful, in a strange, perverse sort of way,” she said, lightly brushing the back of his neck with her fingers. “I mean, other than the poor beaten girl.”

“What’s wrong?” he said, kissing her again.

“I’m scared,” she whispered. “I’m never scared.”

“You should be scared. This isn’t a game, Winnie. These men are making a lot of money. Fred is a small fry. He’s nothing I can’t handle, but the men above him are what worries me. Once my family is here, we’ll be able to really get moving on this.”

“And what about us?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. We live in different states, and I’m getting ready to retire from the Corps. This is my last assignment. Finding your brother’s killer. Then, I’ll be going home where I belong.” She nodded, staring up at him.

“I’m not sure where I belong anymore, Christian. I’m feeling a bit lost.”

“You’re not lost, baby. You’re right here in my arms, where you belong. Let’s deal with this bullshit, and then we can talk about where you really belong. Okay?”

“Okay,” she smiled. “I have food in there if you want breakfast.”

“I always want breakfast,” he grinned. “You get dressed, and I’ll cook.”

“Oh, you cook!” she laughed. “You just moved up the ladder fast, my friend. Big, strong, handsome, and you can cook. I think I’m doomed.” She disappeared into the bedroom, and Christian chuckled to himself, then sobered.

“Damn. I think I’m doomed as well.”

By the time breakfast was over, the dishes were done, and they’d talked about their childhoods, there was a familiar knock on the door.

“Open up, asshole!” yelled Stone. Christian grinned at Winnie, her brow raised with a smirk.

“You do know I have another person in here,” he said, opening the door. Stone hugged him, laughing.

“We know. But better that she gets used to us all now,” he smiled. “Hi there. I’m Stone. That’s Eli, Rory, Whiskey, and Gunner. We are the retired Marines.”

“Oorah!” yelled the voices. Christian could only shake his head.

“Hello, everyone,” she smiled. “I’m Winnie.”

“You’re beautiful,” smiled Red, coming through the door. “Is she taken?”

“Back the fuck off, Red,” growled Christian. Winnie just laughed, shaking her head.

“I’m Red. Retired Canadian military and Mountie.” Behind him, two more men came through the door, ducking as they did.

“Hello,” smiled the first man. He was a huge blonde behemoth with a gorgeous smile. “I’m Rush Anders.”

“H-hi,” she stammered.

“I’m Cade Norgenson,” said the other big man.

“What are they feeding you guys? Are you sure they’re not on steroids?” asked Winnie. “I mean, I’ve seen some of the results of steroid taking.”

“I promise, babe. No steroids. This is the all-natural, Mama Irene cooking way.” She only nodded, not sure what any of that meant. “Have a seat, fellas. This is Winnie Pasko. Her brother, Michael, was a Marine. He came up here, we think, to confront the man I bought the pills from.”

“Why?” asked Rory.

“He threatened me,” said Winnie, staring at the enormous man. “We think his older brother was the one that got our father addicted to opioids. I overheard someone say that Fred told him if he didn’t sell drugs on the base, that they were going to come for me.”

Every man in the room stiffened, and Winnie felt the rise in tension. She looked at Christian, worried that she’d said something wrong.

“It’s all good, hun. We don’t take kindly to men threatening women. It’s just one of the many things that makes us all lose our shit.”

“I see,” she said, nodding. “Well, I can tell you that Fred Hitchkiss comes from a desperate family. They’ve always tried to screw someone out of their money or property. The father is still alive, although I can’t see how. He’s been taking drugs for as long as I can remember. His older brother,

Fulmer, was insane. Certifiably, in my opinion. He was the kid that was torturing dogs and cats from the time he was old enough to catch one.

“Michael caught him trying to set a cat on fire once and beat the shit out of him. He was older, but Michael was bigger. That’s when the brothers started teasing me, calling me names. Michael was always great at ignoring that kind of stuff, but I was still learning.

“By the time Michael was in high school, Fulmer was already an addict and selling to anyone who would buy from him. When he graduated and decided to join the Corps, we left this place and this life. Or I thought we did.”

“What would have made Fred reach out to your brother again?” asked Stone.

“I overheard him once at the front door telling my brother that our parents stole from them, and we had to make it right. Michael said he wasn’t going to do that when he was the only person I had left. Fulmer told him he could get me off to college and then come to work for him.

“I knew Michael wouldn’t do that, and I think we both thought it was over when we left this place. They must have tracked him down. He would never sell drugs, especially to

men on the base. He just wouldn't do it. I think he came here to kill them, and they got to him first."

"It'd be awfully hard for them to take him down," said Christian. "He was as big as me and every bit as strong. They either saw him coming or had help. What did the autopsy say?"

"I-I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "They told me his body would be released to me in a few days. That was several days ago. All the Marine told me was that he had high levels of opioids in his bloodstream. They said his body was found in the backyard of our old home."

"Would that be unusual?" asked Rory.

"Very. We hated this place. The house had belonged to my grandmother, and it saved us after our parents died, but we felt no love loss for it. It was falling apart, and as kids we knew we couldn't keep it up. We sold the house. It wasn't even ours any longer."

The men nodded, looking at one another.

"What's that look for? I know that look," she said, frowning at them. "Michael used to give his friends that look when I was around."

“Well, that look was probably telling his friends to stay the fuck away from his little sister,” said Christian. “This look is that we agree with you. We think someone was waiting for him and probably killed him. I just wish he would have asked for help.”

“I’m sure he was embarrassed,” said Winnie. “Michael worked so hard to rid us both of the stigma of West Virginia and what happened with our parents. He did everything for me. He gave up his dreams to make sure I had a life. H-he...” She shook her head, covering her face as Christian pulled her against his chest.

“It’s okay, baby. We’re going to find out who did this and end it. All of it,” he said, staring over the top of her head at his friends. She cried quietly for a few moments, no one interrupting her, then pulled back.

“I made fresh biscuits,” she said, wiping the tears. “You must be hungry.”

“Starving,” smiled Cade. “But we saw a big barbecue place down the road. Lots of folks sitting outside eating and drinking. Looks like a good place to talk to people.”

“Isn’t that sort of like putting a big bull’s eye on your backs? I mean, you’re not exactly able to go in undercover.

People will know you're not from here, and they're going to be highly suspicious of you. Look at you guys. No one around here is built like all of you."

"That's the point, honey," said Rory. "We're going to make a statement. A big one."

CHAPTER NINE

Baker's Barbecue had been in the same location for nearly forty years. A small mom-and-pop shop, they ran the kitchen out of an old travel trailer on their property. There were picnic tables set up around the lot with big umbrellas to protect from the sun, rain, or snow. When it was full-on winter, they stopped selling for a few months.

But it was the place everyone went to on a weekend. For this October Saturday morning, the air was crisp with an autumn breeze, and the smell of fall was in the air. The big television set up had the West Virginia vs. Penn State game on, so the crowd was bigger than usual.

"Remember, we're all former players," said Christian.

"We are former players," smirked Cade.

"I know, asshole. I mean, seriously, former players. Never mind. Just don't get into any trouble."

"How will we know the asshole Fred?" asked Rory.

"You'll know him," frowned Winnie. "He's about five-ten, skinny, stringy black hair. He usually has a couple of bigger guys with him, but they're all using."

Rory nodded, not liking that descriptor at all. In his experience, users were desperate and did desperate things. If this guy was hooked on his own shit, he would be crazy enough to do anything.

“I’ll order for everyone,” said Christian, guiding Winnie to the picnic tables. Rush sat on one side of her, Cade on the other.

“I, um, I’d like to sit by Christian,” she said, looking up at the big men.

“Sure thing, Winnie. Once he’s back with the food, I’ll move over,” said Cade. “Until then, you get the ultra-special protection package of two members from Team Big.”

“Team Big?” she frowned.

“We have a lot of big men on our team,” smiled Stone. “But Team Big is extra special. They’re all well over six-feet-five and two-forty.”

“Is that normal?” she frowned. They all chuckled, shaking their heads.

“It is in our family,” laughed Gunner. “Six-one is small for us. Not sure why. It’s not that spec ops guys are traditionally the biggest in the pool. We’re usually the average

guys. But, for whatever reason, all of our guys are big. Some bigger than others, like sasquatch there sitting next to you.”

“He’s talking about you,” smirked Rush, pointing to Cade.

“Food is on its way,” said Christian, shoving Cade’s shoulder to move him over. The big man laughed, scooting to the side. “I got one of the owners to agree to speak with us. She said she lost both of her kids to the drugs.”

“No,” whispered Winnie. “I went to school with them. Her son was two years older than me, but her daughter, Molly, and I were in the same grade. I can’t believe it. She was smart and talented. A great basketball player. She had plans to attend WVU.”

“I’m sorry, Winnie,” said Stone.

“Here you go, boys. Thanks for the order,” she smiled. “This one will be a record-breaker for us.”

“Please, take a seat,” said Christian.

“Mrs. Wexton? It’s me, Winnie.” The woman stared at her, then covered her mouth, shaking her head.

“Winnie. Honey, why are you here? Why did you come back? You should leave.”

“I’m here to find the people who killed Michael,” she said.

“You know who killed him, child. The same people who killed my Adam and Molly. Took them within ten months of each other. It was so fast Mark and I didn’t see it coming. Molly was first.”

“I just can’t believe she would ever take drugs. Not her,” said Winnie.

“She didn’t get her scholarship to WVU, and we couldn’t afford the tuition. We think Fred offered it to her in the form of drugs. If she sold for him, he’d pay her, and she could go to college. Things went bad fast from there. His men, his men used her,” she said, looking away. Winnie grabbed the woman’s hand, squeezing.

“Adam found out and went after him. Molly convinced him not to kill him. That this was her way into school. She was hurting so bad from what they did to her she started taking the pills. Then Adam was hurting because he was watching his sister die in front of his very eyes. Ten months. I had them their whole lives, and within ten months, Fred Hitchkiss took them from me.”

“We know his father is involved as well, but do you know any of the others?” asked Eli. The woman nodded.

“Look around you. Most of these people have someone in their family or someone in their home that’s addicted to that shit. They know all the names but refuse to speak about it. Fred and his old man are just bit players in a huge pool of slime.

“Everyone seems involved at some level. Tom Walker is taking delivery of the drugs at the pharmacy.”

“Mr. Walker? But I worked for him when I was in high school,” said Winnie.

“I know, honey, but he’s been doing this for years. He can order the pills without any suspicion. He orders a reasonable amount for the pharmacy, but what gets shipped is a whole lot more. We thought it would get better when he was bought by one of those big chains, but he seems to still be able to get away with it.”

“How do you know all this?” asked Gunner.

“I looked into it when my kids died. Then I was told in no uncertain terms to leave it alone, or I’d be joining them. At the time, I didn’t give a shit about me. I wanted them to pay.”

“What changed your mind?” asked Winnie. She looked behind her toward the trailer and nodded at the man seated in a lawn chair. “Mr. Wexton?”

“What’s left of him,” she said, waving at the man. He just stared at her but didn’t move. “They beat him nearly to death. His brain was so swollen they didn’t think he’d survive. Unfortunately, he did. That’s what’s left of him. Just the body. There is no mind. No thinking, no speaking, nothing. I have to feed him, dress him, help him take a piss.”

She stood from the picnic table and squeezed Winnie’s shoulder.

“I hope you destroy them, and I wish I could do more, but just be careful. There’s been enough death around here. It would be nice if there were some life left.”

Winnie watched her walk away and shook her head. This was not how it was supposed to be. It was not supposed to be middle-aged women taking care of their disabled spouses, grieving for their lost children.

“I can’t even begin to imagine what she’s been through,” she whispered. Whiskey rapped his knuckles on the table, nodding toward a big SUV.

“Heads up. I think our delivery boy just arrived.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Damn, did you bring the whole team,” laughed Fred. Winnie felt a chill creep up her spine, and Christian laid a hand on her back. “Still say she could make you some extra dough with those tits.”

Cade slowly stood over the man, glaring down into his face. He swallowed and backed up, shaking his head.

“Okay, okay, shit! I was just jokin’. You need some pussy? I can get some girls here in twenty minutes,” he said, looking at the men. When no one said anything, he just laughed. “I get it. You’re picky like uppity boy here. No problem. How’r you doin’ with the delivery?”

“Done,” said Christian. Fred’s eyes went wide, and he stared at the men.

“Done? You sold all of that in twenty-four hours?”

“I told you. I have the hook-up. You wanted to fuck with me and try to cheat me, shoot me, that’s what you get. I’ve made a deal with someone else,” he said.

“No. No, wait. We had an agreement. I’ll give you what you need. All of it.”

“I’m not going to screw around with some small-time, two-bit dealer,” said Christian. “My friends and I are interested in bigger distribution. If you can’t handle it, I’ll move on.”

Fred stared at the table of men casually eating their barbeque. He looked back at his own men, frowning. This man was showing him up, and he didn’t like it at all. Taking out his phone, he texted someone then waited. When he tried to reach for a French fry, Red slapped his hand.

“Don’t touch my food,” he growled.

“Shit, you guys are really somethin’ else,” he said. Turning, he stared at Winnie. “Do I know you?”

“No,” she said. “I’m not from here.”

“Where you from?” he asked, narrowing his gaze.

“Louisiana,” said Christian, gripping her hand beneath the table. Fred got distracted as his phone pinged. Looking down, he read the message.

“My boss will meet with you at our place,” he said.

“No,” said Christian. “I’m not falling for your bullshit again. He’s going to meet us in public, all eyes on us.”

“Boss don’t work that way,” said Fred.

“Too fucking bad,” growled Rory. “Right here, tomorrow afternoon.” Fred stared at the big beast and texted the number back. A few moments later, they had their answer.

“Tomorrow at one,” said Fred. “Don’t be late.” Turning, he left them sitting there to enjoy their food.

Christian rose to speak with Mrs. Wexton, letting her know that they would be there again tomorrow, looking friendly with Fred and a few others.

“He gives me the creeps,” said Winnie, watching Fred pull away.

“Because he is a creep,” said Eli. “Guys like him are snakes. They slither around, sucking the life out of people for their own benefit. But he’ll get his. We’ll make sure of that.”

“But what if you guys get hurt?” she asked, staring at all of them. They gave her little grins and sly smiles. She frowned. “Is that funny? I mean, I understand your background. The same background my own brother had. And he’s dead.”

That wiped the grins from their faces.

“You’re right,” said Whiskey. “We’re sorry. We meant no disrespect. But that’s why we’re here together. It’s not one

man up against whatever is out there. It's all of us, plus what we have back home that can be here at a moment's notice. I'm sorry like fuck that your brother came alone. I know that if he'd gone to Christian or any other Marine brother, they would have come here with him. I wish I had come here with him."

"Thank you," she said, shaking her head at him. "I'm sorry. I wish I knew why he came alone. Really, I wish I knew. We told one another everything. Literally, everything."

"Did he have a girlfriend?" asked Gunner.

"Not that I'm aware of," said Winnie. "I feel like he would have told me that. He's never really dated anyone long-term. Once I was in college, he was pretty much deployed all the time. Only recently did he come back stateside."

"Any close friends?"

"I'm sure he had a few. He wrote about Christian in a notebook of his. I guess he was getting workout advice and nutrition advice. I didn't see anything else. It just looked like a bunch of scribble, like a notepad by your phone or something."

"Let's head back," said Christian, walking up to the group with two large bags. "She gave us food to take home.

We'll make a plan for tomorrow and ensure that everyone is safe here.”

Pulling into the small home she'd rented, Winnie noticed that the men had a routine that she was fast figuring out. They would exit the vehicle first, someone in front of her, someone behind her. Then, the same routine would happen with the house. When they were certain no one was there, she entered.

Then, two men would walk around the house, looking for footprints, even checking across the street for anything unusual.

“There are two bedrooms upstairs, each with two double beds. There's a king-sized bed in there, so two men could sleep in there. I can take the sofa,” she said. The men all chuckled, shaking their heads at her. “Why is that funny?”

“Because, if you think for one moment, we're going to let you sleep on the sofa, near the door, while we are in the big cushy bed, you've lost your beautiful mind,” said Rory.

“Then what's the plan, mister smarty pants,” she asked with her hands on her hips.

“The plan, beautiful, is that you and Christian will take the master. Stone, Eli, Rush, and Cade will take the beds upstairs. Red, Whiskey, Gunner, and me will be camping on the living room floor.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Don’t argue, baby. It won’t do you any good,” said Christian, kissing her cheek. She started to speak when her phone rang. Looking down, she swallowed.

“It’s the Marine that came to my door about Michael.” Christian grabbed the phone.

“Hello?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was looking for Miss Pasko,” said the man.

“I’m a friend trying to help her with her brother’s death. Is there something you need?”

“No. We’re done with the body, and it can be released.”

“Can you tell me anything more than that there were opiates in his body?” asked Christian.

“I need her permission,” said the Marine.

“I give my permission,” said Winnie. “Please tell him whatever you can about my brother’s death.”

“Alright. Your instincts were right. Although his levels were high, there was evidence that they’d been dissolved in something before he digested them. Most likely water or soda. There was no alcohol in his system. Also, we found eight undissolved tablets in his abdomen. It appears that someone shoved those down his throat and attempted to wash them down.”

Winnie’s eyes filled with tears as she shook her head. Stone grabbed her, hugging her as Christian listened to the man.

“The initial examination missed it, but our autopsy revealed that he was drugged at the back of the neck. Most likely morphine, which was why they were able to get to him. He wouldn’t have given up that easily.”

“I agree, but I think he knew someone. Whoever was there, he knew them. He wouldn’t have just walked up without being prepared for a fight.”

“We agree with that assessment as well,” said the Marine. “We’re ready to release the body. Where would you

like him to be delivered?” Christian looked at Winnie, and she shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

“Can you hold the body a few more days? We need to figure out what to do,” he said.

“Sure thing,” he said. “You have my number. Just call me, and we’ll get him home.” Christian ended the call then took Winnie from Stone’s embrace.

“It’s okay, baby. We’re going to figure all this out,” he whispered against her hair.

“He knew someone, Christian. Someone other than just Fred. He knew someone, but who could it be. We haven’t been back here in more than a decade.”

“I don’t know, baby. But we’ll figure it out. One way or another, we’ll figure this shit out.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Winnie wasn't sure why the men insisted on building a big bonfire in the front yard. To her, it felt as though they were putting up a big sign that said, 'we're right here.'

In fact, that was exactly what they were doing. Pointing out to anyone who gave a damn that they weren't afraid, weren't going anywhere, and dared whoever was brave enough to come toward them.

"So, you all live on this big property? All of you?" she asked.

"Every single one of us," smiled Cade. "My brother and his wife, my father and his partner, our kids, grandkids, all of us. We all work either for the security company or our other businesses."

"You keep saying 'the security company,' but no one has mentioned a name. Is it top secret?" she asked.

"In a way," said Rory. "We always tried to remain under the radar in order to hide our identities and those of our loved ones. We were all Special Forces, so we have a lot of enemies out there."

“But someone basically sold us out, and we owned that shit. Came out to the world on our own terms. Then, we rebranded. Got a new name, new logo, everything, and went off the radar once again. We’re still building our business back up, but those that know us know how to reach us.”

“So, you’re like a whole bunch of Batmans with one big bat signal?” she smiled.

“Oh, hell no,” said Cade. “I’m Superman, baby.”

“You wish,” smirked Stone. “I’d be Aquaman, definitely Aquaman.”

“The Hulk for me,” smiled Rory.

“Thor, obviously,” grinned Rush. The others laughed, agreeing with that sentiment.

“What about you, Whiskey?” she asked.

“I think I’d be Fury. The leader, wise beyond years,” he said.

“I gotta be Iron Man,” said Gunner. “He’s got really cool toys.”

“Flash,” smiled Red. “Definitely the Flash.”

“That would leave you as Captain America,” said Winnie, looking at Christian.

“And you would be Wonder Woman?” he asked.

“Two different comics. I don’t think Marvel and DC play in the same space,” she said, impressing the men.

“Besides, I don’t want to be Wonder Woman. She’s an Amazonian warrior with God-like powers and lives forever. That would be pretty lonely.”

“Or super busy,” smirked Cade.

“I used to believe in superheroes,” she said quietly. “I’m not sure I do any longer. Or at least, I didn’t until you guys showed up.” Rory smiled at the young woman.

“We’re not superheroes, honey, but we are here to bust some heads and kick some ass. It’s a fun day at the office for us.”

“Don’t get hurt. Please don’t get hurt, and please don’t give me your Marine ‘oorah’ bullshit like Michael always did. Every damn time he left on deployment, I got the same lecture. I’m trained, sis. I’m a Marine, sis. I know what I’m doing, sis. Except he didn’t. He obviously didn’t, or he would be here.

“He should be here,” she said emphatically. “He should be here so I could get mad at him and slap his face and tell him what an asshole he was for coming here all alone. I want to yell and scream and... and tell him I love him. I love him so much.” Christian pulled her tighter against his body, rubbing her shoulders.

“He knows, hun,” said Whiskey. “He always knew, which is why he came here. But I do agree with you. I think someone he knew, other than good old Fred, got him here. No aunts? Uncles?”

“No one,” she sniffed. “My grandmother was the last we had, and she died even before our folks.”

“Tell us about that,” said Gunner. “How did you hear about your parents?”

“I was sleeping, but two deputies came to the door to say they were found in their car, overdosed. Michael didn’t believe it. I didn’t either, but I was only eleven. I can’t imagine what he went through at just fifteen. They were going to put us into the system, but Michael begged them to let him take care of me.”

“They didn’t call child welfare?” asked Gunner.

“No. Michael told them he had a job that could provide for us. The house was paid for, and we got a twenty-thousand-dollar life insurance policy for Dad from the mining company. Michael watched that money to the penny. The deputies would come by every now and then and check on us, make sure we were healthy and had food.

“Michael, he made sure I had it all. He even bought a book so he could explain what was happening to me when I started my period,” she laughed, shaking her head. “He was so awkward, but he was determined to talk to me about it and then have the sex talk. I don’t think I truly appreciated that until just now.”

“Honey, I’m sorry, but I want to back up. Those deputies allowed a fifteen-year-old to take care of an eleven-year-old with no adult supervision?” asked Cade.

“Yea. I mean, that’s what I was told. We did alright, but you have to remember, this is the mountains of West Virginia. I know women who got married at fourteen and started having babies right away. It’s not like that everywhere, but deep in the mountains, it can be. I think they’re just a bit more relaxed.”

She looked around the fire at the faces of the men, all frowning. It wasn't that they didn't believe her. It was something else.

“What's that face for?” she asked.

“Winnie, the authorities would have known that your parents had died. Someone, even if it wasn't the deputies, someone in the system would know that there were two kids under the age of eighteen that needed attending.”

“I-I never thought about that,” she said, looking down at her feet. “How did they do it then?”

“Did you go to your parents' funeral?” asked Christian.

“No. I mean, they didn't have a funeral. We couldn't afford a big ceremony or service, so the deputy had them cremated and brought to us. We kept them in the house for the longest time, but when Michael joined the Corps, we spread their ashes on the mountain.”

“Damn,” muttered Red.

“What? Why damn?”

“We would have liked to test their ashes, honey,” said Red. “It would have been good to know that it was really

them and perhaps even test to be sure they died from an overdose.”

“I don’t think Michael ever thought of that either. I mean, a fifteen-year-old boy wouldn’t have thought of that, would he?”

“Probably not, honey,” said Christian. “It’s been a long day. Let’s get some rest and get ready for tomorrow. It will be another rough one.”

As they entered the house, Red doused the fire, making sure nothing was in danger of spreading. Before Winnie ducked into the bedroom, she hugged each of the men, kissing their cheek.

“Thank you for being here. For helping me. I’m not sure what will happen, but at least I don’t feel alone any longer.” She closed the bedroom door, and Christian turned to his friends and family.

“No matter what happens to me, get her to safety,” he said, staring at the men.

“Fuck you, brother. Nothing will happen to any of us,” said Rory. Christian nodded at him. “Christian? Is she it, brother?”

“Hell yea, she’s it. Capital ‘I,’ capital fucking ‘T.’”



Winnie was already in a big t-shirt sitting on the bed, looking through the notebook her brother had left. Her hair was down around a freshly washed face, the smell of her body lotion filling the air.

“Are you sure you’re okay with me being in here?” he asked.

“It’s either you or Red, and I think I’d prefer you. Nothing against Red,” she smiled.

“Good choice,” he grinned. He quickly washed the smell of smoke off his skin and pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. Sitting beside her, on top of the comforter, he pulled her close, kissing the top of her head.

“Could you bring that a little lower, Marine?” she smiled.

“Gladly,” he grinned, kissing her lips, plying them apart with his tongue as his hand rose up the side of her t-shirt. He stopped, shaking his head. “Sorry. I get carried away when I’m with you.”

“I didn’t ask you to stop,” she smiled. “I want to feel you against my skin, Christian. Please.”

“Baby,” he murmured against her lips. “You won’t ever have to say please to me. I will always be willing to touch this body, to feel it against my own flesh.” He tossed his own shirt to the side, and she gasped at the ripples of muscle and tattoos.

“You’re so beautiful,” she said, touching his chest. He gripped the hem of her t-shirt and gently brought it over her head, tossing it to the floor. Her large breasts bounced free.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he whispered. He molded one breast in his large hand, flicking her nipple with his tongue.

“That feels so good,” she moaned, arching up against his mouth.

He slid his hand inside her panties, his thick, long fingers finding that sweet, wet crevice. In and out, he moved inside her, his big thumb rubbing that delicate clit. Winnie bit down on her lower lip, trying to control the rage of excitement building in her body.

When her legs began to quiver, Christian knew he had her. She was his. Shoving his sweatpants to the floor, his thick cock bobbed up and down. Winnie pushed him to his back, straddling his hips.

“I need this,” she murmured against his mouth.

Nodding, he was willing to let her do whatever the fuck she needed. As her body slid down his thick, pulsating cock, it was all Christian could do to not scream out.

“Fuck, baby,” he said, jutting his hips upward.

“God, you’re so damn big,” she whispered. “Shit, Christian.”

“Yea, baby, yea, that’s it. Rock, honey.” He reached up, gripping her breasts, kneading them in his rough hands as she bent down, giving him access to those perfect nipples. Shit, they would make gorgeous babies, he thought. Fuck. Babies.

“Winnie. Winnie, baby, I’m not wearing a condom,” he said, gripping her hips. He was so fucking close he was about to explode inside her.

“Oh,” she said, stilling. “I-I’m on the shot. I haven’t been with anyone in two years, and I always insisted on a

condom. I'm clean. I swear I am, but we can stop."

"Fuck no, we're not stopping," he laughed. "I'm clean, baby. You know we get tested. If you're good skin-to-skin, I sure as fuck am."

"Good," she smiled, rocking forward with a hard thrust, "because I'm about to cum again."

Christian gripped her waist, flipping her to her back and driving into her with a fierceness and intensity he'd never felt before. Her angelic features stared straight into his eyes, pulling him further and further into the depths of her soul.

He slowed his movements, his body drained of its desire. Winnie kissed him, her hands gripping the sides of his face, passionately wrapping her legs around his buttocks, keeping him inside her.

"Fuck, woman," he smirked.

"It's been a while," she smiled. "And you are a professional. I'm starting to doubt the whole Marine thing."

"I promise, it's real," he laughed. He looked between them to see her ample breasts pressed against his chest.

"Fuck, I love your breasts."

“My breasts love you,” she smiled. She sobered, shaking her head. “I mean, I didn’t mean it that way, Christian. I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for? I’m hoping your mind catches up to your breasts,” he grinned.

“Wait, you want me to love you?” Christian leaned on one elbow, staring down into her face.

“Listen to me, Winnie. Men in our family tend to admit their love quickly and freely. I’ve never, in all my forty years, said I love you to anyone. No one, Winnie. I know there is a lot to work out between us, but I know in my soul that I love you.”

“Oh, Christian, I love you as well. I’m so scared, but I’m really scared that you’re going to leave, and I’ll be alone again.”

“Not gonna happen. You became mine the moment you pulled that bullet out of my leg. It kind of sealed the deal for us,” he said, kissing her. “Sleep. We’ve got a long day tomorrow.” She snuggled into his arms, holding on for dear life, then looked at him.

“Wait a minute. You’re forty? I mean, seriously. The big four oh? Wow, that’s really ancient.”

“Oh, the woman has jokes,” he frowned, running his fingers beneath her arms, tickling her as she wiggled against him.

“Okay, okay, sorry. Forty is perfect.”

“Damn right, it is.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

By nine a.m., there was another massive breakfast, where so much food was consumed Winnie didn't think they'd have enough for everyone. She was almost right. There was a half of a biscuit and one slice of bacon left.

“Winnie, when we get there today, we'd like for you to stay in the car with Gunner,” said Rory.

“But why? I want to hear what this person has to say,” she said, looking around the room.

“I think Fred might be remembering who you are. Twice now, he's seen your face and thought you looked familiar. I want to keep you away from him for now. But we'll make sure that you can hear us by using one of our communication devices.”

“Okay. Fine,” she said, staring at them.

She grabbed the notebook of her brother's and loaded into the backseat with Christian on one side and Gunner on the other. There was a large group of people making their way out of the First Methodist Church. The small shops on Main Street were beginning to open for a slow Sunday afternoon of shopping.

Pulling into the barbecue restaurant, the men exited the vehicle and took their seats at the picnic table while Christian placed their order. By the end of this week, they were going to be sick of barbecue.

“Don’t look nervous, sunshine,” said Gunner. “They know what they’re doing.” She nodded, looking through the notebook.

“I wish I knew what all this meant,” she said.

“What is it?”

“Just scribbles my brother made. Some of it is like a grocery list, other stuff looks like just reminders, but there’s a bunch of stuff I don’t understand.”

“Let me take a look,” he said, grabbing the notebook. “Well, he’s talking about field stuff here. The abbreviations are simply things they need to get better at. Times that he needs to beat in order to be tops in the unit, shit like that.” He flipped the pages and stopped.

“What? What’s that?” she asked.

“I thought you said he didn’t have a girlfriend.”

“He didn’t.”

“Then who is Mary Lou?” She stared at him, turning a pasty white, grabbing the notebook from his hands. “Look, hun. Right here. Mary Lou. Eight p.m. Winnie?” She looked up at him, trying to speak, when she saw the massive Cadillac pull into the parking lot. Two men got out, opening the back door.

A woman stepped out with long dark hair. She was wearing a pair of skintight jeans and high custom-embroidered cowboy boots. She wore a white button-down shirt, gaping at the chest. Her fake breasts clearly not contained in a bra.

“Oh my God,” she murmured.

“Honey, who is Mary Lou?” he asked again more insistently.

“M-my mom. Our mom.”

“Your mom? But she died?”

“Nope. Apparently not. That’s my mom,” she said, pointing toward the woman. “Right there. Mary Lou Pasko. That’s my mother.”

“Fuck me and the horse we rode in on,” he growled. He quickly tapped his earpiece on the comms device. “Listen up. Your Mata Hari is Mary Lou Pasko. Winnie’s mother.”

“Are you fucking with me right now?” asked Christian.

“Negative.” Gunner turned to look at Winnie.

“Winnie? Sweetie, look at me.”

“I’m going to be sick,” she said, placing her hand on her abdomen. “Seriously, I think I’m going to throw up. That’s my mother. The woman that I was told was dead. And- and Michael had her name in his notebook. Why?”

“I don’t know, honey. I need you to just breathe right now. Deep breaths. In. Out. Good,” he said, watching as the woman walked toward the tables. “Just listen to what they say, and we’ll know what to do.”



“So, this is my demanding potential associate. Or should I say, associates?” she said, taking a seat. The men just stared at her. After hearing what Gunner said, they were trying to decide whether to kill her or follow her.

“I’m Chris. We’re all former professional athletes, and we’ve all got connections with guys who need a constant supply of this shit. Including me.”

“You look awfully healthy for a man that needs oxycodone,” she smiled. “But, since you sold a thousand pills

in less than twenty-four hours, that makes me interested.”

“Well, that’s a problem,” said Christian. “We like to know who we’re dealing with, and you’re obviously not the top of the food chain.”

“I am the boss here,” she said, slapping her hand on the table. “I am the top of the food chain.”

“Here,” said Rory. “In this little nothing town, you’re top of the food chain. But you’re not it. We’re used to dealing with owners, not renters. Big boy over there used to play basketball in Europe. We want to expand, and that requires a certain amount of commitment on the part of management. Not sales.”

“Europe?” she asked, raising a brow. “Interesting. I can get you whatever you need.”

“How?” asked Whiskey. “I like to know where my shit is coming from and if it’s for real. I don’t need some fake shit that’s gonna kill me.”

“Honey, it’s all gonna kill you,” she smirked. “It’s the real deal.”

“This is getting us nowhere,” said Cade. “I’m not dealing with some two-bit bitch who isn’t willing to go all the

way and do what's needed to get the job done.”

“Two-bit bitch?” she frothed. “I’m a self-made woman, you drug-addled piece of shit. I’m the woman that helped my addict husband to his grave so that I could take his life insurance. And all it cost me were a few bags of pills given to a couple of deputies with serious drug problems themselves.”

“His life insurance? Wow, wife of the year,” said Christian. “Good thing you didn’t have kids.”

“Oh, I did,” she smiled. “Don’t worry, I left them enough to live off of. Then my son found out I wasn’t really dead. A Marine. A fucking jarhead, bonehead Marine. I took care of him too. Don’t underestimate me, boy. I handle my business.”

“Yes, it appears you do,” said Christian. He tried to stand, but Rory pressed down on his thigh, indicating it wasn’t time. Nodding at him, he continued. “I want to meet the man above you. Because I have no doubt it’s a man.”

“You really are an insufferable prick, aren’t you?”

“Every day,” he grinned.

“Fine. I’ll see what I can do, but for now, here,” she said. She reached into her bag and pulled out five bags of pills. “Five grand. I’ll stick to the agreement that Fred over there made, just to show good faith. You sell that and call me at this number.”

Christian took the plain white card with the phone number on it. No name, no business. Just a number. He handed her the five grand, then gripped her wrist.

“I like to know the name of the woman I’m calling,” said Christian.

“Oh, sweetie, you’re not for me. All that bulk would crush me. It’s Marilyn. That’s all you need to know.” She pulled her wrist free, then followed her bodyguard as he opened the car door. She turned and waved. “Call me when you’re done with those.”

Her Cadillac pulled away, and she sped down Main Street toward the highway. Christian looked at Rory, and he nodded.

“I’ve got it in her boot,” he said. “Comms? Follow that tracker.” They all looked up to see Gunner helping Winnie from the SUV.

“Winnie? Baby, are you okay?” asked Christian. She stood in front of them, just staring, then turned as if to see the car in the distance, but it was long gone. “Winnie.”

It was the last thing she remembered before complete blackness enveloped her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Winnie? Winnie, baby, I need you to wake up,” whispered Christian, kissing her forehead. Her eyes opened, and she blinked several times, staring up at the faces looking down at her. Why were they staring at her? What happened?

Then she remembered. She remembered seeing her own mother. Hearing her talk of killing her father and brother. She felt the emotions surfacing and tried to hold back the tears.

“Oh, baby, I know,” said Christian, holding her tightly to his chest. The others stepped back, frowning at the scene of the young woman with a broken heart.

“My m-mother, Christian. My mother killed my father and brother,” she cried out.

“I know, honey. We’re going to stop her, I promise you.” He gently rubbed her back while she cried into his shoulder.

“We’re all damn sorry, Winnie,” said Rory, frowning at the young woman. “We’ve got to see who is at the top of this, and then we’ll stop your mother.”

“Her name was in my brother’s notebook. I missed that page. I just didn’t see it, but Gunner saw it. She must have contacted him.”

“I would bet your brother knew what your mother was doing,” said Eli. “My guess is he came up here to confront her, possibly even kill her. If the others are right, she wanted him to come and work for her, and he refused.”

“It just shows how much she really knew about us,” said Winnie, wiping her face. “Neither of us would have ever done anything like that. Do you think she got my dad hooked on the drugs?”

“It’s possible, hun,” said Gunner. “If he was already injured and taking pain meds, she might have approached him with it, telling him it would work better. She looked pretty good for someone who has to be in her fifties.”

“Yea, she sure did,” scoffed Winnie. “I’m guessing that’s why Fred thought he recognized me. She looks as young as me, which means she’s had work done because she didn’t look like that twenty years ago.”

“If she had work done, that would mean she’s making a lot of money,” said Christian. “All we have to do is find out who she’s partnering with.”

“Guys, this is Sly. Looks like she boarded a plane and landed in the Raleigh-Durham area. I think she’s headed to the medical complexes there.”

“A pharma company,” said Christian. “She knows someone big in pharma. Let us know if you find out which company, Sly.”

“Roger that.”

“Sly? I don’t remember anyone here being Sly,” said Winnie.

“It’s our communication devices,” smiled Whiskey. “We’re able to hear our team back home, and they’re able to hear us. It’s a safety feature to make sure we’re always in touch with one another.”

“In fact,” said Gunner, “we need to make sure you have a few of our safety features.”

“Me? What do you mean?” asked Winnie. Gunner handed the box to Christian, and he turned, smiling at her.

“I didn’t plan for this to be my first gift to you, but I’d really appreciate it if you’d wear it. This bracelet and necklace have a listening device as well as a tracking device that will ensure I can always find you if something happens.”

“You mean if I’m taken,” she asked quietly.

“Yes. But we won’t let that happen,” said Cade.

“We’re here to get to the bottom of all of this but also to protect you. All of our wives wear something like this. Earrings, necklace, bracelet, even rings.”

“And what about all of you? Do you wear a necklace?” she asked. Eli smirked at the young woman.

“We wear the communication devices implanted behind our ears,” he smiled. “It sends signals to the auditory functions in our brain so that we can hear and speak through it. It’s something our own team developed.” She nodded, staring at all of them.

“What’s wrong, honey?” asked Christian.

“What will happen to me? What’s going to happen to me when all of this is over and done with? Do I just go back to my life in South Carolina and work at the pharmacy, pretending I never met all of you?”

“I highly doubt that’s what will happen,” grinned Stone.

“Then what!” They all jumped back, surprised by her outburst. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know how any of this works.

I'm scared and confused. I've just seen my mother, whom I believed was dead for the last twenty years. I heard her say that she killed my father and my brother. I know she wouldn't think twice about killing me, and all I can think about is that I've finally met the only man I've ever loved, and he's going to leave me!"

The men all looked at Christian, smiling. He had a big grin on his face, grabbing her by the shoulders and squeezing her so tightly she coughed, trying to breathe.

"Sorry, babe. You love me?"

"Y-yes. I'm sorry, but I don't hide my feelings well. I love you, Christian. I'm not sure how it happened so quickly, but I know that I love you."

"That's all I needed to hear, honey. I love you, too. When this is all done, you're coming home with us. Back to Louisiana."

"But what about my job?" she asked.

"Well, we have a pharmacy in the clinic that we run," grinned Whiskey. "We always need extra medical help."

"Really? Should I send my resume?" Gunner chuckled, shaking his head.

“We are your resume, honey. No need. Trust us in this. You’ll be just fine.”

“But what about your parents?” she asked Christian. “Won’t they want to meet me? Approve of me?” Christian pulled out his phone, dialing the number for his parents and putting them on Facetime.

“Christian! Is everything okay? Is your girl okay?” asked Vince. Winnie looked at him, shaking her head.

“She was just asking if you and Mom would approve of her, Dad. This is Winnie. Winnie, this is my father, Vince Martin.”

“Oh, aren’t you lovely? Yes. Yes, I can see why my son fell in love with you. We are so happy to have you as part of our family.”

“Oh, my,” she sniffed.

“You’ve made her cry!” snapped Ally. “Oh, sweetie, don’t cry. Christian, she’s beautiful! Now, you take care of her and get her back home where she belongs. We’ll get her settled here at the clinic. We desperately need a full-time pharmacist.”

“Really?” croaked Winnie.

“Really, sweetie. Oh, I can’t wait to give you a hug and truly welcome you to the family. We’ll see you soon.”

“I can’t wait to meet you all,” smiled Winnie.

“Christian? Let us know if you need extra support,” said Vince. “Luke has twenty additional men on standby.”

“We may need them, Dad, but not yet. Thanks, though. We’ll see you soon.” He hung up the phone, smiling at Winnie.

“They’re wonderful,” she nodded with a smile.

“Thank you for that.” He kissed her, then turned to look at the others.

“We need to find out where Fred and the others are keeping the stash of drugs. If we knock him out of the game, I’m all she has left.”

“The main house was where you were on the ridge,” said Winnie. “It’s always been their place where they kept things. Drugs, moonshine...”

“Moonshine?” asked Whiskey.

“Yea. Their father started selling moonshine. He had five or six stills hidden in the woods behind the house. I

would guess he still does. It's become big business, and they obviously have the deputies in their pocket.”

“Which explains how you and your brother were able to live on your own as underage orphans. Although, I suspect your mother had a great deal to do with that,” said Stone.

“I'll never treat our children like that,” she whispered, looking at Christian. “Never.”

“Just the fact that you're already thinking about our children tells me all I need to know, baby.” He kissed her, then stood from the side of the sofa.

“What do we do with all the drugs?” asked Cade.

“We do what I did with the first bag,” said Christian. “Flush them.” The men all chuckled, shaking their heads. That was a lot of drugs headed down the drain. The rats would be happy.

“You pour, I'll flush,” said Gunner, looking at Whiskey. They nodded, laughing as they headed to the bathroom.

“Get your gear,” said Christian, looking at Stone, Rush, and Eli. “We're going hunting.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Getting back up to the ridge in daylight was definitely a lot easier than at night. Christian's thigh was killing him from the climbing, but all-in-all, things were going as well as could be expected. As they hit the top of the ridge, they heard the sounds of laughter and music.

"Sounds like we missed the invite for the party," frowned Eli.

"We might just have to crash it," said Rush.

"I'm all about crashing today," said Christian. He shook his head, looking at the other men. "She left her kids, man. She killed their father and then killed her own son. What sort of woman does that shit?"

"Not one that I want to know," said Rush. "Greed does shit to people. No excuses, but maybe she got tired of being poor. I mean, these guys are flashing hundreds in their faces like it's nothing, drugs that sell for thousands and can make them forget all their troubles. It's tempting for people who are desperate."

"Yea, well, they're going to be desperately asking for a little support from Jesus in about ten minutes," frowned

Christian. Rush and the others smirked at him as they wound their way around the back of the property, listening to the conversations of the drug- and alcohol-muddled brains.

“Ooohwee! Dance for me, baby! Shake them tits, that’s it!” called Fred. The young woman was probably in her late teens or early twenties. She wore short cut-off shorts despite the crisp October temperatures. She had no shirt on, just a thin bra highlighting her hard nipples.

“She’s good,” laughed one of the other men. “I seen them girls at the strip club on Highway 10, and she could work there. Love it when a girl can get me hard.”

“Any girl can get you hard,” laughed another man. “You’re always hard.” [\[PC3\]](#)

“That’s true,” he grinned, rubbing his crotch.

Eli tapped Rush on the shoulder, pointing toward the back of the property. Just as Winnie had said, there were several active stills pumping out moonshine.

“Now, you know that shit will make an explosion that would be heard around the mountain,” smiled Rush. Eli nodded, laughing as he pulled out the C4 blocks from his backpack.

“I like to come prepared. I’ll set the charges. You keep everyone away from me,” said Eli.

Rush moved back toward Christian and Stone, letting them know what Eli was doing. The girl who was dancing grabbed a sweatshirt and started to walk toward her car.

“Where you goin’?” asked Fred.

“Gotta get home to Mama. You know how she is if I’m late. I’ll be back later to fuck all of ‘ya. But have my pills ready, Fred. I can’t think if I don’t have ‘em.”

“Yea, yea, I’ll have ‘em,” he nodded. “Bitch always needin’ her pills. I swear, if Marilyn doesn’t hurry up and get me my pay raise, I’m gonna go broke.”

“If you didn’t eat all your profit, you’d be alright,” said the other man.

“That ain’t it. She’s got her nose outta joint about her son. Bastard came up here threatenin’ her, tellin’ her to stay away from the little sister. Scrawny little thing, but her big brother was always there.”

“Hell, he wasn’t gonna do nothin’,” said the other man. “Just wanted her to stay away from the girl.”

“She wasn’t gonna do that,” said Fred. “She needed ‘em both to come and work for her. Wanted it to be a family business.”

“Hell, she was dead to them. What’d she think they were gonna do? Welcome her with open arms?”

“Fuck if I know,” laughed Fred. “I think she thought she’d come up with some lie and make it look like she’d been barely survivin’. Hell, she been fuckin’ that big dog at the drug company for twenty years now. They’re makin’ a killin’ off this shit, and we’re still sitting up here in this old house.”

“Yea, but you’re makin’ money,” laughed the other man, so high he couldn’t open his eyes any longer. “Your daddy’s makin’ his moonshine and livin’ a good life. Better’n my old man.”

Neither man said anything, leaning back in their chairs against the porch. When Christian saw Eli, he knew the charges were ready to blow. Eli held up his hand, counting down on his fingers. Five, four, three, two, one.

When the explosions lit the forest behind the house on fire, the men fell from their chairs then tried to move. But before they could, another charge went off, sending what was once their home and safety into splinters of wood flying into

the air. The three men were tossed against the trees, dead on impact. [\[PC4\]](#)[\[PC5\]](#)

Christian stared at the burning home and stills, then turned, looking down the mountain road. They could see four pickup trucks racing their way.

“Time to go.”

Making their way back down the ridge on foot, they walked until they reached the car, the fire still lighting up the sky. Just as they hit the bottom, they heard the loud screams of old man Hitchkiss. Christian wanted to feel bad, but he didn't have it in him. Not this time. Not this man.

“I'm hungry,” said Rush. Eli smirked at him, shaking his head. Stone just laughed, slapping his back.

“Me too,” said Christian. “Me too.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“How long before they get back?” asked Winnie.

“It’ll be a while, hun,” smiled Whiskey. “How are you feeling? Anything I can get for you?”

“No,” she smiled, “but thank you. You remind me of Michael, my brother. Not just in your appearance but also in the way you carry yourself and speak. He was always kind and loving with women and children but all business with other men.”

“That’s the Marine in him,” smirked Whiskey. “We’re all kind of trained that way. I wish we could have met him. He would have been a great addition to our team back home.”

“He would have loved that,” she nodded with fresh tears in her eyes. “Ughhh! I’m getting tired of crying all the time.”

“It’s a natural thing, honey,” said Whiskey.

“Really? How many times have you cried in your life?” she asked.

“More than you can imagine,” he said, sobering. “I cried when I thought my wife was in danger before she

became my wife. I cried when she was pregnant with our daughter. I've cried dozens of times when we were sent to rescue women or children and didn't make it in time."

"Oh, God," she whispered, covering her mouth. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"It's how the team I was on came together. I was MARSOC, but Ghost, our team lead, was a former SEAL. We took the missions no one else wanted. We were sent to rescue twelve schoolgirls who had been kidnapped.

"We followed their trail, on their heels every step of the way. Then we found them. Hanging from a cliffside. They'd been raped and beaten. Their bodies..." He swallowed, and Winnie gripped his hand, shaking her head.

"You don't have to tell me," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"We went after the kidnapers despite leadership telling us to drop it. They asked us nicely to leave, and we did. Ghost formed Steel Patriots, and we worked together for years in Virginia. Then, we started getting help from some old friends, REAPER."

"REAPER?" she questioned.

“They were like us. All former Special Forces working to wipe out traffickers, drug dealers, abusers, all of it. We realized we all had more work than we could handle and joined their team. Best decision we ever made. Now, we all live in Louisiana.”

“Even your daughter?” asked Winnie.

“My daughter and her husband, Callan. Most talented asshole on the planet with a tattoo gun. He was former Army as well but runs the tattoo shop on the property. They haven’t blessed me with any grandchildren yet, but there’s still time,” he smiled. Winnie nodded, smiling at him.

“What’s the clinic like? The one where you all said I could work.”

“Oh, now that’s something else. We’ve got a team of some of the best surgeons and doctors on the planet. Nurses unlike any you’ve ever seen. We started as just a small clinic, but then we needed more. Surgery center, trauma center, you name it.

“We’ve also got a school on-property for the little ones and a dormitory for women and children escaping abuse. One of our men, Keith Robicheaux, he’s deaf, so we have a deaf school on the property. He’s the administrator for the school,

but he's also one of the best warriors I know. He's an incredible man."

"You really love all of these people," she smiled.

"More than you can imagine. They're my family. I need them as much as I need my wife," he smiled, then shook his head. "Maybe not that much. We're tight, Winnie. We rely on one another, and the women in our group are far more special than you could possibly imagine. We have attorneys, doctors, engineers, nurses, teachers, artists, bakers, chefs, and so much more. I'm amazed every day that I get to be a part of this team."

"It only makes me sadder that Michael couldn't meet you all. I know he would have loved to have been a part of something like this. It's why he was still in the Marines. He liked belonging to something bigger than himself."

"I'm sure he knows what you're doing and watching over you. Maybe it's why all this happened so that we could watch over you as well."

"Maybe," she nodded. She opened the notebook, flipping the pages once again.

“Are you looking for something?” he asked, leaning forward to stare at the pages.

“I’m not sure. I mean, I missed my mother’s name being in the book, so maybe I missed something else. Gunner said that a lot of it was information about things to do with his unit, skills to work on, that sort of thing. I don’t know. Maybe I’m just comforted by seeing his handwriting.”

“Well, if you have any questions about anything in there, just let me know.” He stood, and they felt the earth rumble beneath them, then heard the explosion and the ball of fire rising in the sky in the distance.

“What the hell is that?” she asked, jumping to her feet. Gunner laughed, shaking his head.

“That means they’re on their way back. I’ll get dinner ready.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Vince stood at the door of the auditorium, watching as Ally, Lena, Ajei, Kelsey, and Doc watched the documentary. Three men were giving a lecture on the opioid addiction and how it was affecting the country.

“Opioid use disorder and opioid addiction remain at epidemic levels in the U.S. and worldwide. Three million U.S. citizens and 16 million individuals worldwide have had or currently suffer from opioid use disorder (OUD). More than 500,000 in the United States are dependent on heroin. The diagnosis of OUD is made by meeting two or more of the eleven criteria in a year time period.

“The key elements are as follows: increasing dose/tolerance, wish to cut down on use, excessive time spent to obtain or use the medication, strong desire to use, use interferes with obligations, continued use despite life disruption, use of opioids in physically hazardous situations, reduction or elimination of important activities due to use, continued use despite physical or psychological problems, need for increased doses of the drug, and withdrawal when the dose is decreased.”

“Jesus, this is horrible,” said Ajei. They all nodded, continuing to listen to the three men on the screen.

“The increase in OUD can be partially attributed to overprescribing of opioid medications. Healthcare providers in the 1990s increased opioid prescribing in response to the “pain as the fifth vital sign” campaign, downplay of the abuse potential of opioids, and aggressive marketing of drugs such as Oxycontin and Opana.

“Risk factors for misuse of these medications are initiation at a young age, previous history of illicit drug or alcohol abuse, family history of illicit drug or alcohol abuse, sexual abuse in females, adverse childhood experiences, and psychological comorbidities (depression, bipolar disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

“Opioid addiction results from many practices and behaviors. The United States possesses an insatiable appetite for the prescription of opioid medications. In 2015, 91.8 million individuals in the United States used prescription opioids. Due to their inarguable abuse potential, these drugs are frequently misused, with high numbers of patients developing dependence.

“Opioid medications prescribed for mild to moderate acute pain were continued indefinitely, with no intention of tapering or ceasing use. Due to pharmacologic effects, opioids are highly addictive. Tolerance is achieved within days, and the withdrawal syndrome is severe.

“Opioid addiction afflicts individuals from all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Four million people admit to the nonmedical use of prescription opioids. Roughly 80% of new heroin users in the United States report pills as their initiation to opioid use and subsequent OUD.

“From 2002 through 2011, approximately 25 million people in the United States began nonmedical use of pain relievers. More than 11 million misused the medications. In 2017, opioid overdose was declared a national emergency in the United States.”

“What a fucking mess,” said Doc. “We didn’t do a damn thing to help these people, and now they’re so jacked up on this shit, we’re paying the price as taxpayers. This is about negligent doctors, pharmacists, and the drug makers themselves.”

“It happens in every generation, Doc, you know that,” said Lena. “At the turn of the century, it was heroin, then it

was morphine, now it's opiates. We seem unable to learn our lessons."

"What are you doing?" asked Vince, walking into the room.

"Trying to understand what they're facing up there," said Ally. "It's horrible. We knew it was happening, but I don't think we understood how bad it really is."

"What do we do?" asked Vince.

"I'm going to reach out to the boys," said Doc. "The pharmaceutical companies are the place to start with all of this. I know they're working that angle, but we have to figure this out and find out who is supplying them with drugs and how they're getting away with overproduction of them without the FDA knowing."

"It does feel like someone is pulling some pretty big strings behind the scenes," said Vince. "I'm wondering if maybe we don't send a few boys to check out the manufacturing facilities. Maybe they'll see something unusual."

"Maybe," frowned Doc. "One of us would need to go in order to understand what was happening. Cruz, me, and

Wilson would be the most logical, along with a few of the team.”

“Why you?” asked Lena. “One of us could go.” She stood with her hands on her hips, and Doc stared at her, shaking his head.

“You wanna have that argument with your husband, be my guest. But that’s not my vote,” said Doc.

“I think he might be right on this one, Lena,” smiled Ally. “I have no desire to be caught by big pharma inside their manufacturing facilities. We’d set off a firestorm unlike anything we’ve ever seen before. I do think we can help you to know what to look for, though.”

“Let me get the boys together,” said Vince. “We need to bring our son and his girl home.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Are you alright?” asked Winnie, running into Christian’s arms. She looked at his face and chest to be sure there was nothing bleeding, then rubbed her hands down his arms. Seeing the blood on his thigh, she frowned. He laughed, kissing her sweet lips.

“We’re fine,” he smiled, “although I think I popped a stitch.”

“Drop your pants,” she said, pointing to the sofa. He raised his eyebrows, and she laughed. “Just drop the jeans, not your underwear. Whiskey? Will you hand me the medical kit over there?”

“Sure thing,” he grinned, grabbing the red zippered bag. He watched as Winnie removed the dressing and cursed under her breath.

“You popped three stitches,” she said, frowning at him. “You can’t keep running around like this and expect this to heal.”

“Just use some wound sealant on it or glue and then stitch it,” said Whiskey. She stared at him, horrified. “It works. Trust me.”

Christian nodded at her, and she went to work. She'd heard of gluing cuts or wounds in the battlefield but not anywhere else. Willing to try anything, she used the wound sealant that they carried with them, then stitched the wound again.

“Hopefully, it will hold this time,” she said, patting his leg. He stood and pulled up his jeans, then leaned down and kissed her.

“See, those biology classes in pharmacy school paid off.”

“I learned that from Michael, not from school,” she smirked. “He taught me all sorts of things that I wouldn't have otherwise learned. Shooting, knife skills, hiding, climbing trees, stitching wounds. All of it.”

“He sounds like a great big brother,” smiled Rush. “I'm sure he'd be proud of what you're doing, but I don't think he'd want you to risk your life.”

Winnie looked up at Rush, staring at his handsome face. Turning, she looked at the other men as they all nodded in agreement.

“But how am I risking my life if I’m here with all of you? And why is that any different than you risking your life for someone you didn’t even know?” she asked.

“You’re considerably safer with all of us here, there’s no doubt,” said Gunner, “but just by being here, you’re risking your life. Fred was too slow to figure out who you were. I don’t think your mother would be the same. As for all of us, this is what we do for a living. We’re trained to hear things and see things that others won’t.”

“Mary Lou owes me some explanations,” said Winnie, looking around the room. “I want her to look me in the face and tell me why.”

“Honey, you may never get that explanation,” said Christian. “Your mother might flee the country or just plead the fifth if we get her to trial.” Winnie stared at him for a moment. They could tell she was mulling something over in her head.

“Can’t we just kill her,” she whispered. She thought they would jump on that happily. But instead, they frowned at her, shaking their heads.

“Baby, we like killing bad guys and girls more than anyone. But there are some things we need to get from your

mother before we just walk away. I have no doubt she's selling and making cash off those who are dying from the drugs. But there is someone above her pulling the strings, and we need to know who that is."

"That's why we're here," smiled Cruz, walking through the door.

"Oh, my," smiled Winnie. Christian turned to her with a raised eyebrow. "Sorry. But he's beautiful, I mean, that smile. Whoa. I'm so sorry. I never act like this."

"All good, beautiful. Fortunately, my wife loves my smile as well, even if Christian doesn't." He hugged the younger man, slapping his back.

"If you want to keep that smile, you'll stop flashing it at my girl," he grinned.

"He's just jealous," smiled Vince. "Now, let me look at the young woman who has stolen my son's heart."

"Wow, you look just like him," she grinned. "You're both so handsome – and wide."

"Smart and beautiful. You've found a winner, Christian." Christian hugged his father, laughing as they embraced.

“She is a winner, Dad. And as happy as I am to see you, why are you here?”

“Boys and I are doing a little recon over the next few days. We needed medical with us to make sure what we were seeing is legit. I haven’t been in the field a lot lately, so I came.”

“And?” smirked Christian.

“And I wanted to see my son. We’ve missed you, Christian. Your mother and I and all the rest of the crazy motley crew. We’ve missed you being around.”

“And?” said the chorus of men.

“I wanted to meet Winnie. And you’re everything I thought you would be,” he smiled. “You’re beautiful, smart, and obviously brave. You’re going to fit into our family perfectly.”

“Oh, my,” she sniffed. “I hope Mrs. Martin feels the same way.”

“Mrs. Martin would die if she heard you say that. It’s just Ally, and she already knows you were meant for our family. We need a pharmacist. Desperately. So, I think meeting my son was foretold.”

“I’m so happy to hear that,” she smiled. “I really want to work, but I’d like to do it a whole lot closer to Christian if possible.”

“It’s definitely possible,” said Cruz. “I do have some questions for you, though. Since you’re a pharmacist, you should be able to answer some questions around the abuse of these painkillers.” She nodded, taking the seat on the sofa.

“My pharmacy actually stopped carrying them three years ago. We would refer people to the hospital pharmacy, where they have stronger controls and security. We were getting a lot of people coming in off the street demanding prescription refills that didn’t exist or just trying to rob us for pills. They didn’t even want cash or food. Just pills,” she said, looking at all the men. She suddenly looked toward the door and gasped.

All of the men turned, then laughed.

“Sorry, that’s Monster and Beast. They’re friendly,” said Vince.

“I figured the dogs were friendly, but what about them,” she said, pointing to Gator and Ham.

“We don’t bite, honey,” smiled Gator. “I’m Ian, but everyone calls me Gator, and this is Hamish, but we call him Ham.”

“Gator and Ham,” she nodded. “Got it, I think. Why all the people and the dogs?”

“The dogs are bomb and drug-sniffing dogs,” said Christian. “They have the ability to smell for cadavers as well, but for those two, this is their vacation.”

“They were both going crazy in the car,” said Ham. “I think this whole place is dripping in shit.”

“It honestly hasn’t changed much since I was a kid,” said Winnie. “Michael tried to shield me from all of it, but even some of our teachers were hooked on the drugs. I’m certain my father was on some sort of painkillers after the mining accident, but I never once saw him as an addict. I know what that looks like now, and he didn’t act like that when I was a kid.”

“Maybe he wasn’t taking opioids,” said Christian.

“Oh my gosh! I can check that,” she said, standing and going into the bedroom. She returned with her laptop and began searching the records. “My parents used the old

pharmacy on Main Street. They were bought out by a big chain, so I know that they required them to transfer all their records electronically.”

“Were they not electronic before?” asked Vince.

“No. Back then, they kept things in paper format, especially around here. I also think that might have allowed them to do some shady shit, but the big chain decided they wanted everything manually typed into their system.” She continued to type and then stood. “I found it!”

“Was he getting opioids?” asked Whiskey.

“No,” she said, scrolling through the records. “No, he wasn’t. He was getting pain medications but no opiates. This doesn’t make sense. How would he die of an overdose of opiates if he didn’t even have a prescription for them?”

“Sounds like your mom was very busy,” frowned Christian.

“Yes, but she was getting the drugs from someone, somewhere. And let’s not forget the deputies were in on it as well.” Gunner looked at the others.

“Sounds like we need to find our two deputies.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“We might be out of luck on the deputies,” said Gator. “Deputy Morgan died of an apparent heart attack six years ago, and Deputy Franks died of an overdose nine years ago.”

“Damn,” muttered Winnie. “Who is the new sheriff?”

“A man by the name of Oscar Sutton.”

“I know Oscar,” she said with a brighter look. “We went to school together.”

“What was he like?” asked Christian.

“Smart. A great athlete. He was the guy that every girl was after, but he didn’t want any of them, as far as I know. He had focus and goals set for himself.”

“What about his family? Brothers? Sisters? Anyone that might have been involved in drugs?” asked Cruz.

“No. No one that I can think of. He was an only child. I think maybe a year older than me, but definitely not as old as Michael.”

“Do you think he’d speak with us alone?” asked Christian.

“It’s worth a try,” said Winnie. “Let me call Mrs. Wexton and see if she has a contact for him.” Winnie disappeared into the bedroom while the others put the dishes away and were already thinking about the next meal.

“Dad? You, me, Gunner, and Whiskey will go with Winnie. Cruz? Take Ham, Gator, Rush, Rory, and Cade to the location where the tracker stopped in Raleigh. Stone? You, Eli, and Red sniff around town and see if anyone is talking about the explosion up on the ridge.” Winnie came out of the bedroom, still holding her phone.

“She said that he lives in his parents’ old house about a mile from here. He’s not married, no girlfriend or boyfriend that she’s aware of. She seemed pretty certain that he was trying to deal with the situation, but he’d been left a real shit pile.”

“Well, that’s something we’re good at, kicking shit piles.” Vince smiled at the young woman, and she smiled back. She was truly lovely, and he couldn’t wait to see the beautiful grandchildren they were going to give him.

“I’d like to go see Oscar now while it’s dark. That way, no one will see me going into his home.”

“We’ll take a stroll down Main Street and see if we can attract any attention,” said Eli. Winnie looked at them and laughed. “What’s so funny?”

“You’re in a rural town in West Virginia with less than ten thousand permanent residents. The three of you look like you play for the Steelers. I highly doubt you will have any difficulty attracting attention.” They all smirked at her, nodding. “Just a word of caution. Looking the way you do and being strangers to the area, the young women could see you as a ticket out. Watch your, um, assets.”

“Oh, she’s cute,” smiled Red. “I like her. Very funny.”



“This is really a one-horse town,” frowned Stone. “I thought Bronwyn and I were from a little town, but this is really sad. Half the shit on the Main Street is closed.”

“It’s happening everywhere,” said Eli. “Big businesses come and take over the mom-and-pop shops. Winnie said a huge pharmacy chain took over the small pharmacy. But think about it. I remember the one in our little town carried everything. They had groceries and even some clothing items once upon a time.” Stone nodded.

“Yea, man, I remember the one in our town had a little diner counter. I used to wait for my folks and get a milkshake and plate of fries.”

“You guys are old as shit,” laughed Red. They both glared at him, and he cleared his throat. “Joking. Obviously. It was different in Canada. Our pharmacies are more like the big chains here in the U.S. now.”

“The dogs are losing their shit right now,” muttered Stone, pulling back on Beast’s leash.

“Hell, it’s so prevalent here, I can almost smell it, so I know they’re struggling,” said Red. “How are all these people affording the drugs? I mean, if they’re selling them for three

bucks a piece, and the average addict is taking five to ten pills a day, that's a lot of money for a week.”

“I don't know,” said Stone, shaking his head. “Maybe they're asking them for favors. Sort of keeping them on retention with the drugs while holding them on a short leash for their own use.”

“Hey,” said Eli, nudging the other two men. “Over there.”

Across the street was a small park in front of what looked to be the city's government building. There was a picturesque gazebo with small iron benches lining the walkways. But in the center of the gazebo were a couple of guys shoving two young women around.

“Well, we're bored, so why not,” smirked Eli.

“You got yer pills, Mandy, now I get my pussy. That was the deal,” said the man.

“I'm on my period, Nate. I can't.”

“Little blood don't bother me,” he laughed.

“You boys got a problem?” asked Eli. The one named Nate turned, ready to say something sarcastic, but stopped seeing the size of the men and the dogs.

“Ain’t your business, mister. Mandy and lil Becca owe us somethin’.”

“Is that true?” asked Red, staring at the young woman. She looked to be around twenty but could have been younger.

“I-I said I would be with him if he gave me somethin’, but I didn’t think he’d really take me up on it.”

“How old are you?” asked Stone.

“She’s old enough!” yelled the other man. Stone turned, glaring at him as Beast growled, taking a protective stance.

“I’m nineteen,” she said.

“Honestly?” His gaze bore into her, and she fidgeted, then shook her head.

“I’m sixteen, and Becca is fourteen.”

“Sixteen and fourteen. That’s what we call underage and would be considered statutory rape,” said Stone. “My suggestion for you boys would be leave the girls alone, or you’ll end up in jail.”

“Ain’t gonna end up in jail, stranger,” grinned the second man. “Fred always takes care of us.”

“You must not have heard the news,” laughed Red.
“Fred is dead. Dead as a door knocker.” The two men’s faces blanched, and they looked at one another. Stone gripped the two girls by the arms and turned them so their backs were to the others.

“Are you taking drugs?” he asked.

“N-not yet. We thought we’d try it. Everyone is doin’ it around here, and it’s so boring here.”

“Nothing is so boring to make you want to become an addict. You take those pills, and they own you. Every inch of you. You won’t see twenty-five, and you damn sure won’t see anything outside of this city.” The younger girl, Becca, started to cry and reached into her pocket, handing him the pills.

“I don’t want to do this anymore, Mandy. I don’t want to be like them.” The older girl nodded, taking the pills out and giving them to Stone.

“I don’t want to either.”

“Do you live far?” he asked. Both girls shook their heads. “Go home. Don’t go near these guys again, and don’t ever think about doing something so stupid again.”

“We promise,” they said in unison, running off.

“Hey! Hey, you owe me pussy!” yelled Nate. Stone tossed the pills at his feet, and they immediately knelt to pick them up, shoving them back in their pockets.

“They don’t owe you shit,” said Eli. “If you ever speak to those young women like that again or even breathe in their direction, I’m gonna hunt you down, cut off your dick, and make you eat it raw.”

“Whatever,” he said, shoving past him. The dogs both growled, and he stopped, turning to go in the other direction. “Don’t need her pussy anyway. Got plenty up at the house.”

“Then you should go up to the house,” smirked Stone. “You’ll find it gone.”

The three men watched as the younger men ran toward a broken-down car and took off.

“Well, that accomplished several things,” said Eli. “We pissed off two drug dealers, we saved two young girls, for the time being anyway, and we probably just alerted the whole town that we were responsible for killing Fred and those men.” Red and Stone laughed.

“It was a good night, boys. A good, good night.”



“Can I help you?” asked the man standing in the doorway.

“Oscar? Oscar Sutton?” asked Winnie.

“Yes,” he frowned. “Do I know you?”

“Oscar, it’s Winnie. Winnie Pasko.”

“Holy shit,” he muttered, pulling her in for a hug.

“Winnie. Damn, I’m so sorry about Michael. Please, come in.”

“Thank you,” she nodded. “Oscar, this is my boyfriend, Christian, his father, Vince, and two friends, Gunner and Whiskey.”

“Smart of you to come with your own army,” he smirked. “Can I get you guys a beer? Water?”

“We’re good, thank you,” said Whiskey. “We have some questions if you’d be willing to help us.”

“I think I should be asking you all to help me from the looks of you.” They all smiled, nodding at him. “Since I think I know what you guys are, let me tell you I spent eight years as an Army specialist. I got a degree in criminal justice, and when my folks got sick, I came back here to take care of them. The sheriff was a criminal, through and through. I

decided I'd had enough of it and ran for office on a whim. I never expected to win."

"I didn't know you went into the Army," smiled Winnie. He nodded.

"I was hoping to come home and marry Molly."

"Molly," she whispered. "You were dating Molly Wexton? I had no idea."

"You and Michael had already left town. I never thought she'd fall for that shit, Winnie. I was already in the Army and had just come home to see my folks. They were getting on in years, and both weren't in good health. Molly was getting ready to head to WVU. We were both excited. Our lives were going as planned. We talked about getting married once she was out of college."

"What happened?" asked Vince.

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "She got injured and wasn't going to be able to keep her athletic scholarship, but I offered to help pay for her to finish school. She refused. Said she'd think of something else. By the time I was home on leave, she was dead, and Adam was so strung out I didn't recognize him."

“Did you try and get her into rehab?” asked Christian.

“I didn’t know about the addiction until it was too late. Her mother said she tried, but it was useless. My folks were both sick. Dad had lung cancer from working in the mines, and Mom had all kinds of health issues. I was pulled in a million different directions,” he said, shaking his head. “I went back to see if I could get some leave time to handle my folks, but also hoping to help Adam. By the time I got back here, Adam was dead, my father was dying in a hospital, and my mom passed four days after the funeral.”

“God, I’m so sorry, Oscar.”

“Michael came to see me, Winnie. When he got here to confront Fred, he came to see me. Fred found him and told him if he didn’t come and pick up a shipment to sell on-base, they were going to take it out on you. He said they planned to kidnap you from the pharmacy. He wasn’t going to let that happen. He said your mom was alive, and he was going to confront her, alone.”

“She is,” swallowed Winnie. “Alive, I mean. That was my big shock this week. She doesn’t go by her name any longer, and she looks different but the same. I think Fred was

buying drugs from her, but she's getting them from someone much higher up."

"Damn."

"Did you find Michael's body?" asked Christian.

"No," Oscar said, shaking his head. "I got a call from the neighbor across the street. She said someone had pulled into your old place and hauled some trash to the back of the house. I had no reason to think it was anything but that. I shouldn't have waited. I should have gone that night."

"You couldn't have known, Oscar," said Winnie.

"When I got there the next morning, he was sitting on the grass, leaning against that old elm tree in the backyard. The place was falling apart, practically in rubble, but he was sitting there like he belonged."

"Did the investigation reveal anything?" asked Gunner.

"I had a print of some tires, but I didn't need it. I knew it was Fred and his old man, but no one would come forward. Not one damn person."

"My mother killed him," said Winnie. "She admitted it to all of them."

“Are you kidding me? That’s what I need. I can arrest her!”

“No, wait,” said Christian. “We need to get her, but we need something just as big as murdering her son and husband.”

“Wait, she murdered your dad too?”

“According to her, she murdered him by buying out Franks and Morris.”

“That stands to reason,” said Oscar, nodding at the men. “Coupla pieces of shit is what they were. They both died before I became sheriff, but I knew what they were doing. I can’t tell you how many calls I made to the DEA and other federal organizations. They’d send someone down, looking just like a federal agent, and say they couldn’t find anything.”

“Fucking idiots,” muttered Vince.

“Yea, they were that,” smirked the man. “Look, Winnie, I released Michael’s body to the Marines because I knew they’d dig in further. And it looks like they have. I’m glad because right now, I’m a three-man show. It’s just me and two deputies.”

“We took care of Fred earlier,” said Christian, staring at the man. Oscar looked at him and started to speak, then just nodded.

“And the old man? He’s the one you have to watch out for. Slimy bastard that seems to escape everything.”

“He wasn’t there, but we blew the stills, so I’m going to guess he’ll be looking for us.”

“You boys know how to make an entrance,” laughed Oscar. “I heard the blast and knew where it was coming from. No one called me, so I figured they were handling it on their own.”

“You knew they had stills?” frowned Whiskey.

“I did. And I know what you’re thinking. But again, I have two people besides me. Two. Just when I think we’ve got a handle on this shit, something else pops up. I’m up for re-election and had every intention of not running again. The problem is no one wants to run against me. No one is dumb enough to want the job.”

“Well, we’re going to see what we can do for you,” said Christian. “We’ve got several men looking into some

things, including following Mary Lou, or Marilyn, into Raleigh.”

“Raleigh? What would she be doing there?” he asked.

“Big pharma. Their offices and manufacturing sites are all located there. If we can connect her to one of them, we can help to stop this, or at the very least slow it down.” Oscar looked at the room of people and nodded.

“Tell me what you need.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ham parked the SUV at the top of the hill to the tech complex. There must have been three dozen buildings, all dedicated to the medical industry, primarily pharmaceuticals. All of them right in the same vicinity.

“Well, forget banks and U.S. mints. If you want to make a killing on a heist, this is the place to do it,” said Rush.

“That one there makes insulin pens and other diabetic drugs,” said Cruz. “There, it’s asthma inhalers and nebulizers. Cardio, renal, arthritis, and those two are the major manufacturers for opiates.”

“Then that’s our focus,” said Rory, looking through the lens of his binoculars. “I see several big trucks waiting to be loaded.”

“I see those, too,” said Cade, “but why are there three vans waiting next to the semis?”

“Those are private delivery,” frowned Cruz. “We need to get in there and see what they’re doing. It’s a twenty-four-seven facility, so it’ll be busy.”

“This should be fun,” smiled Ham.

The entire building was lit up like a Christmas tree. The parking lot was well-lit. Even the office lights were still on in the building next door. Looking around the buildings, that's when he saw their opportunity.

“Up there. We climb the trees and rope down on the roof from there,” he said, pointing above the warehouse.

“I hate when you Rangers get it up your ass that everyone climbs like an ape,” frowned Cruz. “I'm a SEAL. An old one at that.”

“We got you, fish-boy,” smirked Ham.

“I fucking hate you guys sometimes.” His teammates chuckled, shaking their heads, knowing it was all in good fun.

The men carefully wound their way around the buildings, coming in through the small grouping of trees behind the warehouse. Following the huge branches hanging over the top, moving backwards, they found the tree they needed to climb.

“We need to make sure the security system is frozen,” said Cade. “Do you think anyone is up back home? Or do we need to do this on our own?”

“I can hear you, you know,” said Ace. “You guys must think we’re sleeping while you’re out there. How many times do we need to say, we’ve got it.”

“One more would be great,” smirked Cruz.

“Fine. We got it.”

“Thank you, Ace,” said the group of men, smiling.

“I’ll climb up first,” said Rush. “I’ll set the lines, then lower to the roof. You guys come up behind me while I make a few lights go out.”

“Hey, boys?” came the sweet, feminine voice.

“Aunt Montana?” said Gator.

“Hi, honey.”

“Uh, Aunt Montana, we’re a little busy here,” he grinned.

“Yes, I know, sweetie. If you boys would look in the outer pocket of your bags, I have a surprise for you. It’s something we’re testing out.”

“This spray can?” asked Rory.

“That’s right. It’s a spray-on version of our stealth netting. We think it will cling to clothing and skin, but it’s

only got a one-hour time limit. This is as good an opportunity as any to test it out.”

“Aunt Montana, you’re the best,” laughed Gator.

“I know,” she grinned. “One thing, don’t spray it on your, you know, manhood with no clothing on. We’ve found that it causes an awful rash down there if you do that.”

“Good to know,” frowned Cade. “And who was the poor bastard that tested that?” While the men sprayed themselves down, they couldn’t believe what they were seeing. Or, not seeing.

“This shit works,” said Ham.

“I’ll try not to be offended by that,” said Montana.

“Sorry.”

At the top of the tree, Rush wrapped several ropes around a heavy limb. Hanging out over the roof, he gripped the rope and tugged several times with all his weight. There was no indication that it couldn’t hold them.

One by one, they climbed the tree, scooting out to the limb and lowering to the roof of the warehouse. Once down, Rush and Rory walked around and turned off just a few of the security bulbs.

At the rooftop hatch, they opened the door by picking the lock and lowering themselves onto the catwalk. Below them was a bustling ant farm of activity. Production lines were moving at warp speed while bottling and packaging sections were parsing out medications in small batches.

When they were done, they were boxed, labeled, and packed in large shipping boxes. The boxes were then placed on pallets and loaded into the massive semi-trailers. All except one section.

“There,” said Cruz. “They’re not packaging those. They’re dumping them in a barrel.”

“Could it be waste?” asked Cade.

“Possibly, but why would they load waste into those vans. No, I think they’re saying that those pills are defective, but they aren’t. If I were a manufacturing expert, I’d be asking questions about their process if they’re trashing that much medication.”

“So, they’re logging in that the product was defective and properly disposed of, but what they’re really doing is dumping it in barrels and shipping it to dealers?” asked Rory.

“That would be my guess, big guy.”

“We need to find the woman,” said Ham.

“We find the CEO, and I bet we find her,” said Cruz.

“Call it a hunch.” Rory nodded at his friend, knowing that he would never ignore one of his hunches.

“Then let’s find him.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Winnie rolled over, watching as Christian hung up the phone. She'd heard him talking to someone, but it was just low murmurs. In truth, she was dead asleep, completely exhausted from making love and from a million and one thoughts rolling through her head.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Everything is good, babe," he said, kissing the back of her neck. He pulled her naked body tightly against his own. "That was the boys down in North Carolina. They're gonna be a few more days."

"Did they find anything?"

"We're not sure," he yawned. "We should know more tomorrow."

Pulling her tighter to his body until she fell asleep once again, he knew it was no use. Finding it difficult to fall back asleep, he rose and went into the living room, trying to be quiet. That was stupid of him. The others were all sitting around the room with their weapons lying across their laps.

"What's wrong?" asked Christian.

“We got a heads up from Mrs. Wexton. Apparently, someone let on that some newcomers were renting a house nearby and could possibly be the men responsible for killing Fred and the boys,” said Gunner.

“Whiskey and Eli are outside walking around the property,” said Vince.

Christian nodded, grabbing his own weapon and looking out the windows. He didn't see anything, but then again, these men knew the area far better than they did. Someone could be hiding across the street, ready to blow up the house.

The front door opened, and Eli came in, grabbing the rifle and two more handguns. He dumped some shells in his side pocket and looked at the others.

“Whiskey and I will be in the trees. Two trucks are coming down the road, and look like they mean business. You boys need to get ready.”

Christian ran back into the bedroom, gently nudging Winnie's shoulder.

“Baby? I need you to get into the bathroom and cover yourself up in the bathtub. Don't come out; don't even open

the door until one of us comes to get you.” She only nodded, fear in her eyes, as he watched her lock herself in the bathroom.

When the headlights of the two pickup trucks shone through the front windows, Christian opened the door, standing straight and tall. Six men jumped out of the first truck, four more stepped out of the second one.

“Little early for a party, boys,” said Christian, looking at his watch. “I wasn’t expecting company, but I could bake some muffins or something.”

“Ain’t no party, city boy,” smiled the old man. “I ain’t got no proof but don’t need any. You killed my boy and the others.”

“Friend, I don’t have a clue as to who you are.”

“Name’s Ray Hitchkiss. You blew my stills and killed my son and three others.” Christian just looked at him, then stepped to the side to allow the other men to walk out onto the front porch.

Ray Hitchkiss stared at the men armed with weapons far better than his own. Not only were they better armed, but

these men looked as though they'd stepped off the cover of *Soldier of Fortune*.

“As I said,” smiled Christian, “no clue who you are. But, if you had stills, that’s illegal, so seems to me that someone did the law a favor.”

“Look, stranger, I don’t know who you are or what yer business is here, but you need to gather yourself and get the hell outta here. You killed my boy, and that damn sure don’t make me happy. Last kid I had. He wasn’t very bright, but he did what I told him. Now, I can just shoot you right here, or you pack your bags and leave.”

“Obviously, he wasn’t very bright, or he’d be alive,” said Christian.

The others caught the shadow of movement as one of the men standing near the second truck raised his small pistol and aimed at Christian. He only smiled, knowing that Eli had him in his sights. With the whisper of sound from the silencer, the man fell to his face in the damp earth.

“Who did that?!” yelled Hitchkiss.

“I don’t react well to men trying to kill me while I’m minding my own business,” said Christian. “You see, you

obviously are a man that believes he can do whatever he likes without consequence. Stills are illegal. Selling opiates is also illegal.”

The men all started to squirm, looking down at their feet. Ray Hitchkiss stared at the small group of men and took three slow, steady steps forward. In the faint light from the one bulb on the porch, he now had a very clear view of their faces and their stature. He swallowed and stepped back.

“Don’t fuck with my business, boy,” he growled. “It’s how I make my livin’, and I don’t take that lightly.”

“I’m not your boy. I’m no one’s boy. You sell drugs to children. You get them hooked on shit and then demand repayment in any way you like. That won’t happen any longer. You see, your business is ending here and now.”

The mountain men stared at one another, shifting nervously, anxiously from one foot to the other, almost as if just saying the name of the drugs made them skittish.

“You don’t have that power. Boy.” He taunted Christian, shaking his finger at him.

Christian stepped forward, taking slow, sure steps toward the older man. He still held a finger up, waving it at

him. When Christian was directly over him, his towering height made the old man swallow.

Christian gripped his finger, bending it backwards with a loud snap and pop. The old man winced, trying not to scream in front of his men. Clearly, he was on the drugs as well, or he would have screamed out.

With his massive hand, Christian covered the other man's entire fist and snapped the shooting hand backwards, hearing several cracks.

"Whadda we do, boss?" yelled one of the younger men.

"Yea, boss," smiled Christian. "What are you gonna do? See, here's your problem. One of many. Marilyn, or Mary Lou, or whatever the fuck she wants to be called, is going to be done. I will guarantee it. Your business will end here. All of it. You will never sell another pill again."

"Who are you? Who the fuck are you?" he growled.

"Who I am doesn't matter. Just know that I will walk off this mountain. You will be carried out in a pine box." He released his fist, letting the man fall to the ground. Two men

stepped up, gripping his elbows, but he shoved them back.

Then he made his biggest mistake yet.

“Kill ‘em all!”

Before the poorly skilled, drug-addled men could reach for their weapons, Eli and Whiskey had three more dead. One dropped his gun and ran down the mountain road as his boss yelled at him. The others found themselves suddenly facing some very angry men.

With the expertise of the VG men, there was only one shot per man needed, leaving Ray Hitchkiss standing alone.

“What the fuck do you care about all this?” he yelled.

“I care because it matters to me and someone I care for. You killed a Marine. A brother. That will never be tolerated by me or my family. You are done, old man.”

“Then kill me! Go ahead! Kill me!”

“No,” grinned Christian. “You take yourself to the clinic and get that hand set and casted. Once you do that, pop a bunch of your own drugs, and you’ll feel better real quick. Then, I want you to make your way to Raleigh and tell Marilyn we’d like to meet with her and her boss since she hasn’t reached out to me. Understand me, old man?”

“She won’t meet with you. She won’t. And I won’t ask her to.”

“Then I have no reason to keep you alive,” said Christian.

He raised his weapon and shot the man in the head, leaving nine dead bodies on the ground and only one to tell the tale. With a quick call to the sheriff, he thanked the men, assuring them the trucks and bodies would be removed and dumped in the quarry lake.

Christian tapped on the bathroom door, and Winnie opened the door.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“I’m fine. Are you okay? Is everything out there okay?” she asked.

“It’s all good. But I need you to do me a favor, Winnie.” She looked at him and nodded. “I need you to fly to my home in Louisiana and wait for me there. Shit just got very real.” She stared at him, raising a hand to touch the side of his face with a gentle touch. Kissing him sweetly, she smiled up at him.

“Fuck no.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Winnie! Winnie, come back here!” he yelled as she walked into the living room.

“Christian, this isn’t going to happen. I want to confront the woman formerly known as my mother. I want answers from her, and if I leave here, I won’t get them. You’ll handle things in the way I’ve noticed that you handle them, and I won’t get my answers.”

“Shit!” he yelled, running his hand over the top of his head. Vince smirked at his son, shaking his head. In the living room, Winnie was seated on the sofa, her arms crossed over her breasts. She stared straight ahead at nothing in particular.

“Winnie, honey, he’s just trying to keep you safe,” said Whiskey.

“I get that. And I appreciate it. But that woman owes me some answers. She killed my father and my brother. Her own husband and son! I deserve to know why.”

“Baby, you know why,” said Christian. “She did this for money.”

“Money? Is that all this is about? I find that hard to believe. There are a million other ways for her to make money. I don’t see how killing your family is the easy way.”

“Winnie, there are so many cases in our history of that being the case, I can’t even begin to tell you,” said Vince. He sat next to the young woman, taking her hand in his own weathered, old hand. “Listen to me, honey. All any of us want is for you to be safe. If you’re here, you’re in danger, and Christian won’t be able to think clearly. We need to nail her for the murder of your father and brother, but also the deaths of all those other innocent young men and women. We won’t be able to think clearly if we’re worried for your life.”

Winnie stared at the older man, shaking her head. He was making sense, but she wanted her answers.

“I need to face her,” she said quietly, tears gathering in her eyes. “What kind of mother fakes her own death and leaves a little girl to be raised by her brother? Who would do that?”

“Oh, sweetie,” he said, shaking his head, “there are all kinds of mothers out there, and we’ve seen some of the worst. But the good news is we’ve seen some of the best as well. My own wife is amazing. Whiskey’s wife, all the women back

home. They're wonderful! We don't get to pick our biological parents, but we can pick our family. That's what all of us have done.

“The men and women of Voodoo Guardians are our family. These men around me are like my blood brothers. I would take a bullet for any one of them, and I know they would do the same for me. But it's not just the men, Winnie. The women are amazing. Truly the best the world has to offer.

“Now, I know that you want to face your mother and get some answers, but I also know that Christian wants you safe at our home back in Louisiana. So, I'm going to make you an offer.” She eyed the man, tilting her head.

“Okay. I'm listening.”

“You go back home with Red as your escort, pack your bags, and head to our compound. When we get your mother, and we will get her, we'll video-conference you in, and you can have your say. It won't be in person, but it will be damn close. What do you say?”

She stared at Vince, admiring his handsome features. She'd fallen in love with those very same features in his son. But there was something so wonderfully paternal about his

voice, his demeanor; she was immediately at ease and comfortable.

“Alright. I’ll go back with Red and clean out my things at the apartment. But I want to know the moment you have her.”

“You have my word,” smiled Vince, kissing her forehead. He saw the tears gathering once more and brushed them aside with his thumb. “Why the tears?”

“Because I never had this with my father. Never. He worked fifteen-hour days in the mine. He left while I was sleeping and came home after I’d gone to bed. I know he was trying to provide for his family, but his family barely knew him. I barely knew him!”

“Honey, I will never put down a man who was trying to provide for his family. This is harsh country. Tough country, and any man who survives is one I admire. Your father was injured on the job, but that’s not what killed him. I wish he’d lived so that I could have met him and thanked him for giving my son the greatest gift of his lifetime.”

“Oh, Vince,” she cried, reaching to hug the older man. “Thank you for saying that. Alright. Alright, I’ll go back with Red and wait until you call. I’ll have my moment with her

virtually. But someone needs to promise they'll slap her for me." The men all chuckled, nodding.

"I give you my word, baby," said Christian, hugging her. He looked at his father over her shoulder and mouthed 'thank you.' Vince could only nod, grinning at his only child.

"Let me gather my things. Should I make plane reservations?" she asked.

"Nope," smiled Red. "We'll drive to your place, gather everything you need, and pack up the rest to have it moved. Once that's done, we're flying home in style."

"I don't need a first-class ticket," she frowned.

"Honey, that's the only way we fly."



Watching the trucks leave the facility, the team followed them, dividing and conquering. These weren't trucks headed into big cities. They were headed to rural areas where they could be hidden, unloading their cargo in the dark of night. Tomorrow, the drugs would be in the hands of dealers, selling them to desperate users on the streets.

With the first truck headed toward West Virginia, the boys waited until it was in the darkest part of the road. Using

their stealth technologies, they never saw them coming. One well-placed shot and the rear tire blew, throwing the vehicle over on its side, sliding to the edge of the cliff and down. The fire could be seen for miles.

“One down,” said Cade.

The second truck made its way into rural North Carolina, apparently believing that those near Appalachian State University and the surrounding remote areas would enjoy their addictions. But with the treacherous hairpin turns and cliffs, the delivery train was now down to just one truck.

“Two down,” said Rory.

The final truck was driving so fast at first, the team thought that perhaps they knew they were being followed or that the other trucks notified them before their demise. As it turned out, they were already high on their own product.

Trying to make their way up into rural Virginia, they were driving so erratically the team decided to watch and wait. It was a good decision.

It would later be determined that the car full of drug dealers had fallen asleep at the wheel, crashing their truck into

a tree, catching it on fire, and all perishing inside. Gator would remark.

“Easiest gig I’ve ever done.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“How did we lose three trucks, Marilyn?” asked the man seated behind the desk.

“We’re not sure,” she frowned, staring at the accident photos. “The feds are asking questions about where the discarded product was going. For now, I think I’ve appeased them by saying these men stole them, but they’re asking for video footage of our docks.”

“Shit! I told you we needed to find another way.”

“Marvin, if you yell at me again, I’m going to make sure the whole world knows about you and your dirty little secrets,” she replied calmly. “I’m doing my part. I’ve connected you to all the right dealers, I’m bringing in new business, and I’m making you enough money that you can pay off your debts and the lawsuits of all the people your perfect little pills have killed. Do not fuck with me.”

“Don’t threaten me, *Mary Lou*,” he frowned. “I know who you really are. You’re the woman that spent two years planning the death of her husband, and herself. You’re the woman who left your children to fend for themselves.”

“I left them with enough money to survive. That’s better than most in that God-forsaken town.”

“How generous of you,” he sighed. “Where is Ray?”

“I don’t know,” she frowned. “I’ve been trying to call him for two days. His son and three others were killed, and his stills were destroyed. I know he’s probably trying to find the killer, although I don’t know why. Fred was a useless piece of shit who ate more pills than he sold.”

“You always were such a loving, compassionate woman,” frowned the man. She looked up from the computer screen and stared at him.

“You know, Marvin, you might remember that I know who you are too. You’re not Paul Higgenbotham, the genius scientist and businessman. You’re Marvin Schumholter. West Virginia mountain kid who barely made it out of eleventh grade. I’m not sure how you got all those fake degrees, but the world would love to know about it.

“I can see the headlines now. Drug Billionaire Just A Lost Hick. It would definitely make a splash in the news.”

“You’re a fucking bitch,” he growled. “I should have drowned you when I had the chance.”

“Yea, but you couldn’t, could you? No. Because I was Dad’s favorite.”

“Yea, you were his favorite in bed for sure. He preferred you over Mom.” She glared at him, then shrugged.

“I learned a lot from the old man. So did you. Once his dick stopped working, I was free to do whatever I wanted. Didn’t take much to convince you to kill them both so we could find our way out of that hellhole.”

“Then you went and got pregnant by that miner,” he smirked.

“He was a good man,” she whispered. “He was good to me and good to the kids. He just didn’t have much of a head for business. If he would have agreed to our plans, he’d still be here, and we’d all be rich.”

“Shoulda, woulda, coulda,” grinned Marvin.

“You really are an asshole.”

“Seems to me you liked it up the ass.” She slammed the laptop shut and stood from her desk, glaring at him.

“You know, I think you’re jealous that I never let you touch me,” she smirked. “Our father got what you wanted.”

“You really don’t know me at all, do you?” he said, shaking his head. “I have no interest in women. None. I’ve always preferred male companionship. Which reminds me. I have a friend waiting for me now. Find Ray and find out what the fuck is going on.”

Just as she was about to leave, there was a soft knock on the door.

“Excuse me, sir. Ma’am,” said the assistant. “We’ve just received horrible news. Our three trucks that left early this morning with the defective product have all crashed. There are no survivors, and there are two federal agents that would like to ask you some questions about why the drugs were headed to rural areas.”

The siblings stared at one another, feeling sick to their stomachs.

“We’ll be out in a moment, Heidi.” She nodded at Marvin and shut the door once again. “This is not a fucking coincidence. All three trucks crash, everyone in them dead, and our product is found. Something is going on here!”

“Keep calm. We’ll get out of this just like we always do. You speak to them, and I’ll see who I can get a hold of in

Washington. Defense Secretary Evans should be ready for a refill. I'm sure I can get him to call off the heat."

She left through a side door, walking the hidden corridor to another office. Behind her, she could hear her brother.

"Gentlemen, please come in. It's a very difficult time for RxGen, as you can imagine."

His sister could only smile, marveling at her brother's ability to bullshit everyone. Everyone except her. In her private office, she took the seat behind the massive glass and ivory desk. The huge ivory tusks curved as legs were a gift from a friend in Africa. They were illegal, of course, but that's why her office was hidden. That, and many other reasons.

Dialing the number for the Defense Secretary, she waited as it rang and rang.

"Secretary Evans' office," said the voice. That was odd. This was his personal cell phone number.

"Uh, yes. This is a personal matter. Marilyn Higgenbotham calling for Secretary Evans."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Secretary Evans is on long-term disability leave."

“Disability? Did he injure himself?” she asked.

“I can’t divulge that information, ma’am. He’ll be out for the next sixty days, at minimum.”

“I’m afraid this is urgent,” she prodded. “I really need to speak with him.”

“As I said, ma’am. He is unavailable. If you’d like me to take a message, I’m happy to give that to his aide.”

Marilyn hung up the phone without another word. Shaking her head, she started to feel the nerves creeping up her spine and dialed the next number on the list.

“Senator Greene’s office,” said the male voice.

“Yes, this is Marilyn Higgenbotham calling for the Senator,” she said in a sultry voice.

“My apologies, ma’am, but Senator Greene is unavailable. He’s taking some personal time to be with his family.”

“I need to speak to him,” she insisted.

“And I understand,” said the man with a sharp tone, “but he is not available.”

She hung up the phone again, shaking her head. Turning to the television, she scanned the news channels, watching as their barrels of drugs were removed from one of the vehicles. In the other window, the van was on fire, the drugs burning with it.

“No, no, no,” she whispered.

“RxGen will definitely have to answer some questions, Virginia. In other news, it’s being reported Secretary Evans has admitted himself into drug rehab for an addiction to opioids.”

“Fuck.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The men watched the television, smiling at the work they knew their teammates had performed. This was going to make Marilyn, or Mary Lou, very unhappy.

Although he was already missing her, Christian was happy that Winnie was on a plane headed to Louisiana with Red. At least there, she'd be safe with his mother and the rest of the family. Now, he needed to find justice for a Marine brother.

“I left another message for her, letting her know that we'd blown through the drugs,” said Christian. “I told her we wouldn't sell any more until we met her boss.”

“Beyond the obvious, something is eating at me,” said Cruz.

“There are a million things eating at me,” said Rory, “but for shits and giggles, what's eating at you?”

“How does a mountain woman, with supposedly no education, learn about opiates, drug and kill her husband, kill her son, and become the alleged ring leader of a huge drug operation?”

“Maybe she met someone,” frowned Gator.

“Yes, but who? I mean, by all accounts, she lived right here. It’s not like she traveled to far-off lands or something. She was right here in this little town. Who could she have met?” asked Cruz.

“Comms?” called Christian.

“I can hear you, you know. You don’t have to yell,” said Pigsty.

“Sorry, brother. I’m used to the shitty comms devices we have in the Corps. Have you done a full background on Mary Lou Pasko?”

“We started one early this morning. On her marriage certificate, her maiden name is blank. I’m not sure that’s even legal, but maybe she was paying someone off, even back then. We’re working on it, but we do have some information about RxGen, the factory where the drugs came from.

“RxGen was founded almost twenty years ago by Paul Higgenbotham. He was an entrepreneur with a head for business, or at least that’s what his bio says. I can’t find one damn thing he ever started or invested in.”

“Then how is he the founder of a major prescription drug company?” asked Christian.

“That would be the question of the day, week, month, and year,” said Pigsty. “At first, RxGen had some small drugs on the market, mostly light-weight pain relievers. They weren’t making an impact simply because there were better drugs out there. Then, suddenly, they jump into the opioid market.

“RxGen assures the world that all the research has been done, and their drug is safe, effective, and non-addictive.”

“How is that possible?” asked Cruz.

“It’s not. It’s one of the reasons they’ve been on the FDA’s radar for years now. The studies were all done by their own researchers and scientists, and when the FDA demanded all the full trials and studies, they gave them to them. It took a while for the feds to dive in, but once they did, they realized everything was bogus. The scientists and researchers were using previously published materials from other drug manufacturers. All of those people, all of the researchers and scientists, are now dead.”

“Jesus,” muttered Vince.

“Yep. There are at least thirteen separate lawsuits against them for wrongful death. They’ve paid millions on the side to get rid of at least another twenty.”

“Is it privately held?” frowned Christian.

“Yes, but I can’t see who else is on the board. I’m still digging, and we’ve got the whole team trying to find the information, but nothing yet. It would be very, very helpful if someone would get down there and barge into the proverbial doors.”

“We will,” said Christian, “but I want to give this woman a chance to respond to me.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, and the men all looked at one another, wondering if they’d lost their connection.

“Pigsty?”

“I’m here. You guys need to turn on the news. Secretary Evans has been admitted to rehab. An opioid addiction.”

“Son-of-a-bitch,” muttered Rory. “Maybe he’s how this all got swept under the rug?”

“Maybe,” said Christian. “Maybe we need to visit the rehab hospital.”



On the outskirts of Fredericksburg, Virginia, was a small rehabilitation hospital catering mostly to the rich and famous. Or the politicians. With the others waiting on a call from Marilyn, Rory, Vince, and Cruz decided to make the trip down. They’d met the secretary previously and had Bodwick call ahead.

“Room ten,” said Rory, nodding toward the closed door. He tapped lightly and heard someone say, ‘come in.’ “Secretary Evans, it’s nice to see you again, sir.”

“That’s bullshit, and we both know it, Baine,” he smirked. “But I appreciate you at least attempting to make it sound genuine.”

“Sorry about all, uh, this, sir,” said Cruz. He nodded, pursing his lips.

“The worst is over, or so they tell me. I’m gonna guess that you boys would like to know how all this happened.”

“Yes, sir. We’ve got a dead Marine and a woman whom we believe is responsible, and the Marine’s presumed dead mother.”

“Marilyn?” he frowned.

“Mary Lou is her real name,” said Vince. “She changed it when she started her side hustle of killing off husbands and sons.”

“Take a seat,” he said, nodding toward the leather sofa and chair. “Four years ago, I had back surgery. Miserable fucking shit. All those years of jumping out of planes and my spine was so compressed and jacked up I could barely move. I was facing a wheelchair sooner rather than later.

“Once the surgery was done, I was feeling pretty good, but still had a lot of leg pain. I’m out to dinner one night with Paul Higgenbotham, and my leg is killing me. He’s telling me about their new drug, all the safety studies, and hands me four pills. Four fucking pills. That’s all it took. After that, he or his sister were bringing me drugs every week.

“As long as I kept pushing shit through the Senate, I’d get my pills. I was so damned stupid,” he muttered. “I knew better, but I just wanted to keep going, keep doing my job, and the pills were allowing that to happen. I’ve resigned, by the way. And I’ve come out openly that I will do everything I can to stop the sale of this drug.”

“Could we back up a moment?” asked Vince.

“Higgenbotham has a sister?”

“Yea. Marilyn Higgenbotham. She’s every bit as much in control as he is, maybe more. Ruthless woman, from what I can tell.”

“I heard,” said Pigsty.

“Sir, we think she may be the woman we’ve been looking for. If she is, the dead Marine was her son and her daughter is now engaged to my son,” said Vince.

“Well, I can’t say that I’d want her for a mother-in-law. They don’t let others know they’re related, at least not right away. Usually, she doesn’t even give her last name. She’s just introduced by her first name. She is money and power-hungry. Nothing else matters to her.”

“Is she married? Dating?” asked Rory.

“Not that I know of. In fact, I’ve never seen either of them with a partner. Look, RxGen makes billions – billions of dollars on this one drug every year, just in the U.S. They have no intention of stopping the sale of this drug just because a bunch of people are addicted to it, or dying.”

“You’ve been very helpful, Mr. Secretary,” said Rory.

“I’ve been very stupid, Rory. I was a Marine once, just like you. Just like that young man that died. I knew better, but when you’re in pain, and your body is failing you, well, all reasoning goes out the window.”

“But you’re here now,” said Cruz. “They’ll get you back on track. Then it’s up to you.”

“You’re right. And then I’m going to help you bring down RxGen.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“What are they like, Red?” asked Winnie. “And why in the world do they call you Red? You don’t have red hair.”

“One question at a time,” he smirked. “They call me Red because my face gets flushed very easily. It just looks strange with my black hair. As for what they’re like. They’re unbelievable. The kindest, most generous, incredibly brilliant people I’ve ever known. What you saw with Christian and the others, that’s how they all are.”

“What about the women? The wives?”

“Winnie, if I were another kind of man, I’d be wooing women to my cottage every night,” he smiled with a sexy grin. “But I’m not that man. Those women are so devoted to their husbands, children, and to one another, even I get choked up watching them.”

“What about Christian’s mother? Ally? What is she like?”

“Honey, you have nothing to worry about. Ally is part of our medical team. A dedicated nurse at our clinic. She adores her husband and son, and she’s going to adore you as well.”

“You really care for these people,” she smiled.

“I love these people, Winnie. I was living in Canada, working as a Canadian Mountie.” Her brows went up, and he nodded with a chuckle. “I’d been a Canadian Marine and joined the Mountie’s when I got home. Unfortunately, my wife decided she wanted a different life and left with our daughter. Moved to the west coast of Canada with her new husband.”

“Do you see your daughter?” asked Winnie.

“I was told to stay away. My daughter doesn’t want to see me. Truth is, Winnie, she doesn’t know me. She was born during my first tour. She’d be, whew, seventeen now. I guess in her final year of high school. It’s funny. I think I’ve probably only spent a total of sixty days with her in all that time. Always away. Always deployed or working.” He quieted, shaking his head. “I guess that’s not funny at all. I should be ashamed of myself for not returning sooner.”

Winnie reached across the table between the seats, gripping his hand.

“She knows you love her, Red. One day, she’ll want to know the whole story, and she’ll find you.”

“I keep track of her,” he grinned. “She doesn’t know it, but I check her social media pages, and the guys in comms help me to follow her grades. She runs track for her school, and she’s pretty damn good.”

“See,” smiled Winnie, “you’re a good dad. If you tried any other way, your ex-wife might make it difficult for you.”

“We’ll be landing in a moment,” said Chipper, calling back to them.

“Why am I so nervous?” asked Winnie, more to herself than to Red. She was twisting her fingers together.

“Because you love Christian, and you want to impress his family. But you have nothing to worry about. This group of people are the least judgmental people I’ve ever known.”

Winnie knew she was overreacting, but she wanted Christian’s family to like her. She’d never met the parents of a man she’d dated before. Of course, she never really dated anyone seriously. In fact, she hadn’t really dated Christian. They met, they argued, they fell in love.

She felt the jolt of the plane landing and took a deep breath, preparing herself to meet Ally and the others.

“You’re gonna do great, Winnie,” smiled Red. “I’ll be around if you need anything.” Red grabbed his pack and walked toward the door. Turning, he waved Winnie forward with her own bags.

Standing at the top of the stairs, she watched as more than thirty women walked toward her. Fortunately, they were all smiling.

“Oh boy,” she whispered to herself. “Hello.”

“Winnie? Oh, honey, it’s so lovely to meet you,” said a woman walking toward them. “I’m Ally, Christian’s mother.”

“It’s so wonderful to meet you,” she said, holding out her hand.

“No. No, no, not here. We’re huggers.” She gripped her shoulders and pulled her in for a big hug, rubbing her back up and down. “I’m so sorry for the loss of your brother.”

Winnie had never felt such warmth and compassion from another woman. Never. Twenty years of pent-up emotion, combined with the grief from the loss of her brother, and she was a puddle.

“Oh, honey, it’s okay. It’s all going to be okay now,” said Ally. She pulled back, brushing her hair from her face

and nodding.

“I’m sorry I’m such a wreck,” she sniffed. “I didn’t expect that.”

“You’re in a safe place here,” smiled Piper. “I’m Piper. You met my husband Rory.” Winnie nodded at the woman.

“Let me introduce you to the others,” said Ally. “This is Camille. She’s married to Cruz. Bronwyn, married to Stone; Janie, married to Eli; Kat, married to Whiskey; Darby, married to Gunner; Caroline, married to Rush; Dylan, married to Gator; Sadie, married to Ham; and our leadership team wives Sophia Ann, Gwen, Ajei, and Kate.”

“Don’t forget me!” yelled a tiny voice from the back.

“I’m sorry, Mama Irene,” smiled Ally. “Winnie, this is Mama Irene. The matriarch of our merry band of women.”

“And men,” she nodded. “Hello, my love. Welcome to our family. Now, let me take a look at you. Yes. Yes, you’ll do just fine. You’re beautiful, and you’re smart, I can tell.”

“She’s going to be our new pharmacist at the clinic, Mama,” said Camille.

“I can’t believe this. I was so worried about meeting all of you and how you would feel about me.”

“Honey, you’re my son’s choice, and that was good enough for all of us. We need your skills, the clinic needs your skills, and you’re going to be a valuable part of this family.”

“Do you know? I mean, do you know about what my mother did, what she’s doing?”

“Baby, what your mama does isn’t a reflection on you,” said Irene. “That’s on her, and my boys and God will set her straight soon enough.”

“I want to face her. I need to face her, and Christian said he would do a Facetime call with her when they got her. I want her to tell me why she killed my father and brother.”

“Are you sure you want the answer to that?” asked Ally. Winnie stared at her, then shook her head.

“I don’t know, but I feel I need it for closure.” The women all smiled at her, nodding.

“Then you’ll get your closure, honey,” said Piper. “For now, let’s get you settled into your cottage, and then we eat. Dylan has something wonderful planned for lunch.”

Winnie was shocked at the beautiful cottage with its wrap-around porch, rocking chairs, and a slew of pumpkins and hay bales decorating the porch. Inside, the warmth of the room enveloped her. Gorgeous paintings of bayou life, old New Orleans, and the ocean lined the walls of white shiplap.

It was bigger than anything Winnie had ever lived in and a damn sight prettier. The modern appliances were a dream, but when she walked into the master bedroom and saw the massive king-sized bed, her body suddenly warmed.

Ally looked at the young woman, seeing the flush on her cheeks.

“You love my son,” she grinned. Winnie’s eyes filled with tears.

“I do. I love him so much, and I’m not even sure exactly when it happened.”

“Oh, sweetie,” laughed Camille, “do we have some stories for you.”

Winnie found herself crying on and off all day. The kindness and generosity of the women was unlike anything she’d ever experienced. But when she was led to the cafeteria and the meal placed before her, she’d never been happier. The

food was four-star restaurant-worthy, and the company was better than anything she'd experienced in her life.

She'd found her home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“What do we do now?” asked Mary Lou.

“I don’t know,” said her brother, shaking his head. “I don’t think they’re watching us, but I think we should just pack up and leave. Let’s fly somewhere and start over. We can take on new names, start a new company. We have plenty of money.”

“We don’t have enough,” she frowned. Her brother shook his head, frustrated by her greed. “I think I have a way that we can do one big final run.”

“Why do you do this? Every damn time you think there’s always a way for one more. We have the damn feds knocking on our door, demanding to see all of our files and computers on Monday morning. They’re going to shut down production soon, and now that Evans has detoxed, he’s going to be singing like a bird. We need to leave!”

“Calm down,” she said, crossing her legs. “You’re always so dramatic, Marvin.”

“Don’t call me...”

“Shut up!” she screamed. Her brother jumped back, staring at her from across the desk. “Just for once, shut the hell up. We’re going to do one more major job. We have nine barrels waiting on the docks. Nine. That’s two point three million on the market.

“I have a buyer in Mexico ready to take it all off our hands. We just have to get it there, and I have someone willing to do it. With that kind of money added to what we have stashed, we’ll have a great start at a new life.”

“I think you’re asking for trouble. We could just take what we have, and we’ll be just fine. We’re better off than we were as kids.”

Mary Lou slammed her fist on the table, standing above him. Although younger, she was the alpha in their sibling relationship.

“I don’t want to be *fine*. I don’t want to be *better off* than when we were kids. I want to be one of the richest, most powerful women in the world. I want other women to envy me. I want men to fear me, desire me, follow me.”

“You’re sick,” said her brother, shaking his head. “You should be happy with what you have, what we have. Going for more now will be your death, and probably mine too. It

won't just be Evans singing. It will be others as well. You can't keep having plastic surgery every time we think someone recognizes you."

"But I can, dear brother. I can," she smiled. "You know, you're looking a little old. Perhaps you need to have a little nip and tuck. It would do wonders for that face."

"God, I hate you," he muttered. "Who is this contact that will handle the barrels?"

"Let's call him now."



"What if she doesn't call?" asked Ham.

"She'll call. She's got drugs that have to be sold, and she can't do it by herself. Her big connections here are dead, so she needs us."

When his phone began ringing, he grinned at the others.

"Yea."

"Now, that's no way to greet the woman that's going to make you rich," cooed Mary Lou.

"I'm listening," said Christian, his phone held out for the others to listen as well.

“Here’s the deal, Chris. We’re going to be closing down shop soon. There’s just too much happening, and it’s time. I’ve got nine barrels of pills that need to get to Mexico. You drive them down, and you and your boys get five grand.” She winked at her brother, and he just glared at her.

“Five grand?” smirked Christian. “Lady, you’ve lost your fucking mind. The risks associated with taking them across the border and the potential profit you’re going to make goes way beyond five grand.”

“Fine. What’s your price?” she frowned.

“Five hundred thousand,” he said.

“No. Absolutely not!”

“No problem. You find another crew that can handle this, get it all across the border, and collect your money for you. There isn’t one.”

They could hear whispering on the other end of the line, then the male voice saying, ‘just take the deal so we can be done.’ The men smirked at one another, knowing they had them.

“Alright. Five hundred thousand.”

“Half now, half when the job is done,” said Christian.

“That makes it sound as though you don’t trust me,”
said Mary Lou, frowning into the phone.

“Lady, I don’t trust you as far as I can throw you.
Since you’re a little bitty thing, and I could toss you pretty far,
that should tell you how I feel about you.”

“Fine. I’ll text you the address of the plant. Be there
tonight at midnight. Park around back at the docks. There
will be no other shipments tonight.”

“We’ll be there with bells on.” Christian hung up,
turned to the others, and smiled. “Let’s go. I have a promise
to keep to my girl.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“I can’t believe you were held by a biker gang,” frowned Winnie. “That must have been terrifying for you.”

“It was, but it also taught me some very valuable lessons. Ones that I never forgot. As soon as I was able to escape, I ran as far as I could. I enrolled in nursing school, put myself through, and then went to work for that little clinic. The night Vince brought that little girl in, my heart stopped. I thought, God, please don’t let this man be one of them.”

“But he wasn’t, right?” asked Winnie.

“No, honey. He definitely wasn’t. He was trying to stop a pedophile and sex trafficker within the club. He was working undercover for Miguel, our Miguel. See, Axel had rescued Cait and Corey several weeks before. That’s when they discovered that Corey’s biological father was after him. He was trying to sell him.”

“That’s just awful,” she said, shaking her head. “Is their son alright now?”

“He’s beautiful and perfect,” smiled Ally. “He actually teaches at a school for children just like him in Amsterdam. He’s extremely high functioning, along with his girlfriend.”

“I love that story,” smiled Winnie. “Wait, did you catch the pedophile?”

“We definitely did,” smiled Ally. “Vince didn’t want to leave me in that little town all by myself, so he threw me on the back of his bike and brought me back to our compound in Virginia. His first wife and daughter had been kidnapped and murdered by a trafficker.”

“Wow, this story is not the happy tale I thought it was,” frowned Winnie.

“Honey, I promise it’s a happy ending. Every woman you see here has a story about what she overcame to be here. We’ve all been through our own personal hell, but so have the men. In most cases, the women were the ones that pulled them out of it. Maeve literally saved Chase’s life. So did Caroline. She saved Rush.”

“The truth is,” came the deep, rich, baritone voice, “every woman here saved their man. Winnie, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Gaspar Robicheaux.”

“Oh, you’re Mama Irene’s son,” she smiled.

“I’m the oldest,” he grinned. “There are nine boys and six girls, and we’ve got dozens of grands and great-grands.

But all of these people are our family. Every last one. What I was trying to tell you is that the men aren't the heroes. The women are. In my case, yes, I found Alexandra beaten and nearly dead. But she saved my black soul. Just her trust and love made me realize I didn't want to be alone for the rest of my life."

"I love you, too, handsome," said Alexandra, kissing his cheek. "In fairness, Winnie, we saved one another, and in the deal, I got six beautiful children. Six, when I thought I would never have any."

"I'm so sorry. I mean, sorry that you couldn't have children."

"Don't be. We adopted Luke, Adam, Ben, Carl, Lucy, and Violet. I wanted a big family, and I got it with the only man that I've ever loved."

"I told Christian how much I really wished that my brother had lived to see this. He would have loved you all, and he would have enjoyed being part of all of this."

"Where is he, baby?" asked Mama Irene.

"The Marines are holding his remains for me. I don't know what I'm going to do at this point."

“Well, it seems to me that if you’re here, your brother should be here as well,” said Mama Irene.

“What do you mean?”

“Right back there, behind the grove, is our family cemetery. Every Robicheaux for two hundred years is buried there, plus a few with different last names, yet still family, that deserved to be there. He could be close to you, and you could see him whenever you wanted to.”

“You would do that? You would let a stranger be buried in your family’s plot?”

“Baby, you are family, which makes him family. He’d be welcome here, and you’d always be close to him.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, wiping the tears. “Thank you so much. How do I get him here?”

“We’ll take care of that,” smiled Ben, walking toward her with Adam and Carl.

“Oh, my,” she smiled. The three men looked nearly identical. They were all tall, broad, and handsome.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” laughed Adam. “You contact the Marines, and we’ll head out and pick up your brother for you. We’ll bring him home, where he belongs.”

“I just don’t know what to say to you all. This is so overwhelming.”

“We take care of our own,” smiled Alexandra.

“Always. And you are now one of our own.”

Ally smiled at her future daughter-in-law, recognizing how stressed she was by everything. Bree and Ashley were seated in the circle of women, hoping to help her reach some closure with her mother.

“Winnie, honey, this is Bree and Ashley. They’re part of our medical team as well. They specialize in counseling and therapy. We wondered if you wouldn’t mind telling us a bit about what you remember of your mother.”

“Sure, but I was only eleven when she allegedly died. I was asleep when the deputies showed up and told Michael. He let them know right away that he wouldn’t allow me to go into the system. Apparently, our mother had paid off the deputies and made sure we got twenty thousand from our father’s life insurance policy.

“Michael made that money last until he couldn’t any longer. When he joined the Marines, he spoke with the recruiter and then his commanding officers, letting them know

that he was my legal guardian. They gave him base duty until I turned eighteen and left for college.”

“That’s an amazing brother,” smiled Ashley. “But what about your mother?”

“Dad was always working. Fifteen, sometimes twenty-four-hour shifts in the mines. Mom never worked outside the home, although we damn sure could have used the money. It’s funny, she wasn’t great at anything. I mean, some moms are good at cooking or baking. Others are good at keeping a clean house. My friend down the street, her mom would buy all this remnant fabric and make things. Dresses, jackets, pillows, just about anything. My mom was just... Mom.”

“When they went to your father’s appointment that day, was she behaving any differently? Did she say anything?”

“No,” said Winnie thoughtfully. “No. They left early, right before I left for school. Dad was in a lot of pain with his back, which wasn’t unusual.”

“Was he taking pain medication?” asked Bree.

“Honestly, I don’t remember. I don’t think so. He used to say that pain medication would make him weaker.

When they weren't home by the time I got home from school, I started to get worried. But Michael said it wasn't a big deal."

"Did your mother always go with your father to his appointments?" asked Bree.

"Yes. He acted like he didn't want her to sometimes. He would say his appointments always took twice as long when she went with him. One time, he called home and said she'd taken the car to go shopping, and he was still waiting for her to pick him up. She was so late, they had to stay the night."

"Winnie, did your mother ever mention that she had a brother?" asked Piper.

"A brother? No," she said, shaking her head. "Why would she keep that from us? I mean, my dad must have known. They'd known one another since they were kids. Did Michael know?"

"We're not sure, honey, but if your mother did kill Michael, maybe he knew more than she suspected."

"It would make sense," said Winnie thoughtfully. "Michael tried to shield me from anything bad in the world. If he knew anything, he would have kept that quiet." The

women all stiffened as Pigsty and Sly walked into the cafeteria. Their normally cheery demeanor seemed dark and filled with concern.

“Winnie? I’m Pigsty, and this is Sly. We’re part of the tech and communications team here.”

“Yes, I think I heard you speaking to Christian a few times,” she smiled.

“That’s right, honey. Winnie? What was your mother’s maiden name?” asked Pigsty.

“It was, um, I should know this. Wait. God, I don’t know. I don’t ever remember her telling me her maiden name.”

“We had difficulty finding it as well, but we heard something earlier that helped us along. As the girls mentioned, your mother has a brother. He’s the head of RxGen.”

“That’s not possible,” she laughed. “He must be worth millions if not billions of dollars. Why wouldn’t we have known that?”

“We think your mother is working with him. He goes by the assumed name Paul Higgenbotham, and your mother is

using the name Marilyn Higgenbotham. But their birth name is Schumholter.”

“Schumholter,” she whispered. “No. Please tell me that’s not true.”

“Why is that bad, Winnie?” asked Ashley.

“Everyone knew the story of the Schumholter children from two towns over. It was a story parents told their kids to frighten them. The parents weren’t rich, but they were strict with their children. Nothing extravagant, no alcohol or smoking, that sort of thing. One Sunday morning, while everyone else is at church, the house catches on fire, the bodies of the parents were found inside, and the children just disappeared.”

“No trace of them?” frowned Piper.

“That was the story. But if that’s true, how did my mother and her brother end up in our little town?” She looked at all of the women, then back at Pigsty and Sly.

“That’s what we’re going to find out.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

With nothing to do but wait until their meeting with Marilyn, the men decided to walk the small downtown area and see if they could hear or see anything unusual. Like many main streets in small towns, the businesses were failing. Boarded-up buildings showed no signs of life or revitalization.

“This makes me sad,” said Gator. “I mean, we live near several small little towns, but they’re all thriving.”

“They’re thriving because of Matthew,” said Rory. “He ensures that they have what they need to keep up their business. He also makes sure that all the fishing and river traffic passes right by them on River Road. If it weren’t for him, they’d all be gone.”

“It seems like someone could do the same here,” said Cade. “The mining industry has destroyed these mountains. They should at least give a little back.”

“That’s hard to do when half your population is hooked on drugs,” frowned Whiskey. “But it does beg the question, what is the other half doing to survive. If all these businesses are dying, what is everyone doing to live.”

“I think I can answer that,” said Sheriff Sutton.

“Oscar, nice to see you again, brother,” said Christian.
“What can you answer for us?”

“Maybe it would be best if you followed me,” he said. Nodding to the man, they loaded into their SUVs and followed him in his patrol car toward the mountain road. Turning and twisting, the steep drop-offs below plummeting to the valley floor, they were careful to stay close to the vehicle in front of them. When he stopped outside an old mining entrance, the men frowned.

“No offense, Oscar, but this feels like a trap,” smirked Whiskey.

“Never,” he smiled. “I wouldn’t want to piss any of you guys off. When I took care of the bodies the other night, I decided I’d drop them here. These old mining cars follow the tracks all the way to the back of the mountain, where it drops off into the quarry lake below. It hasn’t been used in decades, but this way, it would look as though something happened here.”

“We appreciate that, but what does this answer for us?” asked Christian.

“More than you might think. Follow me.” He walked them into the shaft, turning on several lanterns hanging on the

side of the mine. “My deputy and I decided we would walk the carts all the way just to be sure they were dropped off. About halfway in, we found those.” He pointed to several barrels. The same barrels they’d seen at RxGen.

“Don’t tell me those are full of pills,” frowned Christian.

“I wish I couldn’t tell you, but I’m telling you. They’re full of pills. Worse than that, everyone is so cocky, each barrel is labeled with their name. Sixteen people. Sixteen citizens, who are not addicted, but selling that shit on the streets.

“You asked how they were surviving. How are they staying in that little town if the businesses have all died? This is how. They sell this shit to those in other communities. That is, they sold it outside this community until Hitchkiss died. Without him interfering in ‘free trade,’ they’re now free to sell locally.”

“What do you want us to do?” asked Cade.

“I need help loading them in the cars, and we’re going to roll them toward the quarry lake. We’ll pop the lids and dump every last damn one of them into the lake.”

“I like your style,” laughed Ham.

“Oh, I don’t know,” grinned Cruz. “I think we can do better than that.”



Having contacted each of the dealers on the barrels, Rory, Whiskey, Christian, Cade, Gunner, and Rush waited at the mine exit, where it fell into the quarry. On the other side of the lake were Ham, Cruz, Eli, Stone, Gator, and Vince with Sherriff Sutton.

“Who would have thought all those people would show up for a free concert by Bull and Amanda,” grinned Gator.

“They’re popular everywhere,” smirked Stone, “although maybe less so after today.”

“If they had half a brain, they’d realize that we only contacted the dealers to show up,” said Cruz into his comms.

“Happy to see all these smiling faces here today,” said Sheriff Sutton into the bullhorn. “We’ll get started with the show here in a moment. We’ve had quite a ride these last few weeks. We’ve ended the drug trafficking coming through our town and the illegal stills.”

The people all gave small smiles, nodding at one another.

“But this event is to celebrate the biggest bust yet,” he grinned. “If you’d be so kind as to look across the way at the open mine shaft, you’ll see a few friends of mine. They’re getting ready to dump sixteen barrels of opiates into the quarry. Sixteen.

“Hey, you know that’s kind of funny since there are sixteen of you. Let me recount. Yep. Sixteen people, sixteen barrels.”

“What are you doing?” asked a woman, suddenly panicked.

“I’m ending this,” he frowned, stepping forward. “We are done with this.”

“If you dump those drugs, nothing survives in this town. We all leave and go elsewhere.”

“Then leave,” he said, standing strong. “I don’t need you or your kind in this town. I want to see our children grow up drug-free with the ability to have a life for themselves.”

“Do it,” said Stone into the comms.

The people on the other side of the quarry watched in horror as rail cars full of tiny white pills were dropped into the lake. As each car was dumped, the barrels were dumped with them, and someone on the other side called out the dealer's name.

Horrified, they tried to back away and run. But the Sheriff had a few extra hands today, and no one was leaving. No one.

It took several hours of interrogation, but most of them crumbled under the stares of Rory, Whiskey, and Gunner. They'd all bought the drugs from Marilyn Higgenbotham herself, selling in their own county as well as others in the state and beyond.

"That should help your case," smiled the Sheriff.

"You have no idea," smirked Christian. "We appreciate you letting us be a part of this. We've got some work to do, but we'll let you know if there's anything new that arises."

"I won't be going anywhere," he said, nodding his head. "This is my home, and I hope that we can bring some life back to it." Christian shook his hand.

“I hope you can, too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“You look as though you still have a lot of questions, Winnie,” smiled Caroline.

“I guess I do,” she grinned, shoving a toe into the wet earth of the gardens. The smell was unlike anything she’d ever experienced before. The wet moss of the cypress trees, the scents of magnolia, jasmine, hyacinth, and more.

“We’re here to help,” said Kate.

“I guess I’ve had a little time to let things sort of sink in on me, and I’m feeling a little insecure. I mean, it seems very strange to have such intense feelings for a man I barely know. But then again, I feel as if I’ve known him my entire life. How is that possible?”

“Oh, honey, that is the question every woman that comes here asks. If you ask anyone, they’ll tell you that it’s something to do with Mama Irene and her magic.”

“Magic?”

“Magic. Or Voodoo, or witchcraft, or something,” said Ajei. “My people, the Diné or Navajo, would say that she is a

shaman. Women are powerful in our culture. Here, they would probably label her as voodoo.”

“But that’s not real, and she seems wonderful,” said Winnie.

“She could be voodoo and still be wonderful,” smiled Kate. “Honestly, though, we’re not sure why this is all so magical. Our men and women find one another and hold on for dear life. We’ve all fallen in love quickly. Cam and I knew one another a long time, so did Ajei and Luke.”

“Us too,” said Sophia Ann.

“Hex and I only knew one another a few days, and I knew that if he left me in Dallas, I would be half a woman,” said Gwen.

“I guess I’m just not very experienced either,” said Winnie. “I didn’t date in high school. Mostly because I knew it would be very hard on Michael. I didn’t want him to have to worry about me when he was serving his country.

“Later, when I was in college, I had a few boyfriends. I also dated a guy he served with for a few months, but I knew it wasn’t right. I think Michael was happy that I wasn’t dating

him any longer. He worried about me being alone, especially while he was deployed.

“Anyway, I had a few boyfriends here and there, but I’ve never in my entire life felt a connection like I have with Christian. It was instant. Like a hot knife to my heart. But this goes against everything I’ve ever been taught about love.”

“Honey, listen to us,” said Ajei. “Every woman has their story, but almost all of them have fallen in love in record time. Pigsty and Sira were married within a few hours of knowing one another.”

“What?!”

“I know, it seems odd, but they love one another completely. All the way back to Nine and Erin, Trak and Lauren, Sara and Wilson, all of them. They fell in love in record time and married almost immediately. Everyone says there’s no such thing as love at first sight, but I’m here to tell you that there is such a thing.

“It’s as real as you and I and as intense. There is something, or someone, that pulls people together and bonds them. I don’t know what it is, but I know that we all want to be a part of it. Kate and I followed in the footsteps of Erin and

have some advice for every new woman who comes to our team.

“Love is so very hard to find that when you do, recognize it as the gift it is. You should hold it gently. Don’t squeeze too hard, but don’t let it go. These men are different in every way. Their lives have been entirely about protecting others, with no thought as to who would protect them. Expect that they’ll be overbearing, alpha in every way. But recognize how unbelievably special that is and that they’ve chosen us to be by their sides.

“He will protect you, but you will protect him as well. He will drive you mad with his overprotection, but he will soothe you with his love and adoration of you. And there is nothing like the love of one of these men.”

“That was beautiful,” nodded Winnie. “But now I’ve left him out there alone with my crazy mother. What kind of girlfriend or fiancée does that make me?”

“A smart one,” smirked Kate. “Winnie, I was with a special division of the military, sort of an offshoot of the CIA. I’m familiar with what these men have to do, and I understand the demands on their bodies and their minds. I tried once to

interfere in something that was happening to my brother, and it only made Cam even more protective of me and worried.

“I didn’t know it at the time, but my being out there was actually making things more dangerous for all of them. It was foolish of me. I’m happy to help them from here, but I won’t interfere in their work again.”

“So, I need to just stay here?” she asked.

“You need to wait for him to call you, like he promised. He will call you when he has your mother ready to give the explanation that you deserve.”

“Alright,” she nodded. “Okay. I’ll wait here.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The SUVs pulled up to the back of the warehouse for RxGen. The lights in the office buildings were dark, even the security lights were minimal. The Higgenbotham's were planning a fast exit.

At 0021, the dark sedan pulled up, and the brother and sister stepped out. Both were dressed in travel clothing, comfortable and dark.

“You’re just as handsome as I remember,” she smirked.

“You’re late,” frowned Christian. Her brother laughed, shaking his head.

“He’s got balls,” he said to his sister.

“From the looks of him, I’d say he’s got big balls,” she laughed. The brother blushed and looked away. Christian just stared at the two people, the others standing behind him.

“Where’s the money?” asked Christian. She stepped forward, handing him a thick white envelope.

“Half. Just like we said. You’ll get the other half once you drop off the drugs.”

“How?”

“How? How what?” said Paul.

“If you’re leaving town, and by the looks of it, you’re leaving town, how the fuck am I supposed to collect my other half? Because I seriously doubt if the drug lord in Mexico is going to hand over the cash owed to me.”

Marilyn looked at her brother with pursed lips. She didn’t expect the beefy ballers to have any brains. Not sure of what to do, it was Rush that stepped forward.

“I tell you what, I’ll do you a favor,” smirked Rush. “I’ll escort the two of you on your trip. When the job is done, you hand over the cash to me, and I’ll return to my friends.”

“Well, now. Not that it would be a hardship to have you along on the trip, handsome, but it would feel a bit awkward. Unless, of course, you’re willing to have a little fun.” Rush plastered on a big smile, stepping forward to look down at the siblings.

“I’ll do you both for an extra million.”

“A million?” screeched Paul. “You’d better be damn good for a million.”

“I’m better than good,” smiled Rush. “I’m a professional.” The brother and sister laughed, shaking their

heads.

“I’ll pay upfront now,” said Marilyn. “But if you screw me over, I’ll let my friends in Mexico know your names.” Christian nodded at the men behind him, who began popping the tops off of the barrels to be sure there were drugs in them. Sure enough, they were filled to the lids.

“Happy?” said Paul.

“Very,” said Christian. “But I do have a question for you. Which one of you killed your parents?”

Their faces paled, and both stood still, unable to move.

“Your names are Marvin and Mary Lou Schumholter, right? So, which one actually lit the fire and killed your parents?”

“Shut up,” said Paul.

“What’s the matter, Marvin? Bitter memories of your folks?”

“It’s okay, Marvin. We’re leaving for a better life. It doesn’t matter who knows now,” said Mary Lou. “Marvin was protecting me. Our father liked his little girl a bit too much.”

“And your mother?”

“Oh, he fucking hated our mother. But don’t feel sorry for me. My father taught me a great many things. Marvin knew it would only escalate, so we slipped something into their tea at breakfast, let them fall asleep in their Sunday best, and torched the house.

“We took every red cent we could find, including several thousand between the mattress, and made a new life for ourselves.”

“But not together,” said Whiskey. “You married and had children, while Marvin over there faked several college degrees and found his way into a position that would yield high dollar returns for decades. If, you played your cards right. Which you did not.”

“I’m not married,” insisted Marilyn.

“Don’t insult me,” said Christian. “You are Mary Lou Pasko, mother to Michael and Winnie. Although I use the term ‘mother’ loosely. No mother would kill her own child.”

“Who the hell are you?” she growled, taking a step forward.

“Me? Oh, I’m a United States Marine. Best of the fucking best, bitch, and I’m going to see you dead before

tonight is done. You killed a brother and left his sister, my fiancée, to grieve alone. You left them as children.”

“I had to!” she screamed, staring at the men circling them.

“You didn’t have to. You chose to. You left a little girl in the charge of her teenage brother. Thank fuck he did a good job, or I’d kill you twice. You’re so fucking heartless you killed your husband.”

“She had to,” said Marvin. “He wouldn’t agree to our plans. The company was taking off, and I knew we could get the drug to the market, but he refused to help. All I needed him to do was take the pills for his back pain and recommend it to others that were injured at the mine. We’d be making a killing in no time with their recommendation.”

“But he had scruples? So, you killed him?” asked Stone.

“We would have all been rich. I was more than happy to be rich alone than poor together. Besides, the kids did fine.”

“Then why did you kill Michael?” asked Christian.

“He found out I was still alive. I never thought he’d seek me out, but damn if he didn’t. Told Hitchkiss he’d sell

for me but wanted to see me again. Bastard was all grown up and looking as good as his daddy did once upon a time. He never once wanted anything to do with the drugs.

“So, I threatened Winnie. I told Michael that if he didn’t sell the drugs on-base, I’d make sure a few of the boys robbed her pharmacy one night and have a little fun with her.”

“You fucking bitch,” growled Christian, gripping her throat. “I should snap your neck right now.”

“Do it,” she choked out. He loosened his fingers, shaking his head. “No, you won’t do it. You’re a do-gooder. I can tell.”

“I’m no do-gooder,” said Christian. “I’m not going to kill you, yet. You’re going to look right there and tell your daughter why you killed her father and brother.”

Mary Lou paled, staring into the darkness around them. Then a tablet lit up, her daughter’s face staring back at her. She’d been there the entire time, listening to every word that was said.

“Mother. Why? Why kill your husband and son?”

“You won’t understand, Winnie.”

“Try me.”

“They wouldn’t go along with the plan. Your father refused to take the pills and didn’t want any part of the business. I couldn’t have him saying something to someone, so it seemed a good idea. He was in such pain anyway. I did him a favor.”

“A favor? A favor, is it? You murdered him. Don’t try to ease your guilt by calling it anything other than what it is. Murder. And my brother? You killed him because he wouldn’t sell your drugs?”

“We needed to get on that base,” she said, stomping her foot. “Michael always was a stubborn little shit. He came up here acting like he was king of the hill. He wanted an explanation, and I gave it to him. When he wouldn’t sell the drugs. I needed to make sure there were no loose ends.”

“You’re despicable,” said Winnie.

“Grow up, Winnie! This isn’t some silly movie. This is business,” she said, staring at her daughter.

“You took two people from my life that I loved dearly. I’m sorry to say there is no one left that loves you. No one.”

“That’s not true,” grinned Mary Lou. “Marvin and I adore one another.”

“Then perhaps Uncle Marvin would like to tell us why he’s working with the FDA and DEA to bring you to justice,” smirked Winnie. Her mother turned, facing her brother as he stood calmly beside two of the men.

“I couldn’t do it anymore, Mary Lou. I just can’t. You’re never satisfied. You always wanted more. More money, more drugs, more houses, more cars. More, more, more. I can’t do it any longer. It ends here. I’ll take my licks and punishments, and I’ll go to jail; I don’t care.”

“You traitor! You fucking traitor!”

“Now, now, Mother,” said Winnie, staring at the woman. “You’re liable to develop a wrinkle. Thank you, Christian, for allowing me to watch this and hear what was said. I love you. I’ll see you at home.”

“Love you, babe,” he smirked.

“Babe? Love her? You’re fucking delusional! She’s got my blood in her,” she laughed. “She’ll be a traitor to you.”

“No,” said Christian, “she’s got the blood of two honest men running through her veins. She might have been in your womb, but she is nothing like you. Nothing.”

Floodlights lit up the parking area like the Fourth of July. DEA, FBI, and other agencies moved in quickly. The FDA swarmed the building, taking possession of computers and everything else they could get their hands on.

Mary Lou Schumholter would be sentenced to four life terms without an option for parole. Her brother, despite his cooperation, would receive two life terms without an option for parole.

Although Christian desperately wanted to kill the woman, he deferred on this one occasion, knowing that prison would be a longer, more just punishment for her.

“Christian? Ready to leave, son?” asked Vince.

“Ready. Ready to head home and marry my girl.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Somehow, Winnie thought planning a wedding would take months. How silly. Mama Irene and Ally had it planned and ready to go within the week. She wasn't complaining. No. In fact, she was thrilled that they would be married and starting their life together.

She'd started almost immediately at the pharmacy and loved the work. She was able to reorganize the entire space, making it more efficient for herself as well as the nurses and doctors. At the end of her first week, she was planning for her wedding night.

First stop was the salon and spa. A new hairstyle, facial, manicure, pedicure, and a private showing of some of Charlie's latest lingerie ideas.

Dressed in a Gwen N'hana original, she asked Red to walk her down the aisle. He was honored. Christian asked his father to be his best man. When the vows were said, the flowers tossed, the party began.

Dancing the night away was exhausting, but Winnie had never had so much fun in all her life. It was like a dream, but this dream came with a twist.

“Winnie? Can I steal you away for a moment?” asked Claudette.

“Of course.” She kissed Christian, promising to return soon. “Is everything okay?”

“Well, I think you need to meet some family members that you’ve never met before.” Appearing in the cool mist of the night air, Nathan, Martha, Franklin, young Claudette, Tony, and Grip emerged.

“Wh-what is this?” she stammered.

“We’ve been trying to tell you what a special place this is. We’re unusual in so many ways. With a history as rich as ours, it stands to reason that some would stay and not move on. These are our family. Nathan is Trak’s grandfather. Martha and Claudette are ancestors of Matthew. Franklin worked here with Martha. And Tony and Grip both worked for our company.”

“That’s so amazing,” she whispered. “Can you hear me?”

“We can hear you,” smiled Martha. “You’ve made a beautiful bride, and you’ll make a wonderful wife for Christian.”

“Oh,” she gasped.

“There is another that you know well,” said Nathan.

He turned, and behind him, appearing before her, was Michael.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, this can’t be true. This is a cruel joke.”

“Sis, look at me. It’s not a joke. I’m not sure what this place is or how I got here, but I’ve been given this new life or lack of life. I’m honestly not sure,” he laughed.

“C-can I touch you?” she asked, stepping forward.

“I don’t think you’ll feel anything except cold air. You’ve got yourself a good one, Winnie. Christian was the best in the Corps, and he’ll take great care of you. I’m sorry I couldn’t be there to help you.”

“Oh, Michael,” she said, shaking her head, tears falling. “I miss you so much.”

“You don’t have to miss me. I’m right here, thanks to Mama Irene. I’ll always be here with you and Christian and any nieces and nephews you give me. I’m grateful for this second chance.”

“Not how I wanted to see you again, Michael,” said Christian, “but I’m damn glad you’re here.”

“Same, brother. Now, why don’t you two go off and finish your reception. I’m getting to know my new friends here. I’ll be around. Just call if you need me.”

They watched as the ghosts disappeared. Claudette kissed her cheek, then went back inside with Jake. Turning, she fell into Christian’s arms, hugging him.

“Thank you, Christian. Thank you for everything!”

“You don’t have to thank me for anything, baby. Loving you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done. I’m just glad everything worked the way it did.”

“What do we do now?” she asked, smiling up at him.

“I have it on good authority that we need to cut the cake, have another few dances, then we can disappear for a few days. What do you say? With me?”

“All the way, Christian. All the way.”



“Well, that leaves a lot more boys to marry off,” smiled Eric.

“That’s true,” grinned Joseph. “My two, Nathan’s two. Plus, we have Ryan’s son.”

“Don’t forget Kiel’s triplets,” said Nathan.

“Bets on who might be next?” laughed Wes.

“No way,” said Joseph, shaking his head. “I’m tired of losing my money when, in the end, none of us has a damn say in who goes next. If you want to know the answer, you’re going to have to go to Mama Irene.” Eric laughed, nodding at the spritely woman.

“Amen, brother. Amen.”

EXCERPT from BILLY (BJ)

Billy rolled over on the worn cot, his torn flesh rubbing against the rough wool of the thread-bare blanket beneath him. He hissed as the pain burned through his back and thighs. Normally, they would have just killed him and placed him on display, but when the strange devices and hidden pockets were found in his pack, they wanted answers.

Unfortunately for them, he didn't give answers easily.

For three months, he'd been hidden amongst their people. With his mixed-race features, black and indigenous, he blended well with those around him. Now, he was wondering if he'd ever get out of this shithole alive.

Hearing the shuffling of feet, he knew that this would be his one meal a day. Too weak to fight anyone, he'd gladly take whatever bug-infested filth they gave him. He didn't care any longer. The key clanked against the iron bars, and he heard the creaking of the opening door. Tiny hands gripped his upper arms.

“Get up,” said the small voice.

Billy tried to adjust his eyes to the dim light of the room, but he was having difficulty.

“Please, you must get up,” said the voice. The person spoke perfect English, and he frowned, wondering who in this land was able to do that. “I can’t carry you. You’re too big. Please, lean on me, and let’s go.”

Pushing himself to a seated position, he hissed once again at the pain at the back of his thighs. The last beating was two days ago, but it was still fresh enough to cause pain. He felt the smaller person pull him to his feet, wrapping an arm over the slender shoulder.

“C-can’t,” he muttered. “Too much. Too much.”

“Damnit, Billy! I need you to get up!” Billy heard the clarity of the voice this time and pulled back, staring down into the green eyes.

“Janine? What the fuck are you doing here?” he growled.

“Getting your pathetic ass out of jail, dumbass,” she said, breathing heavily. “We don’t have much time. We need to get out of here now.”

“How did you escape?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you later. For now, we need to go!” Billy looked at the panic in her face and then realized that she’d

come alone. What the fuck was she thinking?

“You came by yourself?”

“I had to!”

“Why?”

“Because no one else would come. No one else wanted to come, and if I don’t get you out of here alive, more will die.”

SERIES AND FAMILY GUIDE

Key:

RS = Reaper Security

SP = Steel Patriots

MSB = My SEAL Boys

RP = REAPER-Patriots

VG = Voodoo Guardians

(d) = deceased

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RS 1	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
			Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
RS 2	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
			Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
			Nathan	Katrina Santos
			Joseph	Julia Anderson
RS 3	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
RS 4	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
			Julia	Joseph Redhawk
RS 5	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
			Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
			Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
RS 6	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn
RS 7	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker
RS 8	Adele Robicheaux	Clay Duffy		
RS 9	Gabriel Robicheaux	Tory Gibson		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RS 9	John "Gibbie" Gibson	Dhara	Dalton	Calla Michaels
RS 9	Antoine Robicheaux	Ella Stanton	Ryan Holden Robicheaux	Paige Anderson
RS 9	Gaspar Robicheaux	Alexandra Minsky	Luke	Ajei Blackwood
			Carl	Georgianna Jordan
			Ben	Harper Miller
			Adam	Jane Wolfkill
SP 19			Violet	Striker Michaels
RP 6			Lucy	Alex "Sniff" Mullins
RS 10	William "Bull" Stone	Lily Bennett		
RS 11	Luc Robicheaux	Montana Divide		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RS 12	Raphael Robicheaux	Savannah O'Reilly	Ian Luke	Aspen Bodwick
			Katherine Gray "Kate"	Cameron Dougall
	Doug Graham	<i>Deceased partner – Grip</i> Current partner – Miguel Santos		
RS 13	Jasper "Jazz" Divide	Gray Vanzant	Virginia	Wes Jordan
RS 14	Baptiste Robicheaux	Rose Ellis	Elizabeth Irene "Liz"	Kiel Wolfkill
RS 14	Alec Robicheaux	Lissa Duncan	Keith	Susie Redhawk
RS 15	Stone Roberts	Bronwyn Ross		
RS 16	Suzette Robicheaux	Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco		
RS 16	Max Neill	Riley Corbett	CC	

RS 17	Titus Quinn	Olivia Baine	Lane	Frank Robicheaux
			Dominic	Leightyn Dooley
RS 18	Axel Doyle	Cait Brennan	Corey	
	Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
RS 19	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	Crow Foster			
RS 19	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
RS 20	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ('Kiel)	Liz Divide
			Jane	Adam Robicheaux
RS 20	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		
RS 20	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		
RS	Chad Taylor			
RS	Woody "Doc" Fine			
RS	(d) Tony Parks			
RS	(d) Alan Haley			
RS	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
RS	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
RS	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
MSB 1	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
MSB 2	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		
MSB 3	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		
MSB 4	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		
MSB 5	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		
MSB 5	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		

MSB 6	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		
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Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
MSB 7	Chris Paul	Elizabeth Broussard		
MSB 8	Luke O'Hara	Lucia Salvado		
MSB 8	Rory Baine	Piper Colley		
MSB 8	(d) Anthony Garcia			
MSB	Eric & Anna Tanner			
SP 1	Eric "Ghost" Stanton	Grace Easton	(d) Faith & Hope	
			Jack Tyran "JT"	
			Eric Ryan	
SP 2	Jack "Doc" Harris	Aubrey "Bree" Collins	Eva Irene	
SP 3	Wade "Whiskey" English	Katarina Krevnyv	Juliette Rose	
SP 4	Quincy "Zulu" Slater	Gabrielle London	Wade Eric	
			Tyler Gunner	
SP 5	Gunner Michaels	Darby Greer	Calla	Dalton Gibson
SP 5	Tyler "Tango" Green	Taylor Holland	Chase Maxwell	
SP 7	Diego "Razor" Salcedo	Isabella "Bella" Castro	Abraham	
SP 8	Alex "Ace" Mills	Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor	Alexander John "AJ"	
SP 9	Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal	Tinley Oakley	Tyran Eagle	
			Hawk Gunner	
			Benjamin Scott	
SP 9	Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal	Keegan Oakley		
SP 10	Scott "Skull" Crawford	Willa Ross	Mathew Scott	

		(deceased) Avery O'Connor		
			Kevin Alexander	
<i>SP 11</i>	Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
<i>SP 12</i>	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	
<i>SP 13</i>	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
<i>SP 14</i>	Ivan Pechkin	Sophia Lord	William	
			Benjamin	
			Celeste	
			Cassidy	
			Carrie	
SP 15	Griffin "Griff" James	Amanda Nettles		
SP 16	Bryce Nolan	Ivy Brooks		
SP 17	Kingston Miles	Claire Evers		
Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
SP 18	Grant Zimmerman	Everly "Evie" Johnson		
<i>SP</i>	Molly Walker	Asia	Michael	
<i>SP</i>	George Robert Williamson	Mary		
<i>SP</i>	(d) Axel "Axe" Mains	(d) Decker "Ice" McManus		
<i>SP</i>	James Scarlutti			
<i>SP</i>	Chen Wu		Choi Wu	
<i>SP</i>	Ian Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	Conor Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	Vincent Scalia		(d) Isabella	
<i>SP 19</i>	Strikers Michaels	Violet Robicheaux	Grayson Matthew	

RP 1	Dexter Lock	Marie Robicheaux		
RP 2	Jean Robicheaux	Rose "Ro" Evers		
RP 3	Jackson "Jax" Diaz	Joy "Ellie" Dougall		
RP 4	Hunter Michaels	Megan Scott		
RP 5	Carl Robicheaux	Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan		
RP 6	Alex "Sniff" Mullins	Lucy Robicheaux	Caroline Willa	
RP 7	Cameron "Cam" Dougall	Kate Robicheaux	Ian William	
RP 8	Keith Robicheaux	Suzette "Susie" Redhawk	Joseph Alec Keith (JAK)	
RP 9	Eric Bongard	Sophia Ann Redhawk	Billy Joseph	
RP 10	Joseph Redhawk	Julia Anderson	Joseph Billy (JB)	
			Tobias Franklin	
RP 11	Ryan Robicheaux (Holden)	Paige Anderson	Dan Antoine	
RP 12	Nathan Redhawk	Katrina Santos	Nathan Luke	
			Michael Douglas	
RP 13	Ben Robicheaux	Harper Miller		
RP 14	Sean Liffey	Shay Miller	Brooke Elizabeth	
RP 15	Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill	Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux	Everett Baptiste	
			Eastman Matthew	
			Ethan Ezekiel	
RP 16	Ian Robicheaux	Aspen Bodwick		
RP 17	Adam Robicheaux	Jane Wolfkill		
RP 18	Marc Jordan	Ela Wolfkill		
RP 19	Wes Jordan	Virginia Divide	Patrick Jasper	
			Christopher Luke	

			Sadie Allison	
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Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>RP 20</i>	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
<i>RP 21</i>	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
<i>RP 22</i>	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
<i>RP 23</i>	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn	Pierre	
	Jake Fornet	Claudette Robicheaux		
<i>RP 24</i>	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
<i>RP 25</i>	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
<i>RP 26</i>	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
	Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
<i>RP 27</i>	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Alistair Thomas	
<i>RP 28</i>	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
<i>RP 29</i>	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
<i>RP 30</i>	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
<i>RP 31</i>	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
<i>RP 32</i>	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
<i>RP 33</i>	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Forrest Pierre	
<i>RP 34</i>	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
<i>RP 35</i>	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	
<i>RP 36</i>	Magnus Bridges	Addie Patterson	Leif Frode	
<i>RP 37</i>	Hex Vernon	Gwen N'hana	Sebastian Tadzee	
<i>RP 38</i>	Wade Slater	Hannah Evers	Patrick Garr	

RP 39	Sam Cooper	Mia Rogers	Macie Gray	
RP 40	Tiger Slater	Hazel Bream	Brixton Fox	
RP 41	Jalen Carson	Stormy Rainwaters	Major Raine	
RP 42	Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton	Rachel Davis	Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia	
RP 43	Matthew Robicheaux	Irene Hebert	Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachele, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec	
RP 44	Milo Abbott	Lia Goodwin	Christian	
RP 45	Nic "Torro" Torres	Melanie Fairfield		
RP 46	JT Stanton	Kennedy Rice	Maverick	
RP 47	Chase Green	Maeve Korhonen		
RP 48	Will Pechkin	Brooke Ford		
RP 49	Benji Pechkin	Annie Lott	Paxton, Braxton	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>RP-50</i>	Will 'Bogey' Humphreys	Alice Evans	Patrick	
<i>RP-51</i>	Tanner Sung	Micaela Vonn	Mattie	
<i>RP-52</i>	Moses 'Mo' Baird	Ophelia Baldwin		
<i>RP-53</i>	Ethan Dunvegan	Koana Ogi Milner	Ulani	
<i>RP-54</i>	Connor 'Irish' Kelly	Lucinda Harwell		
<i>RP-55</i>	Benjamin 'Hoot' O'Neal	Scout Blevins		
<i>RP-56</i>	Alexander 'AJ' Mills	Skylar Teller		
<i>RP-57</i>	Tyran 'Bone' O'Neal	Londyn Vacarro		
<i>RP-58</i>	Hawk 'HG' O'Neal	Maggie Turner	Wyatt	
<i>VG-1</i>	Joseph Alec Keith Robicheaux 'JAK'	Mattie Smythe		
<i>VG-2</i>	Ian William 'Gator' Dougall	Dylan Meeks	Joey	
<i>VG-3</i>	Hamish Angus 'Ham' McDonald	Sadie Jordan	Ambry, Bailey, Cole	
<i>VG-4</i>	Patrick Jordan	Margo Fleming	Quinn, River, Finnegan	
<i>VG-5</i>	Christopher Jordan	Ramey Curry	Brooks, Mitchell, Marissa	
<i>VG-6</i>	Matt Crawford	Summer Christensen		
<i>VG-7</i>	Kev Crawford	Tila Blackwater	(preg)	
<i>VG-8</i>	Benjmain 'Cowboy' LeBlanc	Autumn Zellers		
<i>VG-9</i>	Rush Anders	Caroline Mullins		

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My SEAL Boys

Ian

Noa

Carter

Lars

Trevor

Fitz

Chris

O'Hara

Steel Patriots

Ghost – Book One

Doc – Book Two

Whiskey – Book Three

Zulu – Book Four

Gunner – Book Five

Tango – Book Six

Razor – Book Seven

Ace – Book Eight

Hawk & Eagle – Book Nine

Skull – Book Ten

Blade – Book Eleven

Noah – Book Twelve

Tristan – Book Thirteen

Ivan – Book Fourteen

Griff – Book Fifteen

Bryce – Book Sixteen

King – Book Seventeen

Grant – Book Eighteen

Striker – Book Nineteen

REAPER-Patriots

Dex – Book One

Jean – Book Two

Jax – Book Three

Hunter – Book Four

Carl – Book Five

Sniff – Book Six

Cam – Book Seven

Keith – Book Eight

Eric – Book Nine

Joseph – Book Ten

Ryan – Book Eleven

Nathan – Book Twelve

Ben – Book Thirteen

Sean – Book Fourteen

Kiel – Book Fifteen

Ian – Book Sixteen

Adam – Book Seventeen

Marc – Book Eighteen

Wes – Book Nineteen

Aiden – Book Twenty

Parker – Book Twenty-one

Dalton – Book Twenty-two

Frank – Book Twenty-three

Hiro – Book Twenty-four

Dom – Book Twenty-five

Bron – Book Twenty-six

Fitch – Book Twenty-seven

CC – Book Twenty-eight

Callan – Book Twenty-nine

Duncan – Book Thirty

Remy – Book Thirty-one

Garrett – Book Thirty-two

Robbie – Book Thirty-three

Cade – Book Thirty-four

Bodhi – Book Thirty-five

Magnus – Book Thirty-six

Hex – Book Thirty-seven

Wade – Book Thirty-eight

Sam – Book Thirty-nine

Tiger – Book Forty

Jalen – Book Forty-one

Chief – Book Forty-two

Matthew – Book Forty-three

Milo – Book Forty-four

Torro – Book Forty-five

JT – Book Forty-six

Chase – Book Forty-seven

Will – Book Forty-eight

Benji – Book Forty-nine

Bogey – Book Fifty

Tanner – Book Fifty-one

Mo – Book Fifty-two

Ethan – Book Fifty-three

Irish – Book Fifty-four

Hoot – Book Fifty-five

AJ – Book Fifty-six

Bone – Book Fifty-seven

HG – Book Fifty-eight

RP Christmas: Do You Believe?

Voodoo Guardians

JAK – Book One

Gator – Book Two

Ham – Book Three

Patrick – Book Four

Christopher – Book Five

Matt – Book Six

Kev – Book Seven

Cowboy – Book Eight

Rush – Book Nine

Strange Gifts

Dark Visions

Dark Medicine

Dark Flame

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to three beautiful grandsons. She works full-time at a job she loves, and writing is her creative outlet. She lives in Texas and enjoys traveling, reading, and cooking. Her passion for assisting veterans and veteran causes comes from a strong military family background. Mary loves to hear from her readers and encourages them to join her mailing list, as she'll keep you up-to-date on new releases at <https://insatiableink.squarespace.com>. You can also join her Facebook page at Insatiable Ink.

Dear Readers,

I love hearing from you and encourage you to visit my website insatiableink.squarespace.com. Let me know your thoughts and ideas on new books or expanding on characters. It's also a safe space to give your own feelings, like those of the characters. I love reading about how you relate to the stories because as we all know, there's a little of each of them within us.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope you enjoy other books in my collections.

Explore... and enjoy!

[PC1] This is a hot topic on the internet. It seems they haven't settled on one way. The three choices I saw are:

1. Bros before hos
2. Bro's before ho's
3. Bros before hoes

They can't even decide on how to spell ho ☺

[PC2] Would it be presented this way or does it need a space?

Remember this is in his journal so it would be written casually

[PC3] How many men are on the porch? I thought there were at two besides Fred. I ask the question because below it indicates two died. I thought there were at least three. (I've marked that section below.)

[\[PC4\]](#) Weren't there at least three men?

[\[PC5\]](#) In chapter 20 Ray says they killed his son and 3 others. Dis only 2 hit trees?