

A muscular man with short dark hair is shown from the chest up, in a fighting stance with his hands raised and fists clenched. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a grey and green checkered pattern. The text 'Mary Kennedy' is written in white, sans-serif font across the top of the image, and 'EAST' is written in a larger, bold, white, sans-serif font across the man's face.

Mary Kennedy

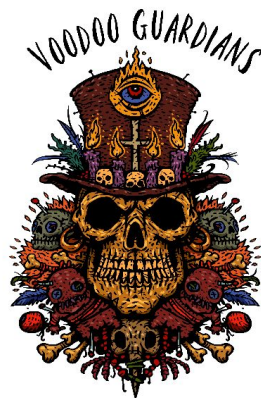
EAST

Voodoo Guardians:
Book Twenty

EAST

Voodoo Guardians

Book TWENTY



Mary Kennedy

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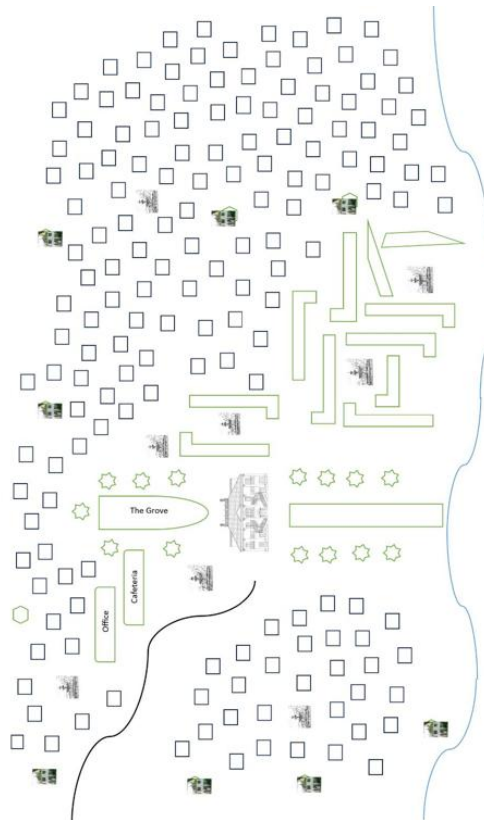
MAP of Belle Fleur

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 (*with the new map #'s are not included on the cottages*)



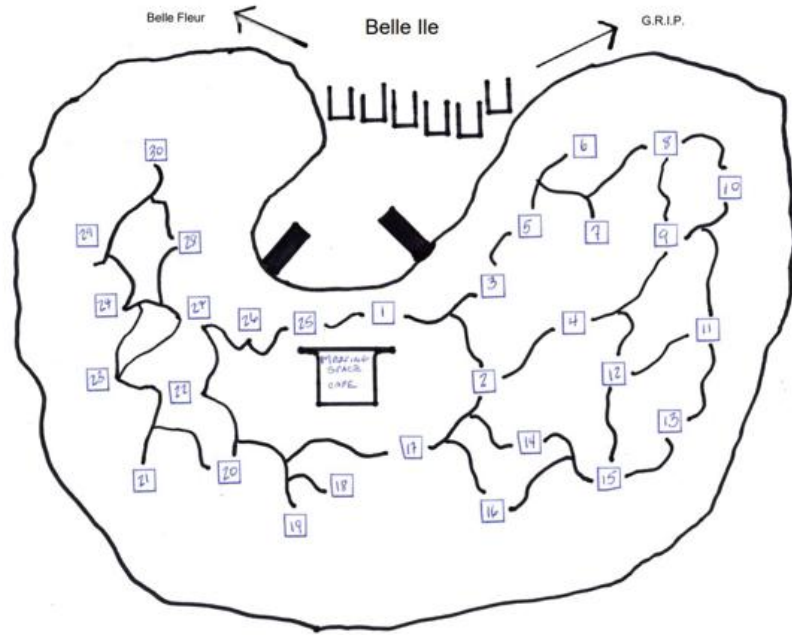
Cottage Assignments

<u>1</u>	Matt & Summer	<u>36</u>	Gunner & Darby	<u>G3</u>	Pigsty & Sira	<u>97</u>	Jalen & Stormy
<u>2</u>	Alec & Lissa	<u>37</u>		<u>G4</u>	Hex & Gwen	<u>98</u>	Jack 'JT' & 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>	Cruz & Camille	<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>	
<u>10</u>	Christian & Winnie	<u>45</u>	Abe & Lyra	<u>76</u>	Cowboy & Autumn	<u>106</u>	Torro & Melanie
<u>11</u>	King & Claire	<u>46</u>	Trev & Ashley	<u>77</u>	Rett & Casey	<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>	Tanner & 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>	Mike & Sage	<u>G8</u>		<u>114</u>	
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<u>27</u>	Sniff & Lucy	<u>62</u>	Cam & Kate	<u>89</u>	Michael & Miriam	<u>123</u>	JB & Dana
<u>28</u>	Noa & Kelsey	<u>63</u>	Jax & Ellie	<u>90</u>	Robbie & Carrie	<u>124</u>	Red
<u>29</u>	Eli & Jane	<u>64</u>	Adam & Jane	<u>91</u>	Cade & Cassidy	<u>125</u>	Tobias & Gail
<u>30</u>	Grant & Evie	<u>65</u>	Ben & Harper	<u>92</u>	Garrett & Celeste	<u>126</u>	
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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	Kegger
6	Ghost & Grace	23	Pork
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

Eastman Matthew Wolfkill was sitting between his brothers on the sidelines of their final high school basketball game. He was always sitting in the middle. It wasn't something he consciously decided to do. It just seemed to always happen that way. It was as if his body said the middle is where you belong.

Eastman, or East, which eventually would become his call name, was a triplet. He was the middle child, born six minutes and forty-two seconds after his brother Everett. Seven minutes and fourteen seconds after Eastman was born, his brother, Ethan Ezekiel, popped his head out.

They were all big babies. More than seven pounds each and long. His mother lamented often about how they'd destroyed her rib cage and bladder. The boys always laughed, kissing her on the cheek, which seemed to calm her down.

But today, East was watching as their high school basketball team was attempting to blow the competitor out of the water. He and both of his brothers were part of the team, along with several other kids from Belle Fleur. They lost the championship game but were playing for third-best in the

state. Third-best wasn't what they wanted, but at least the Wolfkill boys would go out with pride in their senior year. All at six-feet-six. All well over two hundred pounds, they were a sight to behold with their dark hair and eyes, physiques that made not just their female classmates squirm but, more often than not, their mothers as well.

He looked at his brothers on either side of him and shook his head. It was their last game. They knew they weren't headed to college. They'd had plenty of interest from division one and two colleges, but their path was to move to something far more challenging.

“Wolfs!” yelled the coach. He could never seem to get out ‘Wolfkills,’ so he'd shortened their last name years ago. “All three, back in. Win this for us.”

The three boys jumped up, waiting at the scoring table until the buzzer and the referee would allow them in. When their moment finally came, they took it. On their team were Dan Robicheaux, and Nathan and Michael Redhawk. All about the same size, all highly skilled athletes, they knew that they could make up the twelve-point difference and walk away with a trophy.

They could hear the groans from the spectators for the other team. They were known as the Wall. Nothing could get by them, through them, or block them. Within minutes, they were tied and driving the ball down the court once again. As time ticked by, East realized that they had only seconds left to score.

Knowing that his brother, Ethan, was the better three-point shooter, he found his opportunity and passed him the ball. As Ethan released the ball, you could almost hear everyone collectively holding their breath. But East knew it was in. He turned, walking back toward the bench with a smile on his face as the swish of the nylon net caused an eruption of cheers and applause.

Rett and Ethan jumped on East's back, laughing and hugging.

"Thanks for that one, bro," smiled Ethan. "Great pass."

"You were the right shooter," said East. "Your three-pointer is better than mine, my lay-up is better than yours, and Rett's free-throw is better than both of ours."

"That was somethin' else, boys," smirked the coach. "You three really do seem to operate off one brain." The boys

laughed, shaking their heads.

“Well, let’s hope that it’s three brains operating on one wavelength,” smirked East.

“That’s what I meant,” smirked Coach. “Y’all go on and enjoy the celebration with your families. Nice job.”

East looked up into the stands to see dozens of people from Belle Fleur. Hell, they were the stands. But there was one person, one very beautiful person, who caught his eyes. Brooke Elizabeth Liffey. She was the daughter of Sean and Shay.

She was blessed with the speed of her mother, albeit her mother’s wasn’t natural, but nevertheless, she was fast. Her long brown hair and big green eyes made him melt. Brooke smiled at him, giving him a thumbs-up, and he laughed, shaking his head. She was definitely not the chatty girl in the room. Less noise was better for her. And he loved that.

He watched as she made her way down the steps of the bleachers, saying hello to fellow students, family, and friends as she moved. Halfway down, Gil Thomason gripped her forearm, giving it a jerk. He watched her mouth form ‘ouch,’

and that was all it took. He shot up the steps like he was launched from a cannon.

“Oh, shit!” said Rett, slapping Ethan’s arm. They both took off after him.

“Let me go, Gil,” pleaded Brooke.

“Why won’t you answer my text messages?” he snarled.

“Because I’ve blocked you. I told you that I want nothing to do with you.”

“That’s right,” he smirked. “You don’t like white boys, do you? You got a taste for red meat.”

“Let her go,” growled East, “or this big piece of red meat will tear you apart in front of the entire school.”

Brooke could see Gil swallow hard, turning to look up at East. Seconds later, the other two shadows fell over his face. Gil knew he couldn’t take on all three brothers. Hell, he knew he wouldn’t be able to take one.

“You wouldn’t wanna ruin your scholarship chances,” smirked Gil.

“I don’t think we have to worry about that,” said East.

“Let her go.”

He released Brooke's arm, and Ethan gently pulled her behind him, blocking the other young man from even getting a glimpse of her.

"Are you claimin' her?" asked the boy.

"Claiming her? She isn't five acres of land, you idiot! She's a young lady with a mind of her own and willpower to match. I haven't claimed anyone, and she damn sure would never let me. If I'm lucky enough to get a date with her, I'll consider myself blessed. But Wolfkill men know enough to *not* claim any woman for fear of losing our balls."

"You afraid that girl's gonna cut your balls off?" laughed the other boy. "Big boys all afraid of the little, tiny girl."

"No," said the decidedly female echo. Gil turned to see the triplet's mother and grandmothers.

"He'd be afraid one of us would cut off his balls," said Noelle. "Women aren't possessions, Mr. Thomason. If you've been taught that, you were misinformed, and I suggest you get additional tutelage from men who know. Otherwise, you're going to find yourself as a very lonely, very disappointed young man." He looked down at his feet, blushing.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said quietly.

He didn’t apologize to Brooke or East but turned and left the group standing there. Ethan smiled at his brother, walking back down the bleacher steps with the others while East spoke to Brooke.

“Are you alright?”

“I am. Thank you for doing that. He’s a lot bigger than me, and he was bugging me a lot. I blocked his number on my phone, but he kept coming at me anyway.”

“Everyone is a lot bigger than you, Brooke,” he smiled.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. Great game. You really did well out there, and congratulations on third in the state. That’s impressive.”

“Says the girl who won second place in the nation in cross-country.” She shrugged, blushing at him. Although she was only a junior, she’d been getting college offers left and right for scholarships.

“Can I walk you home?” he asked.

“Oh, I think all the parents were going to take us out to dinner. Some new restaurant on the river. The Well.” East laughed, shaking his head.

“The Well isn’t new, Brooke. It’s been around for decades. We were always just too young to go since it’s mostly a bar. I’ll bet they rented it out for all of us.” She nodded, staring up at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head. “Actually, I was just wondering if you’re ever going to ask me out on a date.”

“Do you want me to ask you out on a date?” he smirked. She pushed past him, heading down the steps, and he took two long strides and was in front of her. “Sorry. I do want to ask you out, but I need to speak to your father first. I’ll be leaving at the end of the school year, Brooke. I don’t want either of us to do anything foolish.”

“I know,” she whispered, looking down at her feet again. “I just, well, I just want to get to know you better. Just you and me. It’s always us and three dozen other kids from Belle Fleur. I like them, really, I do, but it would be nice if it were just us.”

“It would be nice,” he smiled. “Maybe we could write when I’m gone. What about you? Have you chosen a college yet?”

“I have it narrowed down. USC, University of Texas at El Paso, and LSU. They all have great running programs. USC is the furthest from home. Not sure how I feel about that right now.”

East gently placed a hand on her lower back, guiding her down the stairs as the crowd thinned out. He saw his father give him a nod, telling him he needed to change his clothes and meet them outside. All that was said to him in just one nod. It was a skill his father and grandfather possessed.

“Why don’t you go with the others while I shower and change.” He nodded toward the doors where everyone was standing, and she smiled. Before she walked away, he gently took her hand and bent down, kissing her on the cheek.

“Thanks for waiting for me, Brooke.”

“I’m good at waiting.”



East smiled as he read the e-mail from Brooke. She wasn’t kidding when she said she was good at waiting. It had been years of being apart, rarely able to see one another, and

yet she continued to write to him, call him when they could, and always tried to be home when he was there.

She ended up not going to any of the three colleges she'd selected, instead choosing Florida State. It was warm, humid, and felt more like home to her. When she majored in criminal justice, he worried a bit, but knew that he had no say in her career choice. Her father would handle that.

“Why are you smiling?” asked Rett. It was the night before his wedding, and the only place he wanted to be, other than in bed with Casey, was with his brothers.

“An e-mail from Brooke. She's doing great. Loves the work that she's doing with immigrants at the border. She's sorry she couldn't make it home for the wedding but sends her love.”

“Are you two ever gonna make it official?” smirked Ethan.

“I don't know,” he said, shaking his head. “We agreed that we would see other people and, if it got serious, tell the other person. But I just can't. I mean, she's all I've ever wanted, and she says she feels the same. I just didn't want to start something I couldn't finish.”

“We understand. You know we do. This will all work out, you’ll see.”

“I hope so. I know deep in my soul that she’s the girl for me. I’ve always known that. Hey, when I was in town the other day, guess who I ran into?”

His brothers looked at one another, shaking their heads.

“Gil Thomason.”

“No shit!” they said in unison. East laughed.

“Yep. He was actually really nice. Matured, shall we say. He’s a loan officer at a bank in Biloxi but was down here visiting his folks. He married a girl from Mississippi, and they have three kids.”

“Damn. He got busy,” smirked Ethan.

“No, we’re just slow,” laughed Rett. The front door of the cottage opened, and their father, Kiel, grandfathers Zeke and Baptiste, Cam, Hex, and Eric walked in.

“Is this where the bachelor party is?” laughed Hex.

“Sorry. No bachelor parties for me,” smiled Rett. “I have all I need right across the path.”

“Smart man,” grinned Eric. “Hey, we’re here really quick for a little business. After the wedding, can we get either East or Eazee to head over to El Paso and see what’s happening with Morgan’s father and his gang?”

“I’ll go,” said East. “I need to clear my head anyway.”

“Great. Brush up on your Spanish. I think you’re going to need it.”

CHAPTER TWO

Louisiana was starting to show the first signs of a warm summer to come. The rest of the country was celebrating Spring, but she was already moving fast and headed to the next season.

El Paso seemed to have decided to move right past Spring and head straight into desert heat and summer temps. Stepping out of his truck, he could already feel the sweat trickling down his back. The crisp, starched blue jeans had a hard pleat down the front, his cowboy boots peaking from beneath the hem. He wore a dark denim shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal sinewy, muscular arms covered in a beautiful array of tattoos.

Grabbing the felt hat from his seat, he placed it on his head, tucking his dark hair behind his ears. Although he'd let it grow long for the wedding of his brother, he'd trimmed it before coming to Texas.

The offices for the DEA were just another concrete building. One that East didn't want to ever be forced to work in. But he did have to meet a contact to try and get some information about Green Sutton.

East had seen men do a lot of heinous things, but giving your only daughter as payment to a cartel leader was one of the worst. Morgan was still recovering from the multiple surgeries that the team back home had performed on her, but she was going to make it. Even if it killed Kegger.

Like all stories at Belle Fleur, he'd found himself guarding her, which turned to loving her almost in an instant.

With Sutton as the head of the Paso Brotherhood, a gang unrivaled in the area, he was raking in money from drugs, women, trafficking children and adults alike, and murder for hire. If the price was right.

Stepping inside the elevator, two DEA agents eyed him up and down. He'd been able to step through security with all his weapons, thanks to the G.R.I.P. technology. Now, he just wanted to avoid anyone getting into a pissing match with him.

“Nice boots,” smirked the agent.

East slowly raised his head, peering from beneath the brim of his hat. The man's smile faded, and he swallowed.

“I like them,” said East, staring directly at the man.

“No, I was serious. They're nice boots.” He pointed to his own feet, tapping them on the elevator floor. “See. We

all wear them here.”

East said nothing as the two men got off at the next floor. He could only shake his head, wondering why smaller men always felt the need to puff out their chests with a man twice their size. He opened the double glass doors, stepping inside a bland, depressing field of desks and chairs. It looked miserable.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m here to see Agent Fuentes,” said East, standing at the desk of the DEA offices in El Paso.

“Is he expecting you, sir?” asked the young woman.

“He is.”

He didn’t give his name, just allowing the woman to call back to the agent’s office. A few minutes later, a short, stocky man walked toward him. He was wearing jeans and cowboy boots with the biggest black hat East had ever seen, or maybe he had the smallest head that East had ever seen. He wasn’t really sure.

“Agent Fuentes?”

“That’s me. You must be East Wolfkill,” he said, extending his hand. East nodded, giving a firm handshake.

“You’re a fucking big bastard. A little hard to be undercover when you’re that big.”

“I don’t do undercover,” said East. “That’s your job. I’m here to find out what you have on Sutton.”

“Probably more than you’d like to know. He was a piece of shit when he was dealing with Ramos, but since his disappearance...”

“Death. His death,” said East. The man eyed him suspiciously and then nodded.

“Okay. Since his death, Sutton is acting like he’s the emperor of Rome. We know he’s got women stashed somewhere, but for the life of us, we can’t find them. He runs a ring of high-dollar prostitutes that draw men in from Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, California, Texas, and Mexico. Hell, we found a guy a few weeks ago that flew in from Hungary. Said he’d been in town a few months back and had the best night of his life,” he smirked.

“He doesn’t seem to care who’s watching or what we get on him. He truly believes he’ll get off no matter what, which leads us to believe some of his ‘customers’ are law enforcement or government officials. He gets away with

everything. We're fairly certain he killed his only daughter years ago."

"He did. More or less." The man eyed him suspiciously, then frowned at him, shaking his head.

"You know, Wolfkill, for this little relationship to work, you need to share information with me as well. DEA is in charge of this investigation, and it's my understanding that you're here to help."

"First, don't use my last name openly again. It's just East. Second, I'm a retired fucking Green Beret. We don't have a relationship. I'm here to stop Sutton. Something that you haven't been able to do on your own. And third, you're in charge of your investigation, but my op runs simultaneously. For all I know, you're working with Sutton."

The smaller man stood, shoving the chair back as he fisted his hands against the table.

"Please," said East, shaking his head. "Don't even think about it. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want to be an asshole, but I'm here to settle a debt. One that Sutton started more than ten years ago. I have no beef with you and the DEA, and I won't stand in the way of your investigation.

But I will find this man, and I will either bring him in or do him in.”

“And you’re doing this all on your own, Superman?”

“Fuck no. I’ve got a whole damn army supporting me.”

“A whole army, huh?” he eyed him strangely, then shoved a folder toward him. “These are copies of everything I’m allowed to give you. Please don’t argue with me. My boss wouldn’t allow me to give you anything else.”

“Do you suspect he’s in on this?”

“Honestly? I have no fucking clue. I’m afraid to speak with anyone down here. El Paso could be a nice town, but it’s not. Almost seven hundred thousand people. Great elevation, making it cool in the evenings, scorching in the day. Drugs and women have been trafficked in and out of here for decades, and everyone seems to look the other way. It’s easy to walk across that mountain or through that river and get what you want. Too easy. We are eighty-one percent Hispanic, East. You’d better speak Spanish.”

East just nodded, working his way through the documents in front of him.

“Listen, I get that this is some sort of a vendetta for you, but for the rest of us, it’s our job. I’ve been here three years. Three very long years trying to nail Sutton on something, and yet nothing comes up that will stick. I have a wife and daughter that I moved back to Pennsylvania to live with her parents so that Sutton couldn’t use them against me. I’m not even sure if my wife will take me back after all this time.

“The drugs will come and go, East. They’ll grow them, produce them, and someone will always sell them. We want that stopped, no doubt. But what really eats at me are the women that he forces into prostitution or sells. Women is a loose description.”

He pulled the folder back toward him, thumbing through the photos. Reaching between a few pages, he pulled out one with a little girl lying on a bed. The coroner had placed a sheet over her torso, bloodied and bruised by the man who paid for her time.

“She was nine, East. Nine. I’ve been with the DEA seventeen years. I’ve seen gang related crimes, organized crimes, you name it. But that photo, that one, is the one that haunts my dreams.”

East just stared at the broken, tormented face of a little girl lost too soon. Her hair had been put up in pigtails, tied with pink ribbons. She wore little white ankle socks with pink bows on them to match her hair. But some sick pervert used her as his plaything. And Sutton allowed it to happen.

“Where is he now?”

CHAPTER THREE

East booked a room at a small inn just outside the gates of the El Paso Zoo and Botanical Gardens. It was neat, clean, well maintained, and, more importantly, within running distance of Fort Bliss and of the Mexican border.

Fuentes was working with his informant to set up a meeting with Sutton. East's cover story was that he'd just been released from prison in Georgia and was trying to make some money before he left the country. The team back home made sure his cover was rock solid, but you never knew if someone might recognize him. For East, it was three times as likely. They could mistake him for one of his brothers.

It wouldn't matter. They were all the same. They'd shared the same ops, they'd shared their military experiences, and they shared the firefights. They were, without a doubt, one person in three different bodies.

With his binoculars, he looked out the window and across the highway, watching as people walked across the border at the Bridge of the Americas International Bridge. Thousands flooded through every day. Some were just looking for a safer life for themselves and their families. They

were willing to do any job, for any amount of money, just to be out of Mexico or any one of the Central or South American countries.

Others were not so pious. They were criminals. Drug dealers, rapists, murderers, and terrorists. He was glad he didn't have the job of figuring out which one was which.

When his phone rang, he stared at the number, an El Paso area code.

“Yeah.”

“Fuentes here. You've got a meet set with Sutton for tonight at nine. His home is on Cypress, not far from the Whataburger.”

“The what-a-what?” frowned East.

“Dude,” laughed Fuentes, “it's a burger joint. Famous in Texas. Try one. Don't worry, it won't destroy your girly figure, and you'll die happy for having one. Seriously, just try one, and you'll be addicted.”

“I try not to put that shit in my body,” said East.

“Who's my contact?”

“They'll find you. Sutton just wants to make sure you're the man for the job.”

“What job?”

“I don’t know. That’s what you’re going to find out. He’s got all of Ramos’s contacts, his drugs, and at least some of his money. He’s been sitting in this town for more than thirty-five years. He lives in a modest little house. Drives an average-priced mid-sized SUV. Doesn’t wear any fancy watches. He’s a man that knows how to fly under the radar.”

“And sell his daughter,” frowned East.

“She something to you?” asked Fuentes.

“No. But she’s something to someone I know. That makes it all the more important to me.”

“Understood. But if I were you, and I am admittedly not, I would not bring her up in conversation. My informant tells me that since the death of Ramos, Sutton wants to know what happened to his daughter, and none of Ramos’s men can tell him.”

“Got it.”

Fuentes laughed, trying not to be offended by the man’s inability to share information or even give him a hint of what he might be thinking.

“Look, he’s throwing a barbeque tonight. Don’t be surprised if he offers drugs or women. Up to you what you want to take, but I’d avoid the drugs at all costs.”

“And the women?” frowned East.

“Wrap that shit up.”

It nauseated East to even think about touching a woman whom he knew was probably there against her will. If he was forced to pick someone, it would be someone older and preferably not there against her will.

He showered and dressed, taking his time to head toward Sutton’s home. Not sure what the man was looking for, he decided to leave the cowboy hat in his room.

As he drove along CanAm Highway, he could see small groups of immigrants camped beneath the overpasses. A little further down, he noticed young men trading drugs openly on the streets. It was as if the police had just given up. He’d yet to see an El Paso city police car or a state trooper.

When he turned the corner onto Sutton’s street, there were cars lining both sides, many with men standing outside them, just watching.

“Nothing suspicious about that,” he murmured to himself.

Finding a spot to park, he secured the car and implemented the shock shell that G.R.I.P. had installed on all the VG vehicles. If anyone touched it, they were going to leave with one helluva headache and burned fingers.

As he walked up the driveway of Sutton’s home, all eyes turned to stare at the big man daring to come onto their property.

“What’s up, amigo?” said one of the men.

“I have an appointment with Señor Sutton. My name is East.”

“East?” he smirked. “Like east, west, north, and south? Where are the other three?” The men chuckled, staring at him.

“Around.” The smile was wiped off their faces, and one of the men started to step forward. East didn’t even look his way when the front door of the house opened.

“Step back!” yelled an older man. “He’s my guest.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“You’re Sutton?” asked East.

“Yep. And you’re East. Come in.”

East nodded at the man, then turned, taking in the faces of each man he passed. He could tell it made them squirm. Men tended to do that beneath his gaze, but when they worked for a prominent drug dealer, they usually had an inflated feeling of superiority. That only made him believe that perhaps these men weren’t drug dealers at all.

The inside of the home mirrored the outside. It was well-maintained. Clean, modern furniture, but nothing over the top, nothing expensive. There were no photos of his late wife or of his beloved lost daughter.

“Follow me,” said Sutton.

East followed him toward the back of the house, then out the back door and into a yard full of people. There was a small swimming pool where men and women were enjoying one another’s company, as well as someone at a grill barbecuing every variety of meat known to man, and some that probably weren’t known to man.

“Hungry?” he asked East.

“I could eat,” he said.

Sutton nodded to a man at the grill, and he immediately took a huge quarter of chicken off the fire, setting it on a plate. He filled the rest of the plate with rice and beans. East began digging in right away. He wanted to give the impression that he was starving and hadn't had a decent meal in weeks.

"There's plenty," smirked Sutton. "Eat slow. We'll give you seconds if you need it."

"Sorry. I just haven't had a good meal in a while. It's good," he said, nodding at the man at the grill. "It's been a minute since I've had good barbecue. Nice job."

"I get it," nodded Sutton. "I hear you just got out."

"Yep. Attempted murder and armed robbery."

"Who'd you try to kill?"

"My girlfriend's fuck buddy. He thought he'd walk away with everything intact. He didn't. I never intended to kill him, just make him piss from a tube the rest of his life." Sutton chuckled, shaking his head.

"A man with a sense of justice. I like that. I can use that for something I desperately need."

“Listen, Mr. Sutton, I need this job. I just want to make enough money to get the fuck out of here and start over. I’m big, I’m strong, I can shoot. I just need a chance.” Sutton stared at him a moment. He was a big bastard. Scary almost, but if he could manipulate him, he wouldn’t dare go up against him. That was Sutton’s style. Manipulation.

“Did you go home before coming here?”

“Nope. Don’t really have a home. I left the pen and drove straight to El Paso, hoping to make some cash.”

“Well, I’m going to bet you could use some serious pussy,” he grinned. East’s stomach was about to spill the rest of the chicken, but he only smiled, nodding at the older man. “I got just the girl for you. Come with me.”

He stood, and East followed him to the back corner of the yard where a metal shed was sitting. Was he keeping these women in a hot fucking shed? He was surprised when the door opened and revealed a man seated above an open trap door with steps leading down.

“A tunnel?”

“One of many. I have tunnels all through this city. This one happens to lead to the best experience of your life.

Tonight is on the house. After this, we deduct it from your pay. If you want to sample the drugs, they'll add that to your deductions."

"No drugs. I need a clear head," said East. Sutton just smiled again, nodding.

"Third door on the left. Best girl in my stable. Leaves every man who walks in there spent and asking for more."

"I appreciate it. Third door on the left?" He nodded, waving him forward. When he disappeared inside the room, Sutton turned to the guard.

"Make sure he doesn't kill her."



East opened the door to almost complete darkness. There was a candle burning in the corner, the smell of rose water and tequila filling the room. He could hear the soft breathing of a woman, and his heart dropped. He prayed he could do this.

“Have a seat on the bed,” said the sweet, husky voice of the woman.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said. “I’m going to wear a condom.”

“How considerate of you,” she laughed. He stilled, feeling a strange pang in his gut. “Lie back.”

He did as she asked, then saw a figure moving toward him in the darkness. Her long hair was curled around her shoulders, falling into her face. Her body was smokin’ hot. Firm, round breasts pointing straight at him in a thin white tank top. She was wearing a tiny scrap of material up her ass, the thong covering a completely shaved pussy.

Her small hand reached out, touching the fly of his pants. He was hard and didn’t want to be. Gripping her wrist, he held her there.

“What’s your name?” he asked, hoping to buy himself some time.

“No names.”

“No names. No sex.”

“No sex. No deals,” she laughed.

East frowned, gripping her shoulders and slamming her to the bed. She let out a squeal as his body straddled her own, his jeans rough against her thighs.

“No fucking games! Who are you?” he asked, pushing the hair from her face. “No. No, it can’t be.”

“Sshhh! You idiot!” whispered Brooke.

“What the fu—“ He didn’t get to finish the sentence as she slammed her mouth against his. Reaching beside her, she grabbed the remote and turned on the music as loud as she could. Pulling his head to her shoulder, she whispered in his ear.

“I’m Fuentes’ contact. We have to do this, or they’ll know.”

“Really?” he frowned. “Just how the fuck are you doing it with the others he sends down.”

“Relax, East. I’m not stupid. I drug them, and they never know that we didn’t do anything. They wake up the next morning, and I’m sound asleep.”

“So, you’ve never had one man here?” he asked with doubt.

“Not one,” she said, staring up at him. “Would that matter?”

“Fuck yes! What the hell do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore. I’m sure you’ve had dozens of women,” she said breathlessly into his ear. “I thought by now you would have come to me or asked me to meet you, but you didn’t.”

“You wanted to meet me?”

“What the hell is wrong with you? Yes. I’ve wanted to meet you, be with you, for years.”

She was careful to not say his name. He stared down into her beautiful face, stroking her jawline, pushing the hair back. He began kissing her sweetly at first, then with a need so fierce he didn’t think he’d survive.

“Take off your clothes,” he said, staring down at her.

“Wh-what?”

“You heard me. Take it all off.” He pulled her close, whispering in her ear. “If you want to make this look good, you either drug me or let me make love to you.”

Brooke was breathing so hard she couldn’t move. She didn’t want to drug him, but make love to him here? In this

dump?

“How about I do it for you,” he smiled. Gripping the tank, he pulled it over her head, then ripped the thong from her body. “What do they call you, beautiful?”

“B-Brooke.”

“Well, Brooke, I’m going to fuck you. Hard. When we’re done, I’m going to do it again. It’s my understanding we have all night.”

She nodded, forgetting that she was lying there naked. East toed off his boots, then pulled the shirt over his head. His chiseled body was slick with a fine sheen of sweat. As his buckle clanked when he opened it, she heard his zipper and held her breath.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

She stared at him, waiting as the jeans slid down his body. His long, thick cock was nestled in a cradle of black curls. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a condom and rolled it over his cock.

At first, Brooke wanted to cry but then realized that he was protecting them both. He shoved her knees apart, lining

his body to her opening. Bending down, he whispered in her ear.

“How many, Brooke? What number will I be?” He was angry. His face was filled with anger and disappointment, and before she could answer, he slammed into her.

East’s eyes went wide as Brooke covered her mouth with both hands to prevent the scream from escaping. His look of surprise and shame told her he knew nothing about her.

“Baby? God, Brooke,” he whispered. She shook her head, tears streaming down her face. “Brooke, look at me.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I should have said something. You didn’t give me a chance to warn you.”

“Brooke, what the fuck were you going to do if they found out?” He was panicked and angry now. A fucking virgin in the middle of Sutton’s sex pit.

“I-I was going to be gone before then,” she said with her eyes closed. He started to pull back, but she wrapped her legs around his bottom, pulling him back in. “It’s done now. It’s done, and it was done by the man who was supposed to do it.”

“Brooke, baby,” he cooed, kissing her sweetly as he caressed her body. Slowly, he began to move inside her. It felt too good not to. She was so fucking wet and tight, her body molding to his own.

“I waited for you,” she said softly in his ear.

“I’m so fucking glad you did,” he said sweetly.

East teased her taut nipples, tasting the flesh that belonged to him now. Everything about her was important to him. Everything. But if he let Sutton know that, he’d hold her over him for whatever sick game he was playing.

He could hear her breathing quicken, and his own body was starting to respond. His stomach muscles tensed, his balls tightening.

“P-please,” she begged. East let out a low growl as he emptied inside the condom. When her breasts jiggled and shook with her own orgasm, he smiled down at her, kissing her sweetly.

“I’m sorry it was here,” he whispered.

“I’m not,” she said. “I would have done this anywhere with you.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Can you tell me what’s happening here?” he asked.

“Not here,” she said, holding a finger to her lips. “Tell Sutton you want me in your hotel room. He’ll charge you for me, but he’ll let me go. He does with a lot of the girls.”

“You have to leave,” said East.

“I can’t. I’ll tell you why later, but for now, please just do as I ask.”

Everything in his body was screaming to throw her over his shoulder and carry her away. But he wouldn’t get far with a hundred of Sutton’s men above them.

“Are there other girls here?”

“Yes, but they’re all in, they’re all over eighteen, twenties, at least. Several important men use them. Law enforcement, government, businessmen, everyone.” He nodded.

“Wait here.”

East stepped out of the room and practically ran up the steps. Sutton was seated around an open fire pit, a woman on his lap, licking her way up his neck.

“Back so soon?” he smirked.

“I want her for the duration I’m here. I’ll pay for her.”

“That good, huh? My boys tell me she leaves them delirious. Alright. You can keep her for the time you’re here. Five hundred a day.”

“That seems steep. She’s not that great.” He was lying through his teeth. She was worth ten times that amount, and he’d pay it if he had to. Hell, he’d turn over every dime in his bank account to take Brooke from this place.

“Five hundred, or you find another girl.”

“Fine. Five hundred.” He pulled out a roll of cash, and Sutton stared at him. Handing over three thousand, he put the rest in his pocket.

“That’s six days in advance. Six.”

“Where’d you get that money, boy?” asked Sutton with a suspicious glare. The woman stopped licking his neck, staring at East with a seductive smile.

“I’m not a boy. Don’t mistake me for one. I got the money because I earned it. I just wanna take the bitch to my hotel and release some more tension.”

“Fine, but if she comes back damaged, the price doubles.”

“Fine. Do I have a job?” Sutton laughed.

“Boy, you got balls. Yeah. You got a job. Be back here tomorrow at three. Not before. I don’t like working in the mornings.”

By the time East got back downstairs, Brooke was dressed in another white tank top and a tiny pair of white terry cloth shorts. He stared at her, frowning.

“It’s all they give us.”

Taking her hand, he led her back upstairs and through the crowd as whistles and wolf calls followed. He gently shoved her into the truck, attempting to make it look worse than it was. When they were out of the neighborhood and down the road, Brooke began to sob.

Fifteen minutes later, they were in his room at the inn, and East was holding her tightly, rocking back and forth.

“It’s alright, baby, you’re alright now.”

“East, it’s not that. I knew what I was doing. I just, I waited all these years to be with you, and it happened in a

tunnel beneath a trafficker's home. I thought it would be romantic and sweet.”

“Baby, it was the sweetest, most romantic thing in the world for me. Finding you there when I've been aching for you for years now was the best fucking gift in the world.”

“Aching for me? Then why, East? Why wouldn't you come to me? We're adults now, not kids in college or in the military. We're old enough to do whatever we want.”

“Because you had a life. You talked about it all the time. You loved your work that you were doing with the immigrants. By the way, we're going to discuss that work,” he frowned. She couldn't help but giggle, scooting closer to him.

“I'm sorry, East. I know I should have told you, but I just couldn't. I never thought you'd come here for Sutton. It doesn't feel like it's something a Green Beret would do.”

“It's not. Not, really. We're out now. All three of us and Rett got married.”

“He did?” she chirped excitedly. “That's right. I couldn't get home for the wedding. I'm sorry, there's been a lot going on. I totally forgot that was recent.”

“He did,” he smiled. “While he met Casey and fell in love, we found Ramos and his unknown wife.”

“I thought they were all dead?”

“Not all of them. One was left. Morgan Sutton.”

Brooke gasped, staring up at him.

“No! No, Sutton talks about his daughter all the time. He wanted her back after they believed Ramos was dead. He said she was sent to him for payment and was probably no good to anyone any longer, but he never said that she’d married Ramos. He was actually going to use her in his stables, and I think he needed her for another reason.”

“Fucking asshole,” growled East. “He’d have to fight Kegger for her, and believe me, one leg or not, that bastard is a mean son-of-a-bitch.”

“I’m glad she’s safe,” said Brooke, nodding at the man. “East, I need clothes.”

“No, you don’t,” he said, lying her back on the bed. She smiled up at him as his big hand spread out across her abdomen. “I like you just like this.”

“East, I can’t go out like this.”

“I know,” he said, kissing his way down her throat, taking one of her beautiful nipples between his teeth.

“How am I supposed to help, if...” She stopped, pushing him back. Sitting up on the bed, she scooted backward against the headboard. “That’s what you’re doing. You’re trying to ensure that I don’t leave this room.”

“Baby, listen.”

“No, you listen. I’ve been working this a long time, East. I’ve seen him murder men, women, and children. More children than I can count, and yet no one would make a move in on him. When they did, suddenly, nothing was found. No tunnels, no rooms, no women, no children, no drugs. Poof! Like magic, everything and everyone is gone.”

“Someone is helping him,” growled East.

“Yes. I’m aware,” she said sarcastically. “Why do you think I’m still here?”

“I didn’t think you were here at all,” he said, moving toward her again. “I thought you were safe in some fucking office helping innocent people.”

“I am helping innocent people. Safe is a relevant term.”

“Bullshit. Safe is safe, and you are not safe.”

“I’m not leaving, East, and you can’t make me. This is my case. Mine and the DEA’s.”

“You working with Fuentes?”

“Yes. He’s a good agent. Competent and honest. Something hard to come by in this part of the country. He pretends to be one of Sutton’s lackeys and visits me once a week.”

“Visit you, huh?” he scowled.

“Oh, knock it off! You know what I mean. He’s never touched me, East. Never.”

“Sorry,” he said, standing and sliding his fingers through his hair. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I’m just, I’m just really jealous right now and feeling insanely protective.”

The door to the bathroom flew open, and three men stepped out, grinning at the couple.

“Well, we know what that means, don’t we?”

CHAPTER FIVE

“You assholes! You scared the shit out of me!” said Brooke, staring at Eazee, Cowboy, and Matt.

“How did the three of you fit in that bathroom?” asked East. “More importantly, how did you get in here?”

“Don’t ask,” smirked Cowboy. “Nice to see you, Brooke. Uh, maybe put some clothes on, though. I’m a married man.”

“Shut up,” she laughed. “I can’t put clothes on because Mr. Frowny Face won’t let me.”

“Here,” grinned Eazee.

He tossed a bag on the bed, and she grabbed it, running around them into the bathroom. As she passed each one, she stood on her toes, kissing their cheeks.

“I’ve missed you guys.” The door shut, and the three men turned, smiling at East. Except he was not smiling back.

“What?” shrugged Eazee. “The girl needed clothes.”

“Why are you here?”

“Pigsty found out that Brooke was the undercover agent down here. Fuentes refused to say anything, but our man did his magic and found out. We were trying to get here to warn you before you walked in blind. Is she alright?”

“Yeah. It seems like she’s been able to avoid the worst of it.”

“That’s because I have,” she called from the bathroom. “I’m a capable agent.”

“Walls are thin,” smiled Matt.

“This isn’t funny, dickhead!” whispered East. “I need her to go home and be safe. I need her to be behind the gates of Belle Fleur.”

“And what?” asked Brooke.

“Fuck, they really are thin,” smiled Eazee. His brother frowned at him.

“Shut up.”

“And what do I do, East? Put on an apron and bake cookies for you while I wait for you to come home. Again.” She walked out of the bathroom, all eyes staring at their familiar, fresh-faced friend.

“Ouch,” muttered Matt.

“I’ve waited more than ten years for you to step up and take what you want, and you didn’t! You didn’t because you were so worried about your job and what might happen. You never once asked about my job. You, all of you, assumed I was sitting behind a desk rubbing people’s backs as they sobbed about their dilemma.

“Well, I wasn’t! I was doing real, detailed, difficult, cut-throat fucking operative work. That’s right, I said fucking! I helped women and children who were escaping from abject poverty, prostitution, and drugs. Me. I fed that information to the feds, Homeland, DEA, and anyone else, and do you know what happened? Not a damn thing. I’m still seeing women and children come across the border, stepping right back into the life they left.”

“Uh, baby, maybe we keep it down. We already know how thin the walls are,” said East. She stared at him, her face getting redder and redder.

“I think she’s going to blow,” said Cowboy. Brooke let out a long, exasperated breath.

“Do you guys have any idea how fucking annoying you are? You assume that we’ll all just take cushy jobs back home. Be a chef, be a teacher, maybe a nurse or a doctor. A

lawyer is good. But a cop? An operative? A soldier, sailor, or marine? No fucking way. Well, guess what? I watched the women around me. I spoke to Sara, Piper, Lucia, Hazel, and dozens of others.

“Badass fucking women! They did it, and I’m doing it. Now, I do plan to work for VG when I retire from the DEA. When I retire on my terms, in my time. Not when you decide it might be best for me.”

They all stared at her, wisely not saying a word. East paced back and forth for a moment, his hands shoving that hair back again. His brother handed him an elastic, and he swiped it from him, pulling the hair into a man-bun.

“You’re right,” he said, stopping to stare at her. Brooke furrowed her brows, waiting for the ‘but.’ “You’re right. I’m treating you differently than I would my brothers or any other man. Hell, probably different than any other woman. But.”

“Here it comes,” she frowned.

“But it’s because I love you, Brooke. I’ve loved you almost my entire life. I want a life with you. Kids, a dog or two, a home. I don’t know how that happens if you’re still in the DEA. You wanna be an operative for VG, great. Let’s do

it together. I'm just trying to figure it all out. I woke up this morning thinking I was after a trafficker, and I'm going to bed thinking I just need to get the woman I love home."

There was utter silence in the room. Eazee grinned at his brother, wanting to congratulate him for the powerful speech. They'd known for years that he was in love with Brooke but didn't want to push him on it. No one, probably not even her parents, would suspect that she was an active agent with the DEA.

"That's fair," she said quietly.

She slowly walked toward him, standing in front of him. Her head reached just below his chest, her long hair pulled back from her face with a scrunchie the guys had brought for her. She was wearing a tight pair of jeans and t-shirt, her feet bare.

"Fair?"

"Yes, fair. I'm a reasonable woman. Can we make a deal? We get Sutton, and I'll resign from the DEA. We go back, become operatives at VG, together. Then, we talk about marriage and starting a family."

East smiled at her, lifting her in his arms.

“Sweetest fucking deal ever.”

CHAPTER SIX

“So, he’s holding women in his backyard?” frowned Cowboy.

“Not exactly holding. The women in the tunnel in the backyard are there willingly. They make the most money for him and for themselves. It’s basically a brothel. He’s put plumbing down there, air conditioning and heat, hell, there’s even a private kitchen. If anyone shows up unexpectedly, the trap door locks, we’re shuffled further into the tunnel, and lawnmowers are placed on top of the trap door.”

“Where are the kids? The women he kidnapped and sold?” asked Eazee.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out, but he isn’t willing to divulge that to one of his whores,” she frowned.

“You’re not one of his whores,” growled East.

“Take it easy. I know, but that’s the way he thinks of me. I have to play the game. Play stupid and willing to do anything. He pays the girls a little bit of money, which is how I’ve been able to have time to myself now and then. I’ll ask to go to the store or the mall, something like that.”

“What does he want with Morgan?” asked Matt.

“That I’m not sure of,” said Brooke, shaking her head.

“When he got word that Ramos was either dead or had disappeared, that was the first question he asked. I had no idea who Morgan was, then learned later that she was his daughter. The only thing I can think of is that she has something that he wants either from Ramos or that was left to her by her mother.”

“Her mother?” said the men simultaneously.

“Yes. She was killed in front of her, but her mother was the one who had all the money. That huge mansion up near North Franklin Mountain is her mother’s home. Except it’s been sitting vacant for years. She put in her will that the mansion could not be sold or torn down unless her daughter made that decision – willingly.

“Whatever was in her trust, it provided for lawn care and maintenance of the home forever, and it ensured that Green couldn’t touch it. It named Morgan and an attorney in Utah, as the executors, with Morgan as the sole owner.”

“How is the mortgage paid?” asked East.

“It’s not. It’s paid for. Outright, in cash. A trust was set aside for maintenance and insurance, which the executor in Utah handles. Mrs. Sutton was a wealthy woman by legitimate means. I haven’t been able to figure out why Green would marry a woman with millions only to use that money for illegal activity.”

“Because he’s fucking greedy and stupid,” frowned Matt.

“Probably, but he’s also singular in his thinking. Ramos owned everything in the region but was using Sutton and Paulo Rivera, out of Los Angeles, to get everything over the border. Sutton killed Rivera three months ago, taking over all of his interests.

“Now, think about that. Sutton now controls guns, drugs, people, everything from the West Coast, Los Angeles on down, and across Texas, all the way to Houston. On Friday, he’s expecting Lomas Rivera, Paulo’s brother, for a meeting. Lomas Rivera controls everything coming in through the Gulf, and Sutton doesn’t like that at all.”

“That’s what he wants me for,” said East. “He wants me to kill someone, and I’d bet a million bucks it’s Rivera.”

“You can’t. You know you can’t,” said Brooke.

“I’m well aware, honey, but I could bargain. If I asked for my payment to be half and you, he might buy it.”

“But you can’t kill Rivera!” said Brooke. “He’s been feeding us information for a year now, helping us to bring down the others.”

“Then we’ll return the favor,” said Cowboy. “We’ll set a meeting with him tomorrow. Eazee and I will head over to Houston, meet with him, and let him know what’s going on. Worst case scenario, we fake a death.”

Brooke paced the room, stroking her neck nervously.

“Maybe I should call Fuentes and run this by him,” she said to herself more than anything.

“No.” Four men said it at the same time, all earning the deathly stare from Brooke.

“What we mean is, you can’t be sure that Fuentes isn’t in on this, Brooke,” said Cowboy. “If he is, you’d be putting all of us in danger.”

“He’s not involved. I know he’s not. He would have had a million opportunities to sell me out to Sutton, and he didn’t. He’s an honest agent who is only trying to bring that

man down and seems to hit dead ends no matter where he turns.”

“Why do you think that is?” asked East, staring at her, pleading with her. “Jesus, Brooke, why the fuck do you think that is? Sutton owns everyone! Every fucking person in this city, he seems to have in his pocket. If he doesn’t own them or know them, he kills them. Even Fuentes said he was fighting a losing battle.”

“That may be, but my job is to stop that man,” she said with her hands on her hips.

“No, your job is to stay alive long enough to become my damn wife!”

Silence filled the room, Cowboy, Eazee, and Matt staring at one another, slowly moving toward the door.

“We’re going to see if the rooms next to you are empty. If they are, we’ll rent them and be sure we have no ears listening in,” smirked Cowboy. They left the room, and East plopped back into the overstuffed chair.

“I’m tired. It’s late. Can we just try to get some sleep?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “We’re not going to bed angry. My parents don’t. I know for damn sure your parents don’t, and Mama Irene and Matthew never do. I won’t start that habit.

“Listen, East. I know that you’re trying to protect me, and I love you for it, really, I do. But I can’t just walk away from this. Not now. There is too much at stake.”

“Why? Why can’t you just let us take care of this issue?”

“Take care of it how, East? Because I’ve been around long enough to know how you guys take care of things. Someone sits in a tree all night, gets a good shot, takes Sutton out, and burns everything to the ground, or, God forbid, there’s a ship somewhere that he owns, and it sinks, blocking a harbor somewhere.”

East actually smiled at that, knowing that it was a favorite trick of their team. It was a good trick, and it worked.

“This isn’t just about Sutton, East. Someone else is involved and clearing the path for him. We need to know who that is so we can stop all of it.”

“You won’t ever stop all of it, Brooke. That’s not how this works. You say you’ve been working with Rivera. Great. He helps you; you bring down Sutton, and then Rivera is in power.”

“N-no,” she said quietly. “No, that’s not how this would go.”

“Then how would it go? Tell me. Because that’s for fucking sure how it would go.”

The three men walked back in, shaking their heads.

“The rooms on either side aren’t being used, but they can’t let them out. They’re being worked on during the day. Sorry, but we’re stuck in here with you.”

“It’s fine,” said Brooke. “Let’s just get some sleep.”

“No,” said East, standing and stopping her from lying down. “No. You said you didn’t want to go to bed fighting, angry with me. Well, let’s settle this. Why the fuck is it so important to you to nail Sutton?”

Brooke stared up at his handsome face, then took the seat that he’d vacated. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, shaking her head. East sat on the bed, his brother beside him as Cowboy and Matt sprawled out on the floor.

“I went to college with a girl named Celeste Ferrin. She was beautiful,” she smiled. “Blonde hair, big blue eyes, the sweetest smile. And she was absolutely brilliant. When I went to work for the DEA, she went to work in their chemistry division, examining new drugs. We were great friends and became roommates.” She looked at the men, smiling at Eazee.

“Don’t get mad, but I secretly hoped to introduce her to you one day. She would have been perfect for you,” she said softly.

“Would have been?” asked Eazee.

“When I was sent here, at first, I was lonely, and it was long nights in the office. Celeste offered to come down and spend the weekend with me. We went out to eat having a great time. She was always so much fun, always laughing and smiling. She got up to use the restroom, and that was the last time I saw her alive.

“It was Fuentes who found her three weeks later floating in the Rio Grande. She’d been raped, beaten, and branded by Sutton. She was so full of drugs that the coroner, mortician, everyone had to wear masks for fear of contamination. Her smile was gone. Her light was gone. Her life gone. All because she came to visit me and help me feel

not so lonely. It was my fault,” she said, sniffing, wiping tears from her face. “Mine. And I’m going to make it right.”

“Baby,” said East, standing and pulling her to him. He sat back down, her on his lap, and held her. “Brooke, baby, it’s not your fault. You couldn’t have known.”

“Brooke, if Sutton’s men took her, they would have seen you with her,” frowned Cowboy.

“Yep. That’s how I got where am. They were following me for a few weeks after that. They didn’t know anything about Celeste or where she worked because she had no ID for the DEA. She was a contract chemist.

“His men approached me one night when I was leaving the grocery store. Said it would be a shame for something to happen to me the way it happened to my friend. I tried to pretend to be afraid. Hell, I was afraid. They offered me another option. I spoke with Fuentes and took it.

“I’m not leaving El Paso until Sutton is buried. I want to put the bullet in his brain. Me. I want to see him beg for his life the way he made Celeste beg for hers.” They all stared at her, their brows knitted in confusion and worry. “He took great delight in telling me everything they did to her. Everything.”

“And you still want to do this?” asked East. She stood from his lap, pushing the men off the bed. Lying down, she let one arm fall over her eyes.

“I have to do this.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Unsure of whether or not Sutton was watching him, East had no choice but to remain in the room with his three teammates. Not wanting to disturb Brooke, they communicated only by sign language.

“What do you think?” asked Eazee.

“I think if we don’t finish this with her, she’s going to do it herself. We have to find out where those tunnels start and finish.”

“Undercover?” asked Cowboy.

“No. That’s too many men in there at once. I think we should use the technology at our fingertips and see if we can find where those tunnels are located,” said Matt.

The men all nodded, agreeing to look for the tunnels tomorrow. Sprawled on the floor of the room, there was no way that East was going to get time alone with Brooke tonight. He was actually okay with that. Knowing that she was safe, beside him, and not leaving was all he could ask for right now.

Later, he would ask her to leave El Paso.



“Good morning,” smiled Brooke, sitting up in the bed to see four men staring at her.

“Good morning,” they said in unison.

“Cowboy went out and got us breakfast,” said East.

“Chicken and sausage biscuits, hashbrowns, coffee, and juice.”

“So, a heart attack?” she smirked.

“Ha, ha, it’s good stuff,” said Cowboy, biting into his second chicken biscuit. The buttery, flaky biscuit crumbled in his hand as the juicy, thick chicken made him moan. Brooke could only shake her head, laughing.

“I had an idea,” said East, leaning against the dresser with his coffee in his hand. “I’m going to go back today as planned, but I’m going to propose a deal with Sutton. I’ll do whatever he asks, in theory, but my payment is you.”

“What? No. No, you can’t do that! This is my case, East!”

“I know that. And you can still help us with this case, but at least you’ll be safe, and he won’t question why I keep going back to you.”

“He’s right, honey,” said Eazee. “He’ll just think East’s got a crush and is willing to kill for you. Literally. He may buy it.”

Brooke stared at the four men. Glaring was a more accurate description, but she was trying to see a flaw in the plan. She appreciated their concern for her, but she didn’t want to be pushed out of this case. Her case.

“I’m not leaving El Paso until this is done,” she said, staring at East.

There was a knock on the door, and she immediately reached for a weapon. Then she noticed that the others did not. Cowboy looked through the peephole and opened the door.

“You asshole! You called my father? You actually called my father on me. That’s low, East. I’m not leaving!” she yelled.

“Keep your voice down,” he grinned. “Yes, I called your father because he was worried sick about you. You

forget that we are all on comms twenty-four-seven unless we turn it off. Your dad heard what was happening once I got to El Paso. Obviously, he wanted to be a part of this.” She looked at her father, then noticed the three men behind him.

“And the rest of the bunny crew?” she frowned.

“Thanks, sweetie,” smirked Mo. “I don’t think I’ve ever been referred to as a bunny.”

“Me either,” said Bogey, followed by Tanner. Brooke just shook her head.

“You’re unbelievable,” she snarled. East felt his stomach rolling in fear. Fear that she would walk away and never come back.

“Knock it off!” yelled her father.

Brooke stilled, turning to look at her father. He rarely lost his temper. He was the happy-go-lucky Irishman who didn’t let things get to him. But when he yelled, you stopped.

“Dad.”

“No. You’re going to let someone else talk instead of throwing a fucking tantrum like a child.” Brooke started to speak, and he held up his hand. “I’ve listened to it all. You’re pissed that someone might take the credit for your case.

You're pissed that you won't have the vengeance for your friend, Celeste. Well, too fucking bad, Brooke. That's not how operatives work.

“Operatives don't care who gets credit for the kill or the case. We are about justice and everyone coming home safely. If you don't want the help of eight, count them eight exceptional operatives who can end this shit sooner rather than later, then go ahead. Walk your happy little ass out of here and do it yourself.” With that, East started to speak. Liffey stared at him, shaking his head.

“Do not piss me off, East. You're a good man, and I think you're the right man for my daughter, but if this is how she's going to behave as an operative, then she won't make our team.”

Silence filled the room, Liffey staring at his daughter. She couldn't look at any of the men, especially not East. Maybe her father was right. Maybe she was so consumed with finding justice for Celeste that she didn't think about the others around her.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered softly. “You're right, and I'm sorry.”

“You’re a fucking DEA operative in the field, and you didn’t tell me,” said Liffey. “Did you forget what I do? Who I do it with?”

“No. No, I didn’t. I’m sorry, Dad. Really, I am. I just worried that if I told you, you’d tell me to quit. I can’t quit, Dad. Not yet. I’ll quit when this is done, and then I’ll come back to Belle Fleur and work for VG. With East.”

“With East?” he said with a grin.

“Yes. You’ve known for a long time that I love him. I should have been more open about my feelings, but I love him, Dad.”

“Good. Maybe he can talk some sense into you,” he chuckled. He stepped forward, hugging his daughter. “Your mother and I love you, and we just want you to be happy, Brooke.”

“I am happy, Dad. I’m very happy. Just help me end Sutton and what he’s done to all of these people, not just Celeste.”

“That’s why we’re here,” said Mo.

“Definitely going to end this shit,” said Tanner.

“We’ve got some additional information from Morgan. She

may have given us a hint as to where the tunnels start and end.”

“She’s been gone a long time,” said Brooke. “Those tunnels could have changed or been redirected.”

“We know, but at least we have somewhere to start the search,” said Bogey. “Your dad, Tanner, and I will be going out today to find some of these tunnels.”

“In the day? That’s dangerous,” she frowned.

“Daylight is when they may not be inside them,” said Tanner. “If we go at night, that could be when they’re transporting things and people. If we can find a way to collapse them without harming anyone or anything topside, we’ll do it.”

“Promise me that you won’t leave me out of this. I know I’m asking a lot of all of you, but I know what I’m doing, and I’ve been after Sutton a lot longer than you have,” she said, looking at all the men. She was maybe half their height and at least half of their weight, but she was capable, well-trained, and willing to do what needed to be done.

“You won’t be left out of it,” said East, “but you’re not alone any longer, and I need for you to not leave us out of

anything. If you know something, tell us. We'll share information as well. The more we have on Sutton, the better our chances are going to be to stop him. But we can't do that if we're fighting one another and worried that someone will be left out."

She nodded, tucking herself beneath his arm hugging his waist. Looking up at the other men, she gave an apologetic look.

"Sorry for my temper tantrum. All of you. Seriously, I'm sorry. I've been worried about this for a long time, and Fuentes was the only man I trusted. I'm really glad you're here," she frowned. "Thank you for coming." Liffey chuckled.

"That's better."

CHAPTER EIGHT

They dropped Liffey off at the federal building downtown, where he was going to have a conversation with a few people. Next door was the police department, where he'd ask a few questions as well, in a curious, matter-of-fact way that wouldn't throw suspicion his way or toward anyone else if he could help it.

Using the drones, Mo and Tanner started at the shed on Sutton's property, attempting to follow the trail. The drones were fitted with modified lidar equipment, showing the abnormalities in the earth below the homes. It would be a long process, but as they flew a grid pattern over the area, the computer was mapping the tunnels for them.

"This is fucking ridiculous," groaned Mo. "We've mapped miles of tunnels so far. Why hasn't someone done something about this? More importantly, how in the hell has the entire fucking place not collapsed on itself?"

"Money, brother. You and I both know that's what keeps this shit afloat. If I had to guess, Sutton is paying off the local officials and maybe even the locals themselves. East said it looks like he owns the entire block that he lives on, so

maybe he bought out those homes, paying off the neighbors. The other opportunity would be business owners, anyone who might look the other way,” frowned Tanner.

“But kids, Tanner. We’re talking about innocent women and children.”

“Brother, we’re always talking about innocent ones. Men, women, children, animals. It seems never-ending for us. Sometimes, I wonder how we didn’t get as fucked up as the rest of the world.”

“Mama Irene?” smirked Mo. “I mean, I know she’s impacted my life in ways I can’t even imagine. She helped to ensure that Phe felt part of the family and the team. She made sure I wasn’t losing my shit with my mother. All of it.”

“I know what you mean,” said Tanner. “Finding Micaela was definitely not something I expected. I remember that morning we went to Baton Rouge. I told Mama Irene how much her morning hugs and kisses meant to me. It was silly, but I needed her to know that. It made my whole day thinking about that woman caring for me. Loving me.

“When I decided to bring Micaela home and help her, it was Mama Irene who made me see that I was in love with

her. Now, having Mattie, well, it's just an entirely different world than the one I thought I might find."

"We're all very lucky, brother." He stopped, staring at the screen.

"What's wrong?"

"Look. The tunnels. They're right below the zoo and botanical gardens. They must be sending people up through the park after hours," said Tanner.

"Well, that just sounds unsafe for the animals," smirked Mo.

"I couldn't agree more."

While the drones continued their passes over the city on the programmed path, Mo and Tanner drove to the zoo and gardens, bought their tickets, and began wandering the grounds. According to the maps, the tunnels passed directly beneath the elephant sanctuary and then veered off beneath the rose gardens.

"What now?" asked Mo.

"Roses do well with manure, right?" he smiled.

"They do, brother. They absolutely do."

Hopping the fence of the enclosure, they snuck into the keeper's cottage and donned two zoo jackets. Seeing the massive pile of manure in the corner, Mo took the backhoe and began digging above the tunnel. When the earth collapsed into the tunnel, revealing the long open space, he had his opening.

Tons of elephant shit were piled into the tunnel, allowing no one to pass through from either side. When the hole was completely filled, he lifted the rest into his bucket and made his way to the rose gardens, where Tanner had dug a hole below them.

“Your hole awaits,” he smiled.

“I wish I could be there to see their faces,” smirked Mo. He dumped a few more tons of manure below the rose garden.

“Those are gonna be some beautiful roses,” laughed Tanner. “Come on. Let's see if we can find anymore.”

It took them a while, but when they located another offshoot of the tunnels near the lake, they knew they had to flood it. This time, it only took a few well-placed charges to make the tunnel collapse and the wall of the lake to flood into it. Someone would be questioning why the lake was down a few feet, but that wasn't his problem.

Picking up the drones again, they made several passes over the area before they finally saw one more tunnel beneath a gas station.

“That’s dangerous,” frowned Tanner. “I mean, who would be silly enough to put a tunnel beneath thousands of pounds of fuel? Dangerous, brother. Seriously dangerous. Anything could happen.”

“It is if there are people in there,” said Mo. “Do you see any heat signatures?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Nothing. What are you thinking? We can’t blow the whole gas station.”

“Why not?” smirked Mo. “Miller would love this job. I think we should make him proud. The tunnel runs beneath the pad, between the store and the pumps. If I blow the pumps, everything will collapse into the tunnels.”

“What about the people in the store?” frowned Tanner.

“Tell them it’s a gas leak,” he smirked.

Pulling his cap over his eyes, he parked the truck across the street and gathered what he needed from his backpack. Tanner ran across the street, telling the people at

the pumps to move quickly. When the cars were cleared away, he ran inside.

“Hey! Are you the manager?” he asked. It was a kid of about twenty who looked barely old enough to drive.

“I’m the assistant manager. The manager won’t be here until later.”

“Okay, well, you gotta clear out. Gas leak.”

“Gas?”

“Yes, like natural gas. The whole place could blow. Lock up the building and get across the street.”

The kid didn’t even argue with Tanner. He locked the doors and ran across the street, watching as another man placed ‘out of order’ signs on the pumps.

What he couldn’t see was that the back of the signs was lined with explosives, lying directly against the pumps. As he placed the last one, he took off running, screaming for cars to stop and people to back up.

The glass of the store shattered, the building shaking, and then a thunderous mushroom cloud of flames and fumes filled the air. The young assistant manager dropped to the ground, covering his head.

“Fire department is on their way,” said Tanner, looking back at the burning building. “Hey, what’s that? It looks like there was a tunnel beneath your building. Strange, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” said the young man. “That explains all the people that would suddenly appear in the early morning hours outside the store. They were pretty ratty looking. Everyone was hungry and tired, didn’t know which was which.”

Mo looked at Tanner, frowning.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. It was just that when I would come in for my shift, there was no one around the place, then suddenly there would be like twenty or thirty people. A few men, but mostly women and kids.”

“What do you mean suddenly? Like they appeared out of thin air?”

“No. Obviously not. There’s a small storage shed behind the gas station. I just always figured Mr. Sutton was letting them hide in there at night or something. I mean, it’s his property, so I didn’t question it.”

“Mr. Sutton? Does he own the station?” asked Tanner.

“Hell, yeah. He owns almost everything on this block. He’s gonna be some kind of pissed when he sees this. I sure hope I have a job tomorrow.”

CHAPTER NINE

East pulled the car into the driveway of Sutton's home, stepping out with Brooke's hand gripped in his own. He gently pulled her alongside him but made it look as though he were pulling her.

"Well, nice to see you again, East. How's my girl doin'?" smirked Sutton with a lust-filled smile. It made Brooke shiver with chills.

"Great," he grinned. "In fact, I want to make a deal with you."

"A deal, huh? I don't do deals, son. I'm the one that makes the rules."

"Alright. You can have her back, and I'll leave."
Sutton frowned at him, standing and walking toward him. East didn't move.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" asked Sutton.

"I'm making a deal. I don't want your money. I want her. Give me the job. I'll complete it within the six days that I already paid you for, and then she will be my payment. I take

her with me.” Sutton stared at him, then down at Brooke. He started laughing, shaking his head.

“That must be some magical pussy for you to walk away from cash. I don’t believe I’ve ever had pussy that good. Maybe I should try her out.”

“It’s a lonely world out there, and you won’t try her out while I bought and paid for her. I just want someone with me, and she’s willing to tag along. She seems to take orders well,” he smirked, jerking her closer. “Don’t you, baby?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Sure.” Sutton stared at the big man, wondering where he’d actually come from. The woman seemed compliant but with a healthy dose of fear, which he admired.

“You’ll do a big job for me. A big one. No questions asked. You’re just going to do it.”

“No questions asked,” said East.

Just when he thought he would get his assignment, two cars jumped the curb and onto Sutton’s lawn, men pouring from them.

“What the fuck are you doing? That’s my lawn!” he yelled.

“We have a problem,” said one of the men, staring at East. Sutton knew they were suspicious of the big man and shook his head.

“He’s cool. What’s wrong?”

“Tunnels have been found and filled. Two at the zoo and gardens, the one by the lake, and the gas station was blown up.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? No one knows about those tunnels. No one! Get me the fucking mayor!” Sutton started to walk away, then turned back to East and Brooke. “Come back tomorrow. Same time. I have more pressing issues today.”

Leading Brooke back to the truck, East took off toward their little inn, grinning the entire time.

“What the hell was that all about?” asked Brooke.

“Just a little VG fun, honey.”

“Care to explain about the VG fun?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I think the boys found some of the tunnels and imploded them. The gas station must have been really

important to him because that's what seemed to set him off the most. Do you know anything about it?"

"No, not that particular one. I know that he owns a lot of businesses, and that's what he runs his drugs, guns, and people through. Celeste had made a comment to me once that she thought he was getting the drugs through in the tires coming across the border. He sold the tires at the gas station but also had an entire tire center somewhere within the city. She found a strange rubbery film on the drugs."

East frowned, nodding as he leaned against the door, his big hand rubbing his jaw.

"Do they work on cars at the gas station?" he asked.

"No. I overheard one of the men say that he owns a dealership and a repair shop. I would imagine some of the drugs and guns are coming across in the cars and parts. Maybe some of the kids and women are as well. They could be hiding in the cars."

"It's possible," frowned East, "although, for the most part, the border security is pretty tight about cars."

"Maybe in San Diego, East, but not here. Not in El Paso, McAllen, or Nogales. The Mexican border guards are

just trying to stay alive. If they aren't bought and paid for by the cartels, they're careful to not make waves so their families aren't punished. On the U.S. side, it's not much different. Especially here.

“I don't think you understand how much power and influence Sutton has around here. Look at where he lives, East. He lives in a modest neighborhood, not making waves with anyone, just doing his dirty business underground. He doesn't want the attention on him. In that way, he's very different than Ramos or any of the other drug dealers.”

“I understand. I understand that he's buying and selling drugs, weapons, women, and children. I understand that he wants his daughter back in order to get control of that mansion up there on that hill.”

“Wait. What did you just say?” she asked.

“He obviously wants Morgan back so that he can somehow get control of that mansion. Clearly, it's important enough to him that he hasn't bought another one to replace it, and, for some strange reason, he can't get into it now.”

“No. No, he hasn't replaced it, has he? But why? He has the money. He could build one five times that size. What

the fuck is in that mansion that he wants so desperately?”
asked Brooke.

“I thought you would have the answer to that,” he
smirked.

“No, but I know someone who might.”



“Fuentes. Nice to see you,” said East.

“What the fuck are you doing with her?” he growled at
the big man.

“Relax. I’ve known Brooke a long time. She’s
family. Right, Brooke?”

“Shut up, East,” she frowned, knowing he was poking
at Fuentes and trying to show his claim on her. Thomason
would be proud of him, finally staking claim on his girl.

“You’re trying to piss off Fuentes, and I’d appreciate it
if you didn’t. Listen, we’ve got Sutton thinking that East is
infatuated with me, and he’s willing to do any job to get my
freedom. But we’re here about something else.”

“Alright, I’ll bite. What are you here about?”

“The mansion. What’s so fucking important about that mansion that he wants his daughter back to get control of it? Why not just blow it up and start over?”

Fuentes stared at the two people sitting across from him and then stood, closing his office door. Pulling a file from beneath his desk, he slid it across the surface toward East.

“Category A biological weapon? What in the ever-loving fuck?” growled East.

“We think that Sutton’s wife helped him to acquire the biological weapons, and then convinced him to store them beneath the mansion because it’s cool and dry. One of the few places around here that is cool. But she either changed her mind, or it was a ruse all along to get them out of his hands. We’ll never know.

“Just before Morgan was taken more than ten years ago, a massive government storage facility was robbed. Almost a thousand tubes of Anthrax went missing, and they’ve never been found.”

“A thousand? Is that a lot?” asked Brooke.

“It’s enough to kill millions,” said Fuentes.

“Why not raid the house? Get a warrant, probable cause, and get in there and find out what they have.”

“You think we haven’t tried that? Two years before I came, the agent asked for a search warrant on probable cause of harboring drugs, guns, and trafficked women and children. He was given the warrant, but when he went inside, there was nothing. No furniture, no dishes, not even a towel left behind. The lights were on, water was working, but nothing else.

“They searched that house for three days and found nothing. No hidden staircases. No basements. No vaults. He was fired. I know in my gut that something is there, but I can’t risk another incident like that.”

“Well, then. We’ll have to get creative,” said East.

“Don’t fuck this up, East,” said Fuentes. “This is our last shot to get Sutton.”

“What do you mean?” frowned Brooke.

“I mean, that we’ve been told if we don’t have something on him, something significant by the end of the month, we’re out of here, and we’re to leave him alone. There is a common belief that Mr. Sutton is a law-abiding citizen who happened to befriend the wrong people.”

“Are you fucking with me right now?” growled East.

“Nope. I am not.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Did you find anything?” asked Brooke, staring at her father.

“Plenty,” he said in exasperation. They were sitting at a Mexican restaurant, the men all drinking beers, while Brooke sipped a virgin margarita. Plates of tamales, tacos, enchiladas, and chips with salsa and guacamole filled the table.

“Care to enlighten us?” frowned East.

“He owns them all,” said Liffey. “The mayor, the sheriff, the city police, the inspectors, everyone. Luke and Cam have an old SEAL teammate who is now with the feds down here. When I mentioned Sutton’s name, he told me to go home.”

“What the fuck? Is he taking from Sutton?” asked Eazee.

“He’s looking the other way. Not because he wants to but because his section chief has ordered him to stand down on the case against Sutton. When we bring Sutton down, the entire fucking city will be without authority or law enforcement. We need to make the governor aware that the

National Guard may have to come in and take over at some point.”

“We have to get inside that mansion,” said Tanner.

“Well, we damn sure know that we can,” said Mo.

“There are plenty of cameras, alarms, all the usual bullshit, but we’ve got our equipment. We should be able to disrupt the signals long enough to get inside and see what’s what.”

“And when we find it?” asked Brooke. “What then? Do you blow it up and kill everyone within a thousand miles? Do you say, ‘hey, we just broke into this mansion, and guess what we found’? We can’t just break in, find something, and not tell the world what’s there.”

“Sure, we can,” smirked her father. “We do it all the time. Sometimes, leaving the public ignorant to what’s in their backyard is a good thing, Brooke. We’re very good at doing that. I think we take a team tonight and get into the mansion. You and East stay here with Matt. That way if Sutton or one of his men come, you’ll be here, but so will backup. Make it look like Matt was joining the party.”

“Ew,” frowned Brooke.

“Gee, thanks,” laughed Matt.

“No. I didn’t mean it like that,” she blushed.

“I know, honey. But he’s right. Your dad is pretty fucking good at breaking into shit. With Tanner, Bogey, Mo, Eazee, and Cowboy, they’ll know how to get past all the bells and whistles of the mansion. Once inside, we can use our lidar to search below the mansion and find a fucking way inside.”

“And what if they’re wrong? What if Sutton’s wife moved everything to another location, and it’s just a big empty house?”

“I don’t know what then, but at least we’ll know. This will help us to get where we want to be.”



Shortly after midnight, they pulled into the Franklin Mountain Reserve. It wasn’t gated or guarded, but there was only one residence on the entire damn property. Sutton’s. Or at least his wife’s.

“Sensors are going off like crazy,” said Tanner.

“They’ve got the entire area wired.”

“Can you disrupt everything?” asked Mo.

“Doing it now. Sensors are disrupted, cameras are frozen on a loop, and the gate is opening up ahead to the house.”

They rounded the bend, seeing the massive three-story Victorian mansion. It was woefully out of place with the rest of El Paso. Whoever built it planned on staying for a while and claiming the area as their own. Just being able to build on the mountain meant that someone had a helluva lot of money to throw at officials.

The front door had multiple alarms and locks. While Tanner worked on the alarms, Liffey worked his magic with the locks. When he turned, opening the door, the others just grinned.

“Interesting skills to have,” smirked Eazee.

“Be nice and I’ll teach you,” said Liffey. Inside the mansion, they found it exactly as the agent had described. Completely empty.

“Well, this isn’t creepy at all, is it?” frowned Cowboy.

“What’s creepier is that there isn’t one speck of dust,” said Tanner, running a hand along the stair railing. He held up

his hand, frowning.

“No dust? Someone is coming up here and cleaning this place,” frowned Mo.

“Who?”

“Let’s find out,” said Cowboy.

As the men split up, Tanner and Mo took the third floor first, checking each of the rooms to be sure they were empty and didn’t have any hidden doors or rooms. The equipment that they possessed worked much like an x-ray machine, revealing things that the naked eye could not see. On the third floor at least, all was as it seemed.

On the second floor, Cowboy and Eazee searched the rooms, admiring the luxurious bathrooms with their gold fixtures, imported tile, and grand bathtubs and showers. On their floor alone, there were eight bathrooms.

“This place is massive,” whispered Eazee. Cowboy nodded, scanning the walls as he moved slowly. Suddenly, he stopped, looking up, then back down.

“There.”

“What? What do you see?” asked Eazee.

“A staircase behind that wall. There’s no door, but it’s there.”

The men ran their hands along the wall, gently pressing as they did. Eazee heard a soft click, then stepped back, allowing Cowboy to pull his weapon. When he pulled the door open all the way, he was met with nothing except dust and a musty smell.

“We have a staircase on two,” said Eazee into comms. “We’re coming down. Don’t fucking shoot.”

The two men looked up, just to be sure it didn’t go all the way to three, but it did not. As they reached the first floor, they realized it didn’t go below the house either. Pushing the wall, it opened just as it had above, leading them into the massive dining hall.

“Well?” asked Liffey.

“Nothing. Empty rooms, no dust, no furniture, not a speck of anything. This was obviously just a hidden staircase for servants or the owners.”

“There has to be something else,” said Tanner. “We’re missing something.”

“If you think about it, it would be stupid to place a biochemical weapon below your home. Maybe it’s further out,” said Bogey.

“Maybe, but they would need to access it quickly,” said the big man.

Cowboy stepped back, leaning on the wall, and they all heard the distinct echo of a creak. He froze, staring at them, then leaned forward again. The creak was louder this time. Stomping his heel on the floor, they heard the hollow sound of emptiness below the floor.

Liffey knelt down, knocking on the floor. The white oak floors were in pristine condition, their beautiful shine puzzling, to say the least. His hand glided slowly over the wood, hoping to feel something that would lead them to what was below. When he jerked his hand back with a sliver, they’d found it.

“I need something to pry this open,” he said, looking up at the other men. Cowboy pulled the huge knife from his boot, gliding it along the edge of the raised lip. “Another.”

Tanner knelt, doing the same. As the two men lifted, they could hear it creak again, then give way, raising from the

floor. A three-foot by six-foot opening revealed a beautifully constructed staircase. Too beautiful to be hidden.

“Is this a room?” asked Mo.

“One way to find out,” said Liffey.

Taking out his light, he shone it down the steps and began the ascension. The others followed, careful to not allow the door to slam. Tanner jammed his knife into the edge of the floor, preventing the door from closing fully. Now in complete darkness, other than their flashlights, the men continued to walk down and into a room.

“It’s almost like an office,” frowned Eazee. “Look. Bookcases, desk, leather chair. And it’s covered in dust. Whoever is keeping house upstairs doesn’t know anything about this.”

“See if there’s anything inside the desk,” said Tanner.

Tanner and Mo opened the drawers, finding folders with information on the mortgage, utility bills, feed for cattle once kept on the property, but nothing to do with weapons.

Cowboy ran his hands over the walls, pushing again to see if anything might lead them to a tunnel. He was right. As

one of the bookshelves swayed open, a blast of damp, stale air hit them.

“Cover your mouths,” said Liffey. “We can’t be too careful.”

Wrapping bandanas or whatever they had around their mouth and nose, they slowly made their way into the tunnel. The floor was dirt, but the sides were reinforced with wood beams and rafters. Still, there was no telling how old the tunnels were, so every step could be their last.

“Did I ever tell you guys I hate tight spaces?” frowned Cowboy.

“No one likes tight spaces,” said Liffey. “You just happen to be larger than most, so tight spaces remind you of coffins. Just move it along. Look. Mining tools. They must have been down here for a hundred years.”

“Is there a history of gold in this area?” asked Mo.

“No. Not that I’m aware of, but they could have been mining for something else. Look how rusted they are.” The men simply nodded, walking past the tools.

After twenty minutes of walking, they knew they must be pretty far out, possibly close to the mountain. Eazee

gripped Liffey's shoulder.

“Do you feel that? Do you hear that? It's water. I feel a cold, damp spray blowing at me.”

“An underground spring?” frowned Mo.

“Maybe. Maybe it was designed to protect whatever was kept down here.” As they moved closer to the sound, they felt the spray more pronounced, then walked into a massive cavern with an underground pool and small waterfall.

“It is an underground spring,” said Cowboy. “It's nice. I wonder if they knew it was here.”

“They knew,” said Bogey, pointing to the steel boxes against the wall. All had skull and crossbones on them, the universal sign for poison. Beside them were cases of weapons, the locks so old they were rusted.

“This shit has been down here a long time,” said Tanner. “It's not just the bioweapon he's after. He wants all the other weapons as well.”

Eazee stood near the pool, staring down into the clear water. It was dark, but he could see faint images of something below the water. They'd seen underground pools like this before. Many homeowners purposely built on top of them,

believing the pools possessed healing properties for them. By covering them, they ensured that only they would have access to whatever was there. But that wasn't the case for Sutton.

Kneeling, he brightened his light, hoping to get a clearer image. He got more than he bargained for.

“Holy shit!” he yelped, jumping back.

“What? What's wrong now?” asked Liffey.

“I think we know what he did with those that went against him. This might be the main reason he wants this house. It proves his ruthlessness.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“We can’t touch the bodies,” said Liffey. “We need to leave all of that as is for the feds when they finally come down here. But, for now, we have to get this shit out of here just in case he finds a way inside. We can’t allow him to have the biochem weapon.”

“Can it be moved?” asked Cowboy.

“I’ve reached out to Erin, Thomas, and the team at G.R.I.P. to find out. It’s the middle of the night for them as well, so we’ll hold for a few minutes. What kind of weapons do we have?”

“Mostly M16s. They’re hardly used at all anymore,” frowned Bogey. “Why would they have those down here?”

“Weapons are weapons,” said Eazee. “If they were selling them to Mexico, Central or South America, no one would care how old they were.”

“We’ve got an answer,” said Liffey. “They can be moved carefully, but they should be delivered to G.R.I.P. to be neutralized and destroyed properly. They’re sending Autumn

to pick it up. Let's get this shit out of here. One problem solved."

The men moved the cases of anthrax as carefully as they possibly could. It was unstable, but not as much as explosives might be. With the number of men, it was easily moved up the steps and out the back to their vehicle.

Autumn was waiting patiently at the pickup point when the SUV pulled up. The boxes were strapped in carefully to ensure they didn't move.

"Fly slow, baby," said Cowboy, kissing his wife.

"I know what I'm doing," she smiled. "Go finish this and bring Brooke home."

By the time they were back at the inn, the sun was rising over the horizon. They weren't looking forward to being cramped in the tiny room but were thrilled that Matt had been able to get the rooms on either side, not caring that they were being redecorating. They couldn't sleep in them, but no one else would be in them either. They just told the inn that they needed a quiet space to work.

"We got the biochem weapon," said Liffey. "And we discovered a nice underground spring that holds most of

Sutton's dead friends, I think.”

“Shit, we'll have to dredge that,” said Brooke.

“Someone else can dredge that. We have to find out who's keeping that house spotless, in spite of it being locked tighter than Fort Knox.”

“I didn't think anyone was allowed to go in that house,” said Brooke, frowning at the group. Cowboy let out a big yawn.

“Well, someone is. I'm gonna shower and get some sleep. Don't leave without waking us,” he said to East.

“No worries, brother. I'm waiting to hear from Sutton. He sent a text late last night saying that he had a job for me. I'm going to guess it has something to do with your little adventure yesterday and the tunnels.”

“He might think that it was you,” frowned Eazee.

“No. I don't think so.”

“I'm headed out,” said Liffey, hugging his daughter and kissing her cheek.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Mo and I are headed to Houston to meet with Rivera. We need to know what Sutton is after besides his daughter. If we can help one another, we might be able to stop this shit. East? Be careful around Sutton. The rest of you, continue to find those damn tunnels.”

“Dad?” called Brooke, following her father to the door. “I’m sorry about yesterday, but I am glad that you came. I’ve missed you.”

“Me too, honey. But you’re gonna have a helluva conversation with your mother when you get home.” Brooke scrunched her face, realizing that her mother would be the more difficult of the two parents.

“Any thoughts on who is getting into that house and cleaning?” asked Mo. Brooke shook her head, frowning.

“No. The estate is locked up tight. I’m sure you saw that. No one is allowed on the property other than the caretakers hired by the executor of the will. They have cameras everywhere, sensors, alarms. The only person who would be given access to that house would be Morgan, and that’s impossible considering what you’ve told me.”

“Sutton is texting me to meet up in an hour.” He kissed Brooke, then turned to the others. “Make sure she’s

with you wherever you go and check with Morgan to see if she might remember someone who could have access to that house.”

“East? Be careful,” said Brooke, pulling back on his arm. “I know you think you’ve got this, but Sutton is ruthless. He would sooner kill you than look at you.”

“Same, baby.”

Brooke just shook her head as he headed out the door. Turning, the others were all smiling, except Cowboy, who was still yawning.

“Weren’t you going to get some sleep?” she frowned.

“Yep. Just making sure I don’t miss anything,” he grinned, passing her as he left to head next door.

“He’ll be fine, Brooke. My brother knows what he’s doing,” said Eazee.

“You guys are always so cocky. Even Dad. You all think you’re invincible. You’re not. You’re men. Average, everyday men.”

“Average? Ouch. That hurt,” frowned Bogey.

“Hey, I’ve got Morgan on the line,” said Matt.

Everyone turned to see the big man holding the phone out.

“Go ahead, Morgan. I’ve got you on speaker.”

“Hi,” she said tentatively. “I don’t know you, Brooke, but please be careful. My father is an awful person.”

“I’m aware,” she said. “But thank you for the warning.”

“Morgan, we were able to get into the mansion owned by your mother last night. Don’t ask how. We found some pretty disturbing things below the house, but that’s not what we need to talk about. Someone is getting inside that house and cleaning it. There was no dust, no dirt, nothing. Everything was spotless.”

“That’s not possible. Is there furniture?” she asked.

“No. Not even a fork or spoon,” said Eazee.

“My mother stipulated that upon her death, the house went to me. If I wasn’t capable of taking care of the house, it would be held in trust until my father’s death, thereby ensuring that he would never set foot in it again.”

“He lived there before?” asked Matt.

“Very briefly. When my parents were first married, they lived there for a few years. I was probably four when my father said they needed to live in a different house. For a

while, he lived in the house he's in now, while my mother and I lived in the mansion. But he said it was too showy."

"Too showy? Well, he wants that house, which is why he's trying to get you back."

"She won't fucking go!" yelled Kegger in the background.

"Kegger, it's okay," said Morgan. She was smiling into the phone, staring at the people in the room in El Paso. "He's very protective of me."

"He damn well better be," smirked Matt. "Any clue who could be cleaning that house?"

"I don't know. Well, maybe," she said thoughtfully. "I was thinking it could be my mother's half-sister. Mom always took care of her, made sure she had food, clothing, even bought her a little house without my father knowing about it. They shared the inheritance from their father, but Mom still felt protective of her. She didn't like to spend money on herself. She was very, very conservative, which is why she didn't want the mansion."

"Does she still live in the area?" asked Brooke.

“I really couldn’t say. I’ve been gone a while, but she was there when I went home that last time. Her name is Carol Todd. Her house was near the Painted Dunes Desert Golf Course. It was a beautiful little three-bedroom house, nothing too over the top, which suited her personality. Aunt Carol had it decorated so perfectly. She was obsessed with things being neat.”

“Sounds like our girl. We’ll let you know if we find her, Morgan.”

“Be careful. My father didn’t know that she existed. Mom made sure that she didn’t speak with anyone about her extended family.”

“Morgan, I do have to ask this question,” said Brooke. “We were led to believe that your mother was as much a part of the drugs and trafficking as your father. Is that not the case?”

“Not at all. In fact, it’s why my father killed my mother. Because she found out all the details of his business, and he wasn’t about to let her ruin his money train. In the beginning, she thought he was just having her take toys to kids in Mexico. She was so naïve. But when she found out the truth, she confronted him and paid for it. Keep that in mind.

He killed his wife, he killed two brothers years ago, and he sold his daughter to a maniac to pay a debt. Don't underestimate him."

"You can be certain we won't," said Eazee. "Thanks, Morgan."

"I can't imagine what she's been through," said Brooke. "We need to speak with this half-sister."

"Well, I'm wide awake," said Matt.

"Me too," said Eazee.

"Let me get dressed, and we can go see if we can find her. The rest of you can get some sleep." Matt nodded.

"Sounds perfect. But I need to stop for a couple of chicken biscuits first."

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Good morning,” smirked Sutton, leaning back in the chair on his front porch. He had a cup of coffee in his hand, his worn boots kicked up on the railing. East thought it looked as though he was trying to be some character in a Western novel. He wasn’t succeeding.

“Good morning.”

“You still enjoying my girl?” he laughed.

“She’s not yours any longer. We had a deal.”

“New deal,” he said, sitting his chair on all four legs.

“No. We had a deal. I do this one thing for you, no money asked for, but she’s mine. That’s the deal, or are you a man that can’t be counted on for his word?” East knew he was pushing buttons, but he didn’t give a fuck at this point.

“You should watch your mouth, boy.”

“I told you once before, don’t call me boy. I accept a man’s word as gospel, and if I can’t count on your word, then how can I trust or count on you for anything? How do I know you won’t sell me out the minute I do something for you?”

There were several other men standing around, shifting from one foot to the other nervously, looking back and forth between East and Sutton.

“Has he always been honest with you?” asked East. The men refused to answer, turning away from Sutton and East. East just chuckled, shaking his head.

“They don’t have to answer you,” said Sutton.

“No, they don’t. We’re wasting time here. What do you want me to do?” Sutton laughed, shaking his head.

“You’re one impatient man. Why don’t you test out one of the other girls. You might just change your mind about Brooke.”

“I won’t change my mind. We fit. I need that in my life.”

“Someone blew up a few of my tunnels yesterday,” said Sutton. East nodded.

“I was here, remember. But even if I weren’t, I saw it on the news. Something about a gas explosion,” said East.

“It wasn’t a gas explosion. There was no natural gas in the area of my station. I own that whole fucking block because those are my tunnels beneath it!” he screamed. The

other men took a step back, but East just stood there staring at him. “I want to know who blew my tunnels. Find him and kill him.”

“Okay. That could take a few days.”

“You got time,” said Sutton. “When you’re done, be here this Saturday. I’m meeting with Rivera. You’re going to kill him, and then before you leave town, you’re going to kill another man for me.”

“That’s three men for the price of one. The man who blew your tunnels, Rivera, and the mystery man number three. I’d say you’re going to owe me, Mr. Sutton.”

“You’ll get your girl without me stopping you.”

“I’d get my girl either way,” growled East. Sutton just stared at him, unsure of whether to kill him or congratulate him on having the biggest balls in Texas. “Who is the other man?”

“A fucking DEA agent who’s been a pain in my ass for years. Fuentes.”

East gave nothing away, just staring at the other man. Fuentes was the man helping Brooke. He needed to be sure he didn’t kill him.

“Killing a fed isn’t as easy as killing a drug dealer. I’ll never be able to set foot in the states again.”

“You will if you’re any good at what you do,” said Sutton. “You’re supposed to be good from a distance. Hide in a fucking tree, climb a pole, sit on a roof, I don’t give a shit. I just want him dead. If he’s gone and Rivera is gone, I’ve got a clear highway to owning this business.”

“The fed will cost you, and because I like you, I’m going to give you a discount. Fifty grand.”

“You are really something else,” he said, shaking his head. “The girl and fifty grand for Rivera, my tunnel blower, and Fuentes. Done.”

“Good. I’ll be here Saturday or before if I have something for you. In the meantime, I’ll be looking for your tunnel guy.”

“Hey, wouldn’t it help you if you knew where my tunnels were located?” asked Sutton.

“No. It would help you. If I know where the tunnels are you could accuse me of blowing them. I don’t need to know. I just need to find this guy and stop him.” East turned, heading back to his truck.

“East? You fuck me over, there will be nowhere for you to hide.”

East stopped, slowly turning to face Sutton. He took one step toward the other man, noticing the slight flinch as he did. It brought him tremendous satisfaction to see that.

“You fuck me over, Sutton, you bow out of our deal, don’t pay me, attempt to take Brooke back, there won’t need to be a hiding place for you. I’ll kill you where you stand.”

Sutton watched as East left his neighborhood. His neighborhood. Every house on this street was owned by him, rented to his employees at a nice profit. But at least he knew his neighbors and his men were close enough to protect him if needed.

“Do you want us to follow him, sir?” asked one of the men.

“No. He would see you from a mile away. He’s better than I thought he was. What I need from you is to find my daughter. She didn’t just fucking disappear into thin air. If I don’t have her, I don’t have that house, and I need it.”

“What about Rivera?”

“I’ll take care of Rivera’s visit. And East will take care of Rivera.”

East stared into his rearview mirror, anger bubbling to a dangerous level within him. Sutton was cocky and believed that he owned everything and everyone. So far, they’d found the tunnels, but no kids, no women other than those who wanted to be there, and no drugs. They’d found what he’d left behind in the mansion, but he didn’t seem overly concerned about finding that. At least not right now.

Sutton seemed surprised that he wasn’t willing to take the bait on the tunnel locations. He’d probably been hiding that little nugget in his pocket, just in case. A lesser man, a man with less experience would have jumped at the map to those tunnels. He would have thought it was easy money, but it would have only brought Sutton down on his head.

He was so arrogant East was certain he believed that no one would ever find their locations. Too bad for him they already knew. Each of his teammates knew where most of those tunnels were located, and they knew how to blow every last one of them.

The drones had done their job, showing mapped tunnels spanning miles in all directions through, around, and in

El Paso. Every one of them began on the other side of the border. And every one of them would be destroyed by the end of the week.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Wow, nice neighborhood,” said Brooke. “These homes are beautiful.”

“It’s probably why Sutton never knew about the house. If he ever knew about the half-sister, or if he found out, he probably suspected his wife would buy something small and unassuming. Fooled his ass,” smirked Matt.

“There. The one with the black shutters,” said Eazee.

They pulled into the driveway, stepping out of the vehicle, and walking the beautifully landscaped path to the door. The yard was immaculate with well-maintained plants, flowers, and shrubs. The grass appeared to be freshly cut.

Brooke rang the doorbell, waiting for someone to answer. When an older woman opened the door, they thought they had the wrong address. Her white hair was pulled back in a bun, a few strands blowing free. She wore a pair of white capri pants with a pretty pink blouse and a pair of pink sandals.

“May I help you?” she asked with a nice smile.

“Carol Todd?” asked Brooke.

“That’s right. Do I know you?”

“No, ma’am. But we know your niece.”

She gasped, clutching her throat, pulling Brooke into the house. The men followed as she shut the door and locked it.

“Where is she?”

“She’s safe, ma’am. But we have some questions for you. Does Green Sutton know where you live?”

“No. He barely knew of my existence. My sister didn’t want me to be put in any danger, so she always acted like I was an annoyance around him. We are half-sisters, sharing the same father, but it didn’t matter. We loved one another.”

“She sounds wonderful,” smiled Brooke.

“She was,” nodded Carol. “I was older. From my father’s first marriage. We didn’t have much as children, but what we had, we shared. Our father came into money later in life. We had a small dirt farm that wasn’t worth anything on the outskirts of the city. Then, one day, our father was digging a new well and found more than he bargained for. Oil. Barrels and barrels of oil.

“We were each given a trust fund and allowed to do what we wanted. When I married, I had to dig into mine when my husband was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. I took care of him for years. Happy to spend every penny I had, but my sister made sure to help when she could.

“Despite suddenly having wealth, when my sister met Green, he swept her away. Clothes, jewelry, fancy restaurants, and cars. I knew something was wrong, and I warned her.”

“What did she say?”

“She said that he gave her a job. An easy job that only required her taking things across the border. I knew what he was doing, but she didn’t want to see it. When Morgan was born, everything changed. Finally, she could see what I was seeing, and she was afraid for them both. So was I.

“It was as if Green had something to hold over her head. I think she was relieved when he suggested they move out of the mansion. But I knew that no man would want to leave that beautiful home unless there was a reason. Our father worked his fingers to the bone, doing back-breaking labor to build that house himself. It was important to him that he leave it to us. It meant everything to the two of us. I couldn’t live there with my husband because of his illness, so I

was more than happy to let her live in it. I had enough. More than enough.”

“Were you aware that he had things hidden below the mansion?” asked Eazee. Carol frowned, shaking her head.

“No. There’s not a basement.”

“He dug tunnels and found an underground spring. He was storing weapons down there,” said Matt.

“I go up to the house once a week to dust. There’s nothing there. No furniture, no drapes, nothing, but my sister was smart enough to place it in the trust that the house would be cared for and maintained.

“The attorney’s office hires someone to maintain the grounds and the upkeep of the house, but I wanted to at least do something for her. So, my therapy is to go up there and spend the day with my little dust mop and make sure there are no dust bunnies,” she said with a sad smile, wiping her eyes.

“Have you heard any rumors of him running women, children, and weapons into the states?” asked Eazee.

“It’s not rumors, son. He’s doing it, and he owns every official here. I went all the way to Washington, D.C., to speak with someone at the FBI, and all they said was that someone

was working on it. Working on it! How could they be working on it when he owns everyone.”

“How? How does he own everyone?” asked Brooke.

“He has their wives or children,” said Carol, staring at the three people. “They’re kept in a secret location and are allowed to speak with their parents, spouses, siblings at least once a week. As long as they are healthy, the police do nothing, always looking the other way.”

“Any idea where they are?” asked Eazee.

“No. I’m afraid not. I’ve tried to make sure that I am out of his sight. I don’t have children of my own, never re-married, but I always prayed that Morgan would be found again.” She stood, walking into the other room. They could hear drawers opening and closing, shuffling of papers, then she reappeared with a folder.

“Take this to her. It has everything about the house and evidence that my sister collected on him before he killed her. I hope it helps you to stop him.”

“We need to find those family members,” said Brooke. “If we can find them, he has nothing to hold over their heads any longer.”

“Maybe they’re in Mexico, not here,” said Matt.

Brooke stared at Eazee and Matt, then nodded at Ms. Todd.

“Thank you for your time. I think we need to find these people. If you hear of anything at all that could be useful, please let us know.”

“He owns every business along Aztec Boulevard. If he’s running tunnels beneath his businesses, then you might start by looking there.”

“You’ve been very helpful,” said Brooke. “I’ll make sure to let Morgan know that you asked about her.”

“She doesn’t have to reach out to me. I’m just glad she’s safe. I want her to stay that way.” Matt nodded at the old woman.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Where do we go from here?” asked Brooke.

“We need to wait until your father is back from speaking with Rivera. Hopefully, he was playing nice since you said he’d been providing information to all of you,” said East.

“What we really have to do,” said Matt, “is find the wives and kids of the officials in this damn town. See if we can get them back on our side.”

“They’re probably in the tunnels somewhere, but where?” asked Eazee.

“You said you found tunnels beneath the zoo,” said Brooke, staring at the men. They nodded, frowning at her. “What if he placed them beneath one of the more dangerous cages? I can picture him threatening the officials with blowing the tunnel above them. Lions and tigers falling through, killing their wives and children.”

“That’s a scary fucking thought,” muttered Matt.

“Where’s the entrance for the tunnel to the zoos?”

East pulled up the images on the screen, following the line with his finger. There were three different possible entry points. The botanical gardens, which they'd already found, the elephant enclosure, which they'd successfully filled with elephant shit. Tons and tons of elephant shit. And an apartment building.

“Well, we know that we've already eliminated the first two. The apartment building would be simple, especially if he owns it,” said East.

“Then the apartment building is the location entrance,” said Matt. “Let's take both SUVs and see if we can clean house. Cowboy, Matt, Eazee, Tanner, me, and Brooke. Once we have them out, assuming that they are down there, we take them to the mansion to be picked up.”

“Sounds like a party. Let's go,” said Eazee.



“Seems like just a regular old apartment building to me,” said Tanner.

“Except it’s owned by Sutton,” said Brooke, staring down at the tablet. “According to what we’re seeing here, the entrance should be inside a janitorial closet. I’m going to guess that it’s a stairwell.”

“Let’s find out,” frowned East as they parked the SUVs at the back entrance of the building.

Inside, they walked down a long corridor to an L-shaped section. At the end was the closet they’d seen on their screens. Locked, Tanner made fast work of the door, and then they entered to find a second door at the back of the closet.

“This one may take a moment,” said Tanner. He knelt in front of the lock, working his magic, but it opened within seconds. Now on silence, they signaled to one another to have weapons ready in case some of Sutton’s men were down there.

With the door wide open, there was a staircase leading down. East went first, then Matt, Brooke, and Eazee followed by Tanner. The damp, dark tunnel smelled of dirt and wet earth but nothing else thus far.

Following the direction of the tunnel, they realized that their hunches were correct. It was directly beneath the zoo across the street. If they had tried to exit in that direction, they would have been trapped by elephant shit.

After walking for almost ten minutes, Brooke stopped them to show the hollow space on the screen that appeared to be a room that lay just up ahead.

Matt pushed to the front, Eazee behind him. Walking slowly, they could hear two men speaking in Spanish, laughing and cussing. Coming out of the darkness, the two giants surprised them, easily handling them. Not wasting time or energy, they shot both men using their silencers. Seated along the walls were a dozen kids ranging in age from three to thirteen and at least four women.

“Please don’t hurt us,” said one of the women. The kids began to whimper.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” said Matt. “What’s your name?”

“Josephine. Josephine Carraras.”

“Your husband is the police chief?” he frowned.

“Y-yes.”

“Come with us,” said Matt. “We’re taking you to safety.”

“You don’t understand. Mr. Sutton said that if we moved, if we tried to escape, he would kill all of us and our

husbands.”

“We’re well aware,” said East. “We’ve got this handled.”

Forty-five minutes later, there were sixteen people sitting in the empty rooms of the Sutton mansion. They’d been able to wash their hands and face for the first time in weeks and were now eating burgers and fries as if it were the last cow and potato on the planet.

East and Brooke had called Fuentes, who asked the police and fire chiefs, mayor, and border patrol chief to meet them at the mansion. When they arrived, they were shocked at what they saw. Their families.

“Josie,” whispered Carraras. “Josie, how?”

“Those people,” she said, pointing. She didn’t run to her husband; she didn’t hug him. In fact, she looked as if she wanted to run the other way.

“Baby,” he said, starting to walk toward her.

“No. No, you don’t get to call me baby any longer. The kids and I are leaving. These nice people sent someone to get us clean clothing, then they’ll be taking us to the airport where we’ve booked passage to somewhere safe.”

“Josie, I...”

“Nope. Don’t say another damn word. Everything you’ve said in the last few years are lies. You fucked around with Sutton and his women, and don’t even think you’re going to lie to me about that. When he had you, he had me and the kids.

“Well, this is your mess now. Not mine. You clean up your shit, and maybe you’ll still have a job. Maybe not. Maybe you’ll go to prison and share a cell with Sutton. But the kids and I won’t be here to see it.”

He was staring at his wife in disbelief now. She knew everything, probably thanks to Sutton. Why hadn’t she said something before now? Did it really matter?

“Wh-where are you going?” he asked.

“We’re all going somewhere safe. We agreed,” she said, looking back at the other wives, nodding as well.

“Maybe all of you can finally grow a pair of balls and take on Sutton like you should have in the first place. Until then, don’t come near me or the kids.”

“Same,” said another woman.

“Me too,” said another.

“How did you find them?” asked Carraras.

“Good detective work,” said Matt. “You remember what that is, don’t you? You follow the damn rules, maybe use some of that stellar detective work you once used, and you nail the fucking bad guys.”

“Brother,” said East.

Matt just raised his hands, walking away. Brooke and Cowboy walked in with bags of toiletries and clean clothes, taking the kids to the bathrooms to get them cleaned and changed.

“He had them. What were we supposed to do?” asked Carraras, looking desperate and forlorn.

“Get help. Call the feds. Find them yourself. I don’t know. How about anything except fuck around with his whores and allow him to sell children, women, and drugs!” yelled East.

“This is what we’re going to do,” said Tanner. “We’re going to get your wives and children to safety. If they want to call you, that’s up to them, but you all are either going to help us, or we’ll fucking bury you now. Sutton has to go, and if you’re on his team, we will kill you.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” asked Elwin Jordan, the mayor.

“We’re the fucking guys with balls enough to take on Sutton and stop him, that’s who we are. Now, we can do this easy or hard. I can call in the feds now, have all of you arrested, or you can tell us everything that’s happening here. Where are the women and children, the drugs, all of it.”

“We don’t know where he keeps any of it,” said Carraras. “All we were asked to do was to keep the trail off of him. We’d arrest small-time dealers now and then, saying that they worked for someone else. Sutton was considered a pillar in the community.”

“And who bought that bullshit?” growled Eazee.

“No one,” said Carraras, shaking his head.

“You guys are fucking unbelievable. You call yourself civil servants? Americans?”

“Sutton is planning something big,” said Jordan. “All of this was leading up to something more than just trafficking and drugs. We just don’t know what it was. He wouldn’t tell us anything.”

“Well, good news. You’re all going on a long hiatus. It will be announced on the evening news that the four of you are going on a retreat to discuss the issues of your fair city. Sutton will have no contact with you because you’re going to give us your cell phones.”

“What if our wives want to contact us?” Cowboy smirked at them, shaking his head.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“What are we going to do when we find Lomas Rivera?” asked Mo.

“Ironically, he’s meeting us at a Colombian coffee house,” smirked Liffey. “Mo, I need for you to record this entire conversation. If anything goes south, I want us to have a record of it for the team.”

“I thought we trusted him?” asked Mo.

“No. Brooke and Fuentes trust him. Not me. He might be providing information to them on Sutton, even his brother in L.A., but he’s still a drug-dealing piece of shit. The last I heard from the tech team, he’s even expanding into artificial intelligence, scamming corporations for billions. He’s no fucking choir boy, but then again, I suppose neither are we.”

“Speak for yourself,” smirked Mo.

“Come on,” laughed Liffey. “I know that you went against your parents when you fell in love with Ophelia. Then, you defied them a second time by marrying her. That’s anti-choir boy behavior if I’ve ever seen it.”

“Maybe,” smirked Mo. “But this is coming from the small-time thief, expert carjacker.”

“That was a lot of years ago,” smirked Liffey. “I haven’t picked a lock since, well, I picked three this week, but it was work-related.”

“If I haven’t told you, Liffey, I love working with you. You’re a solid dude, and I love the way you treat your wife. I know it was a rough start for the two of you, but you’ve made an incredible life for yourselves with Brooke. I’ve learned a lot from you about being a man, husband, and teammate.”

“Yeah,” smiled Liffey. “Thanks for that. I love working with you, too. When I found Shay, or I should say, when we found Shay, she was a fucking mess, brother. Her little boy was dying from cancer caused by some shit near their home. She was skinny as a rail, wouldn’t eat anything. Mostly because she couldn’t afford anything. But through it all, Mo, through all her tears and pain, I knew I loved that woman with all my heart.

“That shit that was injected into her scared the shit out of me, but as it dissipated, almost everything went back to normal. She still can outrun most of the men and doesn’t seem

to get winded at all. She's also still got a pretty good jump. None of that changes how much I love her."

"We've all had our stories, haven't we?" said Mo, shaking his head. "I'm so grateful every damn day that we ran into Ophelia in Jakarta. I'm sick that she had to lose her sister for that to happen, but at least we saved her. Crazy to think we reconnected thousands of miles from home."

"Crazy?" laughed Liffey. "Brother, you and I both know if it's crazy, her name is Irene. I swear that woman is a witch or voodoo priestess or something. Shay and I didn't think we'd be able to have children, and then before we knew what was going on, she was pregnant."

Both men chuckled, smiling at one another as they parked the car in the small parking lot of the coffee shop. There were only two other vehicles in the lot, a rusted out pickup truck, and a very shiny, very beautiful Steel Patriots bike.

"That's interesting," frowned Liffey. "And by interesting, I mean strange as fuck."

The two men walked into the shop seeing one young girl behind the counter and a middle-aged man sitting in a booth. He wore black leather chaps over his jeans and a long-

sleeved black t-shirt. The matching leather jacket was flung over the back of the seat.

“Gentlemen,” smiled Lomas Rivera. “Nice to finally meet you both.”

“Mr. Rivera, I assume,” said Liffey.

“Please, just Lomas.”

“Is that your bike out there?” asked Mo, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

“It is,” he nodded, smiling at the two men. “I had to order it through an anonymous name, but it’s one of the most desired vehicles in the world. It was custom-made for me. Everything, including the paint. Impressive. Yes?”

“Yes,” nodded Liffey, not divulging that it was one of their motorcycles. “I’m sorry for the death of your brother.”

“Don’t insult me,” he smirked. “Even I am not upset about my brother’s death.”

Liffey and Mo just stared at him, unsure of what to say. He took a sip of the coffee in front of him, waving the waitress over to the table.

“Can I get you gentlemen anything?” she asked.

“Two coffees. Black,” said Mo. “Oh, and one of those cookie things.” She nodded, smiling at him.

“My brother and I were raised by an uncle who was head of a cartel in South America. He wished for nothing more than the two of us to never be around drugs. But when you see someone making that much money that quickly, it’s hard to choose a minimum wage job or worse, become a lawyer.”

“We know some pretty great lawyers,” frowned Liffey.

“I’m sure you do. But that’s not why we’re here. My brother decided to branch out. He wasn’t just buying and selling drugs. He was buying and selling humans. Men, women, children. It didn’t matter. I was against that and started to distance myself from my brother.

“My brother was far more adept at technology than I am. He became interested in this new concept of artificial intelligence. People think it’s me, that it was all my idea. I assure you it is not.”

“We’re familiar with AI,” said Mo.

“Good, then you know that it has good qualities and potentially disastrous qualities. My brother used a program

that he created to mimic the voices of other cartel leaders.”

“Jesus,” murmured Liffey. “For someone who was so smart, he did something pretty fucking stupid.”

“I’m aware. He went a step too far when he decided to take on Ramos and Sutton. With Ramos dead, he thought Sutton would be easy. He is not. Not only did Sutton kill my brother, he’s stolen the technology and plans to use it against the military. I don’t know how, but I know that for a while, he was working with someone on a biological weapon.”

Liffey and Mo nodded, not saying anything, just staring at the man. He could be lying, except they knew that at least part of what he was saying was the truth.

“You don’t have to believe me, but you do have to find a way to protect yourselves against Sutton. He will continue to come for all of you, not stopping until he eliminates everyone in his path. The person he desires most is his daughter. She is the secret to obtaining the mansion where he’s hidden some unusual things.”

“Why not just break into the house?” asked Liffey. He knew full well why, but he wanted to hear it from Rivera.

“Right now, Sutton has fooled the people of El Paso into believing he is a good man. A fine, upstanding citizen who helps the poor, opens new businesses, and gives back to his community. It’s all smoke and mirrors bullshit.

“If he started to tear down that mansion or try to dig up what’s in there, someone would surely notice. If he just barged in and tried to overtake it against the directives of the estate, there would be out of state lawyers and law enforcement involved. He can’t risk that. He wants to own the home outright, and he can’t do that unless his daughter signs it over to him, and then is dead. He believed that he would one day use his daughter’s pain to convince her to sign over the mansion to him, and he’d offer her freedom.

“Of course, he’d never be able to do that if Ramos owned her, and even if he did not, he wasn’t about to let her go free.”

“Why not just kill him? Men like him are assassinated every day. Why not just shoot him?” asked Mo.

“Because there are a dozen men waiting to take his place. This is not just about cutting off the head of the snake. You must kill the snake, behead him, and then kill every snake in the snake’s nest.” Rivera stared at the two men, sipping his

coffee casually as they did the same. “Sutton has asked to meet with me at the end of the week. He wants to discuss a partnership. I have access to people he does not. For that, he needs me. But once he had those connections, I have no doubt that he would kill me.”

“Then don’t go,” said Liffey casually. Rivera just laughed, shaking his head.

“You really don’t understand, do you? If I don’t show, he will come for me. I’m not afraid of him, but I’m afraid for the men and women who work for me.”

“You mean your drug dealers?” said Mo. Rivera stared at him, not saying anything at first, then nodded.

“I deal in drugs. I admit that and have never claimed otherwise. My drug dealers, as you call them, are men and women trying to support their families here and in their own countries. I know that your next words will be, ‘let them get jobs.’ Which is true, but have you ever considered that these are men and women who cannot get jobs?”

“Because they are illegal aliens,” said Liffey.

“No. Because they are discriminated against for being who they are. For being Mexican, Colombian, Peruvian,

Panamanian. They're not American-born. Yet they build their homes here, send their children to schools here, they even pay taxes.

“I don't profess to be an angel or a saint. I'm a businessman, and my business is drugs. But I do not, not now, not ever, sell humans. It's despicable, and for that reason more than any, Sutton must be stopped.”

“And how do we do that?” asked Mo.

“I've heard this morning that you, or someone, was able to free the wives and children of the local authorities.”

Both men just stared at Rivera, not saying anything.

“Understood. He is livid that someone dared to touch his property. When men like Sutton get angry, they become more dangerous because they don't care about the mistakes that they make. If you run in firing, you may kill him and some of his men. But you would do better to take his business apart piece by piece.”

“You think we should chip away at the wall, forcing it to crumble little by little,” said Liffey.

“That's exactly what I think.” He stood from the booth, grabbing the leather jacket. “I will continue to cooperate with Fuentes and his agents. I've made my deal

with him and the federal agents. My arrival in El Paso is supposed to be early Saturday morning, but I plan on arriving Friday morning. If you need me, you can reach me through Fuentes.”

“Wait,” said Liffey. “Is there someone else involved with Sutton? This seems far too big for him, especially since he was working for Ramos.”

“Ramos?” laughed Rivera. “Ramos wanted to believe that, but it was Sutton who was running everything. Who do you think put the idea of using the American servicemen’s faces as their own? Who do you think convinced him to dig for the lost gold and art? And who do you think encouraged Ramos to regularly beat Sutton’s own daughter?”

Mo and Liffey felt their guts clench, thinking of the pain that Morgan endured at her own father’s orders.

“That’s right,” nodded Rivera. “Now you’re understanding just what kind of man he is. He convinced Ramos to beat her, forcing her into submission, so afraid of everyone and everything that she would never dare run.”

“Well, she ran anyway,” growled Mo. Rivera nodded, walking past the man.

“I hope she ran very far away.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

East knew exactly what was happening when Sutton not so gently summoned him to come to his home immediately. He was pissed. Beyond pissed. His hostages were gone, and the bribed officials had taken administrative leave to attend to ‘important business’ at a secret retreat.

Pulling in front of the house, East couldn’t help but smirk as something went flying out the front picture window. He laughed, shaking his head as he realized it was a toaster. Three men came running out the door, racing down the street, and took off in their vehicles.

Stepping out of his own truck, he casually walked up the driveway, and turned to step onto the porch. When a vase came flying his way, he caught it, and tossed it back inside.

“Fuck!” yelled Sutton. “Who the fuck threw that at me?”

“Oh, sorry,” said East, frowning at the man. “I thought it was some sort of game. You threw it at me, I throw it back.”

“Wrong day to fuck with me!” he growled. East only shrugged.

“Seems like you’re having a bad day for sure. Anything I can do for you? Maybe pick up some takeout? Fix the broken window?”

“You just keep picking and pulling threads, don’t you?” he said, walking toward him. He wasn’t prepared for East not moving. Most men backed up when he walked toward them. Most men lowered their eyes in fear. But East was not most men. He was a very different kind of man.

When he was eye-to-eye with him, he stared up into his eyes, unsure of what to say or do next. East took that burden from him.

“You have something you want to say,” he growled, looking down at the man. “If not, back up. I don’t like my space invaded.”

“Your balls must be the size of fucking Texas, East,” said Sutton. “I had some collateral that I was holding for a rainy day, and now it’s gone. All of it.”

“Well, that does seem careless,” said East. Sutton stared at him, suddenly worried for his own life.

“Where were you? What the fuck were you doing while someone stole from me?”

“I was out looking for the man that blew your tunnels. Had a pretty good lead on him, too. Then you called screaming in my ear demanding I come here. For what? To get a vase tossed at my head?

“Listen, I need this money, but I don’t fucking need it that bad. I’m a professional, and I was under the foolish impression that you were as well. If you can’t control your temper and focus, then I’m wasting my time.”

“Wasting your time? I gave you a prime piece of ass. Some of the best pussy in my stables. You owe me,” said Sutton.

“I’ll pay you. Cash. Then we can be done,” he said in a threatening tone. Sutton couldn’t believe it. Who the fuck did this guy think he was?

“You leave when I say so. You leave when your job is done. I want the man who blew my tunnels. I want Fuentes dead, and I want Rivera dead.”

“Fine. The tunnel guy and Fuentes. Rivera will cost you an additional fifty grand.”

“What? Who the fuck do you think you are?!”

“I’m East. The man who can shoot from six hundred yards away. Accurately. Every fucking time. You might want to remember that.” East actually took a half-step closer to the man, standing directly over him, looking down into his sweaty face.

“Are you threatening me?”

“I’m promising you. I’m a professional, and I expect you to act like one as well.”

Sutton sat down on his front steps, his elbows on his knees as he wiped the perspiration from his face. There were a few small cuts on his knuckles, his left hand covered in dry-wall dust as well. Someone would have to patch a few holes in the house, no doubt.

“Calm now?” asked East. Sutton stared at him, nodding. “Good. I think the guy who blew your tunnel stole your collateral. Before you ask, they’re gone. Someone stuck them on a private plane and flew them out of here. I don’t know who yet, but I’m working on it.”

“How do you know so much?” he said, squinting at the other man.

“I know how to do my fucking job. In spite of the fact that none of your damn businesses have security cameras, stupid by the way, the gas station on the corner across from the Essex Apartments does. I was able to bribe the manager to let me have access. I saw one man dressed in black, taking several women and kids out in a van.

“I tracked the van to the airport. It was a rental under the name James Smith. The plane was privately owned, and the flight plan was sealed. They’re gone. But if you haven’t seen the news, so are your paid city officials.”

Sutton’s head flew up, staring at him.

“You have heard,” smirked East, shaking his head back and forth. “Let me ask you something. What the fuck do all these men do for you? Do they do anything other than barbecue and eat your damn food and drink your tequila?”

“Where are they?”

“They left right after the others. I’m not sure where they went yet, but if they’re on the way to the feds in D.C., you’re about to be fucked.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “They wouldn’t do that. They know what I’ll do to them if they dare go up

against me. I think the pathetic weak pieces of shit are in hiding.”

“Okay. Let’s assume they’re in hiding. They’re gone. Your collateral is gone. Now what? Do we just sit around and wait for Rivera? And why kill him? He might want in on what you’re doing.”

“I prefer to work alone and make my own decisions. Too many cooks and all that shit. Besides, he’s not as advanced as me. He doesn’t see the possibilities in using new forms of technologies.”

“Says the man with no security cameras,” muttered East.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” he said, shaking his head. “You really are a piece of work, East. No man has ever spoken to me the way you do or defied me and lived to tell about it. Maybe you should stay a while.”

“Nope. I told you. I want to finish this job, get my money, and move on.”

“Alright, I can appreciate that,” he said, nodding, eyeing him cautiously. “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

East followed Sutton through the house and into the backyard toward the infamous shed. Inside, he nodded to the guard and continued to follow him down the steps, passing the private rooms. One door was open, a young woman in her early twenties sitting on the edge of the bed in nothing but a pair of panties.

“Put some clothes on, Benita,” growled Sutton. “We don’t show everything to the customer before they pay.”

“I’m hot,” she whined. “We need more fans down here. Besides, I thought we could play this afternoon.” Sutton just chuckled, shaking his head.

“Bitch wants my dick because she thinks she can convince me to marry her. She’s a good fuck. Knows how to suck a dick better than anyone I’ve ever had, but she’s high fucking maintenance.”

East just stared at the man, then looked at the woman.

“You heard him. Put some fucking clothes on.” She just shrugged, lying back on the bed, her arms above her head.

“I’ll be back later,” laughed Sutton.

East continued to follow the man through another door at the end of the hallway and down a long underground

corridor. There were lights hung by strings along the way, an occasional man sitting in a chair giving a nod or wave.

“Where are we going?” asked East, tired of walking with his head hunched into his shoulders, stooped over.

“Hang tight.”

After another ten minutes of walking, they finally reached a large door in the side of the corridor with two men seated outside. They stood, opening the door for Sutton and East. Inside were a dozen people, women, young girls and boys. It took East a moment to adjust his eyes.

“Okay. So you’re selling flesh. I already knew that,” said East with noticeable disdain.

“Not just any flesh,” smirked Sutton. “I’m selling the cream of the crop. Most of these are untouched and highly desirable.”

“These? They’re not objects. They’re humans,” he frowned.

“When did you get so fucking pious? Saint East. Is that what we’re calling you now?”

“That’s a kid over there, and there. They’re fucking kids! I like a woman in my bed just as much as the next guy,

but not a kid. Never a kid.”

Sutton started laughing at him, and East wanted to punch him on the nose. The bastard was definitely trafficking women and children.

“You find that funny?”

“I think you’re fucking hilarious. Your reaction is exactly what I hope everyone else’s reaction is. I’m not trafficking women and children. That’s what I want others to think.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Simple. I’m collecting geniuses.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“He’s what?” echoed the room of people.

“He’s kidnapped women and children mostly. But they’re geniuses. They’re all geniuses. Mensa all the way. He’s got them working on ways to use the biochemical weapon we removed, and he’s forcing them to improve the AI program that he stole from Rivera’s brother.”

“Jesus, what for?” asked Cowboy.

“The kids are being asked to create recording devices that can tap into the phones of everyone at the White House, Pentagon, Langley, anywhere that he needs the voices of the top leaders. Once he has that, he can create AI programs that will fool anyone.”

“What is he planning to do with it?” asked Brooke.

“He plans on selling it to whoever might find it useful. We’ll be completely defenseless, totally with our pants down and our asses shining to the rest of the world.”

“They’d have to get rid of everyone at the top and replace them, and even then, they couldn’t guarantee that the next group wouldn’t be in the same boat,” said Liffey.

“Exactly. Sutton thinks that one of the kids can take recordings from news programs, Senate hearings, that kind of shit, and duplicate them. He said this kid was doing something similar in his middle school.”

“Middle school?” frowned Matt. “I was trying to get Regina Carvin to kiss me in middle school.”

“Well, that was admirable,” smirked East.

“We need to get those kids out of there,” said Eazee. “Can we get in without him seeing us?”

“I don’t think so. There’s only one way in, and it’s the shed in the backyard. If my step count was correct, the room that they’re in lies directly beneath Highway 62.”

“That’s a busy main highway,” frowned Bogey. “If we blew that, people would be coming at us from every direction. There’s no way to get it open and the kids and women out.”

“No, but I did get them a message,” said East. “I took a chance that if they were all geniuses, then hopefully they knew sign language. And they did. I told them I was there to help and whatever they did, not to give him the answers he wanted.”

“Jesus, that was risky, East,” frowned Liffey.

“I know, but it paid off. The little girl signed back, ‘*do you think we’re idiots?*’” He chuckled, smirking at the moment she’d signed to him. “I think we need to find out from Thomas and the other geniuses if there is any record of these kids gone missing. The women as well.”

“Geniuses. Someone is missing a few eggheads, and I know where to find them,” said Eazee. “What happened with Rivera?”

“About what we expected, other than he owns one of our bikes,” smirked Mo.

“No, shit?” laughed Eazee.

“No, shit. He’s willing to help with anything we need as long as we leave him alone. He just wants to sell his drugs and make money.”

“Is that all?” frowned East.

“I know it seems too much, East, but this is one of those cases where we need to choose our battles. He isn’t our issue right now. As you’ve discovered, the AI problem is stemming from Sutton, not from Rivera,” said Liffey.

“I know you’re right. It’s just leaving him out on the street is counterintuitive to everything we know.”

“I agree, but he’s given us quite a bit of information, and I think we have to keep our word with him. Our beef isn’t with him. At least not today.”

“I’ve got Thomas and Ace on the tablet,” said Tanner, turning the device toward everyone.

“We understand you need some help with a group of geniuses,” said Thomas. “Could someone explain a little further?”

“It’s not just any group, Thomas. They’re kids and women. I’m not sure where they’ve come from or what they were doing, but Sutton has them, and he doesn’t intend to do anything noble with them, I assure you.”

“There’s a school,” started Thomas. “It’s very small, or at least its remote locations are small. They only take about a dozen kids per year, but there are several different locations around the world. The teachers were all once students as well.”

“What is this school?” asked East.

“The Einstein Academy for the Gifted. There are a dozen or so around the world. London, Cairo, Chicago, Beijing. I’d have to look up the other locations. The schools

aren't well known. In fact, they try not to let anyone know of their existence for this very reason. Many of the children who attend don't have any living relatives. It's sort of an orphanage for savants and geniuses."

"How do we find out if anyone is missing from these schools?" asked Liffey.

"You don't," said Ace. "The identifications of the kids and teachers is kept secret so that something like this doesn't happen to them. Obviously, someone found out about it, and Sutton took advantage of it. If no one is keeping count of these kids, that means he can keep these kids, and there's no way of anyone knowing anything or becoming the wiser."

"We have to help these kids," said Brooke. "I think we need to get into that shed and get them out."

"How?" said East, shaking his head. "One way in, and one way out. And I'm the one person he showed that shit to. I want to get them out, but right now, they're safe down there. Let's get Sutton on everything before we rush in for the kids."

"Let me get with Ryan and the rest of G.R.I.P. and see what we can do," said Ace. "I've got the street plans pulled up, and we may be able to find a way to get to those kids without going through the tunnel. There could be something

that we're not seeing or something that we're missing because we're beating our heads against the wall."

East nodded, staring at the others, looking as if there was something else on his mind. Genius kids with their entire lives ahead of them, waiting to be molded and impressed upon by mentors and leaders in their proposed fields. Among them could be the next great architect, engineer, scientist. Perhaps a president or a neurosurgeon. Someone who cures cancer.

"What? What are you not telling us?" asked Brooke.

"If we don't get those kids out of there, once he gets what he wants, he's going to sell them off like livestock to the highest bidders."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“I can help them, Kegger,” said Morgan.

“No! Absolutely not. No.” His face was flush, his tone filled with anger. Not for her but for the man they both despised.

“Kegger, you don’t get to tell me what I can and cannot do. I’m a grown woman who’s survived unimaginable pain and terror.” Kegger stared at her, propping his prosthetic leg up on the table.

“I’m well aware of what you suffered. I can understand better than anyone. But I will not allow you to risk your life because your father is a maniac. We will stop him, and we will get him out of El Paso.”

“I know that, and I’m sorry. I know that you understand what kind of pain I’ve been through. I didn’t mean to diminish your own. But I’m saying that I could get to the mansion, allow the federal agents in to see what’s down in that tunnel and underground spring, and that would help to build the case against him. He might not ever know that I’m there. The federal agents could tell him afterwards that I allowed you all in, remotely.”

“Oh,” frowned Kegger.

Morgan smirked at him, shaking her head. She pulled her chair closer to him, resting her hands on his upper thighs. She could feel where his prosthetic started, his own flesh no longer there.

“Kegger, I don’t want to die. I’m no heroine, and I have no desire to sacrifice my life for that hideous man.”

“You’re not going to die,” said Kegger, gripping her hands.

“No, I’m not. But I can help those children and women. I can help the members of our own team that are there. I can stop him from having that mansion. I know that you got the biological weapon out of there, but who are the people in that pit? Who did he kill? Surely, that will help the case against him.”

“You could just send word to the estate attorney and let him know that the federal authorities can go in.”

“It doesn’t work that way, but nice try.” She stared into his pain-filled eyes, trying to determine why this was so important to him. “Kegger, why are you fighting me on this? What does it matter?”

“What does it matter?” he growled, standing quickly and pacing around the table. “What does it matter? Fuck, Morgan! I’ve been caring for you for weeks now, watching over you, holding you when you’re having nightmares, walking with you, feeding you, l-loving you.”

“I-I know,” she whispered. “And I’m grateful.”

“Grateful? Is that it? That’s all you feel for me?” He could see her chest rise and fall with heavy breaths, staring at him. It was as if realization slapped her in the face. He’d certainly mentioned caring for her, wanting to get to know her, and that he would be patient. All the things she needed to hear. She just wasn’t certain that he’d meant it. Perhaps he had.

“Kegger, you know what happened to me. You know what was done to me at the direction of my own father.”

“He’s not your father. He’s the man that placed seed in your mother’s belly, but he’s not your father. A man, a real man, would have never done such a thing to their own child.”

“His relationship to me doesn’t matter. But what happened to me does. How can you possibly look at me, want me, knowing what happened to me?”

Kegger kneeled in front of her, holding her hands in his own. He shook his head, tears filling his eyes.

“I love you even more knowing how fucking strong you are to have come out of that nightmare. You are incredible, Morgan. You are smart, funny, kind, and the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

“I’m old as fuck. I get it. I’ve never been married, don’t know if I can have kids at this point in my life. I get horrible headaches thanks to the steel plate in my head. This leg isn’t exactly ideal for the beach, but it works. I would defend you with my life, Morgan. I would risk everything just for a few minutes with you. Everything.”

Morgan stared at the man she’d come to love, too afraid to admit it. Now, he had the courage to admit it to her. He loved her.

“K-Kegger. Ken. I love you, too,” she said in a barely-there whisper. “I-I’m just not sure I can...” His index finger gently touched her lips.

“That’s all I needed to know,” he smiled. “I just needed to know that you loved me, too. The rest we’ll figure out as we go. I’m in no rush to make love to you. I mean, I am, but I can be patient. When you’re ready.”

Morgan smiled at him, shaking her head. She stood, sitting on his lap, as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Kegger. I was saying I wasn’t sure if I could have children,” she grinned. “I’m older as well, and there was a lot of damage done.”

“Oh,” he blushed. “Right. Well, that would be unfortunate for you because I know that you would make a great mother. But, just having you is all I need.”

“Same. But we’re not done with this conversation. I still think I can help them by being there and giving the federal agents access to the house. Or what if you all got permission to go in and take out all the evidence found? You’ve already taken the biochemical weapon out. No one needs to be aware of that.”

“Baby, I love you. I love you so much I can’t breathe some days, but sending you back to the place where your hell began is not okay with me. We’ll find another way. I promise we will.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “I trust you.”

“Good. Now, back to the whole making love thing.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Liffey hung up the phone, laughing and shaking his head.

“Dad? What’s so funny?” asked Brooke.

“Oh, just laughing about an old SEAL getting his first taste of resistance,” he smirked. The others stared at him, unsure of what he was implying. “It seems Morgan was all set to board a plane and head this way to help us. She wanted to give permission for the estate to open the house to federal agents.”

“Damn,” laughed Cowboy. “I’m going to bet that he’s ready to tie her down.” Brooke frowned at the group of alpha males, crossing her arms over her breasts.

“Oh, oh,” muttered East.

“That’s right,” said Brooke. “Oh, oh. You know, just because you’re males and have that flappy thing between your legs doesn’t mean you’re always right.”

“Flappy thing?” frowned Mo. “I take exception to that.”

“Too bad! You always do this. You always think that you know what’s best for the ‘little women.’ Well, guess what? You don’t. We’re intelligent, trained, capable, and brave. We don’t always need for you to run in and save the day.”

“No, you don’t,” said Liffey. “But you should understand that every man here was trained to protect those around him, regardless of size, strength, or gender. Our lives in the military have taught us that no matter what, even if you’re the enemy, sometimes you’re worth saving.

“So, dear daughter, as much as I appreciate your riveting speech about the strength of women, you’re not going to change the men in front of you. Not ever. Get used to it and be grateful for it. Because the same women we’re trying to save are those that wish they’d had a male like these before them.”

Brooke was quiet for a long moment, not saying anything to anyone, especially her father. He didn’t often pull the ‘dad card’ and lecture her, but when he did, she usually deserved it. Her temper was definitely from his Irish heritage, but her fierce fighting nature came from both of her parents.

“I didn’t mean to imply that I wasn’t appreciative. Maybe just think about changing the way you say things. It comes across as superior and implies that we’re somehow weak and incapable.”

“Understood,” nodded Cowboy. “I know it wasn’t anyone’s intent. But you make a good point. Those women and kids that are hidden are more than capable.”

Cowboy turned toward the table, spreading out the city maps. Looking at the tablet, he compared it to the map and pointed.

“Look. Right here is a sewer manhole cover,” he said, pointing. “This is an alleyway that wouldn’t be in use at night. We could get down into the sewer tonight and dig toward their tunnel. It would bring us to the back end, where there was no exit.”

“That’s awfully dangerous. The tunnel could collapse on them without support, and that’s going to take too long. How do we get them all out through the sewer?” asked Brooke.

“We don’t. We give them communication devices to feed them information until we can get them out the right

way. At least with this, they'd have communications to all of us."

"It's worth a try," said Liffey. "Cowboy, Matt, and Bogey. You guys head over there tonight and see what you can do. It's about twenty feet to their hiding place, but it's a dangerous twenty feet."

"We'll stop by the lumber supply store," said Matt. "If we can at least secure it long enough to get them what they need, we can release it after that."

"What about explosives?" asked Mo.

"Too loud," said East, shaking his head. "Unless."

"Unless what?" asked Brooke.

"Unless we created a distraction at the other end. Does Sutton ever go down into the tunnel to be with the women or see the hostages?" asked East.

"I only know about the women. He has a favorite that he sees at least once a day, usually around nine or ten at night."

"If I could follow him down there on the premise of testing another woman," grinned East. Brooke was not finding that amusing, glaring at him. "Just a premise, baby. If I could

follow him down there, maybe get him to bring the guards back this way, it might work. You've got to be delicate with this. Call Miller and Hiro. See if they know of something that would do the trick without a lot of noise."

While the team was planning out their festive evening, East gave Fuentes a call to let him know that he was the prime target of the week.

"Well, I knew it was going to happen sooner or later," he said.

"Brother, there's no harm in disappearing for a while. In fact, it would help me because then I could claim I killed you."

"I'd love to help you, East, but I'm not leaving. You can claim the kill, and I'll help from behind the scenes. I know how to hide. Hell, I've had my family hidden for years now."

"I just want to keep you alive long enough to see your family again, Fuentes."

"Appreciate it." He hung up, stubborn bastard that he was, and East turned to the others.

"Well, what's the plan?"

“We’re waiting on assistance,” smirked Cowboy. “We should have thought of it sooner.”

“What kind of assistance?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Dogs. That’s what you brought to help us?” frowned East. “I want to save those kids, not entertain them.”

“Brother, the dogs can dig faster than you. I can get them to dig that hole, wiggle through with the listening devices and a note,” smirked Sniff.

“So, I won’t need to create a distraction?” asked East.

“Nope. You’d need bat hearing to hear the dogs digging. Once they’re close, we can send a radio-controlled car through with a communication device, or I can tie it to the dogs. They’ll hear us and know what we’re doing. Then we can send equipment to them. If they can make the tunnel wide enough, I’m slim enough to slide through.”

“Alright. I need someone to blow another tunnel tonight. Something that says I’m on your tail, and you’re scared. What’s next?” asked East.

“Here,” said Cowboy. “We blow the tunnels near the dry cleaners. It’s far enough away from the women and children and the zoo.”

“Alright, let’s go,” said East. He turned to see Brooke staring at him. Glaring was a more accurate description. Definitely glaring.

“Let’s go, Brooke,” said Cowboy, saving the day.
“You’re with me.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Yep. Come on. We don’t have a lot of time.”

Brooke kissed East on the cheek and happily followed Cowboy out of the room. East took off, pretending to look for the tunnel bandit, while the others made their way toward the sewer entrance.

In the dark alley, Matt and Tanner removed the sewer cover and then stepped back to allow Sniff down first. Using safety lines, they lowered the dogs into the tunnel. He’d brought Zeus, Thor, and Zilla, short for Godzilla. All three were Burmese Mountain dogs, mixed with German Shepherd.

With everyone safely in the tunnel, they gently replaced the cover and turned on their lights. The damp smell of water and sewer drainage had everyone covering their nose and mouth, but the dogs didn’t seem to mind.

Taking a turn toward the Sutton compound, they followed the concrete tube until they hit a dead end.

“This is where we have to start digging,” said Matt.

Using sledgehammers and picks, they broke the end of the tunnel and then put the dogs to work. By Sniff’s command, the three looked as if they were having a great time.

“Is this too much for them?” asked Bogey.

“No,” said Sniff, shaking his head. “They know this a job, but it’s also fun for them. They have treats at the end, a good bath, and a steak.”

“I’ll take that gig,” laughed Mo.

“We’re lucky the dirt is pretty packed,” said Sniff. “If it started to collapse in on them, we wouldn’t be able to continue. Just keep placing the two-by-fours around the dig, and they can keep going.”

Shortly after three a.m., the dogs came back, almost smiling at the group. Sniff crawled on his belly to the end, realizing that the dogs had, indeed, broken through. The women and children were sound asleep, having not heard a thing from them.

The hole at the end of the tunnel was only about ten inches in diameter. Not enough for a man to get through, but enough for equipment. Sniff placed the small device through the hole with a note attached, then whispered softly.

“Please don’t be frightened. If you can hear me come closer to the sound.” He repeated it three times before he saw a glimpse of someone moving.

“Wh-who are you?” asked a small voice.

“I’m here to help you and get you out. We’re working on a plan. What’s your name?” asked Sniff.

“Alex.”

“Alex,” smirked Sniff. “That’s my name too, but my friends call me Sniff.”

“Sniff? That’s weird,” said the boy. Sniff chuckled softly, nodding his head.

“It is weird, but they call me that because I train dogs. The same dogs that dug this hole so we could get to you. Where are the guards?”

“They’re outside the door. They don’t come in here because the other man ordered them to leave us alone except to bring food.”

“Have they hurt you?”

“Not yet, but they want to. You can tell,” said the boy. “He makes us work on something that Miss Gerta says is bad, but she says we have to do it. We keep making mistakes on purpose, but it’s really easy. Don’t tell the bad man.”

“I won’t tell, Alex. You keep listening to Miss Gerta. Hide the device somewhere but leave it on so that we can hear them. We will only reach out if we think you’re alone or to warn you that we’re coming for you, okay?”

“Okay. Hey, mister?”

“Yeah, Alex,” smirked Sniff.

“I don’t think I wanna be smart anymore.”

“What?” said Sniff. “No. Being smart is the coolest thing in the world. I had to be smart to train the dogs to get to you. My friends who invented that communication device are really, really smart. In fact, I work with some of the smartest people in the whole world. We’re like one big happy family.”

“I don’t have a family,” said the little boy. Sniff could only see a small head with dark hair. No other features were visible.

“What about all the other kids and teachers with you? Aren’t they like your family?” asked Sniff.

“Sort of. I mean, I guess.”

“Listen to me, Alex. I promise you that once we get you out of there if you want to find a home with a mom and dad, we’ll find you a home. Whatever you need, we’ll find for you. Okay?”

“Promise.”

“I promise, buddy.” He heard the little boy shuffle away, then slowly crawled backwards through the tunnel. When he reappeared, the others stared at him.

“You okay, brother?” asked Matt.

“Yeah, man. I just wonder how those kids ended up in a kiddie think tank without parents. It feels strange to me, and I don’t like it.”

“Let’s send a message to the team back home and see if they can investigate further,” said Liffey. He was rubbing Zeus’s head, the dog’s tongue still hanging out from his hard labor.

“Okay, let’s head to the car wash,” said Sniff.

“The car wash?”

“How else do you think we’re going to wash these three? They love it, and it’s the fastest way to rub them down.”

Sniff wasn’t wrong. The dogs got so excited by the smell of the car wash they could barely contain themselves. Only using light pressure for the power washers, they scrubbed the dogs with the brushes, then gave them a shower. Back at the hotel, they fed them their steaks, rare. As they sprawled out on the floors, the men took their cue, showering themselves and settling in.

They could hear the kids waking and the teachers instructing them to wash their hands and use the facilities. A few minutes later, the guards showed up with milk and donuts. Not exactly a healthy breakfast, but at least they were feeding them. When they were gone, Sniff spoke.

“Alex? Alex, can you hear me?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. I signed to the other kids about the device this morning. They can hear you too. The teachers are talking to the guards outside.”

“Is this the GR4750?” asked a girl. “I’ve seen this device before, and it’s amazing. No one seems to be able to reverse engineer it.” The men all laughed, shaking their heads.

“It is,” said Sniff. “I’ll tell you all about it when we get you out of there.”

“Sir,” whispered the girl, obviously moving closer to the device. “If the enemy is within, I do not fear the enemy outside.” Sniff frowned, not saying anything at first.

“I understand. I’ve read that book as well,” he said calmly. “Did you figure it out in the end?”

“Not yet, sir. I’m still working on it.”

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Marilisa, sir. I’m seventeen.”

“I’m Sniff, Marilisa. Keep us informed, but we’ll be listening.”

“What the hell did that mean?” frowned Matt.

“She was telling us that one of those teachers, or all of them, sold them out. There is a traitor in that room, and I seriously doubt if it’s one of those kids.”

“Jesus, a teacher sold those kids out? For what? For money? Fame?” asked Mo.

“Probably all of the above,” said Sniff. “Listen, I want to stay until we finish this. The dogs might be able to help. If

we can get to those kids, the dogs could lead them out to safety without anyone else guiding them.”

“Let’s just focus on getting them out of there,” said Liffey. He brushed a hand over Zilla’s head, the dog not even moving.

“Good boy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When the tunnel below the dry cleaners blew, it created a chain reaction that collapsed dozens of tunnels. They hadn't expected that to happen, but it was a fortunate side effect. It made Sutton angrier than before, ready to kill whoever came near him.

East sat back, watching the temper tantrum rage on as his men scattered. Some even hid behind tables and chairs, vehicles, or fences. Shaking his head, he wondered how Sutton had become so powerful that the men around him were so afraid of him.

Then it dawned on him. Perhaps he'd taken their families as well. That seemed his mode of operation. Take their wives and children, make them succumb to his whims and wishes, and if you were lucky, you'd get back your own family.

"Why aren't you afraid of him?" asked the man beside him.

"Because he's just a bully who believes he has more power than he actually does."

“He has more power than you think. He has the power to destroy your life, your family, everything you’ve worked hard for.”

“Only if you give him that power,” said East, staring at the man. “Did he take your family?”

“Yes,” he said in a low voice. “My daughter is used in the tunnels. She went willingly because Sutton gave her money, clothes, jewelry. She’s blind to his insanity. My wife and young son are somewhere in the city. I just don’t know where.”

“Is he holding the wives and children of everyone here?” asked East.

“Nearly everyone. Some are single, but he tends to not hire those men. He can’t hold you if he doesn’t have something you want.”

East just nodded, not saying anything as Sutton continued to rage on.

“You’re investigating the tunnels, right?” asked the man.

“I’m trying to find out who’s blowing them up. As I find them, I’m exploring them to see if I can find any

explosives. Why?”

“If you find them, if you find my family, please get them to safety,” he asked. “Tell them. Tell them I’m sorry that I was a coward.”

“You’re not a coward. You’re confused,” said East.

“Maybe, or maybe...”

“What are you doing?! You’re supposed to be finding this man, not here!” yelled Sutton. He was coming toward the two men, a baseball bat in his hand.

“Don’t move,” muttered East. “Stand your ground.” The man stared up at him as if he’d lost his mind. As Sutton got closer, he raised the bat as if to swing it at them.

“You’d better be prepared to kill me if you swing that bat,” said East. “Because if you don’t, I will beat you to death with that thing.”

Sutton stopped, frozen in place. He was breathing so heavily he could barely catch a full breath. His face was flaming red, his big belly causing strain on his body.

“You’re so fucking cocky,” he growled. “I should kill you just for that.”

“But you won’t. Because you need me. If you hadn’t panicked and called me back here, I would have caught the man who did this. I was on his tail and had tracked him to the tunnel location. But you acted like a spoiled child, screaming and yelling for me to get back here. Well, here I am, and he’s still out there.”

“Who is he?” screamed Sutton, spittle flying from his lips.

“If I knew that, I’d be with him, not you.”

The man next to him didn’t move, just staring at the two men as they argued. Sutton loosened his grip on the bat, letting it stand beside him. He was leaning on it, almost as if he needed the support, and East filed that in his head. Perhaps he did need the support.

“Where was he?”

“Obviously, near the tunnel,” said East. “I was at the hardware store and followed him to the location. I waited for him, but as he was coming out, the tunnel exploded. I chased him two blocks, but that’s when you called.”

“What were you doing at a hardware store on my time?” yelled Sutton.

“Are you really that dense?” said East, taking a step toward the man. “A hardware store has everything you need to blow shit up. Fertilizer, wire, everything. That’s what I’ve been doing. Visiting hardware stores and asking questions. If you’d leave me the fuck alone, I could do my job.”

“I didn’t realize,” said Sutton quietly. The man beside East was shocked that Sutton was giving a half-apology.

“You didn’t realize because you’re too consumed with your own anger. What did you think? Did you think that there’d be a sign somewhere that said, ‘Ted’s Bomb Making Shop’?”

“You’ve made your point,” growled Sutton. “Fine. Get back out there and find him. When can I expect that Fuentes will be dead?”

“When you stop fucking interrupting my work,” said East, walking away. He needed to get Fuentes to disappear. He’d fake his death, have something put out on the news, and at least Sutton would be happy with that.

In thirty-six hours, Rivera would be arriving, and they would need to have a plan in place to assure his safety. But there was a lot to get done before then. They needed to get the

kids out of the tunnel and to safety, but he also wanted to help Sutton's men and get their families back as well.

Feeling confident that no one had followed him, he entered the back door of Fuentes' apartment building and took the stairs up to the fourth floor. Outside his apartment, he gave two sharp knocks and waited.

"Come in," said Fuentes, opening the door. He looked as if he hadn't slept in months, his eyes rimmed in puffy red circles.

"Are you alright?" asked East.

"No. I'm not," he said. "My wife is hundreds of miles away, and she's sick. Not critically ill, but nevertheless, my daughter is taking care of her mother. Not me."

"It's a rough life, Fuentes. You know that and so do I. This will be done soon. Let me fake your death, take a few pictures, and you disappear. Brooke can finish this out with our help. Use this time to heal with your family."

"Are you sure?" asked Fuentes.

"Positive. We'll leak the story to the press that you've been murdered, sending the photos. No one at the agency will be the wiser. They'll just think you're dead. When this is

done, you can come back out and claim it was all part of the plan with Brooke.”

Fuentes stared at East, shaking his head.

“You know, I still have no idea who you really are. I get a strange call in the middle of the night saying that the Defense Secretary needs a favor. A personal favor. Then you show up in my office bigger than life and sweep in, getting more out of Sutton than anyone has been able to.”

“Just know that I’m on your side,” said East.

“Alright. How do we make me dead?” he grinned.

East pulled out a small pouch with makeup, wire, and other strange things. As he got busy on Fuentes, the man couldn’t believe what he was doing. When he was finished, he posed him on the floor of his apartment, the wire wrapped around his neck, blood everywhere, and a very convincing bullet hole in his forehead.

East snapped a few photos, admiring his work. He turned the phone toward Fuentes, smiling down at him.

“There. Dead.”

“Damn, that’s scary,” he frowned. “It looks real.”

“That’s what it’s supposed to look like. I’m going to send this to Sutton. Then we’ll leak the photos to the press. The mysterious missing body won’t be found.” East looked outside, the sun setting over the mountains. “It’s a good time to leave, brother. It’s dark, and no one will see you. Get cleaned up, and I’ll be your cover until the coast is clear.”

“Thank you, East. Seriously. I don’t know what I would have done without you here. Promise me you’ll take care of Brooke.”

“On that, you can count on for sure,” grinned East. “This isn’t the end, Fuentes. When Sutton is done, you can come back.”

“Maybe,” he said, frowning as he wiped away the blood on his neck. “Or maybe it’s time for me to retire. I’ve been doing this for almost twenty years, East. I’ve missed every major thing my kid was in, every anniversary and birthday. I can’t believe that my wife is still willing to put up with my ass.”

“They’re amazing creatures, aren’t they? You know, I’m a triplet,” smirked East as he stared at Fuentes, shock on his face. “That’s right. Two more that look just like me. My

father and grandfather are both incredible men. Elite Green Berets. My maternal grandfather a former Ranger.”

“No fucking way,” gasped Fuentes. “Well, that explains you.”

“Yeah, I guess it does,” he laughed. “My point is, my mother and grandmothers never faltered, never left their sides for a moment. I would expect that Brooke and I will be the same. Some women are made differently, Fuentes. Some women are made for men like us.”

“Wolfkill. Jesus, that’s why you didn’t want me to repeat your last name. You’re fucking Easton Wolfkill. Zeke, Kiel, Ethan, and Everett Wolfkill. Holy fucking stupid! I’m stupid! I didn’t make the connection. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I didn’t want you to make the connection. We like being unknown.”

“Brother, there’s no way for your family to be unknown. Your father wouldn’t remember me, but he worked a case once that saved my life. Him and a bunch of other Special Forces guys.” East just nodded, smiling at the other man. “I was dead. Sure as shit, I was dead. This cartel leader was pissed off at me about something, and then these giants

came through the jungle and saved my ass, along with my team.”

“Sounds like my dad,” smirked East.

“This was meant to be, East. You were meant to be here, meant to save me again, and meant to protect Brooke. You have my number. Text me when this shit is done, and I’ll come back to resign from the agency. Maybe I’ll buy an ice cream truck and enjoy life for a while.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-

TWO

“What took you so long?” asked Liffey.

“Sutton was throwing one of his famous tantrums because of the tunnels blowing. He was more pissed about the other tunnels collapsing.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” smirked Bogey. “We thought we had the amount right, but it turns out the tunnels were collapsing on their own anyway. Which brings about another issue.”

“What now?” frowned East.

“Rain,” said Brooke. “They’re expecting storms starting around midnight Friday night going through the weekend. This area isn’t used to that kind of rain. It’s going to flood, and that means anyone in those tunnels is in danger.”

“Shit,” he muttered, sitting back on the sofa, resting his head on the back of the cushion. He rubbed his eyes, then shook his head.

“We got this, East,” said Eazee. “We’re going to find a way to get those kids out of that tunnel.”

“I know, but I found out there are more. That’s how he keeps his men in line. He’s kidnapping their families, hiding them, and forcing them to cooperate.”

“Double shit,” muttered Eazee. He smirked at his brother, shaking his head. “Okay, looks like we need to find them fast. How many are we talking?”

“Easily a hundred, maybe more. He’s got about a hundred men, and the man I spoke with said almost all of them had wives and children.”

“Where would he keep that many? It can’t be the tunnels,” said Cowboy.

“There’s no way. The tunnels are narrow and wouldn’t hold that many people, not for long anyway. It has to be somewhere larger. Someplace with a lot of room...” Brooke stopped, staring at the men around her in utter shock. “Son-of-a-bitch. It’s right beneath our noses.”

“What do you mean? A tunnel below the motel?”

“No. The tunnel in the apartment building.”

“There wasn’t anything else in there. We didn’t see anything,” said Eazee.

“You’re thinking down. Not up.” They all opened their mouths to speak, and Brooke smiled, nodding at them. “It’s his apartment building. His. We all know how averse to electronics he is. There’s no alarm system, no cameras, but those women and children may not know that.”

“But we didn’t see any guards at the building,” said East.

“He wouldn’t have his men guard them because it’s their families. He’d have his drug team. The sellers, who are probably on the drugs themselves.”

“Shit, they’re on the top floors. That’s where he’s kept them all this time. We can use the apartment building as the distraction,” said East. “Get the families and children out and blow the building. He’ll be panicked knowing that he’s lost his leverage with the men.”

“He wouldn’t tell them that,” said Brooke.

“No. But I will. I’ll let Sutton know the building was destroyed, and there were dozens of women and children found in the rubble. Then I’ll tell his men what really

happened. When that happens, it will be the distraction we need for you all to get into that shed in the backyard. I'll keep them out in front of the house. You guys hop the fence in the backyard, get into that shed, and get everyone out."

"It's going to take some time to distract him," said Liffey. "We'll need at least thirty minutes to get to those kids and get them out. That's if we don't have to fight whoever might be on his side like the kid said."

Sniff looked at his watch. It was ten p.m. Most of the people inside that tunnel room were probably asleep.

"Alex," he whispered. "Alex, can you hear me?"

"Sshh," said a little voice. Sniff said nothing, holding his breath as he heard the rustling of fabric and little feet.

"Okay, sir. The teachers are outside with the guards again."

"Did the girl that spoke the other day find out who is betraying us?" he asked.

"It's the teachers, sir," said Alex. "Marilisa said she heard them talking about what they would do with their money."

"It's me, sir," said the girl. Sniff could only grin, realizing how young these kids were. "I heard them talking

about going their own way once we were turned over to the men buying us. Mr. Sutton thinks that we can figure out how to make the AI do what he wants.”

“Can you?” asked Sniff.

“Of course,” whispered the girl. “We’re geniuses. Didn’t you know?”

“Yes,” he chuckled. “I knew. But you can’t help them. What they’re trying to do could start a war. A very big war.”

“We know. We’re geniuses,” she said again.

“My apologies. I forgot.”

“Anyway, we’ve been putting them off, refusing to do the work, or just messing it up. But the teachers are getting mad, sir. They’re threatening the little ones.”

“Marilisa, I need you to hold on and get the little ones to remain calm. We’re going to get you out of there and somewhere safe.”

“Where is that, sir?” she asked. Sniff was quiet for a moment, the others staring at him, then at the device. “I mean, our families were killed. Some said that their parents sold them to the schools. We don’t have anyone to keep us safe.”

“You do now,” said Liffey. “We’re going to keep you safe. No one will ever use your genius again.”

“I want to believe you, sir. Really, I do. We’ve just been through a lot, and we’re not even old enough to vote or drink yet.” The men chuckled, shaking their heads.

“Stay where you are, and we’re going to get you out. Keep the device close. When it’s time, you’re going to hear a lot of commotion on the outside of the room. Go to the back of the room and huddle together.”

“Yes, sir. Sir?”

“Yes, ma’am?” smirked Sniff.

“Thank you.”

The men in the room were quiet for a long moment, Brooke staring at them as the young girl expressed her thanks because someone actually cared about their futures. Children, whose future was dim just a few days ago, now had a light that they could hopefully focus on and move toward.

“Someone betrayed those children,” said Liffey. “They bought them, sold them, kidnapped them, murdered their parents. All so they could have access to their genius. Those poor kids are probably afraid of their own intelligence.”

“Then let’s make them less afraid,” said Brooke. “But first, let’s get the women and children out of that apartment building.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-

THREE

Matt borrowed a city bus, parking it on the street behind the apartment building. He put the ‘out of service’ sign on the window, then sat and waited for the others to appear. Once he had his passengers on board, he’d be heading out of town and onto the base of Fort Bliss.

With East at the lead, Eazee behind him with Liffey, Sniff, Mo, Bogey, Cowboy, Brooke, and the dogs, they quietly made their way up the stairs. At each floor, they cracked open the door to see empty hallways. Until they reached the eighth floor.

“Three men,” whispered East.

He lay his weapon on the floor, pointing to Eazee. The two men smiled at one another, having pulled this trick more than once. As the others lay flat against the walls of the stairwell, the two men flung open the door, weaving down the hallway.

“Sixty-one bottles of beer on the wall, sixty-nine bottles of beer,” sang East.

“You fucked it up!” yelled Eazee. “It’s sixty-three.”

“No, no, it’s sixty-one,” said East.

“You said sixty-one, then sixty-nine,” said his brother, laughing hysterically.

“I like sixty-nine,” slobbered East. His brother laughed, shoving him against the wall, tripping and falling to the floor of the hallway.

“Leave,” said a man standing above him. He pointed a pistol at his head. “Leave now.”

“Wh-what? No, that’s not nice. We live here,” slurred Eazee.

“You don’t live here. It’s a private floor,” said the man.

“Okay, okay, help me up,” he said, reaching for the man’s hand.

He was foolish enough to offer it. Eazee grabbed his arm, yanking hard, pulling his head into the wall. A loud snap was heard in the hallway, and the other two men rushed toward them.

Sniff opened the door of the stairwell.

“Get ‘em.” The three beasts stormed toward their prey, happy to be doing the work they were trained to do. East took the first man out, easily subduing him, while the dogs leaped over his back and directly onto the third man. His shrill screams echoed in the hallway, causing two more men to come out of the apartments.

“Looks like fun,” smirked Cowboy, slapping Tanner on the back. “Let’s go.”

When the rest of the men went running toward Sutton’s men, Brooke just shook her head, casually placing the silencer on her weapon. Just as they were about to reach their ‘fun,’ they heard the telltale sound of a silenced bullet whiz by them. Dropping to the floor, they saw the two men fall, blood dripping from their bodies.

“What the fuck?” muttered Bogey, staring at Brooke. She shook her head at them.

“Not everything has to be physical. We don’t have the time for you to play wrestling games with them. We have to get them out now.”

“Spoilsport,” growled Mo.

Slowly, the doors began to open, revealing the shocked faces of women.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Brooke, holding up her hand.
“We’re here to get you out.”

“S-Sutton. He’ll kill our husbands,” said the woman.

“No. We’re going to make sure he doesn’t,” she said.
“Where are your children? Are they safe?”

“They’re inside,” said the woman. Eazee started to walk toward them.

“Get them. Grab them, and don’t worry about anything else.”

“There is nothing else. We’ve been surviving on dry cereal, sandwiches, and water from the faucet. They refused to give us anything else. Many of the women weren’t even allowed to have feminine products at their time of the month.”

“It’s okay,” said Brooke. “Let’s get you somewhere safe, and then we’ll get everyone what they need.”

Opening the door behind the woman, East scanned the enormous space. Sutton had torn down the walls, combining all of the apartments into one large empty space. It wasn’t

pretty. The drywall was jagged, simply open to allow people to walk through. The smell was overpowering.

Sweat, dirt, human waste, and food filled the air. The women all looked embarrassed, but their team said nothing. Each of the men knelt down, picking up a sleeping child, while the older ones were awoken and forced to walk. At the lead were the dogs, ready to pounce if needed.

“Do we risk the elevators?” asked Brooke.

“I think we take the stairs,” said East. “The elevators could trap us. Let the dogs take the lead with you.”

“With me?” she asked, shocked.

“You’re capable. Trained, as you’ve reminded me. Take the lead and shoot anything that moves other than the dogs.”

“I can do that,” she grinned, kissing him.

Down the stairs and into the night air, the women and children were thrilled to have fresh air on their faces. With the wind blowing, they didn’t even smell themselves any longer. Matt stood at the door of the bus, waving them toward him. He helped the women with children on board the bus,

squeezing several into one seat to make room for the next group.

When the bus was full, the apartments cleared, Eazee pulled the fire alarm, setting a small fire inside their former hell. As residents poured out, they prayed they'd all made it. Just as the sirens could be heard in the distance, there was a loud explosion, the building collapsing into itself.

The children pressed their faces against the glass, watching as their prison tumbled to the ground in a cloud of dust and fire.

“Let’s go,” said East, tapping Matt on the shoulder.

He sped away in the opposite direction of the fire trucks and police cars. As they approached the gates of Fort Bliss, the arm automatically came up. Luke and Cam had come through, giving them safe passage onto the base.

Along the main road, men were directing them toward an open, empty hangar. Once inside, the bus was hidden, the women and children taken off the bus.

“They’re hungry, dirty, and tired,” said East as he stepped off the bus to face a man in uniform.

“Yes, sir. I’m Sgt. Major Rivers. My team has cots set up for them, clean clothing, and showers ready for them. We’ll get them taken care of, sir.”

“You don’t have to call me sir,” said East.

“Actually, Captain Wolfkill, yes, we do,” said Rivers. East just shook his head, grinning at the other man. “It’s an honor to meet you and your brother. We’ve heard all about you.”

“Let’s not tell anyone else,” he smirked.

“No, sir. We won’t. Except, uh, all the men behind me know.”

East and the others walked toward the wives who were anxiously waiting their turn to get showered and changed. The children who were showered were already in clean clothing seated at tables filled with nutritious food. The woman they’d first encountered stood, shaking their hands.

“Thank you,” she said with tears. “We’ve been there a long time. Is my husband alright?”

“We think they are okay, for now,” said East. “We’ll make sure that they’re home as soon as we can.”

Cowboy stared at his watch, realizing that they only had a few hours before Rivera arrived. If they were going to end this madness, they needed sleep of their own. Always able to survive on little to no sleep, the preferred method would be at least a few hours of rest to keep a clear head. With Rivera and Sutton, they needed both. Sleep and a clear head.

Matt looked over his shoulder and let out a shrill whistle.

“Let’s go,” he said. “I need to return this bus.”

“You didn’t rent it?” asked Eazee.

“Where the fuck do you rent a city bus?” he growled. “I stole this shit. I’ll take it back filled with gas, and no one will know.”

“Jesus,” muttered Liffey. “You could have told us that before.” Matt just shook his head, walking up the steps to the bus’s driver’s seat.

“You didn’t ask.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-

FOUR

Although the room was filled with men, including her father, Brooke cuddled closely to East, just wanting to feel him next to her. After their first random, heated sexual encounter fueled mostly by anger, they hadn't been alone for even a moment. She didn't need the sex right this minute, but she did need to feel his body next to her own.

Growing up with East and his brothers, she'd always been able to tell them apart. After all, a young girl doesn't forget the one she fell in love with. Even if he did have two identical brothers. The men had slept for nearly three hours, but she'd been asleep for nearly seven. So, Brooke quietly got up, hoping to start some coffee and check messages before the others needed to leave.

It didn't surprise her to see her father seated at the table, already sipping his first cup.

"Enough rest for you?" she whispered.

"I never needed more than three or four hours of sleep before a mission," he smirked. He shoved a cup of coffee

toward her with creamer, remembering her preference for the hot elixir.

“Thank you,” she smiled.

“You handled yourself well last night,” said Liffey.

“That shot was incredible. I’m very proud of you, Brooke.”

“Thank you, Dad. That means a lot to me.”

“Can I ask why you weren’t honest with your mother and I?” She was quiet, unsure of what to say. “Did we give you the impression that we wouldn’t have been proud of you for doing this job?”

“Not at all, Dad. You and Mom have been nothing but supportive with me. I guess I just wanted to show everyone that I could do it, then I would come home and hopefully work for VG.”

“I hope you do that as well,” said Liffey. “We miss you. You’re the only child we have, Brooke. The only one we could have. It wouldn’t have mattered if you were a school teacher, a nun, a high diver. Your mother and I still would have worried about you every day.”

“But why?” she frowned.

“Honey, that’s something that you will learn when you have children of your own. You never stop worrying about them. Never. And it doesn’t matter how many you have, or how old they get.

“I remember Mama Irene talking about how she worried for each of the boys as they left for the Army, then the girls as they left for college. Although she didn’t know that Alec was in the CIA. She thought he was in medical school and still worried for him all the time.

“It didn’t matter how big and strong they were, how smart they were, or old they were. Worrying for your children never stops. No matter how old they are, how close or far away, male or female. It never stops.”

“Did your parents worry for you?” she asked.

Her father hadn’t spoken much about his parents over the years, only saying that they were distant. He let out a long, slow breath, shaking his head.

“My parents weren’t like your mother and me. They were both alcoholics. Violent alcoholics. My father spent his paycheck before it was even cold in his hands. My mother stole whatever was left. I had two older sisters, but they both left the house as quickly as they could.”

“They didn’t take you with them?” she frowned.

“No, honey. They didn’t take me with them. They left me behind, starting their own families, not worried about me or our parents. I think they just figured that if they had to make it on their own, so should I.”

“But you got out,” she said quietly. “You got out of Chicago and made something of yourself.”

“I did. After I stole the car of the wife of the biggest gang leader in Chicago. The only way I was going to live was to steal another car, one that belonged to him, that had been placed in police impound. My life was over.”

“Dad, I didn’t know that,” she whispered.

“No one knew. Except the guy at the Army recruiting station. It was my way out, my way to survive outside of Chicago. Problem was, I hated the fucking Army.” Brooke looked shocked by her father’s admission. Everything she knew about him was that he was a great Ranger.

“Don’t look at me that way,” he chuckled. “I hated the regular Army. When I discovered the Rangers, my life turned around. I felt powerful, useful. I met Eric and Aiden, a few

other men that made a difference in my life. I learned that I was good at more than just breaking into cars.”

“Dad, you’re amazing. You and Mom both,” she said, shaking her head. “I should have told you everything. You would have understood. You’ve been a great father. Wonderful. You and Mom have given me an amazing life, and I had no reason to not be honest with you. I’m sorry.”

Brooke hugged her father, kissing his cheek. He just smiled, standing to refill his cup. When he turned, he stared at his daughter.

“I can’t tell you what to do anymore, Brooke. You’re a grown woman, capable of more than most women I know. You’re going to be happy with East. I always knew you would be. It just took you both some time. Be careful when we go in for Sutton, Brooke. He knows that you mean something to East, and he’ll try to use you against him. If he does that, East won’t be able to focus, and it will leave him vulnerable.”

“I understand, Dad,” she nodded.

“I’m going to go grab some of those chicken biscuits everyone is talking about,” he grinned. “I’ll be back shortly.”

She smiled at her father, starting another pot of coffee as the room began to awaken. By the time he was back, everyone was showered and dressed, ready for Rivera's arrival.

East looked down at his phone, grinning. There were a dozen text messages from Sutton asking where he was. He was panicked. Time to make it big. He dialed Sutton's number, holding a finger to his lips for everyone to be quiet.

"Where the fuck are you?" he snapped.

"I was busy. Remember. Trying to find your explosive mole."

"Well, he struck again! He blew up my apartment building. The whole fucking building and there were important people inside."

"Shit, sorry," said East, trying to sound sympathetic. "I was following a trail toward a Walmart on the east side."

"I don't have any fucking tunnels on the east side!"

"You know, Sutton, you need to calm down, or you're going to have a stroke. Then where will you be? I took care of Fuentes, which you haven't even acknowledged. He's dead, and it's all over the news that an agent was killed. I'm

following your bomber, and I'll get him soon enough. But as I recall, you still need me to get Rivera tomorrow, so how about you stop fucking screaming at me.”

The eyebrows of his teammates raised in admiration for the way he was manipulating Sutton. It was showing what kind of man he really was – a bully and a coward. He could easily be manipulated, unless he found a loophole to bribe others, forcing them to do his bidding. That wouldn't be the case for East, Eazee, or any of the others.

“I'm frustrated,” he said in a low voice.

“I get it, but screaming at the only man helping you right now seems stupid. Rivera is supposed to be there tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. He said he'd meet me here at five. I need you to be in those trees on the other side of the road.”

Eazee shook his head at his brother, realizing that it would be the ideal place to kill East if Sutton decided to turn on him. Someone else could shoot him out of the trees or cut the tree down. He'd be trapped.

“Don't worry about me. I know what I'm doing. I'm headed out to try and find the trail of the bomber again. I

think I have an idea of where he could be.”

“How’s my pussy doing?” he laughed.

“I told you not to speak of her that way again,” said East. “She’s mine now. If I want to call her good pussy, I’ll do that. You don’t have that right any longer.”

“She’s still mine,” said Sutton in a low voice. “Don’t you forget that. If you don’t finish this job, I’ll take her back, and you won’t recognize her when I’m done with her.”

This time, it was Liffey who wanted to leap at the phone, but Brooke gripped his arm, shaking her head. They had to play his game. He knew that by bringing her name into the conversation, he’d annoy East.

“You keep thinking that, Sutton. But you won’t get near her. Brooke will be so far from you and El Paso you won’t know which end is up. Hell, you can’t even find your own bomber or get to Rivera without me. You won’t get to her.

“I’ll finish the job because I’m a man of my word. When it’s done, Brooke and I will be gone, and you won’t know where or when. But mark my words. If you ever come near me or her again, I won’t hesitate to put a bullet in your

head. You won't hear me, you won't see me, you won't know when it's coming. But it will be coming."

"Don't fuck with me, boy. Or I'll show you who the king of this mountain is. I built this empire. Me! I'm the one that got rid of Ramos and Rivera's brother. Me! I'm the one that killed my fucking wife to get what I wanted and needed. Me! I was brave enough to sell my daughter to keep Ramos busy while I finished my plans. Me! Not many men have that kind of passion for what they're doing." He hung up the phone, and East wanted to throw his against the wall.

"He's just trying to get under your skin," said Brooke.

"Well, he succeeded. Now we'll see if he knows when to run."

CHAPTER TWENTY-

FIVE

East decided to do a drive-by on Sutton's street just to see what he was up to. As he pulled into the driveway, the same man who stood by him the day before waved at him. Getting out of the truck, he approached him.

"Where is he?"

"Don't know," he said. "He got angry because his building was demolished, and there was something important inside." East nodded at him, looking behind them.

"How many of these men do you trust?" he asked.

"All except those in the blue hats. It marks them for Sutton. They're his drug mules and are usually on the drugs themselves. I want to believe that you'll finish this, but I'm frightened."

"What's your name?" asked East.

"John. John Hernandez."

"John, the building that exploded, it had your wives and children in it," said East. The man's face paled, and he

leaned forward, gripping his knees. East gripped his shoulder, pulling him upright. “Look at me, John. Some friends and I got them out. They’re safe.”

“Wh-what?”

“I promise you with my whole soul, your wives and children are safe. Clean, fed, clothed, and protected. Sutton will never get to them where they are.”

“P-please. Please tell me where they are,” asked John.

“If I do that and Sutton finds out, he’d torture you until you tell him. It’s best if we leave it like this for now. I need you to trust me. I’ve gotten them to safety, and they’re protected where they are right now. You and these other men have no reason to stay any longer.”

“We can leave?” he croaked through tears.

“Now would be the time. He’s gone and wouldn’t know what happened. I would say that you and the men you trust, the men who had families in that building as well, should get in your vehicles and leave. Go to another town for the time being, and I’ll call when this is done.”

“He had them in that building. It was just a few miles from here. All this time, all these weeks and months of

worrying about them, and they were within reach. I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed of the man that I've become," he said, shaking his head.

"John, I need you to stay focused," said East, gripping his arm. "Sutton had the most precious thing in the world to you. That's a powerful motivator to do whatever someone asks of you. Right now, I need your help. Where are the drugs and the weapons?"

"The weapons are in a storage bunker below a church on Tularosa. I think he thought that no one would break into a church, and maybe even God would protect his weapons," frowned John.

"We read," said Eazee into his comms device.
"Headed that way now."

"And the drugs?" asked East.

"I'm not sure. That's the truth. I'd tell you if I really knew, but I don't know. They bring a big stash to the house every few days for the men to either sell or use themselves."

"Who is they?" asked East. John looked around, up and down the street to see the two men he wanted.

“The two men standing by the old Impala. I don’t even know their names, but they’re the ones that bring the drugs. They’re supposed to be picking up a big stash to bring to the house. Sutton wants to impress Rivera.” East nodded.

“Here’s what I want you to do. Once I’m gone, tell the men what I’ve told you. Only the ones you trust. Then I want you all to get in your cars and leave. Don’t say anything to anyone, don’t tell anyone, don’t stop for anyone. Just drive.” John nodded.

“Will we see you again?” he asked.

“I’ll see you again,” he said, nodding. “When I’ve taken care of Sutton, I’ll text you and let you know where your families are.”

“We’ll never be able to repay you,” said John.

“Never.”

“No repayment necessary, other than for you all to find very different jobs in a very different city,” he smirked.

“Why are you here?” asked one of the men in the blue hat.

“None of your fucking business,” said East, staring at the other man. John stepped back, moving toward his friends

as East stood his ground.

“Jefe’s not here to protect you. I don’t care what he wants. I’ll gut you right here on his pretty front lawn.” East laughed out loud, throwing his head back as the man pulled a knife on him.

“You’re going to gut me with that?” he smirked.
“Bring it on, little man.”

Suddenly nervous, the man bounced from one foot to the other, then back again. He gripped the knife, twisting it in his hand as East stood solid, just watching. Down the street, he could see John and the other men getting into their cars, leaving the area as planned.

The man jabbed at East as he turned, twisting out of his way. He backhanded him, knocking him to the ground, laughing as he fell.

“That’s one shot,” said East. “I’ll give you one more. Then I come for you. Fair fight.”

He quickly stood, realizing his reputation was at stake as his friends watched. Thrusting the knife at him once more, East gripped his wrist, twisting the knife out of his grasp. He

threw the weapon into a tree, thirty feet in the air, where no one could reach it.

“Now it’s my turn,” said East, pulling the massive Bowie knife from inside his boot. The eyes of all the men went wide as they backed up. “See, my father and grandfather taught me how to use this knife. They knew exactly how to make it sing. But the real master was a friend of my grandfather’s. A man who understands knives better than anyone in the world. Let’s see if I was a good pupil.”

By the time East left Sutton’s home, there were eleven men dead on the front lawn. None were left, other than those in the tunnels who hadn’t seen a thing. Sutton was going to have a surprise when he got home.

“East? We got the weapons. And the drugs.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Eazee and Tanner entered the old Catholic church, their boot heels clicking on the tiled floor. There was a priest standing at the altar, walking back and forth, repeating words that were written on a sheet of paper.

“Oh, good morning,” he said, raising his head in surprise. “I get lost when I’m practicing my liturgy. How can I help you?”

“Father, you don’t know us, but we have reason to believe that there are weapons being stored beneath this church.”

“Weapons?” he gasped. “No, that’s not possible.”

“Do you know a man by the name of Green Sutton?” asked Eazee.

“Of course. Mr. Sutton gives to the church regularly, quite generously, I might add. He uses our basement for storage of donated clothing items for the homeless shelter. He’s a fine man to have in our parish. We’re fortunate to have him.”

“Father, I hate to disagree with you,” said Tanner, “but Mr. Sutton is a drug dealer, arms dealer, and traffics women and children. He is not who you believe he is.”

“This isn’t possible. It’s just not possible. He wouldn’t do this to us, to the church. There must be some other explanation for what you believe.”

“Father, this can all be settled if you’d just let us look in the basement,” said Eazee.

The priest nodded at the two men, walking toward a side door that led to the basement stairs. At the bottom, he flipped on the light, pointing to the cardboard boxes of clothing.

“See, it’s just clothing,” he said, waving at the boxes.

Tanner grabbed one of the boxes, opening the top to see a few clothing items. Moving it to the side, he pushed the others as well to reveal crates of weapons behind them.

“No,” whispered the priest. “No, he wouldn’t...”

“I’m sorry, Father,” said Tanner. “Mr. Sutton is not who you believe. We’re going to have to take these weapons and get them to the military base.” The man nodded, practically falling into an old folding chair.

“What’s your name, sir?” asked Eazee.

“Father Michael Rios. Just Father Mike is fine. I’ve been at this parish for nearly ten years now. In fact, Mr. Sutton fought to keep me here when the diocese wanted to move me to Houston. Do you know what that looks like? They’ll think he kept me here to help him in this scheme.”

“Sir, we’ll be happy to vouch for you. You’re not the first man of the cloth to be fooled by men like Sutton.”

Almost an hour later, the men of Fort Bliss had the weapons loaded onto the back of a truck, covered from prying eyes and ready to pull out. The same Sgt. Major that had taken in the women and children leaned against the wall of the now-empty basement and practically fell backwards as it gave way.

“Oh, dear!” said Father Mike, running to the man.
“Are you alright? I don’t know what happened.”

“I do,” said Tanner.

The Sgt. Major stepped aside, removing the fallen drywall. Behind the space were dozens of storage crates, their lids secured tightly. Tanner cut the zip tie holding the top in place, gently removing it. Inside each crate was fifty bags of

cocaine. Wrapped, labeled, and secure. Behind them was a tunnel leading into darkness.

“Stay with Father Mike,” said Eazee. “Tanner? Come with me.”

Tanner followed his friend down the long dirt corridor, eventually ending up at a ladder that led upwards. He quietly climbed the ladder, gently pushing on the opening above their heads.

“Where is it?” whispered Tanner.

“We’re beneath the crawl space of someone’s house,” said Eazee. “No idea who it is or where it is.”

“Let’s seal it and blow the tunnel,” he said. Eazee nodded, finding his way back down the steps and toward the church again.

“Where did it lead to?” asked Father Mike.

“Someone’s home. The door opens into the crawl space below the house, which was easy access in and out for whoever wanted the drugs.”

“Oh, dear. What are we going to do?” he said, wringing his hands.

“Father, I need for you to trust us in this. We’re going to set explosives in that tunnel and force it to collapse. It won’t harm the church, but it might be a little dusty in here for a while. If Mr. Sutton comes through here, just let him know that there was a gas leak at a house a few blocks away.”

“A gas leak?” he frowned.

“That’s right. A gas leak. I know it’s not in your nature to lie, Father, but we need you to protect yourself and this church if at all possible.”

“You’re right. I don’t make it a habit to lie, but then again, Mr. Sutton didn’t feel the same when he fooled me all these years, making me an unwilling accomplice in his schemes.” It seemed that suddenly Father Mike had found his backbone. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be able to put on a smile with a note of concern for the poor people whose home was destroyed by the blast.”

Tanner smirked at the older man, nodding.

“I’m going to set explosives on the other end of the tunnel, then close the tunnel at this end by removing the support beams. It should help to alleviate some of the mess that comes through into the basement. Once that’s done, we

can let the explosives do the rest. I suggest you go upstairs and pretend that all is just fine.”

“What about the drugs? Where will they go?” he asked.

“The military will take them to Fort Bliss, catalog, and confiscate them. They won’t be out on the streets of El Paso. Not this time.”

“Very well,” he nodded.

Father Mike followed the others back up to the church, watching as the military vehicles pulled away. A few moments later, Eazee and Tanner came running upstairs, pushing Father Mike to the floor. A loud rumble, then a thunderous sound echoed in the church, dust falling from the rafters.

“Oh, my,” he said, grinning at the men. “That was exciting.”

“We’ll be going now, Father. You can expect that someone from the city, and perhaps even the fire department, will come out to investigate what happened. If you need anything, call the base, and they’ll come out. When Mr.

Sutton arrives, and believe me, he will arrive, just play it cool.”

“Play it cool. Yes, I think I can do that,” said the old man.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

Sutton was not having a good day. Every direction he turned, something was going wrong. The apartment building was nothing except a pile of rubble. He couldn't reach anyone at his home, and he'd just heard from someone that there was another explosion caused by a gas leak.

Racing inside the church, he found Father Mike standing with a group of people discussing upcoming nuptials. The happy bride and groom looked at one another dreamily while the mothers discussed flowers and the fathers discussed just how much this wedding would cost them.

“Excuse me, Father. May I have a word with you?” he asked politely, his face a fine sheen of sweat and anxiety.

“Of course, Mr. Sutton,” he smiled. “I'll be right back. Go ahead and walk around. Think about how you'd like your wedding to look in the evening light. Mr. Sutton, how may I help you?”

“There was a gas leak earlier,” he said, trying to remain calm.

“Yes. Terrible thing. It didn’t damage the church of course, but it did rumble and cause dust downstairs. The city came by to ensure that the building was safe. There was a collapse in the basement, but it appears everything is fine. We’ll just have to patch the hole in the wall.”

“A collapse? A hole in the wall?” asked Sutton, gasping for air.

“That’s right. Unfortunately, it crushed the boxes of clothing, but I don’t think it damaged them.” Father Mike was proud of how easily the lies were coming to his head. After each one, he begged forgiveness, hoping that the Lord understood his reasons for deceit. He knew it wasn’t okay, but he wanted Sutton to suffer a bit for what he’d done.

“May I, may I go and look?” he asked.

“Of course, Mr. Sutton. You know the way.” He smiled as Sutton practically sprinted down the steps. He let him have a few moments, then he followed him.

“As you can see, it’s not all that bad. We’ll have it all cleaned up in no time,” said Father Mike.

“There were other boxes down here,” he said.

“Other boxes? I’m afraid the only boxes I’ve ever seen are those that got crushed by the debris.”

“Was anyone else here? Someone other than the city?”

“Well, the fire department, obviously. And some men from Fort Bliss. They said they were checking to be sure there were no more gas leaks.”

“Dear God,” whispered Sutton, gripping the priest’s shirt with his fists. “Did they take anything out of here?”

“Mr. Sutton, you’re acting irrationally. I was upstairs the entire time with my first communion class. Everything is just fine. We’ll replace the clothing in no time. Please, release my shirt,” said Father Mike.

Sutton glared at him, and for just a moment, Father Mike thought he might do him bodily harm. Finally, releasing the shirt, he quickly went back upstairs. When he left, Father Mike sent a text to the Sgt. Major at Fort Bliss, who then relayed the message to Eazee.

By the time Sutton got to his home, he was ready to kill everyone in his path. Unfortunately, someone had already done that for him. Men were lying across his lawn, covered in blood. Not one of them left alive.

Two of the regular guards from the shed tunnel were standing over them, kicking them with the toe of their boot.

“What the fuck happened here?” he screamed.

“We don’t know. They were late replacing us in the tunnel, so we came up to see what was happening. This is what we found. They’re all dead by knife wound.”

“Knife? Wh-what? No. No, this can’t be happening.” The two men stared at one another and started to walk away.

“Where are you going? You have to stay. Get back down in the tunnel,” said Sutton.

“Sir, we’ve been down there twenty-four hours. We need food and sleep,” said the man.

“Too fucking bad! I don’t have time to argue with you right now. Get back down there. You can have your pick of the girls and extra drugs. Just stay.”

“Fine,” said the man, heading back through the house.

“Wait! You can’t go yet,” he said. “Move the bodies.”

“Move the bodies?” said the second man. “But we didn’t kill them. We shouldn’t have to move them.”

Sutton was so frustrated he pulled his pistol and shot the second man. Turning, he pointed it at the first one.

“Okay, okay. I’ll move the bodies,” he said. “It’s gonna cost an extra hour with Bridget.”

“Whatever. Take two hours, I don’t give a damn. Just get rid of those bodies!”

Sutton went inside, checking to be sure the house had been cleaned as ordered for Rivera’s arrival. What a fucking mess! The guns and drugs were gone, his hostages were gone, the men nowhere in sight. The only thing he had left were his little geniuses in the tunnel and the hope of killing Rivera. He saw East’s pickup truck pull into the driveway and stormed out the front door to meet him.

“Where in the hell have you been?” he yelled.

“I warned you once before about yelling at me. Don’t do it again. I was doing my job. Your bomber is buried beneath the crawl space of a house.”

“The crawl space of a house,” he repeated. “You idiot! That’s where my weapons and drugs were stored! Everything I had!”

“You stored everything in one place?” smirked East, shaking his head. “That doesn’t seem very smart to me, Mr. Sutton. I mean, everyone knows not to put all your eggs into one basket. You have to spread it out.”

Sutton was fuming. The unnatural shade of red in his face made East think he just might drop dead at any moment, saving them all a lot of time and money.

“Go. Just leave,” said Sutton. “Be here tomorrow by four. Rivera will be here at five.”

“Okay, cool. But if I were you, I’d pick up this place. It’s a mess. What’s all the dark stuff on the grass?”

“Blood,” muttered Sutton.

“Maybe get someone to water the lawn. Speaking of, where is everyone? I usually get harassed by the lackeys around here.”

“They’ll be back,” said Sutton, looking around the lawn, then up and down the block. “I’m certain they’ll be back. It just may take some time.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Sutton. Just have my money ready tomorrow when I kill Rivera. The bomber is dead. I’ve

killed Fuentes. One more, and I leave.” East began walking to his truck, then heard Sutton yell his name.

“Wait! East. Wait. What if, what if I paid you triple to stay a few extra weeks. Get my new security team up and running. Teach them.”

“No, thanks. I have places to be,” said East. “Besides, your team isn’t loyal to you anyway.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sutton, frowning at him.

“Who do you think your bomber was?”

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

“That was pretty clever making him believe that one of his own was the bomber,” smirked Tanner. “He’s not going to trust anyone.”

“That’s the plan. Where are we meeting Rivera?” he asked the room. Brooke stepped forward, looking at her phone.

“He’s going to meet us at Pepino’s near the mountain road. We’ve reserved a back room where no one will see us. I’ve ordered some food and drinks so it looks more like a business meeting to anyone on the outside. Rivera is staying at a home he rented, but no one knows where it’s located. I’m okay with that. Then we’re sort of out of the picture.”

“What exactly is the plan with Rivera?” asked Liffey.

“He claims that he has information that will nail the coffin on Sutton. I have no idea what that is, but I hope to find out. Once Rivera is on Sutton’s property, we need to get those kids out of the tunnel.”

“What about the teachers?” asked Sniff, rubbing the head of Zeus.

“Do what you think is right,” said Brooke. “If the tunnel happens to collapse, then so be it. Just get those kids out of there and on a chopper to Belle Fleur. We’ll find out what to do with them from there.”

“That does bring about a dilemma,” said Bogey. “These kids, if they don’t have families, are going to be ‘desired’ by everyone from the government think tanks to universities, and as we already know, foreign governments. What do we do about that?”

“For now,” said Brooke, “no one is aware that Sutton has them. They’ve disappeared from their schools with their teachers. That’s all we know. We’ll do what we’ve always done. We’ll find somewhere safe for the kids, even if that safe place is Belle Fleur.”

“Honey, you need to be prepared for the fact that if anyone finds out about it, they’re going to accuse us of harboring those kids for our own benefit,” said Liffey.

“I know, Dad, but I just don’t see another option for these kids. It doesn’t feel right to turn them over to just anyone.”

“Alright,” he nodded. “I’ll call home and let them know we may be sending the kids that way. Sniff? You and Tanner head back to that tunnel and make sure the kids are okay. I know we’ve got comms operating in there, but I don’t like what I’m hearing from the teachers. They’re getting impatient with Sutton, and their impatience may be directed at the kids sooner or later.”

“We’re on our way,” said Sniff, patting his leg for the dogs to follow.

“Hey, this time I get shotgun,” said Tanner. “I’m not giving up the front seat to Thor.” Sniff just laughed, shaking his head.

“You tell him that.”

“We need to get to the restaurant,” said Brooke. “Let’s go.”

Pepino’s was situated in the shadow of the mountain. The beautiful evening sky was filled with the waning light of day, purple, orange, and yellow glowing behind the peaks. A mix of Mexican and Italian cuisine, Pepino’s had become a favorite in El Paso. That is until the new owners decided to remodel the restaurant and increase their prices by nearly thirty percent.

That played well for the team. The restaurant wasn't as crowded as it once had been. Instead, it was filled with businessmen and their wives enjoying an evening meal. No families. No kids. Very few single professionals.

They were surprised to find Rivera already seated, nursing a cup of coffee. He stood, smiling at Liffey and Mo.

"Gentlemen, nice to see you again," he nodded. "And this beautiful woman must be Brooke. A pleasure."

"Nice to finally meet you face-to-face, Mr. Rivera," said Brooke, shaking his hand. "Please, let's have a seat. Someone will be bringing food in for us in a moment. We're grateful for this meeting ahead of tomorrow's meeting with Sutton. Our team is going to ensure your safety, Mr. Rivera."

"I know," he nodded. "And if they don't, or if they cannot, then it's my time to leave this world. I'm alright with that. What I'm not alright with is Sutton and his games. We spoke of his infatuation with AI technology when we met in Houston."

"We did," said Liffey. "Has something new come about?"

“He’s frustrated that his young geniuses have been unable to make it work the way he wants. As you all are now aware, if he doesn’t get what he wants, he kills those around him.”

“We’re well aware,” said East. Rivera stared at the big man, then at Eazee.

“Twins?”

“Actually, we have a triplet out there,” smirked East. “I’m the man that Sutton hired to kill you. I have no plans of doing that unless you force my hand.”

“I will not be forcing your hand,” he said, raising both of his in the air. “My informants tell me that you or someone, although I suspect it was you, was able to take his weapons and drugs.”

Not one man let on to anything that had happened in the last week. Brooke just stared at Rivera, not making any comment at all.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter who got them out of his hands. It’s done. He has a meeting planned with a North Korean ambassador on Sunday afternoon. The man is flying

into El Paso for only one hour. They are to meet at the airport and exchange their cargo.”

“Cargo?” asked Brooke. “What cargo?”

“The geniuses.” The men all stared at Rivera, then back at Brooke. “As you well know, if North Korea were to get its hands on those children, they would never be found again, nor would they ever be normal again. You mustn’t let that happen.”

“On that, we can agree,” said East. “But I am curious, Mr. Rivera.”

“Lomas. Just Lomas,” he grinned.

“Alright, Lomas. I’m curious. What are you getting out of this? I mean, other than the DEA agreeing to leave you alone for the foreseeable future, what do you get? There’s no money exchange here. No prisoner exchanges. What else is there?”

“Revenge.”

“Revenge? Revenge for what?” asked Brooke. “I haven’t found anything that says you’ve met in conflict.”

“We haven’t.”

“Lomas, we want to cooperate here, but it would be wonderful if we knew what this was really all about,” said Brooke.

“Do you know what’s on the other side of this mountain?” he asked. They all nodded, knowing that the mountain park and the mansion were on the other side.

“We know. Sutton’s late wife’s mansion. What does that have to do with anything?” asked Brooke.

“Were you aware that there is a tunnel beneath the mansion? One that stretches all the way to this restaurant.”

“We were aware of the tunnel, but it stopped at an underground spring. A spring filled with dead bodies and a cave formerly filled with a biochemical weapon.” He let out a long, slow breath, nodding.

“Then you were able to get to it,” he nodded. “That’s good. That’s very, very good. But the tunnel, once upon a time, ran all the way here so that those coming across the border could come into the restaurant and disappear toward the mansion. It may have collapsed, but it was there at one time.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” asked Eazee.

“Indulge me for a moment,” he smiled. “My brother and I met with Sutton on behalf of Ramos nearly forty-five years ago. I was a young man. Just turned twenty-two. My brother was older, wiser, or so I thought. We spent a week here. A week I will never forget.

“Sutton’s wife was very beautiful. Perhaps the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known. In fact, she was perfect. I have never found anyone since that time to compare to her beauty. When I left, I asked her to leave with me, but she refused. She was a few years older than me and didn’t think it would be appropriate. She believed that Sutton was a good man.

“It didn’t take her long to see that he was not. By that time, it was too late. She was pregnant. With our child.”

“Your child?” frowned Brooke. “Morgan is your child?”

“She is. I believe Sutton knew almost instantly that she wasn’t his.”

“Her eyes,” said Liffey. “She has green eyes like yours.”

“Yes,” he nodded with a sad smile. “I only saw her twice after that. Once, when she was about six years old. She was so beautiful, so perfect. She took my breath away. The next time, she was nearly twenty. That’s when Sutton recognized how much we looked alike. I should have taken her then. I should have gone against her mother’s wishes and taken her with me.”

“Why didn’t she let you?” whispered Brooke.

“She hoped to eliminate Sutton herself and start anew. We would start a life together. It was only a few years later he killed the love of my life and then sold my daughter to Ramos. I have been after both men since that time.”

“Well, I’m happy to say that we solved one problem for you,” said East, “but there’s still the matter of Sutton.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “Do you, do you know where my daughter is? Is she safe?”

“She’s safe,” said Liffey. “She’s safe, happy, and, from what I understand, in love.” Rivera’s face lit up with a smile, nodding his head at the happy news.

“Excuse me a moment,” said Brooke, stepping out of the room.

“You cannot allow the North Koreans to get the children, and you must not let Sutton live. If I have to kill him myself, I will.”

“No offense, Lomas, but you’re not exactly a choir boy yourself,” said East. “You sell drugs that kill men, women, and children every day. That doesn’t make you any worse, or better, than Sutton.”

“I know that you’re right, but it feels different. It feels less criminal.” Brooke walked back into the room, her phone in her hand.

“Lomas, there’s someone that would like to see you,” said Brooke, holding up the phone. “Morgan? This is your father. Lomas Rivera.”

“I-I look like you,” she whispered, staring into the screen.

“Mi dío,” he said breathlessly. “You are a vision. Like your mother.”

“I’m not sure what to say. I just found out from Brooke. I mean, I’m glad that Sutton isn’t my father, but you’re in the same business. I don’t know how to feel about this.”

“I know,” he said, nodding his head. “Just seeing you is a gift I don’t deserve. I just want you to be safe. Had I been able to find you when you were with Ramos, I would have come for you.”

“I wish you had. I wish that someone had,” she said, smiling at him. “I’m alright now. I’m safe, and I’m in love.” She moved to the side, showing the stoic face of Kegger.

“He looks efficient,” chuckled Rivera. “And skilled. I can see it in his eyes. You are safe.”

“Will I see you again?” asked Morgan.

“I’m not sure. If we can find a way, I will reach out to our friend Brooke, and see if we can meet up again.”

“I’d like that,” smiled Morgan. She handed the phone to Kegger, walking away. They heard a door shut, and he looked into the phone.

“She stepped out onto the porch. I think she needs a moment. I know what you do for a living, Mr. Rivera, but I won’t judge you for that. I’m in love with Morgan, and I will marry her when she’s ready. If you can find a way to clean up your life, there’s nothing she’d want more than to have her father, her real father, beside her.”

Lomas choked back a sob, nodding his head. He was wringing his weathered hands. He wasn't old, but he was older, and his body was starting to show the signs of his age.

“I will do my best to be the father she needs.” When the call ended, he slid Brooke's phone back to her, nodding. “Thank you. You've given me a great gift.”

“Now, we have to stop Sutton,” said East. Rivera nodded, standing from the table.

“First, get the children out. Then we can end Sutton.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-

NINE

East held Brooke tightly to his chest in the bed. They were fully clothed, the others sprawled between the three rooms. Sniff and the dogs were on the sofa. All of them. Tanner was on the floor.

The children were frightened, and some were sick, according to little Alex. They didn't have much time. They had to get them out of there and fast. The more they questioned Alex and the young girl, Marilisa, they learned that the kids ranged in age from eight to twenty-three. They had been taken from different parts of the country, forced to enter the Einstein school, then, only a few months later, they were kidnapped.

It was a well-executed plan by Sutton and one of his many female companions. One of the teachers. She'd recruited her friends to help, making the four women a part of the ruse and responsible for what was happening.

"I can hear your heartbeat," she whispered.

“I’m nervous. I want you to be safe,” he whispered back. He pulled her tighter, kissing her forehead.

“I’ll stay with Sniff and Tanner to get the kids out,” she said, leaning on one elbow. East looked up at her, surprised by her willingness to acquiesce. “Don’t look so shocked. You and Dad are both concerned for me, and I appreciate that. Hearing Morgan and Lomas connect last night was eye-opening for me. All these years that they’ve missed out on knowing one another, spending time together. I would hate if that happened to me.”

“Nothing will happen to you or to your father. I’ll make sure of it,” he said.

“I wish Lomas had gone after her. Morgan’s mother. Don’t people deserve to be happy?”

“They do,” nodded East, “but sometimes folks can’t see the forest for the trees. It’s so murky and cloudy, they can’t figure out a way to get to where they want to be. Where they need to be. It’s sad really.”

“I agree,” she nodded. East felt the vibration of his phone against his pocket and immediately sat up in the bed. Sniff and Tanner did the same, the noises in the other rooms telling him the others were awake from their naps as well.

“It’s three. I want to get there to scope out what’s happening at Sutton’s before I arrive. I’ve found a two-story house a few blocks away that’s empty. I can climb the roof, get a good shot of the property, and make sure he’s not pulling anything stupid.”

“That seems a given,” said Tanner, smiling at him. They watched as he packed his weapons in his backpack, hiding several on his body beneath the stealth armor. As he reached the doorknob, he turned back and kissed Brooke. Looking at the others, he grinned.

“Remember, don’t shoot this face,” he said, pointing at himself.



Sutton paced back and forth on his front porch. He’d forced his paid whores to come out of the tunnel and clean his house the night before. They whined about it, but when they were given a little extra blow and a little extra green, they were fine with it.

Now, back in the tunnel rooms, he was waiting for East to arrive, then Rivera. The kids were restless, and the teachers, if you wanted to call them that, were even worse.

He'd met Gerta while in Las Vegas for a business trip. She was seated at the bar, looking drunk and willing. Just his type. A little plump on her hips, she had a rack to die for. Lucky for him, she also had a mouth. One that sucked and one that talked.

When she started talking about her work, at first, he wanted to tell her to shut up. Then he heard the word 'genius.' As he questioned more and more, his ideas were rolling around in his head. Just a few weeks later, he learned that the teachers weren't geniuses at all. They were all educators fed up with the traditional system, making shit for money, and were willing to do anything to get what they wanted.

Gerta found three other women willing to sell out the kids at the school. The ones they selected were the ones with no parents, no family, no siblings. They had nothing except one another. From there, it was easy to get them on the bus to El Paso.

The problem was that none of the kids had lived up to their hype. Not one had been able to do what he asked, and he was running out of time.

“Your golden boy is here,” smirked one of the men.

“Shut the fuck up,” he growled. “He’s a means to an end. You make sure that shed is covered, and no one comes near it. I have to have those kids ready to go tomorrow.”

Frowning, the man walked out the back of the house and disappeared into the shed. When the front door opened and East walked in, Sutton said nothing at first. East looked around the house, nodding.

“Glad to see the maid came,” he smirked. “Good impression for Rivera when he comes. Gonna make a mess from where I’m sitting, but that’s your problem to clean up.”

“You know, East,” said Sutton, shaking his head. “If I didn’t need you so much today, I’d kill you right where you stand.”

“You could try,” said East. “I’ll be around. Don’t block my shot.”

“How will I know if I’m blocking your shot if I don’t know where you are?” he yelled.

“You’ll know if you feel the bullet.” East walked out the front door and down the steps of the porch, disappearing in his truck once again. Sutton just shook his head, staring at the empty space that was once filled by the giant of a man.

“I really hate that guy.”



Sniff crawled on his belly to the small opening where the kids were being held. They listened carefully, realizing that the teachers were no longer in the room.

“Alex,” he whispered into the microphone.

“We’re here, sir,” said the little boy. “But you gotta hurry. Marilisa isn’t feeling well, and the others are getting hot.”

“Do they have fever?” asked Sniff.

“I think so,” he said. “I’m scared, Mr. Sniff.”

“I know, buddy. We’re gonna get you out of there, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Listen to me, Alex. I need all of you to get back from the door. Lean against the wall, and if you can, cover your faces with blankets when you start to hear gunshots.”

“Gunshots?” he repeated.

“Yes, son. Someone is coming to get you, and there could be shooting. We’re going to try not to do that, but it might be necessary.”

“You’re gonna need to shoot Miss Gerta for sure,” he said. “She’s got a gun, and she waves it at us when she’s mad. The others just slap us.”

Sniff’s body went into overdrive, his anger rising to the point of destruction. The dogs immediately felt it, growling low behind him. If he could make the hole bigger without endangering the children, he could get a dog through to protect them. But then the women would know that they’d been in communication with someone.

“Just try not to be in their way, Alex. I have to go to the other side now. The next time you see me, I’m going to be coming through the main tunnel.”

“How will I recognize you?” asked the boy.

“I’ll be the man with the three biggest dogs you’ve ever seen.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

East had to give it to Rivera. He had the biggest balls in Texas, pulling up to Sutton's house on his custom-made motorcycle. No guards. No bulletproof glass. Just him, the wind, and a leather jacket. Unbelievable.

From his perch just a block away, much closer than Sutton expected, he could see everything clearly without binoculars or scope. There was no need to have anything except a clear line of sight.

To the west, Liffey and Cowboy were sitting in a pair of lawn chairs in the front yard of an abandoned house. To the south, Matt and Mo were casually walking the block. And to the north, Bogey was waiting for the word from Sniff to move in on the kids.

"Rivera," said Sutton. "Nice bike."

"I like it. Custom-made just for me. It's the way I like things. Just for me," he said, taking a small dig at the man.

"Yes, I seem to remember you like things just for you. Even if they belong to someone else."

"Don't push me today, Sutton. You sold my daughter."

“She is my daughter. I raised her, I put her through college...”

“You killed her mother; you sold her to a madman.”

“Is that why you’re here, Lomas? Are you here to exact revenge on me? Are you here to kill for me making your bitch daughter the personal meat of Ramos?” Sutton laughed, and East could hear every word. The microphones that had been carefully planted around the property were telling them everything they needed to know.

“We’re getting off track,” said Rivera calmly. “What do you want?”

“I want the rest of the plans that your brother had for the AI technology. My experts are having some difficulty getting it to work.”

“And why would you think I have that? I didn’t agree with that technology, and I still don’t. My brother was obsessed with it and made his own grave with it. If he had anything additional, it was in his home in Los Angeles, which I assume you robbed after you murdered him.”

“You knew,” smirked Sutton. “You knew, but you didn’t come to kill me.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m here now,” said Lomas.

Sutton’s smile faded, and he stared at the man.

“Where are the plans?”

“I told you. I don’t have them. This is a waste of time, Sutton. Even if I had them, I wouldn’t give them to you. Besides,” grinned Lomas, “I heard that you’ve lost a lot of money recently. Guns, drugs, people. All gone. How can I be certain you even have your little geniuses.”

Now Sutton was sweating. How could he know about all of that? And if he knew, who else knew? Sutton raised his hand, giving the signal he’d told East would indicate that it was time. When nothing happened, he did it again. Then he saw the big man walking toward them.

“Your time has come to an end, Lomas. Just like your brother. You’re no longer needed. I will own everything from L.A. to Fort Lauderdale.”

East stopped, standing between the two men, looking back and forth.

“Well, kill him!” yelled Sutton.

“I think I told you before. Don’t yell at me,” said East. Sutton was panicking now. His chest rose and fell, the

sweat more pronounced on his face and body. Lomas said nothing, just staring at him.

“You double-crossing son-of-a-bitch.” Reaching for the walkie-talkie, he pressed the button and yelled into it. “Kill the fucking kids!”

East raised his weapon, pointing it directly at Sutton. But before he could pull the trigger, there was another trigger pulled. The bullet hit the middle of Sutton’s chest. Sutton stared at the blood-stained shirt, gasping for air. Lomas didn’t have a weapon, and East knew he hadn’t fired his own.

“I think I owed you that,” said Morgan. Sutton’s expression was one of shock and disbelief. He fell back to the grass, staring straight up as Morgan stood over him. “You should be grateful I didn’t allow the man I love to do this. He wouldn’t have been as kind.” Firing two more bullets into his chest, Kegger gently grabbed the pistol from her, tucking it into his belt.

“It’s done, baby. It’s all done,” he whispered, kissing her temple.

“The children,” said Lomas, looking at East. Nodding, he ran to the backyard. Lomas looked at Morgan, nodding. “Hello. I’m your father.”



The minute Sutton was preoccupied, Eazee, Sniff, and Mo were working their way into the tunnel. The guards outside the women's rooms were so delusional on their own drugs they barely noticed the men. Inside the rooms, the women were the same. Completely overwhelmed with drugs, they were sprawled on their beds, waiting for death to take them. They had no idea how soon he would actually come.

With most of the men gone, only a few remained on the path toward the children. Quickly dispensed of, when they broke down the door to the room with the children, only Gerta stood defiant with her pistol. It was Mo who took aim, not missing a beat.

“Mr. Sniff?” asked a little voice.

“That’s me, buddy,” he smiled. “Come on. We have to get out of here. Fast. Come on, children, let’s go.”

As the children began to follow the men, Eazee noticed one young girl in the corner, huddled down. Her sweatshirt

was pulled over her knees; her head turned as one cheek lay against the top of her knee.

“Honey, come on. We have to get out of here,” he said with compassion.

“Just leave me,” she pleaded. “Just leave me.”

“I can’t do that,” said Eazee. He knelt beside her, lifting her easily and heading back into the tunnel. Sniff stared at him.

“Is she the last?”

“Yep. Get the teachers into the room and blow this fucking place.” Eazee moved toward the light at the end of the tunnel while Sniff along with Cowboy and Matt, who’d joined them, began laying the explosives. When they reached the backyard, all was quiet, and they knew that Lomas and East had done their job.

What shocked them was to see Kegger and Morgan standing over the body of Sutton. The kids were dirty and tired, but all appeared healthy and unharmed other than a few bruises on their cheeks. That alone sent most of the men into protective overdrive.

“We have to go. That tunnel is going to blow in like thirty seconds,” said Matt.

With everyone loaded into the vehicles, they made their way toward Fort Bliss, where they got the kids washed, showered, and changed.

Morgan and Kegger hopped a plane back to New Orleans, no one the wiser of their appearance. Before she left, she was able to have a good conversation with Lomas, who was more than pleased with the outcome of his meeting. The telltale sounds of Steel Patriot pipes rattled the windows as he drove away.

Seated in front of the children as they ate their first hot, healthy meal in weeks, Brooke began to question each of them.

“So, none of you have parents?” she asked.

“No, ma’am,” said Marilisa. It turned out that she wasn’t sick at all. She was starting her period and didn’t want to tell Alex, feeling he was too young to understand. Even she forgot that he was a genius.

“We were all either dropped at the school as toddlers or sent there from orphanages,” said another girl.

“Well, we have some choices to make,” said Brooke.
“We all live in a large community south of New Orleans, Louisiana. It’s safe, well protected, and the people are loving and caring. We can find homes for you there if you’d like to go.”

“Or?” asked Marilisa.

“Or,” smiled Brooke, “we can contact child protective services, and you’ll be placed in foster care or a children’s home.”

“I don’t want that,” said Alex.

“Me either,” said another boy, Nigel. “Me and Spencer stay together. We’re brothers.”

“We’re not brothers,” said Spencer, rolling his eyes.
“We just said that so they’d keep us together.”

Brooke smiled, nodding her head at them.

“Alright, so what I’m hearing is that you’d like to give our home a try. Is that right?” she asked. “If you agree, raise your hand.”

The children all raised their hands, and East smiled at Brooke. These kids were headed to a place that just might smother them in love and affection.

“Wait,” she frowned. “I’m counting seven kids. There were eight. We had four women that we left behind, then there were eight kids. Why is there only seven?”

They all looked around the room, the kids staring at one another.

“Oh, Chelsea’s gone,” said Alex. “She was always really sad and didn’t talk to anyone.”

“That’s the girl I carried out,” said Eazee. “She went to the showers with the other girls.”

“She showered,” said Marilisa. “I was there when she showered. She dressed behind the curtain and then walked out before us.”

“Fuck,” muttered Eazee. “I’ll go see if I can track her down.”

“Alright, kids. Let’s get everyone on board the plane. We’re going to get you somewhere safe,” said East.

“Uh, sir. Can I assume that we never saw these children, nor did we see you or anyone on your team?” asked the Sgt. Major.

“Yes,” smirked East. “You can assume that.”

“Cool. Have a nice flight, sir.”

“Ready to go home, baby?” East asked Brooke.

“I’m more than ready,” she smiled. “I reached out to Fuentes to tell him it was over and done. The locals can clean up the rest of the mess left behind. He notified someone at the agency that he’d heard from a source that Sutton was dead, and his operation was finished. I notified him that I’ll be resigning effective immediately.” East grabbed her, hugging him to her.

“Oh, baby. That makes me so fucking happy.”

Kelsey, Ajei, and Wilson were waiting at the plane to examine the kids as they boarded. Everyone seemed relatively okay, other than the bruises and a little dehydrated and underfed. Alex immediately went to the front of the plane, asking questions of Savannah.

“Where’s Eazee?” asked Brooke.

“I don’t know. He went after the girl. Chelsea,” frowned Liffey. He turned to see him running toward them at full speed.

“What’s wrong now?” asked Brooke.

“She left. She just fucking walked off the base, and the guard saw her get into a car with someone headed west.”

“Fuck!” yelled East.

“I’m going after her,” said Eazee. “Something is wrong.”

“Be careful, brother,” said East, hugging his triplet. “If you need us, we’ll be there.”

“I’ve got a truck. I should be able to find her in no time,” he called back as he ran toward the truck.

“Famous last words,” said Brooke.

“Let’s go home, baby.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

There was no stopping Mama Irene, George, Ruby, and the other senior mothers and grandmothers. With seven little geniuses arriving, they had everyone ready to lend rooms. The school was full, so the only places safe would be the homes of the team members themselves.

While they sat in the cafeteria eating a full hot meal, being pampered and coddled by the wives, Brooke just shook her head.

“I don’t have any clue what to do with them,” she said.

“Well, they’re going to require different attention than normal kids,” said Thomas. “I was lucky that I had my grandparents. They made sure I had a normal life.”

“Normal,” whispered Brooke. “What does that even look like?” Noa and Kelsey walked toward her, both smiling.

“Hi,” said Noa.

“Hi. Is everything okay? You were speaking with the little boy, um...”

“Brady,” nodded Noa. “Listen, Brooke, I know that Kelsey and I are a bit older than this kid’s parents would be,

but we'd love to foster him. Maybe even adopt him if that's what he wants. He's great. The kid knows more about marine life than anyone I've ever met. He's well-mannered, sweet." Brooke held up her hand.

"You don't have to convince me, Noa. If he's willing to stay with you, let's see what happens. There will be a lot of legal sleight of hand by our team to make sure this happens."

"Did she say yes?" asked Brady. Brooke laughed, shaking her head.

"She did, buddy," smiled Noa, pulling the boy up into his arms.

"Does that mean we can go on a boat ride in the bayou now? I want to see the alligators and the nutria."

"We'll go first thing tomorrow, buddy. Let's show you your new room and get you settled," smiled Noa. "Thanks, Brooke."

It seemed the trend. Trevor and Ashley asked to foster Marilisa. The young girl thought it was cool to have a foster mom who was a shrink. Nigel and Spencer didn't want to be separated, so it was Fitz and Zoe who took the two boys. Jax and Ellie were immediately drawn to little Alex, although it

turned out that was a made-up name. His real name was Monroe.

“I hate that name,” frowned the boy.

“But I think it’s a very handsome name,” said Ellie. “I think it suits you. It’s different and strong. Just like you.”

“Yeah?” he asked, looking at her sideways.

“Yep. My dad has a really cool name too. His name is Nine.”

“Like the number?” frowned the boy. “That’s wicked.” The couple laughed, realizing just how much they’d missed not having a child in their life.

“What do you say, Monroe? Would you like to stay with us and see if you like it?” asked Jax.

“I already know I’ll like it. You guys are cool.”

Mo and Ophelia immediately formed an attachment to a curly-haired little ten-year-old girl named Victoria. She seemed to revel in counting everything in her sights. The number of tables, ceiling tiles, salt and pepper shakers, everything. But Mo thought she was amazing, and Ophelia couldn’t get enough of her. Easy choice.

Scout and Hoot were speaking to the last child in the group. Hayes was sixteen, six-feet-three, and barely a hundred and forty pounds. They were worried that he'd been starved, but as it turned out, he just had an incredible metabolism. He thought their names were cool, and they couldn't understand anything coming out of his genius mouth. But they couldn't let the boy go.

Kari, Kat, and Katrina gathered the adults while the kids got dessert.

“Listen, this isn't a done deal. We have to do diligence with these kids and make sure they have no surviving family capable of taking them. I don't want anyone to come back and say we did this the wrong way. If they're here, they grow up just like any other kid. Music, sports, school, and fun.”

“Agreed,” echoed the parents.

“Wait, we don't have to study all the time?” asked Hayes.

“No,” said Hoot. “If you wanna play ball, you can play ball. If you want to play an instrument, you can do that too. We expect you to attend school and get good grades, but we won't force you to study anything all the time.” The boy

just stared at him for a moment, then a slow grin appeared on his face.

“That’s so cool.”

When the kids were finally tucked into their new bedrooms, safe and sound for the first time in their lives, the men met in the grove to follow up on Eazee.

“He’s following the car that she got into,” said East, “but he doesn’t want to scare her or the driver. When they stop, he’s going to speak with her to be sure she’s alright. According to the other kids, she’s over twenty-one.”

“They looked like babies,” said Liffey.

“They are babies,” smirked Luke. “Alright. Let’s give him time to figure this out. We’ll be here for him if he needs us. Good job. Everyone. Brooke? Glad you’re home, honey.”

“Me, too,” she said, hugging East.

“East? I s’pect there will be a weddin’ soon. Don’t you make me wait,” said Mama Irene. “I’m an old woman. I need my weddin’s to make me keep goin’.”

“Yes, ma’am. I promise as soon as Eazee is home, we’ll set a date.”

“Alright. Good night, y’all. Sleep well. You did good today. Because of all of you, them babies got homes. Good homes and good parents. It’s gonna change your lives for the better. Trust me.”

As everyone walked back to their cottages, East took Brooke’s hand in his, slowly walking toward their own home.

“Don’t you think it’s time we did this right?” smiled Brooke.

“Baby, that’s exactly what I was thinking.”

EXCERPT from EAZEE

“I’m not going to hurt you!” yelled Eazee, chasing the young girl. Although chase was an exaggeration. She could barely run. It made him wonder if she was injured.

“Leave me alone!”

“Please, just stop,” he said. “You’re going to hurt yourself.” He looked over the edge of the canyon, even his stomach feeling a tug at the sharp drop below.

“What do you want from me?” she asked with tears streaming down her face. The oversized sweatshirt was dirty, the neck torn slightly.

“I don’t want anything except to get you to safety. Do you understand how dangerous it was to hitch a ride with that man? Do you know what he was going to do?”

“I’m well aware,” she frowned, folding her arms over her breasts. Eazee stared at her, looking her up and down.

“Look, you may not be aware of it, but those North Koreans are after you. I don’t know what you know or what you can do with that beautiful mind of yours, but they know. They want you, and I can’t let them have you.”

“Uggh!” she groaned.

“I know it sucks, but we have to get you to safety. If you’ll just come with me...”

“Ugghh!” she screamed again. Eazee frowned at her, turning back to see the two North Koreans coming toward them along the canyon edge.

“Sorry, honey. We gotta go.” He lifted her into his arms again, realizing why she’d cried out.

“Let me go,” she pleaded.

Eazee sped up, following the trail down the south rim of the canyon, down into the darkness and depths of the most magnificent natural structure in the world. He’d figure out how to get out later.

“Fuck.”

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
<i>RS 1</i>	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
			Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
<i>RS 2</i>	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
			Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
			Nathan	Katrina Santos
			Joseph	Julia Anderson
<i>RS 3</i>	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
<i>RS 4</i>	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
			Julia	Joseph Redhawk
<i>RS 5</i>	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
			Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
			Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
	Will 'Code' Erickson	Hannah Jordan		
<i>RS 6</i>	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn
<i>RS 7</i>	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RS 8	Adele Robicheaux	Clay Duffy		
RS 9	Gabriel Robicheaux	Tory Gibson		
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		
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	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
	Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
<i>RS 19</i>	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	Crow Foster			
<i>RS 19</i>	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
<i>RS 20</i>	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ('Kiel)	Liz Divide
			Jane	Adam Robicheaux
<i>RS 20</i>	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		
<i>RS 20</i>	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		
<i>RS</i>	Chad Taylor			
<i>RS</i>	Woody "Doc" Fine			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Tony Parks			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Alan Haley			
<i>RS</i>	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
<i>RS</i>	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
<i>RS</i>	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
<i>MSB 1</i>	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
<i>MSB 2</i>	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		
<i>MSB 3</i>	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		
<i>MSB 4</i>	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		
<i>MSB 5</i>	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		
<i>MSB 5</i>	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		
<i>MSB 6</i>	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
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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 (deceased) Avery O'Connor	Mathew Scott	
			Kevin Alexander	
SP 11	Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
SP 12	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	
SP 13	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
SP 14	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 Scarlatti			
<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	
<i>RP 1</i>	Dexter Lock	Marie Robicheaux		
<i>RP 2</i>	Jean Robicheaux	Rose "Ro" Evers		
<i>RP 3</i>	Jackson "Jax" Diaz	Joy "Ellie" Dougall		
<i>RP 4</i>	Hunter Michaels	Megan Scott		
<i>RP 5</i>	Carl Robicheaux	Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan		
<i>RP 6</i>	Alex "Sniff" Mullins	Lucy Robicheaux	Caroline Willa	
<i>RP 7</i>	Cameron "Cam" Dougall	Kate Robicheaux	Ian William	
<i>RP 8</i>	Keith Robicheaux	Suzette "Susie" Redhawk	Joseph Alec Keith (JAK)	
<i>RP 9</i>	Eric Bongard	Sophia Ann Redhawk	Billy Joseph	
<i>RP 10</i>	Joseph Redhawk	Julia Anderson	Joseph Billy (JB)	
			Tobias Franklin	
<i>RP 11</i>	Ryan Robicheaux (Holden)	Paige Anderson	Dan Antoine	
<i>RP 12</i>	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	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RP 20	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
RP 21	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
RP 22	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
RP 23	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn	Pierre	
	Jake Fernet	Claudette Robicheaux		
RP 24	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
RP 25	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
RP 26	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
	Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
RP 27	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Alistair Thomas	

RP 28	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
RP 29	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
RP 30	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
RP 31	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
RP 32	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
RP 33	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Forrest Pierre	
RP 34	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
RP 35	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	
RP 36	Magnus Bridges	Addie Patterson	Leif Frode	
RP 37	Hex Vernon	Gwen N'hana	Sebastian Tadzee	
RP 38	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, Rachelle, 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	Willa Avery (Wavy)	
<i>VG-8</i>	Benjmain 'Cowboy' LeBlanc	Autumn Zellers		
<i>VG-9</i>	Rush Anders	Caroline Mullins		
<i>VG-10</i>	Christian Martin	Winnie Pasko		
<i>VG-11</i>	Billy 'BJ' Bongard	Janine Corvallo		
<i>VG-12</i>	Joseph Billy 'JB' Redhawk	Dana Vaughn		
<i>VG-13</i>	Tobias Franklin Redhawk	Gail Mackenzie		
<i>VG-14</i>	Operation Père Noel			

<i>VG-15</i>	Abe Salcedo	Lyra Wolford		
<i>VG-16</i>	Nate Redhawk	Harlow Judge		
<i>VG-17</i>	Mike Redhawk	Sage Marshall		
<i>VG-18</i>	Dan Robicheaux	Finley Xavier		
<i>VG-19</i>	Everett 'Rett' Wolfkill	Casey Islip		

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Bron – Book Twenty-six

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[Christopher – Book Five](#)

[Matt – Book Six](#)

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[Rush – Book Nine](#)

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[Nate – Book Sixteen](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to 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.

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