



40-Yard Line (Gray Wolf Security #13)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Its not often that the team meets a man who could easily overpower them. Bigger, stronger, and looking to find the person who murdered his teammate, New Orleans Fire center, Trevon Marks, is asking for the help of the team. But not everything is as it seems. Football should be a game, an occupation for some, but not a death sentence. The world of semi-pro football is not something the team has explored before. They hope they never have to again. Dirty, cut-throat, all about the money, theyre shocked to learn that owners are killer their players for profit and contracts are signed with no way out. This time the team is going to have a little fun and maybe get rid of some aggression of their own. Who knows, with Alvin they might even invent a new sport. Escape the alligator and you win.

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“Butch Cavet is really struggling today, Mike. He’s had two interceptions for large returns, and he’s been sacked three times. I know that his offensive line needs to step up and make some blocks for him, but I’m just not seeing the same Butch you and I know so well.”

“Man, I couldn’t agree more. You know, give him credit for coming back to New Orleans after being injured to help the team out earlier this year, but once their new starting quarterback was healthy, management should have released him. It makes you wonder what’s happening here and why they keep him on the payroll.”

“I know there are folks at home that think that’s harsh, Mike, but I agree. Forty-two might not seem old to most of us, but for a quarterback, it’s retirement age, and Butch Cavet’s body has taken quite a beating.”

“For sure, Tom. For sure.”

“Ohhhhhh! That hit was vicious, and folks, Butch is not getting up. Oh my, he is not getting up, and he is not moving. This does not look good. Oh my, oh my. Folks, let’s take a break while the medical teams get out there. We’ll be back soon.”

“Sorry, old man,” smirked the defensive lineman from the other team.

“Get the fuck off of him!” yelled the trainer. “Butch, Butch? Look at me, buddy. Oh, shit. Butch, how many fingers am I holding up?”

“H-how many?”

“That’s right, man, how many fingers?”

Butch couldn’t answer. It just wasn’t physically possible to do it. The world was spinning so fast he was about to puke inside his helmet. He spit out his mouthpiece and tried to roll to his side.

“Don’t move, Butch.” The trainer turned to the sidelines. “I need the doctor and a cart!”

“Fuck, Butch, that was a hard one, buddy,” said his center, Trevon Marks. “I’m sorry, man, they came in behind me, and I didn’t see them. I should have had that one. Stay down, man, stay down.”

“We got the flag, Butch,” said his receiver. “Roughing the passer. It’s okay, man. We’ll win this one for you.”

Butch wanted to say something, but every time he opened his mouth, his stomach began to hurl its contents. He felt hands on his body, lifting him gently and then the familiar feeling of the backboard. It should be familiar. He’d been carted off the field seven times in his career. Seven. Most of those were suspected or confirmed concussions, but two were broken bones that he could still feel to this day.

People said football was entertainment. Bullshit! It was a bloodsport with men willing to literally die on the field all for a fucking six-point touchdown.

“Stay with me, Butch,” said the doctor. “This one is bad, buddy. Stay with me. Don’t go to sleep, man. Not yet.”

“He’s bleeding,” said one of his teammates. “Why is he bleeding?”

“I don’t know yet. Get to the sidelines!” yelled the doctor.

The entire team was kneeling in solidarity and prayer, watching, not for the first time, as their teammate was carefully carted off the field. It would be hours before anyone would know his prognosis, and that would be the worst part. Commentators and supposed football experts would proclaim his demise, predict his retirement, and review every possible outcome to the scenario. Everything would be the worst possible outcomes, no one talking about what an amazing guy Butch is or what he could still offer the sport. Nothing but gloom and doom. Unfortunately, that was reality.

In their hearts, they already knew this would be the last time Butch would step onto the field as a player. It was too much. Too many concussions. Too many broken bones. Too many missed opportunities. Just too much.

“I need the scans done immediately,” yelled the team doctor. They whisked him into the training room with x-ray machines, CAT scans, even minor surgery stations where they could stitch someone up or fix a broken bone temporarily.

“I’m alright,” he whispered.

“You’re not alright, Butch. The league isn’t gonna let you play again, son. This is concussion number five.”

“Four,” he said. “Four that were verified.”

“Fine. Four. Four concussions, Butch. You’re not going to be able to function if you keep this up. You’re going to end up with permanent neural damage and possibly physical damage as well. You can’t keep this up.”

Butch didn’t say anything. He knew it wouldn’t do any good. No one would understand how he felt. No one except someone who had been through it with him.

It was hours later, after scans, x-rays, and an ambulance ride to the hospital, before multiple doctors walked into his room to give him the grave news. At least, that's what the looks on their faces told him.

"Well, I can see by your face it isn't good news," he said. He was trying to hold his head still against the pillow. One wrong move, and he'd lose the contents of his stomach. Again.

"Butch, this is Dr. Strange. He's one of the world's foremost experts on concussions and their long-term effects on athletes. He's looked at everything, son, and he agrees with me. You can't continue."

"But it's my decision," said Butch firmly.

"The league could deny your right to play," said Dr. Strange. "I'm not sure you fully understand the severity of this, Mr. Cavet. Let me explain what this could look like for you. The first concussion generally appears with dizziness and blurry vision, insomnia, loss of concentration and memory, psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, and irritability. You've already experienced all of that.

"The intensity of these symptoms depends on the number of brain injuries sustained and the severity of the head trauma. There's no definite number of how many head injuries a person can sustain before permanent damage occurs, but you are definitely at the precipice. Given the number of concussions you've had, I would suspect that you're experiencing brain dysfunction, vision and vestibular system dysfunction, autonomic nervous system dysfunction, and hormone dysfunction.

"The next things that will occur are not pretty. They could place you in a nursing home or other type of care facility. You have already begun a buildup of abnormal proteins that damages brain tissue. Symptoms include memory loss, mood problems, and suicidal thoughts. According to your coaches and teammates, your moods have

been erratic at best.”

“So much for being great teammates,” he scoffed. “My moods have been erratic because my coverage has been fucking awful, and we’ve been getting our asses kicked. Anyone would be moody with that shit happening.”

“Butch, this isn’t funny. We’ve all heard the stories of the guys who have killed themselves because of this kind of damage. Heroes of the game. Guys that everyone thought were made of steel. But they weren’t!” yelled the team doctor.

“Then what? What are you saying? I’m done. I’m no longer a player. I can’t play football. Is that what you’re saying? If that’s fucking true, what am I supposed to do? What?”

“I think you need some time to think about this, Butch. You’re off the roster on injured reserve for the next three weeks.”

“Three weeks!”

“Three weeks, Butch. That or retire now. We’ll reexamine in three weeks and repeat the scans, but it’s unlikely anything will change. Football is a great sport, Butch, but it’s not worth your life.”

The two doctors left his room, closing the door behind them. He stared at the ceiling, then slowly closed his eyes. At some point, he fell asleep, only waking when he heard a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

“Hey, asshole,” smiled his teammates.

“Hey. You guys here to give me my gold watch,” he frowned.

“Brother, we just want to be sure you’re okay, that’s all,” said Petey Rossi. His longtime friend, although that was a stretch, and offensive tackle had been there for him the last ten years on and off as he played with New Orleans. There was a brief break in there where he played in Colorado, but he always wanted to come home. Behind him, Butch caught sight of the young QB that would be taking his place.

“Kurt,” he said briskly.

“Hey, Butch,” he said quietly. “Sorry about all this, man. Really, I am. I know you have to take it easy for a few weeks, but we’ve got Nashville next week. I could sure use some guidance on how to handle their defense.”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure. I should be out of here in a few days but come by any time.” The young man nodded, smiling at him. It wasn’t his fault. He was doing a job. Just like Butch had done his job when selected to take over for the retiring QB two decades ago.

“Butch, you’ve got a lot to offer the game,” said Petey. “It doesn’t have to be on the field. Imagine what you could do as a coach or mentor for new QBs. Or as an analyst. You could even be a scout for a team. You would be able to identify young talent on both sides of the ball. The game needs you.”

“Yeah. Right. Just not throwing the ball.”

“Man, you’ve got a lot to learn, Butch. I’ve been playing more than a decade now, and even I know it all comes to an end sooner or later. Your life isn’t worth it.”

He followed the advice of the doctors for a whole week. One whole week and still, all he could think about was getting back on the field. While the others wore full-on

pads, tackling and hitting, he was working out on the sidelines. He wanted to show them he was good to go.

Unfortunately, his body wasn't ready to go anywhere. He could feel it. Something was different. With his head down, he went into the training room and had one of the trainers draw him an ice bath. It was miserable at first, but the benefits for his aching body were worth it.

"Butch, maybe you need to seriously think about retirement," said the coach. He was chest-deep in the ice bath, staring at the man who'd had enough faith in him to bring him back from the dead pile.

"I'm not quitting. You and I both know that I can recover from this."

"Butch, I'm not sure that you can," said Osterhausen. "Doc says this could be career-ending, and that doesn't even include all the concussions you've had before. The league and the team owners are putting pressure on me."

"The damn concussions aren't my problem!" he said, slamming his hand into the side of the tub. "My problem is that I don't have an offensive line that protects my ass."

"Careful, Butch. Those boys work hard and have protected you for a lot of years. You need to face the facts that you're slower than you used to be, you don't release the ball as quickly, and you're not seeing the open receivers as well. It's natural. We all slow down eventually."

Butch said nothing, turning his head away from the one man he thought would have his back.

"I'll leave you to it," said the coach. "We have to talk about this, Butch. I'm getting pressure from the front office and from the league."

He left the training room, rubbing his bald head, realizing that was why he had a bald head. Forty years of playing and coaching would do that to you. Frustrated? Rub your head. Confused? Rub your head. In the end, you ended up with ulcers and a bald head.

It was nearly an hour later that he decided to finally head home and maybe, if luck were on his side tonight, not be on his wife's shit list. Looking down the hallway, he spotted the lights still on in the training room.

"Damn. He can't even turn off a fucking light."

As he approached the room, he heard the soft hum of the ice bath. Did he leave that on as well? Turning the corner, he stopped, staring at the picture in front of him. What the hell happened?

"Oh, damn."

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“We’ve only got one potential client that’s coming in today. Didn’t really give a lot of information, only that they suspected that a friend was murdered,” said Whiskey.

“Well, I’d say that’s a plus for us. Not for the dead guy, but we could use a break. We’ll take this one and be done until after the holidays. If possible,” said Nine, shrugging with a grin. They always said they’d ‘take a break,’ and the break never happened.

“What’s the word on baby patrol?” smirked Gaspar.

“Maddie and Daphne are both due any day now. I’m honestly surprised that Maddie has lasted this long,” said Wilson. “She’s on bed rest, but those babies are damn near ready to pop out for sure. Then, of course, there’s Brooke, Harlow, Lyra, Dana, and Caroline, all ready to pop at any time.”

“More babies,” smirked Miller. “Mama must be in seventh heaven. Hell, even I’m smitten with all the little ones. Those damn twins of Marcel’s are the cutest kids I’ve seen in a while.”

“There’s something about them that’s a little magical,” said Antoine. “I don’t know what. But they’re different. Like they can read your thoughts or something. They just stare up at you with those big eyes and tilt their heads one way, then the other, and they do it at the same damn time.”

“Who knows?” shrugged Gaspar. “Anything is possible around here.” Ace tapped the doorframe and stepped inside.

“Hey, uh, our client is here.”

“Okay,” said Ghost. “Show him in.”

“Well, I will, but I’m telling y’all right now if this guy decides to get pissed off, you’re gonna need Tailor, Alec, Rory, and the rest of Team Big.”

The men all frowned at one another. Trak stood and moved toward the corner. If needed, he could move quicker on his feet than in a chair. They heard Ace speaking to someone and then the sounds of heavy footsteps. As the man appeared in the doorway, he ducked, turning slightly sideways as he moved through the big frame.

All of the doorways were taller and wider than usual to accommodate the sizes of the men on their teams. If this guy was ducking and turning, that said a lot about him.

“Jesus,” muttered Alec. “That must be what people see when we walk in the room.”

“Team, this is Trevon Marks, center for the New Orleans Fire.”

“I can damn sure see that,” smirked Ian. “Have a seat, Mr. Marks.”

“Just Trevon,” he smiled. He turned to see Alec and Tailor and raised his brows. “Your doors are a bit higher and wider. That’s nice for a guy like me and I suppose for all of you as well. You two played?”

“Some,” said Alec. “High school and a bit in college for both of us. Nothing like what you do.”

“Looks to me like you could still play,” he smiled. The others chuckled, then his face sobered, and he looked down at the table, his massive hands folded in front of him.

“Are you okay, Trevon?” asked Ghost.

“No, sir. I don’t think I am. I’m not sure if you keep up on minor league sports, but we lost our longtime quarterback this week, Butch Cavet. They suspect that he committed suicide, but I don’t buy it for a minute. He’s been my best friend for ten years now.”

“I’m damn sorry,” said Nine.

“Me too. Butch took a nasty hit a few weeks ago, a cheap shot if you ask me. It was his fourth or fifth concussion, and it was bad. Dude was having serious mood swings, forgetting things, acting strange all the way.”

“We’ve all had concussions from our time in service,” said Gaspar. “They’re damn sure no fun.”

“No, sir. They are not. Butch, he was hardheaded and wanted to play again. The league, the doctors, even the team were telling him he should retire. I’d had a couple of conversations with him to get him to see that he could still be part of football without dying while playing. He didn’t care for those thoughts at all.”

“Sometimes, it’s hard to give up all you’ve ever known,” said Ian. Hell, they were all there because they couldn’t give up helping others.

“It is. Butch was being stubborn, but I knew that eventually he would make the right decision. Last Tuesday, we were all on the field finishing practice. Butch was on the sidelines, just riding the stationary bike and doing a few throws and drills with the trainers. We were still going at it, full-on pads, but he went into the training room. He had one of the trainers prepare an ice bath for him.” The men all nodded their heads.

“Coach tried to talk to Butch, but he was being stubborn, so he left him there. A few

hours later, he realized the lights were still on in the training room and went back. There was water and ice all over the floor, and Butch was still sitting inside the tub. He was blue from the cold. And from being dead.”

“Damn,” muttered Antoine. “What did the coroner say?”

“Nothing yet. He says there’s a lot involved with this one, and the league and the owner are calling the shots on it. Butch was never married but had a seventeen-year-old daughter in Arizona. They weren’t close, but Butch did everything in his power to make sure she had a good life, and he was trying to get closer to her. I think they’d made some headway in the last few years, but it was rough going for him. The league is pretty sensitive anymore about concussions, and they want to be sure of the cause of death.”

“Sounds like they’re doing everything right,” said Nine.

“They are,” he nodded, “except there was an obvious sign of death. His wrists were slit. No razor or knife found. No sharp objects anywhere. Only his blood was in the ice bath and on the floor.”

“Nothing?” asked Gaspar.

“Nothing. Listen, I knew Butch. He would have been pissed about having to leave football, but he would never have offed himself. That wasn’t him. He loved life, and he loved the game of football more than anything. Plus, he was determined to make sure Carigan, his daughter, had all she needed.”

“We’ve learned to trust our gut, Trevon. What does your gut tell you?” asked Nine.

“There are so many suspects in my mind I can’t even begin,” he said, shaking his head. “Kurt Michaels is the new starting QB. He’s been waiting in the wings for a

while with Butch starting, and Butch was actually doing a great job of mentoring him. But Kurt's a kid still, twenty-six or so. He was getting impatient."

"That's one," frowned Ian.

"Petey Rossi, offensive tackle. Butch has been really giving shit to the offensive line for not protecting him well enough. I knew Butch. I knew he didn't really mean it, but I can't say it didn't hurt. My body takes a beating trying to protect his ass. Comments like that don't win you friends. Petey was pissed. His contract was up for renewal, and he was hoping to get traded for more money."

"There's two," growled Jean.

"Joe Sheffler was the lineman who hit Butch the last time. The shot was dirty all the way. I have the clip if you want to see," he said, holding up his phone.

Code took the device and connected it to the screen. He clicked on the video, and they all watched as the massive lineman went headfirst into Butch, then leaned over him and pointed.

"What did he say to him?" asked Tailor.

"'Sorry, old man.' Joe's been an asshole for a while now. Taking cheap shots on a lot of people. Usually, as the center, I watch for him and get to him quickly, stopping him. I missed him this time, and I hate myself for it," he said.

"You can't be everywhere at once, Trevon," said Alec.

"It was my job to be everywhere at once. Which brings me to the next person. Me."

"You?" frowned the entire room.

“I have to include myself in all of this. I mean, I didn’t kill Butch, but I was getting pissed at him. He was making our jobs harder and wouldn’t listen to us. Coach Osterhausen, the owners of the team, the Pinken family, hell, I guess I could keep going.”

“Sounds like he pissed off a lot of people,” said Gaspar. “Is there any indication that he had CTE?”

CTE, or chronic traumatic encephalopathy, is a disease directly related to numerous concussions, most commonly in football or other contact sports. But all of the men on the Gray Wolf team knew men who had experienced the same thing in the service.

“It’s one of the things the coroner is going to look at. I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “Butch was different these last few months. I know that Carigan was being a little bitch to her father. I didn’t really mean that, but she was giving him a lot of shit and just being a teenager, I guess.”

“You said they weren’t close,” said Gabe. “Why?”

“Her mom and Butch were a fling. He met her at the pro-bowl, and they spent a hot four days together. The result was Carigan. She didn’t want to marry him, and he felt the same. But he never abandoned that little girl. That kid has gone to the best schools. He bought them a gorgeous eight-bedroom home outside of Scottsdale. She’s had the best of everything, but damn, that girl was nasty to Butch.”

“Was the mother feeding her shit about her father?” asked Miller.

“Naw. I mean, Lara wasn’t like that. She and Butch made decisions together. She never asked him for more money. Hell, she made a good living as a marketing analyst for a big company out west. I don’t know.”

“Should we put the daughter on the list?” asked Miller.

“No. Yes. Fuck, maybe,” he said, shaking his head.

“You’re tired,” said Nine. “Why don’t you join us for lunch, and we’ll talk some more.”

Trevon looked at the room and smiled, shaking his head again.

“Hell, by the looks of all of you, someone knows how to cook, so fuck yeah. Maybe you guys can give me some pointers on this weekend’s game. We play Philly.”

“Let’s go, brother,” smiled Tailor. “I got a play that will work every time.”

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“What is this place?” asked Trevon in wonder. “Better still, what are those amazing smells?” The men all chuckled, slapping his back.

“This is our cafeteria,” said Nine. “You signed a non-disclosure agreement when you arrived today. We all live here. Us, our families, our friends, all of us. We’re all former Special Forces. It’s important for us to keep our anonymity and privacy. Gaspar’s parents, Mama Irene and Matthew, own all of this land. They decided decades ago they wanted their children to come home and built all the homes you see here.”

“Are you their son as well?” he asked inquisitively.

“Yes! Yes, he is,” said Mama Irene, walking toward them. “Now, let me look here. Oh, you’re a fine young man. Fine. Big, strong, smart too. I can tell. Come on, I got a plate filled with fried catfish, gator fries, hush puppies, a little gumbo on the side, and some coconut cake.”

Tailor and Alec were smiling at Trevon, nodding toward the table.

“Come on, man. It’s all good.”

“Oh, I have no doubt. I’m just freaking out a bit. Those are all my favorite foods. How did she know that?”

“Best not to ask, my man,” smiled Tailor. As they took their seats and began eating, Tailor, Alec, and Miller asked a few questions here and there.

“How is the team doing overall?” asked Miller. “My apologies for not following closer. I follow the NFL, but I don’t follow the minor leagues. To be honest, I didn’t even know we had a minor league team in the city.”

“It’s not a big deal, man,” said Trevon. “Our league has only been around for about twenty years. It gives guys like me, who didn’t get drafted out of college, the opportunity to play and maybe be seen by the bigger teams. Problem is, there’s a lot of great talent out there. After a few years, I realized I was making great money, loved New Orleans, and didn’t really want to leave. I’m happy where I am. I also realized that the NFL doesn’t exactly send guys out to scout us. I’m not sure they even know we exist.”

“That’s good that you’re happy,” nodded Alec. “Nothing better than being happy with your work, your life, all of it.”

“I couldn’t agree more. I think that’s where Butch and I had our biggest disagreements. He just didn’t seem to be happy at all, and I couldn’t figure out why. He had no commitments at all. No girlfriend, no wife. He lived in a condo close to downtown, but he paid cash for that with his last signing bonus. He never shopped for new clothes. We all had to force him to buy a suit for our annual banquet.”

“I guess what I’m confused by is what anyone would have to gain from killing him,” said Tailor. “I mean, it sounds like he was going to be forced to retire either way. The doctors wouldn’t have let him play after a fourth or fifth concussion.”

“Money,” said Trevon, moaning as he took a bite of the cake. “Damn, that’s good. Sorry. Money. All of it. If he were gone, it would free up money for the salary cap, the new QB might get more money, the team might have more to play with. It’s always about money.”

“That’s a shitty way to have to live your life,” said Alec.

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said, wiping his mouth. “I was born and raised in southern Indiana on a farm. My folks weren’t poor, but we barely made enough. Tack onto that my size and finding clothes was a serious problem for me.”

“That I can relate to,” grinned Tailor. “It’s how I got my name. I had to sew my own clothes sometimes.”

“Seriously? Hell, I could use some lessons on that. Even now with all the big and tall stores, I find it hard to find good stuff in my size. Anyway, my folks had just enough, and that always seemed just right for me. When we get our bonuses, I bank those as fast as I can. I drive an eight-year-old car, live in a two-bedroom apartment. I bank almost all of it. I don’t smoke, drink, or do drugs. My biggest expense?”

“Food,” said the men at the table at the same time.

“Yep,” he laughed. “I should buy grocery stores as an investment.”

“Pops did that, and we ate his profits,” smirked Miller. “Bought the General Store you passed on the way in. Great food, lots of homemade stuff from Mama and some of the other women. But damn, we could eat away at some groceries.”

“Wait, are y’all brothers?” he asked, pointing to Alec.

“Yep. Him and seven more. We have nine boys and six girls in our family, and if you ask Mama, all the rest are hers too.”

“That’s so cool, man. I’m really glad I met you guys. Football is getting to me lately, and I can’t figure out why. Maybe it’s time I retire and do something else.”

“Well, you’re built for security, so if you ever want a career change, let us know,” said Miller.

“Maybe,” he nodded. “Ironically, I’m not a man of violence unless it’s on the field. I don’t own a weapon, I don’t know how to use one. Don’t laugh, but I’d love to do something with farming or gardening.”

“We would never laugh at that,” said Alec with a sober expression. “It’s honest, hard work, and we owe everything you see here to our farmers, fishermen, and cattlemen. Mama is a fanatic about her gardens, the crops we grow out back, all of it.”

“Trevon, honey, this is Noelle. Noelle owns a landscaping business and greenhouse. I thought you two should get to know one another,” smiled Mama Irene.

“How...”

“Don’t ask, brother. Just don’t,” smirked Miller. “Oh, and the grumpy bastard behind the beautiful Noelle is Zeke Wolfkill, her husband.”

“I’m not grumpy,” he snapped. “I mean, look at him. He’s young, good-looking, and big as a house.”

“Honey, I love you and you only. Trevon? Do you have time to talk about what we do?”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously,” she smiled. “I need help, and I’m getting too old to do all this on my own, in spite of what my handsome husband thinks.”

“You mean you did all these decorations? Alone!?” he yelled.

“Well, the others did help a bit. But this isn’t all of them, and we’re not done yet. If you’d like to learn more, we can take a drive around the property, and I, Zeke and I

will show you around.”

“Man, y’all are the best,” said Trevon. “Yes, ma’am. I’m all in. Fellas, thanks for the lunch and the conversation. I feel better knowing y’all are looking into Butch. If you need me, just reach out.”

“We’ll be in touch, man.” They all shook his hand as he left with Zeke and Noelle. When Tailor stared at the faces around him, he frowned, shaking his head.

“Something is seriously fucked up about this.”

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“Did Butch’s autopsy come back yet?” asked Glenda Pinken, the primary owner of the team.

“Nothing yet. We know that it will show damage from the concussions, but we’re not sure what else,” said Coach Kristopher Osterhausen.

“Kris, you’ve been with us a few years now and are doing a damn fine job. But we can’t have the press thinking we played a man who shouldn’t have been playing,” said Glenda in a condescending tone.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I play guys who are cleared by the medical team, Glenda. Your medical team, hand-picked by you. I don’t have any other choices. Butch should have been placed as inactive a long time ago and slowly worked out, but y’all wouldn’t let me do it.”

“Don’t blame me, Kris. I’m the owner, not a medical professional. I just spend my money so you can win games. Be careful of your language with me. Your own contract is coming up for renewal soon, and you wouldn’t want to have to go back out on the market at your age,” she said, glaring at him.

“You know, Glenda, your constant tone of intimidation and aggression could get you into trouble,” said Osterhausen, standing to leave her office. “Rumor has it the league is already looking into allegations of sexual harassment, discrimination, and a myriad of other issues. You don’t need the bad press. Don’t start with me. I’m not some stupid kid hoping to make it big.”

She glared at the man, slowly standing and pushing her desk chair back. She walked

around the desk, leaning against the edge. At sixty-one, she was a good-looking woman and knew it. Of course, she had enough money to pay for the facelift, the breast implants, the tummy tuck, the liposuction, and her injections as needed. It also didn't hurt that all that was wrapped in Armani and Chanel suits, her feet encased in Jimmy Choo and Christian Louboutin. This was a woman who understood fashion and the difference it could make in people's impressions of her.

Although her siblings were involved in the team, they weren't in charge. One worked in marketing, and the other worked in player relations, happy to be out of the spotlight.

"All of those claims are false, Kris, and I'll prove it. I'll come out on top just like I always do. Do you know why?"

"Why?" he scowled.

"Because I'm rich. Richer than rich. Filthy rich. A lawyer, or ten, will get me off with a slap on the wrist. The accusers will look guilty, I'll be the poor old lady who has too much money tempting all those around me, and my world will be right."

"I'm glad you can justify your actions, Glenda. Don't fuck with this shit with Butch. Let it come to light, whatever it is, whatever happened. Just don't screw with it. He deserves better."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"He has a daughter who deserves to know what her father was really like. I'm going to tell her."

"Kris? Don't forget. If you don't win the game this weekend, you and I will be having a conversation."

“How could I forget, Glenda? You remind me every chance you get.”

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The team always had a great relationship with the coroner's office, but they also recognized that most of the cases they worked weren't related to someone famous. Butch Cavet was a professional athlete, and the whole country was waiting to hear if he had really committed suicide or not.

"Pierre, it's nice to see you, brother," said Dr. Thibodeaux. Felix Thibodeaux was a homegrown boy. He'd gone to high school in New Orleans, college at UNO and Tulane, and had been with the coroner's office for almost twenty years now.

"Felix, how are things? How's your mama?"

"Good man, always good. She's retired and involved with all the church ladies," he laughed.

"I know that's right," smirked Miller.

"You said you wanted to see me about Butch Cavet."

"We've been asked by one of his teammates to look into this. He doesn't believe that he committed suicide."

"There seems to be a lot of speculation about how he really died," nodded Felix. "This one has me stumped, Pierre. I'm not usually stumped. If I were a different man, I'd stamp suicide on the death certificate. But I'm not that man. It's too easy. Too simple. The marks on his wrists are clear, cut at the right angles, all of it. But there was nothing found near him."

“How would a man slit his own wrists, get up and put away the razor blade or knife without dripping any blood, and leaving no evidence? I’ve never seen that trick in all my years.”

“It does seem too easy,” frowned Miller.

“What about his brain health?” asked Wilson. “Any signs of CTE?”

“Man, that’s the sadness in all of this. His brain was riddled with scar tissue. They claimed he had four or five concussions,” he said, shaking his head. “More like eight to ten. He had to have been suffering from headaches, mood swings, possibly even mild psychotic episodes.”

“Shit,” muttered Wilson.

“That ain’t all, brother. That man has had his throwing shoulder dislocated twice, three ribs broken, four broken fingers, a fractured ankle...”

“Wait,” frowned Miller. “We read the reports on him and only the fingers and ribs were in the medical on him.”

“That’s right,” nodded Felix. “They didn’t tell anyone. It was all hidden.”

“Jesus, who knew football was so fucking cutthroat. I guess we knew. I mean, I remember my high school coach asking me to suck it up and play through the pain. Mama gave him hell for that.”

“I’ve done a bit of research on CTE, Felix. Can you give us any further insight into this?” asked Wilson.

“Yeah, let’s go get a coffee,” he said, covering Butch’s body. “He ain’t going

anywhere.”

Locking the body in the cooler once again, he told his assistant not to allow anyone near the body until he returned. They were well aware of the hype around this case and weren't about to make any mistakes.

Although it was cool outside, the sun was out, and the three men grabbed coffee and took a seat at one of the wrought iron tables.

“So, CTE,” said Felix. “Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, or CTE, is a progressive degenerative disease, as you all are aware. It affects people who have suffered repeated concussions and traumatic brain injuries. You’ve seen it in those that were hit or affected during the military. The more common occurrences are in athletes who have repetitive head injuries.”

“Wasn’t there a book or movie about this?” asked Miller.

“There was. In fact, that doctor helped to change the way the game treated concussions. Or at least that’s what we thought. He was a coroner, just like me, but he was seeing this more and more in the brain during autopsy. He’s my personal hero,” smirked the man.

“Anyway, the causes of it can be repeated head injuries, especially in contact sports like football, boxing, and hockey, military service, or even domestic violence where the victim is hit in the head repeatedly.”

“Would he have been angry a lot? What kinds of signs would he have shown?” asked Wilson.

“Cognitive problems are the most common, such as memory loss, confusion, difficulty concentrating, and mood changes such as depression, anxiety, and

aggression. All of those things should have been recognized by the medical staff. The ones that his teammates spoke of were his behavioral problems, such as being impulsive and irritable. He might not have been sleeping well, either. His coach mentioned that he was slower than usual, not releasing the ball as quickly. That could be related to motor problems, such as tremors and difficulty with balance.”

“There’s no doubt that he suffered from this?” asked Miller.

“None. We’re still doing some studies, tissue samples, all of that, but that man should not have been playing football.”

“If he were diagnosed, or at least spoken to about the possibility, what was the treatment for this?” asked Miller.

“There is none. His career would have been over, and his life would have been very different. Some therapies and medications can lessen the effects of the symptoms, but there is no cure. If he was diagnosed, or there was a suspected diagnosis, and the team covered up for financial reasons, well, that’s your wheelhouse.”

“Shit,” muttered Wilson. “It looks like they covered up a lot with this guy, but was it so much that they would try to make it look like he committed suicide?”

“We’re talking millions of dollars owed to him. Millions,” said Felix. “His life expectancy would change, not to mention all the injuries that were covered up by the team.”

“Damn, I really hate this,” said Wilson. “It’s not like this guy was seventy. He was still young.”

“I understand he has a daughter in Arizona,” said Felix. “My suggestion would be to get someone to speak with her. Ask if his moods had been different, anything strange

in his behavior.”

“Thanks, Felix. You’re always the best,” said Miller.

“Tell your Mama I want a coconut cake for this one,” he grinned.

“Done,” laughed Miller. He and Wilson walked away from their friend, weaving through the holiday crowds on the street. Wilson gripped Miller’s arm and pointed up to a billboard.

Memorial Service for our beloved longtime QB – Butch Cavet – Saturday 1:00 p.m. at Fire Stadium.

“Somebody’s trying to send a message to the public,” frowned Wilson.

“We’ll get to them. First, I want to know about the daughter.”

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Scottsdale, Arizona is a beautiful desert town filled with young professionals and retirees alike. Littered with high-end shops, golf courses, swimming pools, hiking trails, and mountains, the beauty of the Southwest shines through in her gorgeous desert terrain.

Having called Lara O'Connell, Carigan's mother, Mac and Gabe headed toward the address. They knew it was a gated community, but seeing the massive homes really hit them on how well Butch had taken care of them both.

"Damn. This is really something," said Mac.

"Yeah, but why a mansion for just a woman and her daughter? Did he hope to come back here one day and live with them?" asked Gabe.

"I don't know," he said, stopping at the gate.

"Help you, gentlemen?" asked the guard.

"We're here to see Lara O'Connell. We're with Gray Wolf Security," said Mac.

"Yes, sir. Ms. O'Connell told me you were coming. Follow this road around the bend, then take the first left. Her house will be third on the right up against the mountain."

They thanked the guard and followed the directions, easily finding the house. The reddish-pink stucco seemed to blend in seamlessly with the earth around the house. There was a massive double front door of custom ironwork.

Ringling the doorbell, the two men stared at one another and waited.

“Hello. You must be the two men from Gray Wolf. The guard called to tell me you were here,” said the pretty woman. “I’m Lara O’Connell.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m Mac, and this is Gabe.”

“Please come in,” she said with a wave. She pointed to the massive great room and the steaming pot of coffee waiting for them. “I figured you guys might need some coffee.”

“Always,” smiled Gabe. “We’re terribly sorry for your loss.”

She nodded, swallowing as tears filled her eyes.

“Butch and I weren’t a couple any longer. Hell, I don’t know if we ever were. We spent a week together a lifetime ago. But from that, we got Carigan. She was the light of our lives, and Butch did everything in his power to give her the life he’d dreamed of as a kid. All of this is because of him.”

“We understand that you work as a marketing executive,” said Mac.

“I do,” she said with pride. “I love my work, and I love keeping busy. Carigan is involved in a lot of things at school, so that keeps me busy as well.”

“How is she taking all of this?” asked Gabe. Lara looked up at the man and shook her head.

“Carigan’s relationship with Butch was complicated. She loved him. Adored him even. But she couldn’t understand why, if we were such good friends, we got along, why he couldn’t marry me and come and live with us. She wanted her father present

all the time.”

“I can understand that,” said Gabe. “A child wants their father present. It’s good that the two of you got along so well.”

“We did,” she smiled. “We were like best friends. I think that’s what we were really good at. I never once felt any ill-will toward Butch. He was a good guy. Handsome, smart, determined, dedicated, and he loved his daughter more than anything in the world.”

“Lara, was he different lately?” asked Mac.

“Different? Different how?” she frowned.

“I don’t know. Maybe his moods were erratic, or he seemed confused.”

“No. Not that I saw. He called us almost every day. He texted Carigan morning and night and called whenever their schedules didn’t conflict. In all the years I’ve known him, he never once lost his temper with her or me.”

“He sounds like a great man,” smiled Gabe.

“He was,” she said softly. “He truly was, which is why this doesn’t make sense. Butch had been talking about maybe taking some time away from football and coming here for a while. Carigan was so excited. Everyone knew who her father was, but she never shoved it in their faces. She was proud of Butch.”

“His center, Trevon, said that sometimes they didn’t have a great relationship,” said Mac.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” said Lara nervously, twisting her skirt between her fingers.

“Butch was very protective of Carigan. She wanted to move in with him there in New Orleans, and he refused. He didn’t want her exposed to the media and all the bullshit that those players have to go through. She, of course, took it as a sign that he didn’t love her. They worked through it, and she understood. Another time they argued was when she got her license. She wanted a Mustang, and Butch refused. He said she would start with a used, safe car, and I agreed. She needed to learn responsibility and show that she could handle the burden of a car.”

“Sounds like solid parenting to me,” smirked Gabe.

“Thank you,” she grinned. “We thought so. No, they got along great, and any arguments they had were more about not being together or just the usual teenage angst that we all go through.”

“I noticed that you and Carigan have the same last name. Did you remarry?”

“No. In fact, I’ve never dated anyone. Neither did Butch,” she said with a painful smile. “Butch wanted her to keep my name, not his. He hoped it would keep the spotlight off of her and allow her to have a normal life.”

“Was it that bad for him?” asked Mac. She stared at the two of them, tilting her head.

“You don’t know?”

“Know what?” asked Gabe.

“Butch was thrust into the spotlight by his overzealous father. He was billed as the next great quarterback of the twenty-first century. While in high school. His father had people following him around, making sure that he was always doing the right thing. He wasn’t allowed to eat fast food, go to movies, attend parties, nothing.”

“Damn,” muttered Mac.

“It made him an outsider. When he went to college, he was encouraged to get his degree in three years so he could join the draft after his third year of play. He’d get injured, and his father would push him to play through it. So did the coaches and medical teams.”

“Is his father still living?” asked Gabe.

“No. No, if he were, I’d have talked to him about all of this because that man was an abuser. Maybe not in the traditional sense, but he abused Butch and his talents.”

“I’m really sorry about all of this,” said Mac. “He sounds like he was a good man.”

“One of the best,” she nodded. The front door opened, and a beautiful young girl walked in dressed in a private school uniform with a book bag over her shoulder.

“Mom! I’m home,” she called. “Oh. Sorry. I didn’t know someone was here.”

“Carigan, this is Gabe and Mac. They’re trying to find out what really happened to your father.” She stared at her mother a moment, then back at the two men.

“That’s easy. The team killed him.”

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“She said the team killed him,” said Mac into the speakerphone.

“Did she say why she thought that?” asked Gaspar.

“All she said was that her father wanted out of football, but he wanted out in his own way. It doesn’t make sense with everything that everyone has been telling us about him. Why would he insist on continuing to play if he wanted out?”

“I don’t know. Are you guys on your way back?”

“Tomorrow,” said Gabe. “Lara and Carigan both suggested we go speak with a woman in Tucson whose father played with Butch. They just said we’d find it interesting.”

“Well, that’s not strange, is it? Alright. Just be careful and let us know if you need anything.” Gaspar ended the call and turned to Ian, Ghost, and Nine, shaking his head. “This is just fucking weird. I think we need to speak with Trevon again.”

“I’m up for a drive. Let’s go.”

“They’re probably at the practice field prepping for the game,” said Ian.

The drive into New Orleans was more crowded than usual with the holiday traffic picking up. Temperatures were cooler, offering soothing breezes. After showing their ID and explaining why they were there, security finally allowed the four men onto the field.

Standing on the sidelines, they watched as the coaching staff barked orders, pulled men aside to give them shit for not performing, and patted their new golden boy quarterback on the head every time he did something right.

“Seems like they’re pleased with their replacement,” said Ghost.

“He definitely seems happy. Look at the faces of the others, though. Look at his offensive line. They’re definitely not happy,” said Nine.

Lined up to run a play, the defense came forward as if to get to the quarterback but, instead, dove toward Trevon.

“Oh, damn,” muttered Gaspar. “That was a fucking cheap shot.”

Trevon jumped off the ground, shoving the defensive lineman.

“What the fuck!” he screamed. “This is practice, asshole, and I’m on your damn team.” The other man just smiled, flipping him the bird. Whistles blew, and the coach threw his hands up.

“Alright! We’re done. That’s it. Hit the showers.”

Trevon looked up and noticed the four men giving a nod. As he walked toward them, others slapped his back, shaking their heads.

“Hey, man. That looked like it hurt,” smirked Nine.

“Fucking asshole is what he is,” said Trevon.

“Wasn’t that part of the play?” Ian asked innocently.

“Fuck no. He’s pissed because I’m digging in on Butch. He thinks I should leave it alone. I can’t, y’all. I just can’t.”

“Hey, Trevon. You okay?” asked a young man.

“Yeah. I’m good. Fellas, this is Kurt Michaels, our new quarterback.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Nine. “We’re investigating Butch’s death. Maybe we could ask you a few questions later.”

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah, sure,” he said nervously. “I’ll see you later, Trevon.” He quickly walked off, not looking back as he headed to the locker room.

“That seemed odd,” frowned Ian.

“He doesn’t like any questions about Butch at all. I think he feels like people are thinking he should have refused the starting position, but that’s ridiculous. If he did, he’d have lost millions of dollars and might not ever play again. He’s a kid. He’s got a bright future ahead of him. He just needs to learn to manage the media better.”

“Trevon, we wanted to speak with you about something that Carigan told our guys. They went out to visit her and Lara, and Carigan said her father told him that the team was trying to kill him. She said that he repeated it several times. What do you think that’s about?” asked Gaspar.

Trevon looked around, seeing some coaches and other staff cleaning up the sidelines. He didn’t want anyone to overhear the conversation, so he waved the men onto the field, standing at the forty-yard line.

“Butch wanted to finish his career here in New Orleans. One last year. But he wanted to do it his way, through the injuries and no sidelines.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” said Ian.

“No. No, it doesn’t. The team had said that he was injured and needed to leave because they wanted Kurt to move up to the QB slot. If he left due to injury, he wouldn’t get his full payout. The payout he wanted to have for Carigan’s future. If he died, as he obviously did, there would be an autopsy, and he said that the team would find themselves libel.”

“Libel? For what? His injuries?”

“I don’t know. I’m guessing so. If you asked the owner, she would say they wanted Butch to play as long as he was healthy. Butch said they encouraged him to play until this last concussion when they wanted him to retire. It’s a million different stories, and none of them feel like the truth.”

“What do you think the truth is?” asked Gaspar.

“The truth is a mix of lies, man. Butch said he wanted to play but was blaming everyone else for his injuries. Coach said he wanted Butch to go on injured reserve but that the owners wanted him to retire. If you ask the owners, their line is that Butch was their guy. I can’t even filter through all the bullshit anymore. To top it off, I heard Glenda, the owner, yelling at coach this morning because the autopsy wasn’t complete yet.”

“Why yell at him? He doesn’t control that,” said Ian.

“That’s what he said, but apparently, the league is putting pressure on her to produce the autopsy so they can lay this to rest. It all fucking sucks,” he said in frustration.

“Hey, man, we didn’t mean to upset you,” said Nine. “We know you’ve got a big game tomorrow. Just focus on that.” He nodded.

“I’ll try. Hey, how was Carigan and Lara?”

“Our guys said they were good. They both loved Butch,” said Gaspar. He nodded again, biting his lower lip. “Trevon? What aren’t you telling us?”

“Lara and I had been seeing one another,” he said quietly.

“Fuck,” muttered Ghost. “You didn’t think to tell us this?”

“Look, she lives in Scottsdale, so it’s not like I could see her that often. We got to be friends the last few years, trying to help Butch. Lara’s three years older than I am, but it didn’t matter. We totally clicked. We kept it quiet because we didn’t want Carigan upset by it all, and we didn’t want the press to find out.”

“Did Butch know?” asked Ian.

“We think he did, but he never said a word to me. He loved Lara, but he wasn’t in love with her. He wanted what was best for their daughter, that’s all.”

“Are you sure?” frowned Nine.

He stared at the four men in front of him, then turned, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Looking up at the press box, he saw the face of the owner and turned back to the men.

“Honestly? No.”

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“This is the place,” frowned Mac, staring at the rundown home. “I thought this guy was a teammate of Cavet’s.”

“That’s what Lara said, but damn, this is sad looking. Come on,” said Gabe. They stepped up to the door, knocking softly at first, then a little harder.

“Can I help you?” asked the young woman.

“Lara O’Connell called about us speaking to you. I’m Gabe, and this is Mac,” he said with a smile.

“Oh, yes. Sorry, it’s been one of those mornings. Come in,” she said, opening the door. Behind her, a large man stood from his chair, reaching for a baseball bat. “Dad! Dad, no! Dad, they’re friends of Butch’s.”

Gabe and Mac readied themselves for potentially having to take the man down, but he was a big bastard.

“Please, just have a seat at the end of the sofa,” said the woman. “Dad, let’s take your medicine, okay. Here you go.” She handed him the three pills, and he willingly swallowed them. Gently, she pushed his hair from his eyes, then kissed his forehead.

“Can I ask what’s wrong with your father, Ms. Hardesty?” asked Mac.

“Kelly. I’m just Kelly,” she smiled. “If you ask the league, it’s dementia due to multiple strokes. If you ask his doctors here, it’s CTE-related traumatic brain injuries.”

“I’m asking you,” said Mac. She stared at him and nodded.

“All of the above. Let me ask you two something. How old do you think my father is?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe fifty-five?” said Mac, looking at Gabe.

“I’d say fifty-five to sixty,” said Gabe.

“My father just turned forty-four. I’m twenty,” she said. “Twenty, and I look almost as old as he does because I’ve spent the last five years taking care of him. When they told him he couldn’t play any longer, my mother emptied our accounts and left. Before I could get everything else frozen, we lost our house and ended up here.”

“I’m damn sorry,” said Mac.

“It’s okay. Sorry, that’s not why you’re here.”

“Actually, it might be why we’re here,” said Gabe. “Did your father have multiple injuries and concussions?”

“Seven,” she said with tears in her eyes. Her father’s big paw reached out, gripping her tiny hand, and he smiled at her.

“Don’t cry, Kelly. I’ll be better tomorrow.”

“I know, Dad. You’re better today,” she grinned. “Are you tired? Would you like to take a nap?” He nodded, and she helped him up, walking toward the back room. A few minutes later, she came back out and sat down, her head in her hands.

“You’re exhausted. You need help,” said Mac.

“I couldn’t agree more. The problem is I don’t have the money for help. Lara and Carigan come down every now and then and help when they can. Lara sent a guy to fix a few things around the house, but there’s so much,” she said, shaking her head.

“Why isn’t the league helping your father?” asked Mac.

“Dad was in a car accident right before he left the league. They claim his injuries were related to the accident, not his time playing. The doctors have disagreed, but the league doctors are saying that he never reported his injuries to them.”

“Did your father play with Butch?”

“He did,” she nodded. “They played together in college and then on different teams for a while. Eventually, Dad’s last few years were with New Orleans. He was a defensive end. He was hit a lot. Two months before the accident, he twisted his knee. They said it wasn’t anything serious, but they were injecting his knee non-stop, and he was taking all these anti-inflammatory medicines and pain medicines. Our family doctor said the combination is what led to the last stroke.”

“And I bet the league argued with that,” said Mac.

“The team did, for sure. The league says it’s a team matter.” She turned to look down the hallway and then back at the men. “He has good days and bad ones. Today is in between. He’s still strong as an ox. Before you ask, he’s never hurt me. I don’t think he would.”

“He might,” said Gabe softly. “He doesn’t know his own strength right now, Kelly. He doesn’t understand the things in his head.”

“He has no one else. Nowhere else to go. I will not put him away,” she said defiantly.

Mac nodded, holding up a finger. He dialed home and asked to speak with Ashley and Bree first. Then, they brought in Riley and Suzette. The young woman listened to all the strangers, answering their questions.

“We’re going to send some help for you, Kelly,” said Riley.

“What? I don’t understand.”

“We have some connections in the area. We’re going to ask a nursing team to come out and help you with your father. We’ve also sent a message to a contractor we know in the area who will come out and get everything straight with the house. You won’t have to worry about a thing.”

“Wh-why would you do this?” she croaked.

“Because you need the help, and we can give it. That’s all. It looks as though your house is paid for, but it’s not exactly well-maintained. We’re going to give it a good spruce up and make sure it will last you and your dad for a long time. The medical staff will provide a break for you so that you can leave and not worry about your dad. Whatever you need, they’ll help with.”

“Oh, my God,” she cried. “I can’t believe this. Do you know how long I’ve prayed for someone to help me?”

“It can be overwhelming, honey. We can see that. We’ll check in on the house to be sure things are getting done, but don’t worry about it for now,” said Gabe.

“You’ve taken a huge burden off my shoulders. I just didn’t know what I was going to do. I can’t leave my father alone, and I can’t take him places with me. He gets overwhelmed in crowds. It’s why we live in the country so that it’s quieter for him.”

“We can understand that,” said Gabe.

“Honey? Is everything okay?” asked Ed.

“Yes. Yes, Dad. It’s all good. These men are trying to find out what happened to Butch. They’ve offered to help us too. Isn’t that nice?”

“I don’t like charity,” he said, frowning. He looked at his daughter’s sad face, then back at Mac and Gabe. “But I want my daughter to have a good life. I told her to just put me in a home.”

“We don’t think that’s the right choice, Mr. Hardesty,” said Mac. “Being here with your daughter is a good choice. You just need a little support.”

“I’m feeling good right now. Clear. If you want to ask me questions about Butch.”

“That would be great,” said Mac. “Were you aware of all of Butch’s injuries?”

“Hell, yes. Everyone on the team was aware of them, but we were told under no circumstances were we to speak with the press or anyone else about them. Same as my injuries. Butch was a tough bastard and had played through broken bones, torn muscles and tendons, everything. Playing in this league has been like the leagues of old when they didn’t give a shit about their investments.”

“Was Butch behaving differently because of the concussions?” asked Gabe.

“You mean, was he acting like me?”

“I didn’t mean anything by that, sir.”

“It’s okay. I do act differently, and I know it. I just can’t seem to stop it. Butch was

just starting to see the same signs. He was terrified that he wouldn't be there for his daughter. This league isn't like the big leagues. If you're released for medical reasons, you get nothing. You don't get your bonuses or pay out your contract. You're paid through the date of your last game. That's it."

"That sounds illegal," said Mac.

"Maybe, but it's in the contracts we all sign. Worse than that, if you're injured outside the game like I was, then they don't cover a damn thing and blame any past injury on the accident."

"But broken bones can be shown to have occurred years before," said Mac. "They couldn't blame that on an accident."

"All I know is what happened to me and what was happening to Butch. He wanted to finish the season, get his bonus and payout, and then he'd leave. The owners wanted him gone so they could free up their cash."

"Jesus, this is all so fucked up," said Mac. "Kind of ruins my dreams of what football life is like."

"Don't get me wrong," said Ed. "I loved playing the game. I breathed, ate, and slept football my entire life. Hell, it got me Kelly. Her mother wouldn't have chosen me unless I was playing ball." Mac and Gabe looked at the young woman uncomfortably.

"It's okay. He's telling the truth. Mom wanted to marry a famous athlete, and she did. When he wasn't famous any longer, she was done."

"I'm sorry," said Mac.

"You boys seem like good, fine men. I want to ask a favor of you."

“Anything,” said Mac.

“If something happens to me, if I die, I want Kelly to call you first and get here as fast as you can. You take me to the coroner. Choose the one you want. You make sure my death is handled right and the truth comes out.”

“Dad,” she whispered, shaking her head.

“No, Kelly. You know this is how it should be. I don’t want her to have to deal with all that.”

“You have our word,” said Mac. “We’re going to leave all our contact information for you.” They heard trucks pulling up outside and smiled. There was a general contractor truck, plumber, electrician, and roofer. A few seconds later, a landscaping truck pulled up.

“You guys got here fast,” said Gabe at the door.

“When we get a call from you guys, we move,” smiled the man. A young man stepped from the truck and looked at Kelly standing behind Gabe.

“Kelly? Kelly Hardesty?”

“Oh, my gosh! Henry! I haven’t seen you in years!”

“Since high school,” he smiled. “My dad owns the construction company, and I work for him now.”

“Why don’t you two get reacquainted, and I’ll start looking at what needs to be done,” said the older man.

By the time Mac and Gabe left, the contractor had laid out everything that would get done to the house and ensured Ed and Kelly that they would be provided temporary housing until the work was done. Almost everything had to be either repaired or redone in the home. When it was done, the house would look brand new.

“We’ll be in touch to check on things,” said Mac. “If you think of anything else, just give us a call.”

“Thank you,” said Kelly, shaking her head. “Henry is going to help me with Dad until the medical team arrives. After that, he’ll help us get to the temporary housing. We don’t have a lot, so packing things up should be easy. Henry said that the temporary housing will have dishes, pots and pans, towels, everything. I was worried about moving Dad to a place that was unfamiliar to him, but Henry said that it would be quiet and somewhat similar to this house. I don’t know why, but I trust him.”

“He seems like a nice guy,” smirked Mac.

“He was. He is, I think,” she said. “I don’t know. I haven’t been able to think about dating with Dad here. Maybe now I can.”

“You’re young and have a life to live, Kelly. Don’t forget to live it. Your dad will be okay.”

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Holiday decorating was full-on at Belle Fleur. The trees had been placed on the porches as well as inside the cottages and cabins. The big house was being decorated, and even the island with the animals on it had lights on the trees, wreaths, and a number of festive signs.

Gaspar stared at the animals from the dock of the island, shaking his head. It looked like Santa's village, with all of the animals donning red ribbons around their necks.

"Red ribbons? Seriously? We're putting red ribbons on their necks," he frowned.

"Mama insisted," smirked Antoine. "She said the animals feel better when they're decorated like everything else."

"I cannot fucking believe this. How much did ribbon cost for the necks of bison and elephants?"

"Does it matter?" laughed Rafe.

Gaspar punched his brother's arm, sending him stumbling as he laughed. He turned to stare at the menagerie and shook his head again. Then, seeing something strange, he looked back at the men.

"Are those live turkeys?" asked Gaspar, opening and closing his mouth in shock.

"Uh, yes," said Sly.

"Explain. Why do we have live turkeys? Are we serving them for dinner?"

“Not those,” said Jean. “Mama wanted to give them a pardon, sort of like the president does every year. You know, it’s her kingdom and all, and she thought it was a good idea considering Mr. Babin and his sons were hunting them, and they wandered onto our land. They asked permission to hunt them, but Mama refused. Instead, she brought them here.”

“So, we can’t eat them. We can’t hunt them, and we can’t let Mr. Babin have them. Why the hell are they here?”

“I guess so they can have a good life,” smiled Baptiste.

“On my tombstone, I want it to say, ‘driven mad by his mother.’ Everything else okay with the animals?”

“Babies.”

“Fuck!”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!”

“Shit!”

“Trak, I swear I am going to shoot you one day. I’ve been saying it for years, but I’m getting too old for that shit, and my trigger finger is itchy as hell,” said Gaspar. “What babies?”

“Two of the bison are pregnant, and Alvin is expecting with Tammy.”

“Well, please congratulate them for me. Are they registered anywhere? Should I buy them something specific for their dozen baby alligator eggs!” yelled Gaspar. Trak just stared at him, shrugging.

“Maybe they’d like matching Crocs for their kids. Get it,” smirked Code.

“I will beat the hell out of you,” said Gaspar. “How many eggs?”

“Eight.”

“Shit. Eight baby alligators. That’s dangerous, y’all.”

“They will find their way in the bayou,” said Trak. “They won’t stay with their parents for long. Do not worry. All will be well.”

“Sure. Sure, I won’t worry about baby bison and baby alligators. Why would I worry about that?” said Gaspar.

“You seem stressed. Perhaps you should attend one of Cait’s yoga and meditation classes. They’re quite helpful,” smiled Trak.

“Hey, wait a minute,” frowned Gaspar. “Didn’t Cait and Ashley do a joint class for the VA hospital? Cait taught meditative yoga, and then Ashley was able to get them to sleep and talk through their trauma.”

“They weren’t asleep,” said Antoine, “but I understand what you’re saying. Maybe we could get Cait to submit a proposal to the team, help them with the stress of Butch’s death. We won’t mention that she’s connected to us.”

“I think it’s worth a shot. Trak? I want you there with them. You seem to get a good sense of when someone is telling the truth. Bring Noah as well. If Butch’s ghost is there, he might be able to tell him what happened.”

“I’ll see if Trevon can help us. Maybe if he makes the suggestion, they’ll be less suspicious,” said Antoine.

“How are things going in Tucson?” he asked Mac and Gabe.

“Great, from what we hear. The house was falling apart around them, but it was all things that could be handled fairly quickly. The cosmetic stuff is happening now. The contractor understood the need to get Ed back into his own home,” said Mac.

“That’s good news, and we needed some good news. Trevon gave us tickets to the game tomorrow. None of the wives want to go, so we have ten altogether. I say we go and do some casual observing of the team. I want to see which players are actually protecting the QB and which ones are ignoring their position. I also want to see how that owner reacts to the plays and the game overall. There is something seriously fucked up here, and we’re going to find out who killed that man,” said Nine.

“I’m game,” said Tailor. “It’s been years since I’ve been to a game, and I could use a good dose of sweat and testosterone. Plus, I want some game food.”

“Same,” said Alec. “Nothing like a stadium hot dog loaded with onions, relish, mustard, and if they have it, chili.”

“You know how bad those things are for you, right?” said Sly.

“Yep. And I’m gonna eat five if I have the time. Five dogs loaded with everything and fries to go with it, loaded as well. If they’ve got popcorn I want popcorn, nachos, peanuts, and some of those red licorice string things. I’m in the mood for some serious junk food,” nodded Alec.

Tailor laughed, grinning at his best friend.

“Okay. Game tomorrow, and let’s see if we can’t get Cait, Ashley, Noah, and Trak into the locker room to help everyone out.”

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Although football in New Orleans and the surrounding area was dominated by the New Orleans Saints and the LSU Tigers, the other colleges always drew big crowds as well. Tulane, Southern, and others entertained their alumni and visiting teams with hard-fought games, outrageous marching bands, and epic tailgating. You could walk through the parking lots and smell barbecue, gumbo, fried fish, and so much more. Tailgating was a sport in itself, and the people in the South knew how to do it right.

The Fire wasn't even in their league. Literally. From the looks of the stadium, they were struggling to bring in fans and sell tickets, with prices for upper deck seats selling at only ten or fifteen dollars.

"Well, this is sad," frowned Ghost.

"Damn, I had no idea they were struggling financially. Maybe all of this has something to do with Butch's death," said Nine.

They walked through the tunnel and toward the barrier between the fans and the players on the sidelines. Trevon turned and waved at the men, then went back to focusing on his warm-up.

"I smell hot dogs," said Tailor.

"Me too," Alec said, nudging his friend. Gaspar turned to them both, frowning.

"Get enough for everyone. See if you can get someone to help with the sodas. And, Alec, don't eat all the dogs before you get back."

“That’s just rude,” he sniffed.

While the two giants walked back beneath the stands to the concessions, children were taking photos of them, believing they must be ex-players.

“Our seats are down here,” said Gabe. “Looks like we got the entire second row. Pretty sweet seats, but I imagine they’re just happy to have them filled. This is pathetic.”

The men looked around the stadium, seeing only about half of the seats filled. It was a chilly Sunday afternoon, but football in the southern United States was a big deal. The seats should have been filled, especially considering the lower prices.

When the national anthem started, the men stood at attention, removing their hats, and saluting the flag. All eyes looked their way, but no one said a word. When the Fire won the coin toss, they elected to receive the ball, placing the offense on the field first.

It didn’t take long for them to begin cheering for the Fire, yelling for Trevon to succeed. As they neared the end zone, the defense began taking cheap shots, earning themselves two penalty flags.

“What the hell is this all about? Why are they after Trevon?” asked Jean.

“Not sure,” frowned Ghost, “but they’re definitely taking their shots at him and the quarterback, and no one seems to be paying any attention to it, including the refs and the coaches.”

On the next play, Trevon snapped the ball to Kurt, who tossed it to the receiver in the end zone, earning a touchdown.

“Touchdown for the Fire! Oh no, it looks like we’ve got an injured player on the field, and it’s veteran center, Trevon Marks. Let’s hope he gets up on his own.”

“Damn. Get up, brother,” said Tailor.

“This does not look good for the Fire, folks. Marks is not moving. The doctors and trainers are on the field now, and they’ll have to cart him off. We’ll take a break, folks, and be back soon.”

It took nearly thirty minutes for them to get Trevon on the cart and slowly took him off the field. As the men watched, they noticed that some of the players walked up, wishing him well. Others stood off to the side, not saying anything.

“Anybody else bothered by all this?” asked Nine.

“Fuck yes. Let’s see if we can get into the training room below,” said Gaspar. They weren’t surprised to find that there was no security on the outside of the training room, and in fact, there was none on the inside of the room. The trainers were leaning over Trevon, speaking in low voices to him.

“Trevon? How many fingers?” asked the trainer.

“Four.”

“Good, that’s good. Hey, who are you guys?” he asked, staring at the group of men. Trevon turned his head, staring at the men, and smirked.

“It’s cool. Those are my friends. Help me up,” he said, pointing to Tailor and Alec.

“Should you be sitting up, brother? I don’t want you puking on my shoes,” smirked Alec. Trevon laughed, shaking his head.

“It wasn’t a concussion. He stepped on my back, and I got a good zinger for a minute, but I’m feeling okay now.”

“You can’t go back in, Trevon,” said Ghost. “It was pretty evident they were out to get you.”

“With me out, they can get to Kurt,” he said, looking at the men. The doors opened, and a woman walked into the locker room dressed in an impeccably tailored pantsuit. “Ms. Pinken. I was just telling these boys I need to get back out there.”

She stared at the faces of the men and then back at Trevon. There was no compassion, no concern on her face. In fact, it looked like the exact opposite. She barely gave them a second glance as if they didn’t matter any more than the dirt on Trevon’s cleats.

“Actually, Trevon, you won’t be going back in. I’m sorry, but the team will be releasing you. This is your third injury in as many years, and after what happened with Butch, we just don’t need the press.”

“Don’t need the press?” frowned Angel. “Don’t need the fucking press for a man that died on your property? For a man who gave his life to your team? Trevon was targeted out there, and now that his other linemen know, hopefully, they’ll watch out for it.”

“Young man,” she started. Angel could only smirk, knowing he was older than the woman, but he wouldn’t give her that satisfaction. “Young man, I don’t need you to tell me how to run my team. The team I own, finance, and run. Trevon has been a valuable part of our growth, but his time here is done.”

She turned on her heels and started to walk out of the room. Trevon called out to her.

“Glenda? Glenda, I’m talking to you. Turn around.” She froze and turned with a glare that sent chills up the spines of every man. “You drove Butch to his death. You. I’ll prove it.”

“Listen carefully, Trevon. If you want anything to do with this league or any other, you will mind your fucking business, pack your shit, and get out of my clubhouse. Now.”

“You know, lady, you might want to watch what you say. Strange things happen to people who threaten our friends,” said Zeke.

She glared at the men, then turned to leave, running right into Trak. She let out a shriek, earning grins from all the men and chuckles from Trevon. Edging around him, she stormed from the room, leaving the men behind.

“Fucking sorry, man,” said Tailor.

“You know what? I’m not,” said Trevon. “I’m not even thirty-five, and my body feels like I’m ninety. I need a break. I don’t need the money. I’ve been smart with my money. Besides, your pretty wife offered me a job, and I just might accept it.” He smiled at Zeke, and Zeke smiled back.

“I know she’d like that, and I’d be happy knowing that you were around to watch out for her.”

He stepped off the table as it creaked beneath his weight. He turned his neck one way and then the other, a loud cracking echoing in the room. The men all chuckled, having done the same thing a time or two.

“Alright then. Let me shower and change, and you guys can give me a ride. I took the bus here.”

“You took the bus? Don’t you have a car?” asked Ian.

“Yes, sir. I just don’t like to drive if I don’t have to.”

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Knowing that the press would be hounding Trevon, they offered him Sor's old cabin to use for a few weeks until everything died down. It also put him closer to Noelle and the team to help with the holiday decorations.

With him no longer a part of the team, Cait and Ashley had to make their proposal to the Fire on their own. They were both shocked when the coaching team gave a thumbs up.

"Do you need to check with your owner?" asked Cait.

"It would be best if we didn't," said Coach Osterhausen. "I make the decisions about the team. For now."

With the green light, the team showed up the next morning early to walk through what they would be doing. The players seemed open to the idea but probably more because they wouldn't have to run drills after their overtime win the day before.

"Dude, it fucking sucks what they did to Trevon," said a big man seated on one of the yoga mats. "They didn't give a shit about his contract or anything else. We're nothing but meat for the Pinken family."

"Contracts aren't the same here as in the big leagues, man. They aren't worth the paper they're written on. It's all for show," said the lineman, Rossi.

"What do you mean?" said the deep bass voice behind them.

Rossi and the other man jumped a mile, gripping their chests as they turned to see the

big indigenous man standing behind them. He was in loose-fitting yoga pants, a t-shirt that looked as if it were painted on him, and his feet were bare.

“Jesus! Who the fuck are you?” asked Rossi.

“I’m part of the training team here today. What do you mean the contracts don’t matter?” he asked again.

“Well, they just don’t. It’s all a show, really. We’re supposed to be prepping for the big leagues, but if you look at the numbers, maybe only five have ever moved up. Most of us know that, but we just want to play. The way the contracts are written, the owner has the right to let you go no matter what.”

“That’s why she was allowed to let Trevon go?” asked Trak.

“Yeah. Exactly. He was still at the top of his game. Shit, it wouldn’t have surprised me if she was the one that had the illegal hit put on him.”

“And Butch?”

“Butch was a different matter altogether. He was old as fuck, no offense,” he said, staring at Trak. Trak’s eyes bore into him, and he cleared his throat. “I mean, he was older. Anyway, he’d had a lot of injuries, especially concussions. Dude wasn’t all there anymore. Know what I mean?”

Trak turned from him, walking away as Cait stood in front of the large room. She was still stunning with her fiery red hair and porcelain skin. As she led the men through some breathing techniques and stretching, Trak and Noah walked the room between the rows of men. On occasion, the men would look up with appreciation at the physical specimens before them.

“Do you feel him here?” asked Trak.

“Not at all,” said Noah. “It is strange. I feel nothing in the building of his presence.”

“Could it be because it was suicide?”

“Perhaps. I am not sure, but it feels strange to not feel anything here.”

When Cait finished with the meditative yoga, Ashley stood before the men, smiling as she talked about the stages of grief and loss. Immediately, Noah and Trak saw a few men squirming on their mats, including Kurt and Petey.

“Butch was a good man,” said one of the players. “He was devoted to his little girl, and that alone earned my respect. To be a quarterback in this league for as long as he was, well, that’s something special.”

“I agree,” said another player, “but you have to admit, he was losing it. He was old, slow, and his head wasn’t on right, man.”

“Watch your mouth,” said Kurt. “He deserves our respect.”

“Says the man that took his job,” smirked another. Kurt started to go toward him, but Noah gripped his shoulder, giving it a hard squeeze and shaking his head.

“This is not about attacking one another. It is about dealing with what happened in that room down the hall.”

“He slit his wrists. That’s what happened,” said Rossi. “He slit his wrists because his brain was scrambled, and he could barely wipe his own ass any longer.”

“That’s it!” yelled another, leaping toward Rossi. It took Noah and Trak fifteen

minutes to calm the men enough to have Ashley speak to them again. Only this time, everyone refused to speak. When they left, she stared at her friends.

“Well, that didn’t go as planned,” she frowned. “Did you get a sense of anything at all?”

“Fear. Guilt. Death. That’s all,” said Trak, Noah nodding in agreement.

“That’s all? Trak, that’s a lot. Who were you getting guilt from?” asked Cait.

“At least four men,” said Noah. Trak nodded at him. “I do not know why they were feeling guilty, but the sense was overwhelming to me. What I did not get was a sense of Butch’s spirit here in the building. I should feel something, but I do not.”

“The two men in the front row wouldn’t make eye contact with me,” said Ashley. “The young man, Kurt, the quarterback who took over for Butch, definitely wouldn’t look at me when I spoke of him. I don’t know if that’s guilt or sadness without talking to him directly.”

“You might get your chance,” said Trak, staring at the practice facility as players began to exit. Ashley nodded at him, walking slowly toward the young man.

“Kurt? Kurt, hi, Ashley again,” she smiled.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m kind of in a hurry,” he said nervously.

“Oh, I know. I don’t mean to bother you. I just wanted to offer my services for free any time you want to talk. You must be going through a lot right now. It can’t be easy taking over from someone like Butch.”

“Look,” he said with a curt tone, “I don’t want to talk about this. Not now, not ever.”

“Okay,” she said, taking a step back. He looked up to see Noah standing just a few feet away and shook his head.

“I wouldn’t hurt her,” he said. “That’s not who I am.” Lowering his head, he left Ashley and Noah standing in the parking lot, staring at one another. When Cait and Trak approached, they just shrugged.

“That didn’t go very well,” said Cait. Noah nodded, watching as the car sped away.

“No, but he is feeling guilt for something. I just don’t know what it is yet.”

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“I don’t know where your doctors train, but my body hasn’t felt this good in ten years,” said Trevon, smiling at Alec and Tailor. He’d been going through a number of physical, background, and intelligence tests with the team, finally succumbing to the pressure of a naked hot springs bath in a strange, secret pond. He was grateful he’d done it.

“The hot springs make all the difference,” grinned Alec.

“I’m gonna gain fifty pounds if I keep eating this cooking,” he said, shaking his head. “I swear this is the best food I’ve ever had in my life, and I’ve eaten a lot of good food.”

“Mama knows what she’s doing, but so do the rest of our cooks,” smiled Alec. “We’ve got Michelin star chefs back there, as well as homegrown cooks. It’s all the same to us here. Delicious.”

“Anything new on Butch?” asked Trevon.

“Nothing yet,” said Tailor. “We’re hoping that the team got a sense of something while they were there today.”

“A sense? Like a guess? I figured you guys would be more technical than that,” he laughed. Tailor and Alec smiled at one another, nodding. “What? Did I offend you?”

“No. No, that’s not it. Look, Trevon, you’re going to be working here on the property for a while. We hope long term.”

“Me too,” he grinned.

“Right, well, there are some things you need to know about us. We were all Special Forces.”

“I knew that,” said Trevon. “One of the men said that to me the first time we met.”

“Okay. Well, we also have some interesting things, people on this property.” Trevon stared at him, then looked over his shoulder, his eyes darting from what he was seeing to the two men before him.

“Would those interesting things be ghosts?” he asked calmly.

“Yes,” nodded Tailor. “They’re family to us. Friendly, helpful, and wise like you can’t imagine. They won’t hurt you, and in fact, they’ll probably help you in some ways.”

“You sure?” frowned the big man. Yori stared at him as a smile came across his face.

“Such a big man to be fearful of a group of spirits,” he smiled. “We do not possess people.”

“How did he know that’s what I was thinking?” gasped Trevon.

“Yori, stop gettin’ in folks heads,” said Tailor. “We asked y’all not to do that unless you had to.”

“I did have to. He is innocent and good. The kind of good we need here. The kind of good that the world could use a little more of. He is a gentle spirit and soul with a love for all things living,” he said, nodding at Trevon.

“And he’s cute,” smirked Martha. Trevon looked at the ghostly figure and laughed, shaking his head.

“Ma’am, I’ll take that,” he laughed.

“Stop flirting with him, Martha. Nathan will get jealous,” said Alec.

“You are innocent, but you do feel guilt,” said Yori. “Guilt for your love of the woman.”

Trevon stiffened and looked at the men. He nodded, lowering his head as he stared at his plate of food.

“Brother, there is never anything to feel guilty about for loving a woman. A woman who is single, available, and loves you back.”

“I don’t know that she loves me back,” he said, shaking his head. “I told her I’d give her some time to be alone with Carigan, but I desperately want to hop on a plane and go see her.”

“Call her,” said Tailor. “Call her and tell her that. Maybe she feels the same.”

“I already did that,” said Trevon. “She wants to take a break. I think I was a good distraction for her while Butch was getting worse before our very eyes.”

“Fuck, sorry,” said Alec. Tailor nudged him, and he scrunched his shoulders. “What? I am sorry. But we all know what that means.”

“It don’t mean anything,” said Claudette. “My baby brother is a big idiot sometimes, Trevon. You must understand how awkward this is for her. Her daughter’s father either commits suicide or is murdered. He may or may not have known about the two

of you, and his daughter does not. That's a lot to unpack for her."

"That's true," he said, looking at Claudette. "I don't want to cause them any pain. Lara and I started out as friends, just talking about Butch and his condition. We spent a lot of nights on the phone just wondering what we could do for him, how we could make it better. Then, a while back, he had an injury that put him in the hospital, and we saw each other almost every day.

"We didn't plan it. It just happened. We went back to her hotel room, got to talking and then suddenly we were climbing all over one another. When we caught our breath, we slowed down, started talking again, and realized we'd both enjoyed it more than we wanted to admit. Carigan was still in Scottsdale at a friend's house.

"We said we'd keep it between us. See one another when we could. E-mail, call, text, that sort of thing. As I told you before, I think Butch knew something was up, but he never said anything. I'm not sure he would have cared. I just wish we would have spoken about it."

"He knows," said Claudette, gripping his hand. "He knows."

"Are you an angel too?" he asked.

"No, honey. Ask my Jake. I'm no angel," she said with a wink. "But there is another Claudette who is one of our ghosts. Don't confuse us." Claudette left them, and Trevon just shook his head.

"Man, I love your family," he smiled. "I've never met a more interesting group of people, more loving and helpful in all my life. My family was good. My dad died when I was in middle school, so my mom was a single mother raising four boys, two of whom ended up in prison. My youngest brother and I got lucky, I guess. Or maybe we just listened more. But your family is awesome."

“Most people feel that way,” laughed Alec.

“Hey, big stud,” called Noelle. “We got work to do. Did you fill your belly?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Then let’s go. Santa waits for no one.”

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Cait, Trak, Noah, and Ashley sat before the senior leaders, shaking their heads, unsure of what to say.

“I realize that meditative yoga might have been new for them,” said Cait, “but that was the most stressed group of men I’ve ever been around, and I’ve lived with all of you for decades.”

“Was it pressure around the game?” asked Ian.

“I don’t think so. I do think we should ask to see a contract if we could. Maybe Trevon would let us see his,” said Cait.

“Funny, I heard my name and contract in the same sentence,” said Trevon, walking into the room. “I’m sorry to bother y’all, but Noelle said I should come right over here.”

“What’s going on? Is everything okay?” asked Ghost.

“No, sir, everything is not okay. I was just told I would not be receiving the payout of my contract or any medical benefits from the league. They said my contract says when I am released due to injury, they don’t have to pay me anything.”

“That can’t be legal,” frowned Nine. “Didn’t the NFL change their rules decades ago about that? They were in a lot of deep shit for the way they paid disabilities. Aren’t you all connected?”

“No. That’s the problem. We’re not unionized like the others. We don’t have the

same benefits, nothing. I just don't know what to do. I'm not desperate for money, but I know for sure some of those guys would be if this happened to them. Is there anything we can do to help them? I've got savings. I'll pay y'all."

"You won't pay us a damn thing," said Gaspar. "You're one of ours now, Trevon."

"Hey," said Georgie, coming into the room. "Noelle called and said there was something I needed to look at. A contract or something."

"Yes, ma'am," said Trevon. "My contract." He explained the situation to Georgie again as she casually perused the contract information. Occasionally, she'd hold up a finger to silence him, then wave him to go on again.

"Well, Georgie?" asked Nine.

"I'm not sure how this is legal. Did you have an attorney read this before you signed it?" she asked.

"Miss Georgie, I was a kid, twenty-two, when I signed that. I didn't know any better, and I thought I was getting a great start to my future life as a professional player. When it would come up for renewal, they told me it was all the same, and I believed them."

"This contract gives all the rights to the owners. All. They can end your contract without notice, without reason, and stop your pay immediately, with no options to get any bonuses. In fact, you could have led them to the championship game, which, according to this, has a bonus payout of fifty grand, but if you were released before game time, you don't get a dime."

"So, I can't do a thing about any of this? I won't get paid for the remainder of my contract. I have no health benefits for injuries received while playing, and I get no

bonuses, nothing?”

“I’m afraid not. At least not as of right now. If you give me permission, Trevon, I’ll review as many of the contracts as allowed. But yours? I will definitely fight yours.”

“How can they get away with this?” asked Nine.

“It’s as he said. They’re not unionized. The league executives almost seem like a dummy board. If I had to guess, there is no set relationship with the NFL, although they like to make their players believe that there is. The NFL is a behemoth. They probably just brushed it all away as an annoyance.”

“What about Butch’s contract? What about everything he was owed? For his daughter,” asked Trevon.

“I don’t know, honey. But I’ll find out. He deserves that. She deserves that. Do you have a copy of his contract?”

“I don’t, but I would bet Lara does. She kept all his papers and personal things in their home in Scottsdale.”

“Okay. Don’t worry about anything. I’ll look into this, and we’ll see if we can find out what’s happening. I’m going to grab my handsome husband and get down to the courthouse and pull the public records on all of this.”

“Trevon, there’s nothing to worry about, son. You have employment with us now, you have the cabin, you have healthcare, all of it. You’re taken care of.”

“I know,” he said, nodding, “but what about the others? What if someone on the team is doing something to intentionally injure players?”

“We didn’t get a sense of that,” said Trak. “We felt something strange happening, but nothing dark. Noah didn’t get a feel for any ghosts. None.”

“You feel ghosts?” asked Trevon, staring at the big Viking.

“I can see and feel their presence,” said Noah. “There was none, which felt strange since Butch died there.”

Trevon nodded with a frown, then turned to leave.

“Trevon? You okay, brother?” asked Ghost.

“Yes, sir. I’m gonna head back to Miss Noelle and get to work, take my mind off of everything for a while. I’ll send a text to Lara asking about Butch’s contract.” Gaspar gripped his massive shoulders, squeezing them.

“It will work out, son. It might not feel like it right now, but it will. We’re going to find the truth about Butch, and we’ll bring those responsible to justice.” He nodded with a sad face.

“And if Butch is responsible? How do we punish him for all this?” Before anyone could answer, Trevon walked away. Gaspar looked at Ashley.

“Will you keep an eye on him, honey?”

“You know I will. He’s scheduled for some sessions with Bree and I tomorrow. I’ll let you know how it goes. There’s a lot for him to unpack. I’m not sure Lara is in love with him, but I think he’s in love with her. He’s a big man with a big heart, and he’s not a child, yet, in many ways, he’s naive about a lot of things.”

“I wonder if all the men are like that,” said Nine.

“I can say definitively they are not,” said Trak. “Some of those men struck me as calculating. Almost like mercenaries.”

“Well, that’s not fucking scary at all, is it?” said Ghost.

“I will say that the one person who seemed to take our sessions very seriously was Kurt, the new quarterback. He was completely engaged with me,” said Cait.

“Me too,” said Ashley. “He seems like a good young man from what I’ve seen so far. I can only imagine the guilt he feels taking the place of a veteran like Butch.”

“But I did not feel that when I was around him,” said Noah.

“I didn’t either,” said Trak. “This is all strange. Maybe Alvin can help.”

“Trak, don’t fuck with me today. I’m tired, and Mama is driving us all crazy with the holiday decorations and events. Alvin cannot help.”

“He could. Let him decide who is guilty. He has great instincts.”

“I can’t entertain this conversation right now,” said Gaspar. “I’m hungry. I’ll see y’all later.” Gaspar left the room, the others smirking at his back. Trak shrugged, waving his hands in the air.

“He could help. I’m just saying.”

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Glenda Pinken looked down the long table of the executive conference room and stared at her financial analysts. Her brother and sister were both in the room, but knew they would have nothing to say in matters of money.

“You’ve been able to free up several million with the loss of Cavet and Marks,” said the man.

“Cavet was a death,” said someone at the table. She immediately looked up, staring at the man who was their public relations executive.

“Yes. A suicide,” said Glenda. “Tragic, but we don’t owe anything for that. After all, we don’t pay for suicides.”

“You’ll have to pay if the final autopsy reveals his suicide was related to injuries during his time playing football,” said the PR executive. His name was James Begnaud. He’d only been with the Fire for about eight months, but he wouldn’t make the year with that attitude.

“James, although I appreciate your insight, shut the hell up unless I ask you for said insight,” she said with a haughty air. He took in a deep breath, releasing it slowly, and nodded. “Now. Since we have the additional few million and I can get someone decent in here, what players do we have access to?”

When the discussion regarding available players finished, the ticket sales and concessions were reviewed, painting a grim picture for the Fire. They were losing money. Not just losing, hemorrhaging. In fact, all of the teams were suffering the same.

“Carolina is considering selling or just exiting the league,” said her brother.

“That seems dramatic,” she scoffed. “What about the others?”

“I’m afraid it’s the same all over the league. Without the backing of the professional leagues, we can’t keep going like this.”

“I refuse to just throw my hands up and quit,” said Glenda. “We’ve invested decades into this league, and we will make it succeed.” Her sister stared at her, shaking her head.

“I don’t know, Glenda.”

“Don’t know what, Gwen? What!” she yelled.

“Don’t yell at me. This isn’t working, no matter how much you think it is. I want you and Glen to buy me out.”

“What?” frowned her brother.

“I’m done. Just buy me out, and I’ll move on.”

“No,” said Glenda. “You can resign, and we’ll take over your shares, but I won’t pay a cent for them.”

“Then I’ll sell them to someone on the outside. And don’t give me any legal bullshit, Glenda. I’ve already checked with the lawyers. I can sell to anyone I like.”

Her sister was the flaming color of a flamingo, her cheeks burning with pink and red. She gripped the edge of the table and stood, glaring at her.

“Fine. Sixty cents on the dollar.”

“No. You will pay me fair market price.”

“I’ll pay that for your share,” said Glen. “That will give me majority.”

The panic in Glenda’s chest was growing, and she glared at her siblings, then snapped her fingers, waving everyone else out of the room. She poured a glass of whiskey and took her seat once again, staring at her siblings.

“I will own the majority of shares for this team. Me. I will pay you two dollars above asking per share for all of your shares.”

“You know I can’t compete with that, Glenda,” said Glen. “You’re doing this intentionally.”

“Of course I am, Glen. I never do anything without intention.”

“Like Butch and Trevon,” said her sister quietly.

“Watch your tone with me, Gwen. Butch is a tragic story. One that will be resolved soon enough. And Trevon? Well, he was just getting old and unable to do his job any longer. I’ll have the papers on your desk in the morning, Gwen. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you.”

She stalked out of the room, her heels clicking on the tile of the hall floors. Glen looked at his sister, shaking his head.

“You couldn’t have given me a heads up?”

“I’m sorry, Glen. I just blurted it out, not thinking. I’m so tired of her bullshit and all

of this.”

“It’s okay. I was never going to get full ownership. Maybe you helped me out. I can threaten to sell to an outsider as well. It might be time for me to leave, too.”

“If you do, God help those left behind.”

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“Lara, thank you for speaking with me,” said Georgie, staring at the screen. “I was speaking to Trevon...”

“How is he?” she interrupted.

“He’s doing well. You should call him,” she smiled, looking up at the woman, but noticed that she wasn’t smiling back.

“No. I don’t want him to misinterpret anything.”

“He cares for you, Lara.”

“I-I know, and I care for him. Truly, I do. He’s helped me through a lot these last few years, and he’s always been there for me and for Carigan. But I don’t love him. Not the way he deserves to be loved.”

“Maybe you should tell him that. He’s embarking on a new life now and deserves to seek out someone who truly cares for him.” Lara’s face had a hint of disappointment on it, then she nodded, understanding that she was holding onto Trevon, just in case.

“What did you need from me?” she asked quietly.

“Do you have a copy of the most recent contract of Butch’s?”

“Definitely. He asked me to keep a signed copy in our safe. I couldn’t believe he signed that garbage. Their lawyers put in all these clauses about injuries, and if he were injured again, they wouldn’t cover it. Like he was responsible for injuries! They

didn't protect him, and they never did the right thing with his concussions."

"That's what we've been hearing," said Georgie. "I'm not sure these contracts are even legal, but they're all different. I have Trevon's and another man's, Bill Schuster."

"Bill is a good man. I knew his wife. She died a few years back from an aneurysm. She was only thirty-four years old. Bill was devastated but agreed to return to play."

"There's a reason for that. If he didn't return to play, they could release him, and he wouldn't get the remainder of his contract."

"That's absurd! His wife had just died, and he has two little boys."

"I know, sweetie, that's why we're looking into this. If you could scan Butch's contract and send it to me, I'd appreciate it."

"Of course. Georgie? Tell Trevon I wish him the best."

"So, you're not going to call him?" said Georgie with a slight edge. The woman said nothing, and she just shook her head. "Listen, I understand how difficult all of this must be for you, but that man deserves to know why you're ghosting him. He's been nothing but kind to you and your daughter, and he's been a great friend to Butch."

"He should have protected Butch more," said Lara.

"What?"

"He was his center. He should have protected him more. It was his job to make sure that Butch was safe. We, Butch and I, we'd been talking a lot these last few months. He was hoping to be able to retire the way he wanted, and we would start being a

family.”

“Are you kidding me right now? You had a relationship with Trevon. You made him believe you cared for him!”

“I do care for him!” she yelled. She turned as if to be sure no one was there, then turned back. “I do care for him. But I loved Butch. I always loved Butch, and he loved me.”

Georgie had no words. She just stared at the woman, shaking her head. What a mess, what a fucking mess.

“Please send the contract. I’ll let you know if I find anything.” Georgie hung up the phone and turned to see her husband standing in the doorway.

“Need a hug?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He held his wife, rocking her gently in his arms, placing soft kisses across her forehead. She didn’t get overly emotional when it came to work. This must be something more.

“Babe? What’s wrong?”

“I made a lot of mistakes with you and me, Carl.”

“Hey, we’ve been through all that a million years ago. It was my fault too. We’ve had a beautiful life together.”

“I know, I know that. I’m just looking at this woman and how stupid she’s being.

She's going to lose an amazing man because she can't forget the father of her daughter. A man, who, by the way, never publicly acknowledged her as anything except the mother of his child. Trevon is a good, sweet, wonderful man who loves her and would be an amazing father to Carigan."

"Honey, he is all those things, and he would be an amazing husband and father, but if she doesn't love him, then there's no hope for any kind of relationship."

"She wants me to tell him," she frowned.

"No. No, you're not going to do that. Let's figure all this shit out, and then we'll see how he's doing. If you're done with this for now, we can head into town and meet with the records clerk."

"Can we stop for beignets on the way back?" she smirked.

"Any time, honey. Any time."

Georgie bit into the deliciously hot, powdery beignet and moaned as Carl shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Smiling at him, she ran a hand up his thigh and grinned.

"Thank you for coming with me. This helped a great deal," she said.

"Did you find what you needed at the courthouse?" he asked.

"No. There are no public filings of contracts between the players and the teams. It was a long shot." He took a bite of his beignet and then sipped the hot, strong chicory coffee. New Orleans was decked out for the holidays, and Christmas music was playing everywhere, including a small jazz band playing a jazz version of White Christmas.

Carl set his mug down and then looked up, frowning.

“What’s wrong? Do I have something on my face?” asked Georgie.

“No. You’re perfect and beautiful. But isn’t that the owner of the Fire over there talking to that man?” asked Carl. Georgie turned slightly in her seat, seductively crossing her legs.

“That’s the assistant coroner,” whispered Georgie. “What the hell is he doing?”

“Looks to me like they’re exchanging information. I think we need to call Felix,” said Carl, reaching for his phone. He dialed Felix’s number and waited.

“This better be good, Robicheaux,” said the man.

“I promise it is, Felix. Can you tell me why your assistant coroner would be schmoozing with Glenda Pinken?”

“What the fuck?” he muttered. “He knows better than to speak to anyone with the team. This might explain a few things. I’ve had some reports slow in coming, and he keeps giving me excuses.”

“Well, she just handed him an envelope. A fat, thick envelope. I don’t like to guess, but I’m guessing it’s cash,” said Carl.

“He’s due back here in fifteen minutes,” said Felix.

“He’s leaving now. We’ll meet you at the office.”

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“Roger, I hope you had a nice lunch,” said Felix.

“Oh. Yes. Yes, I did, thank you.”

“Roger, where are the toxicology and tissue samples reports for Butch Cavet?” he asked.

“I thought I gave you those. I’ll have to look for them again. I know they’re around here somewhere. If I don’t have them, I’ll redo all of them. It will take a few days.”

“That would be a shame,” said Carl, standing behind the man. Roger froze in his tracks. He knew that voice, and he stilled, waiting for a bullet. “How much did she pay you?”

He was awkwardly, painfully quiet for what seemed like hours. Neither Carl nor Felix were in any hurry to push him. They could wait all day. He could not. He was going to have to speak with them or die right where he’d lay. The morgue.

“Don’t lie, Roger. You’re already in deep shit,” said Felix.

“She gave me fifty thousand,” he frowned with an exhaustive sigh.

“What did she want?” asked Georgie.

“She wanted me to slow everything down, and anything that came up leaning toward CTE, I was supposed to lose. She needs for this to not be reported until after December 17 th .”

“Why then?” asked Georgie.

“It’s the championships,” said Carl. “What does it matter? Why does that date matter to her?”

“I don’t know. That’s the truth,” he said, shaking his head. “Felix, I just needed the money to pay off my student loans and debts.”

“And what about Cavet and his family? What do they get?” asked Georgie. “Do you have any idea the bullshit that woman has placed in their contracts? It’s criminal, and she’s going to go to jail. So are you.”

“No,” said Carl.

“Carl! He tried to destroy evidence.”

“Yes, and he almost did. We need him to remain right here and feed that woman what she wants to hear. You make one move to her side. You lose so much as a paperclip, and I will make sure you never see the light of day again.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“What did you tell her today?” asked Felix.

“Nothing. There’s nothing to tell yet. I meant it when I said that the tissue and toxicology samples are around here somewhere. I just have to find them. She wanted to know if we had full results from the brain studies yet. I told her it might be a few weeks.”

“What did she say to that?” asked Carl.

“She said that was good for her, and she’d appreciate it if I could make it last longer. Apparently, at some point, the league officials are coming in to question all the owners.”

“When?” asked Georgie.

“Before December 17th. That’s all I know, I swear. I’m sorry, Felix. I promise I wasn’t going to tamper with anything, just buy her some time so that I could get out of debt.”

“Well, you’re deep in debt now,” said Carl. “You owe that viper, you owe me, you owe Felix, you owe fucking everyone!”

Roger took a seat on the stool, lowering his head in shame. Felix knew that he’d been struggling with his student loans and credit card debt, but he’d made it a practice not to interfere in personal matters with his employees. Roger was a grown man, and he would need to figure this out by himself.

“What now?” he asked, looking up.

“Swear to me that you won’t run or tell her that we know,” said Carl.

“I swear, Mr. Robicheaux. I swear to God I won’t say a word to her. What do I do with the money she gave me?”

“Does that help you?” smirked Carl.

“Yes, sir. It pays all my credit card debt and some of my student loans.”

“Then pay those bills fast. In cash. Don’t put it in the bank. Go to the credit card companies and pay the debts in cash. That way, even if she’s stupid enough to claim

that she bought you, there's no trace of that money hitting your bank account. You could always just claim that someone loaned it to you or that you hit the jackpot at the casino."

"Thank you, sir," said the younger man. Georgie smiled at her husband, loving that soft, fatherly side of him.

"Out of curiosity," said Georgie, "did the toxicology report show anything at all?"

"Triptans. It's an ingredient most commonly used in migraine medications. I suspect he had severe headaches that were almost debilitating at times. There were a few traces of pain medications, but I think it was an injectable. No narcotics, no illegal drugs that appeared in the bloodstream. Tissue samples are still running."

"That's what we suspected," said Georgie. "The migraines could be caused by CTE, right?"

"Definitely," said Felix and Roger together. The older man smiled at the younger man, shaking his head. He was a good doctor, a good coroner, and he hoped like hell this didn't ruin his career forever.

"One other thing," said Roger. "I've seen several suicides by blade to the wrists. Without fail, there is blood beneath the nail beds."

"And?" frowned Carl.

"There was none beneath his nails or the nail bed. Do you know how difficult that would have had to have been? He would have had to have had something long, like a knife away from his hand. This wasn't a knife. It was a razor blade. Thin, small, and sharp."

“But we found no blade at the scene,” said Felix, frowning at them. “Nothing.”

“Maybe we need to go back and check again. Take that ice bathtub apart,” said Carl.

“You can try, but she’s not letting anyone near that place.” There was a knock on the door, and an assistant came in. “What’s up, Alissa?”

“I thought you should know that it was just announced on the news that Gwen Pinken Sharp sold her shares of the Fire to her sister, Glenda. Glenda now owns sixty-five percent of the team, while her brother only owns thirty-five percent.”

“That does make for interesting family dinners, doesn’t it?” frowned Carl. “Let us know when you have the full reports. And Roger?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t take any more money from anyone.” He smirked at Carl, realizing how fortunate he was at this moment.

“Yes, sir. Not a dime.”

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“So, she just handed over fifty thousand in cash to the kid?” said Ghost.

“Yep. I don’t agree with what he did, but I get his reasons. He’s on our side, and he’s going to help, I’m certain of it.”

“And the contracts, Georgie?” asked Gaspar.

“There were none available for public view. That’s not suspicious on its own. Employment contracts don’t have to be shared publicly. What’s more suspicious is the lack of

information around her tax filings, profit and loss statements, medical spend, all of it. I think we need to do some digging into this league. I can’t find anything that tells me they are connected to the NFL or CFL.”

“Do you have the time to take this on, Georgie?” asked Nine.

“Of course, Uncle Nine. Anything for you,” she said, kissing his cheek.

“Hey, I’m your father-in-law. Don’t I get a kiss?” frowned Gaspar. She laughed, kissing his cheek as well, and then started to leave the room. At the door, she stopped and turned toward the men.

“Lara O’Connell isn’t going to be seeing Trevon any longer, but I don’t think she’s even going to bother to tell him that,” she frowned. “Someone has to let him know, and I think it should be one of you guys.”

“Damn,” muttered Ian. “I’ll have a talk with him.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Ghost. “I think he’s out at the Sugar Lodge putting up some lights and things.”

“Do you need any help?” asked Carl.

“Only if he gets pissed off,” smirked Ghost. “I’ll take my weapon just in case.”

Ghost and Ian took an ATV to the back of the property, where the Sugar Lodge was getting fully decked out for the holidays. In recent years, the team had become so large that for holiday meals they often ate out there so that everyone could eat at the same time, not in shifts.

“Sounds like Lara used our man a bit,” frowned Ghost.

“Yeah. I think she was lonely and wanted to be closer to Butch and thought he would be the way to do it. She doesn’t sound like someone who is intentionally cruel, but it doesn’t change that this is going to feel cruel to Trevon.”

“Seems strange that he hasn’t met and married someone yet. He’s a nice-looking kid, made decent money as a player,” said Ghost.

“He reminds me of Skull in a lot of ways,” said Ian. “Big, wide, gentle as a lamb, as I said, good-looking kid other than a few scrapes and scars.”

“I think we were right about him, though. He’s a bit naïve about certain things, and I think women are one of those things. He’s going to do well working with Noelle, and I think Zeke has already taken him under his wing. Maybe we can get him involved with our school team. That might make him feel connected to football in a small way,” said Ghost.

“That’s a good idea.” He smiled at his friend, nodding toward the Sugar Lodge. There were so many lights on the building it should be visible from space. There were trees along the front of the lodge decorated, as well as more than a dozen trees glittering in the windows upstairs.

They took the steps to the top level and smiled as they entered, smelling the beautiful scents of cinnamon, apple, cloves, and sugar. The enormous body of Trevon was seated at the long coffee bar laughing with Noelle and Zeke as Mary and George poured hot cocoa and shoved a plate of sugar cookies their way.

“Oh, hi there,” smiled Trevon.

“Trevon,” grinned Ghost. “Looks like you’re being taken care of.”

“Yes, sir. Miss Mary and Mr. George are the best. They feel like they should be my grandparents,” he grinned.

“We are your grandparents in a lot of ways,” said Mary, patting his massive hand. “You’re a sweet boy, and we’re glad you’re here.”

“I’m darn sure glad you’re here,” smiled Noelle. “I could have never done all of this without you, Trevon. Where did you learn so much about trees and flowers?”

“My granny. She helped raise us when my mom was busy trying to keep my two brothers out of jail. Granny was raised on a farm and knew everything there was about soil, rain, clouds, all of it. I grow herbs in my little place, and I love to watch things grow.”

“That’s cool, man,” said Zeke. “I know nothing about plants, and I’m sure my native ancestors are rolling over in their graves over that.”

“Is there any problem, sirs?” asked Trevon, looking at Ian and Ghost.

“No. No, not a problem, son. It’s about Lara. Do you want to talk about that in private?” asked Ian. Trevon swallowed, looking at Mary, George, Noelle, and Zeke.

“No, sir. We’re family. Right?”

“That’s right, son,” said Ian. “Trevon, she doesn’t want to call and tell you, but she’s not going to see you again. It turns out that she was in love with Butch this whole time.”

“I see,” nodded Trevon. “I kind of thought I was just her side distraction. I made my feelings pretty damn plain for her.”

“She said that Butch was going to retire the way he wanted, and they would be a family finally.”

“That’s her story,” said Trevon. “Butch wanted nothing to do with being a husband. He was trying to be a father to Carigan, but Carigan was always giving him shit. I think she thought they could be friends, and of course, Butch wanted to lecture her in a fatherly way. She didn’t appreciate that at all.”

“We’re sorry, honey,” said Mary.

“It’s okay, Miss Mary. I’m smart enough to know I don’t want to be with a woman who doesn’t love me for me. I’m confident in who I am. I’m a good man with a good heart and soul. Football was a means to an end for me. It made me a good living, built my savings, and hopefully, will allow me to live a full life here with all of you.”

“You know that’s what we want,” said Noelle. “I meant what I said. I need you on my team, Trevon. I have too much business now, and just taking care of things here is

overwhelming for me.”

“Well, I’m here for you, Miss Noelle.” He looked at Zeke and smiled. “As your employee and friend.” Zeke laughed, shaking his head.

“I’m yanking your chain, Trevon,” he grinned. “You’re all good, brother. I trust my wife, and I trust you. That’s what teammates do.”

“So, you’re okay with all this?” asked Ghost. “You don’t seem too surprised by her actions.”

“I think a man knows when a woman isn’t as into him as he is to her. I said ‘I love you’ several times to her, and she never said it back. I guess I was just hoping she could learn to love me.”

“She’s a fool,” said Mary. “You’re the most lovable young man I know.”

“Woman, you best watch your words,” said George. “I still get jealous on occasion.”

“Don’t you worry, Mr. George. Like I said, I think of y’all as my grandparents, and I love it that way.”

“Good man,” smiled Ian. “You’re gonna be just fine, and we’re going to figure all this shit out. I promise. Until then, you’ll keep working here and avoid any press related to the team. I think your former owners knew a lot more than they were saying.”

“Yes, sir. I definitely believe that as well.”

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“How did he take it?” asked Nine as they sat down for dinner.

“I think he had an idea it was coming,” said Ian. “That’s a solid young man, and he’s not stupid. Too bad Lara will figure that out too late. We haven’t been able to get access to the training rooms, but according to Trevon, there aren’t any cameras. A few years ago, the guys bitched about it because they felt like Glenda was watching them. Naked.”

“That woman has got to go,” said Gaspar, shaking his head.

“We’re sending Angel and Trak to the stadium tonight to do a little digging and see if they can find anything in the tub or one of the lockers,” said Nine.

“Who will be on the outside?” asked Ian.

“Pork and Kegger. There’s no night security at the stadium, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“The more we’re learning about this, the more I can’t help but feel this is just some janky low-budget league that someone is playing with,” said Ghost. “What else has Georgie found?”

“Nothing else yet, but she’s like a dog with a bone once she gets started. She knows that there’s something strange happening, and she’ll find it.”

Trevon walked into the cafeteria with Zeke and Noelle, smiling with a wave at the table of seniors.

“Hey, I got an e-mail from Carigan,” said Trevon. “I guess her mother told her that I wouldn’t be coming around any longer, and she just wanted to tell me that she’d miss me.”

“I’m sorry, man,” said Nine.

“Me too. I think she’s angry about Butch not being there more often, but she’s a good kid. She’ll figure it all out. Anyway, she sent me the last few e-mails from her father. I gave them to Miss Georgie, but I think they sound like someone saying goodbye.”

Ian took the sheets that he handed to him and set them on the table so everyone could read them.

“I know it’s been hard not having me there all the time, Carigan. But I hope you know that I love you more than anyone or anything else in the world. I want to retire and be a bigger part of your life, but I have to do this with some finesse. Not exactly something I’m known for. I know you won’t understand this, but the timing has to be perfect for me.”

“Rather cryptic, don’t you think?” frowned Ian.

“I guess. But the second one is more so,” said Trevon.

“I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be here, honey. Know that you have been my greatest accomplishment, my greatest achievement, and you always will be. No matter what is said about me in the beginning, don’t believe them. Believe what you know. Believe what Trevon and your mother tell you. Believe in what teammates tell you. Nothing else matters to me.

“I’ve made a lot of money in my career, and I’ve made sure that it’s been invested wisely so that you can do whatever you want in this life. Don’t judge me, Carigan.

Please don't judge me, but things have to happen this way. One day, I hope you'll understand."

"Jesus, what the fuck?" muttered Nine.

"I can't figure it out," said Trevon. "It felt like he was saying goodbye to her long before he was actually leaving."

"I think he was, son. We just have to figure out if he was willingly saying goodbye or if someone was after him."

"How do we do that?" he asked.

"You let us figure that out. Is there anyone we should try to speak with on the team?"

"Everyone that I told you about," he said, shaking his head. "You'll have a hard time getting to them right now because of the playoffs, but I know they'll talk to you when you're ready."

"Then I guess we wait until the playoffs are done," said Nine.

Trevon nodded, then excused himself, taking a seat with a few of the younger men. He was fast becoming one of the team whether he recognized it or not. The big man always had a smile on his face and a skip in his step. No matter what. No matter how he was feeling inside, he was always cheerful.

Angel, Trak, Kegger, and Pork parked their vehicle down the street from the Fire's facility. Just as Trevon had said, there were no guards, no cameras, and no security whatsoever. Either the Pinken family were the cheapest business owners known to man, or they didn't give a shit about their property. Either way, they were about to have a rude surprise.

“We’ll tap comms if we see anything, but it doesn’t look like you guys will be interrupted,” said Pork. Trak just nodded, walking toward the facility. He touched the door and then searched around it, looking for anything that could be hidden.

“Nothing,” he said to Angel. “It’s only the lock on the door.”

“Well, this should be fast.”

Trak knelt in front of the door, and in less than sixty seconds, he had picked the lock, and the door opened. They entered the building, locking it behind them just in case. Slowly, they made their way down the halls, looking for any hidden cameras or security devices.

“This is crazy,” said Angel. “There is nothing protecting this place. Nothing.”

“Lockers,” said Trak, nodding at the next door. Pushing the door open, they both scrunched their noses at the stench.

“Jesus, does no one clean this place or disinfect? That’s some serious man-funk. I’ve been in close quarters with guys my entire career, and if things started stinking like this, we’d force someone to clean that shit. It’s like body sweat, ball sweat, and feet.”

“I might be sick,” frowned Trak. “I’m never sick.”

“Here,” said Angel, handing him a mask. “Put this on.”

“What made you bring these?” Angel shrugged, securing his own mask on his face.

“I don’t know. I think my thought was there could be blood or something that we would want to protect ourselves from. I never thought about body funk.”

The locks on the lockers could have been picked by a middle-schooler. They were simple combination locks that required one tool to open them all. Some, they wish they hadn't opened.

"God, does this guy ever wash his shit? I thought they had someone doing laundry for them?"

"Apparently not," frowned Trak. "This guy has a serious obsession with porn. Look. Magazines, videos, posters, all of it. I'm not touching those socks."

"I think we were right. This is just a pretend league, and some of these younger guys don't even know it yet," said Angel.

"Look," said Trak. "These two lockers both have bottles of pills for migraines."

"Damn. Well, that's not suspicious at all, is it?" Angel shuffled some papers on one of the locker shelves and stopped. "Hey. Look. A copy of a contract proposal for Petey Rossi. Wasn't he on Trevon's list?"

"Yep."

"Hey, guys – we heard some noise and realized it was inside the stadium. We climbed the fire ladders on the outside and can see that someone is on the field digging a hole. It looks like a woman."

"We'll head that way once they're gone. Keep an eye out," said Angel.

After finding a few more interesting items in the lockers, they found the training room and started looking inside the tubs.

"I think this one has mold in it," frowned Angel.

Trak looked down inside the tub and shook his head in disgust. Moving to the next one, he knew it was where Butch had died. The position of it matched the one that had been shown in the police reports and coroner photos. Shining his flashlight into the tub, he stopped, seeing something stuck in the metal seam along the edge.

“Did you find something?” asked Angel.

“I think I just found our murder weapon.” Using his own knife, he pried the piece of steel from the tub. It was a single razor blade.

“Maybe he pushed it back in there after he sliced his wrists,” said Angel.

“Or, whoever slit his wrists dropped it and didn’t want to dig for it. If Butch had done it, the tub would have been full of his blood, and since it was an ice bath, it would have slowed the blood flow, not increased it. Remember, there was water and ice on the floor when the coach came in and found him. If he had tried to dig for that blade, he could have splashed everywhere. I’m guessing someone else tried, and he fought them.”

“Let’s take it with us and see if we can find any prints.”

“Female just left. We’re headed down to the field. See you there.”

When Trak and Angel stepped out onto the field, they walked toward the two dark figures standing at the 40-yard line. There was a terrible attempt at placing the turf back where it should have been, dirt all over the grass.

Using their own tools, they reopened the hole and weren’t surprised to find two manila folders filled with correspondence, including medical tests. Trak looked at the first sheet of paper and then looked up at his teammates.

“I think we have a problem.”

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“Whatever is going on there has so many layers to it, you can’t even begin to uncover them all,” said Trak, tossing the folders on the table. “The stadium itself was built on the grounds of an old chemical plant. Inside the lockers, treatment rooms, and coaching offices, there was asbestos found three years ago.”

“Asbestos?” frowned Ghost.

“Asbestos. A former player, Tim Runyon, claimed that the building had made him sick when he was diagnosed with advanced-stage lung disease most likely caused by asbestos exposure.”

“That should have been easy to prove,” said Gaspar.

“Apparently, the building was tested twice, and both times showed no signs of asbestos. What do you want to bet she paid off the companies who came in and did the testing?” said Angel.

“That’s an easy bet to win,” said Nine. “I’m seeing several reports from the team doctors around suspected symptoms from the concussions. Chronic headaches, mood swings, even episodes of psychosis. These poor bastards have been abused beyond belief.”

“That’s not all,” said Trak. “The helmets don’t meet the standards that the NFL set forth for its players. They’re using helmets that have been modified but are from the eighties and nineties. The safety technology has advanced beyond belief since then. These guys have been abused, lied to, poisoned, and disabled.”

“What about the contract you found?” asked Ian.

“We took photos of it and sent it to Georgie. She said she’d look at it first thing this morning and let us know what it says. I do think we need to speak with him and Kurt, the new QB.”

“Good morning,” said Trevon, stepping into the room. “I just got a weird call from Petey Rossi. He sounds bad. He said he wasn’t feeling like himself and needed help. I was going to go to him.”

“We’ll go with you,” said Ghost. “You don’t know what’s going on with him.”

Ghost, Gaspar, and Trevon piled into an SUV, and he directed them toward Petey’s townhouse in the city. When they pulled up, it didn’t look like anyone was home. Then Trevon noticed Petey looking through blinds as if he was worried that someone was coming for him.

“Has he ever shown signs of paranoia before?” asked Gaspar.

“Not to me, but we weren’t exactly best friends,” said Trevon. He knocked on the door, and Petey opened it quickly, waving him inside.

“Who are they?”

“They’re friends, Petey. What’s going on?”

“My head. My head is killing me, and I told them I couldn’t practice today, but now they’re saying they’ll let me go, and I won’t get any money.”

“Petey, my name is Gaspar. We’re working with Trevon now.”

“Working with him? Y’all are playing football?”

“No,” smirked Ghost. “We’re a bit old for that. We’re helping him to find out what happened with Butch.”

“She found someone to kill him. That’s what happened,” he said, pacing back and forth in his living room.

“She?” asked Gaspar.

“Glenda. She wanted me to get rid of Butch. She said if I did it, it would free up a lot of money for the rest of us. I told her no.”

“Why?” asked Trevon. Petey stared at him. “Come on, Petey. There was no love loss between you and Butch. You even said you thought he needed to retire.”

“Retire, yes. Die, no. I didn’t wish him dead. He was hurting, like the rest of us. This game, that place, it makes us sick, and we’re all slowly dying!”

“How did she want you to kill him?” asked Gaspar.

“She wanted me to allow the others to get to him, not cover him like I was supposed to. The problem with that is that it makes me look like a shitty O-lineman!”

“Okay, man. Why don’t you come with us?” said Trevon. Petey looked at him, then back at the other two men.

“Where? Are you taking me to a hospital?”

“No,” said Ghost. “We run a business that has a clinic on it. We can have someone check you out to be sure you’re okay. Then we can provide any treatment you need.”

“Where’s Debra? Where are the kids?” asked Trevon. Petey turned from him, nibbling on his lower lip.

“She left. She took the kids and went to her parents in Boston. Said she couldn’t take my mood swings any longer.” He sat down, gripping his head in his hands, shaking it back and forth. “I’m tired of the headaches. I’m tired.”

“I know,” said Trevon, sitting beside him. He gripped his forearm, squeezing it as he looked at his teammate. “Get your things and come with us, Petey. Please.”

The big man nodded at his friend, standing and stretching. Ghost stared at his wide, heavy body, his eyes traveling up toward the oddly shaped bone at his shoulder.

“Is your collarbone broken?” he asked.

“Docs said no, but it sure as fuck hurts like it is,” he said.

“Son, it’s broken. I can see it popped up like a tent. Did they inject it?” He nodded, holding up three fingers.

“Gave me a shot directly into it and then two shots for pain. Gave me some pain meds as well.” He saw the looks of concern on the faces of the men. Shaking his head, he stood and walked down the hallway.

“Need some help?” asked Trevon.

“No, man. I got this. Trevon?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for coming,” he said, nodding at his friend. Trevon smiled at him, nodding.

“Is that unusual?” whispered Ghost. “Do they often cover up injuries like that?”

“All the damn time,” said Trevon. “You have to be willing to shake the trees to get them to give you the right treatments. It’s all a set-up, isn’t it? You can’t play if you’re injured, but if you’re injured, she can let you go.”

“Hey, is he okay back there?” asked Gaspar.

“Petey? Petey, you okay?” asked Trevon, walking down the hall.

The next sound was not something any of them were prepared for. Not one of them. It was the sound of a gun. One single shot from a gun.

“No,” whispered Trevon. “No!”

“Son! No, don’t go back there,” said Ghost. He tried to hold Trevon back, but it was like trying to stop a bus. He plowed through him, knocking him to the floor. “Damn.”

Gaspar followed him, standing behind him in the bedroom. It was a stark room. Only the bed and a few items of clothing on the floor. Slumped against the wall was Petey Rossi with a .45 caliber pistol in his hand and a bullet wound through his heart.

“No,” whispered Trevon. “No.” He looked down at Petey’s left hand and noticed a sheet of paper below it.

Stop her T. For all of us.

It was hours before Felix and his team took the body and promised to do a thorough autopsy on Petey Rossi. Trevon notified his wife, Debra, and the police would be calling on the team to notify them. But by six o’clock, his suicide would be all over the news, connected directly to that of Butch Cavet’s.

“I’m sorry, Trevon,” said Ghost.

“I’m sorry I pushed you,” he said with a sad smirk.

“I won’t lie. It hurt like a bitch and pissed me off,” grinned Ghost, “but I would have done the same damn thing. We’ll find out what is going on, Trevon. I promise, son.”

“Thank you, sir. Can we go home now?” Ghost and Gaspar smiled at the young man, giving a quick nod.

“Let’s go home.”

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The news of Petey Rossi's suicide was all over the news that evening. His autopsy would take at least a week, possibly longer, but the news was already reporting the death could have been related to a recent injury, drug use, or even concussions. Every reporter commented that Glenda Pinken was under a microscope.

"Trevon? You okay, baby?" asked Claudette, giving him a big hug.

"I don't think I'll ever be okay, Miss Claudette. Petey and I weren't best buds, but we respected one another. This last year, he was acting weird, but I attributed it to him getting older like we all were. I didn't know that he and Debra had split up."

"People always have something to hide, honey. You don't know why, and you don't know when, but it happens to folks, and they're embarrassed to speak about it. I imagine a man like Petey, who was used to success, didn't like to admit that he'd failed at marriage."

"No, I guess he didn't. He and Debra were married while in college. She got pregnant with their first son, and they sort of had to get married. They loved each other, but I think that was a lot for Petey to take on. Debra dropped out of school to take care of the baby. He tried to continue playing ball and getting his degree. Eventually, the Fire came calling and offered him a lot of money."

"That must have been hard for him to turn away," said Jake. "A man wants to take care of his family."

"He was from a very traditional Italian family, and they expected him to do just that. He was tough to get to know sometimes. I should have been more patient with him."

“Don’t beat yourself up, son,” said Jake. “I think we can pretty much be assured that he wasn’t healthy, both body and mind. He wasn’t in a place that would have worked for either of you to have fireside chats.”

“I guess not. You played, didn’t you, Jake?”

“I did,” he nodded. “A lifetime ago, but I played. I loved every moment of it. Then my mama got sick, and my sisters needed an adult to take care of them. So, I left one future for another. It brought me home, and eventually, it brought me to Claudette, which is where I needed to be.” He kissed her forehead and hugged her close. Claudette smiled up at him, nodding.

“He asked me to stop her,” said Trevon. “I’m not even sure how to do that any longer. What if the other owners are doing the same thing?”

“They’re not,” said Georgie, walking up to them. “Kat and Kari went to visit the teams in Buffalo, Carolina, and Memphis. They were more than willing to show the contracts and open up their medical records. The owner of the Carolina Crabs, he might want to re-think that name, by the way. Anyway, his name is Ted Lister. He said he’s considering selling the team or shutting it down altogether. He wasn’t surprised by what Glenda is doing. Her sister, Gwen sold her shares to get away from her sister, and rumor has it the brother will be next.”

“Mr. Lister was always nice to me when I met him a few years back. Really genuine with a true love of the game,” said Trevon.

“He said the league has been struggling for a while now. They all bought franchises and invested their money for a business investment, tax deduction, nothing but for the love of the game, really. They’re all losing money because they’re just not able to meet the expectations of the NFL and to be enveloped in their fold. We’ve got more than enough evidence to shut her down,” said Georgie.

“No,” he said, shaking his head, “I’m sorry, Miss Georgie, but no. I want to get her for Butch and Petey’s deaths. I just know that she’s responsible for them. I want to make sure we have everything that will put her behind bars.”

“We will,” nodded Nine. “Her sister is gone now. Sold her shares, sold her home, and she and her family moved to Boise, where they had a house. I guess she couldn’t get away fast enough.”

“Maybe we should talk to the brother,” said Trevon. “I didn’t know him very well. His part of the business really didn’t touch the players, but he might talk to me if we reach out.”

“We can try,” nodded Ghost. “Do you have his number?”

“I have it,” said Georgie. “I was going to reach out to him anyway. Is he married?”

“As far as I know, he’s not. In fact, I’ve never seen him with a woman, or man for that matter.”

“Go ahead and call him. See if he’ll meet with us,” said Nine.

Trevon nodded, dialing the number he had for him if players needed to have a conversation about ticket sales. They were only given four tickets a piece for family and friends. If they wanted more, they had to call Glen Pinken and make a special request.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Pinken, this is Trevon Marks. How are you, sir?”

“Trevon,” he said with a calm tone. “How are you?”

“I’m well, sir. In fact, doing better every day.”

“So, you plan to try and return to the league? We could sure use you on the Fire again,” he said unconvincingly.

“Mr. Pinken, you and I both know that your sister would never allow me to return. No offense intended. I’m calling because I’d like to speak with you about Butch and Petey. In private, sir.”

There was a long pause and the sounds of papers shuffling, then a door closing. He could hear the man’s shoes tapping on wood floors and then the squeak of a chair as he sat down.

“Trevon, this is a very delicate matter,” he whispered.

“Mr. Pinken, you and I both know that your sister is hiding medical records as well as records regarding that building and stadium. I know that Miss Gwen left, and I have a feeling that you’re thinking about it as well. I know that you’re a good man, Mr. Pinken. You’ve always been nice to me, and I know you were good to Butch and Petey. All I’m asking for is a few minutes of your time.”

“She can’t know. If she found out that I was speaking to you about all of this, she’d kill me. No joke, Trevon, she’d kill me.”

“I promise you that we can do this in private. You tell me when you can get away, and I’ll tell you where to meet us. It would be outside of the city, in a little area in the country.”

“Okay,” he said, finally speaking. “Okay. I can get away tomorrow morning early.”

“I’ll send you a text with the address of a diner. No one will recognize you out here. I

promise.”

At six a.m., Trevon, Ghost, and Nine were seated in the café at the front of the property. They’d directed Glen to the café, assuring him that no one would see him or recognize him. The moment he left his gated community, the comms boys had him in their sights.

“Do you think he’ll show?” asked Nine.

“I hope so. This is awful early for me,” grinned Trevon. Nine and Ghost laughed, shaking their heads.

“We’ve spent years waking at 0500 or earlier. You learn as SEALs to operate on little to no sleep and be ready to go at any moment. It’s been hard as we became semi-retired to learn to sleep in, but a beautiful wife will help convince you to do that.”

“Y’all definitely have beautiful wives, respectfully, sirs.” Nine and Ghost laughed, nodding again. “I hope to have that one day. And if you don’t mind me saying so, this doesn’t feel like retirement at all. Y’all work every bit as hard as the others here.”

“We appreciate that but don’t tell our wives. We promised to slow down and take less risks. That hasn’t exactly worked out for us,” smirked Ghost.

“I can see why that would be hard. I mean, playing football, playing a game, doesn’t compare to risking your life for others, but I can only imagine what the adrenaline rush must feel like.” In the dark winter morning, headlights shone through the front windows of the café as a car parked outside.

“Nice car,” said Nine.

“Yeah, I think the team actually paid for it,” frowned Trevon. The bell above the door

rang as the man walked in wearing a black hoodie and black sweatpants. Trevon smiled, standing to greet him.

“Trevon,” he nodded.

“It’s okay, Mr. Pinken. This isn’t a covert operation,” he smiled.

“Isn’t it?” he asked, looking at Ghost and Nine. “Are they former players? I don’t recognize them.”

“No, sir, they’re not. They’re good friends who I’m working with now. Please, have a seat.” Nine waved over Jackie, the morning manager of the café.

“Coffee?” Pinken nodded, and Jackie poured everyone fresh, hot coffee. “I strongly recommend the cinnamon rolls.”

“Sure. Why not,” said Pinken. “I really do need to make this fast.”

“Alright,” said Ghost. “We know that your sister is hiding the medical histories of these players and, in fact, attempted to bury, literally, the information on several players and their suspected CTE results. Top that with the fact that your facility is loaded with asbestos, and you’re sitting on a massive lawsuit.”

Glen sat back in the seat, staring at his coffee cup. Jackie placed the cinnamon roll in front of him, and he cut a piece, letting it melt in his mouth. The gooiness of the caramel and cinnamon warmed his insides as he took a sip of the coffee.

Nine watched him carefully. This was a man who wanted to run but was unfortunately trapped in the booth with Trevon next to him.

“Did you know?” asked Trevon.

“No. Not all of it. We suspected that some of the players were more injured than was let on, but she never allowed anyone to see the medical reports, and as you know, the league doesn’t require us to publish them.”

“And the stadium and facility?” asked Ghost.

“That I knew about,” he frowned. “Listen, it’s not an excuse, but it is fact. My sister is a viper. A killer of the worst kind. She hides, she stalks, she plays people against one another.”

“What do you mean?” asked Trevon.

“Butch knew that you were seeing Lara.” Trevon’s face fell in shock. He stared at Glen, then at the men across the table.

“How did you know about that?” he frowned.

“I knew because my sister paid Lara to have an affair with you and then told Butch about it. I think Butch knew what she was trying to do, keep him distracted and unable to play at the highest level.”

“Lara played me?” frowned Trevon.

“I’m sorry.” The big man moved so fast that Ghost and Nine couldn’t reach him. He gripped the throat of Glen Pinken, dragging him like a rag doll from the booth.

“Not as sorry as you’re going to be.”

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“Trevon? Trevon, son, put the man down. Let him go, or you’re going to kill him,” said Nine.

“Should I call Team Big?” whispered Ghost.

“He’ll be dead by the time they get here,” said Nine.

“Trevon! You put that boy down!” yelled Jackie. He turned and stared at the older woman, then looked back at the purple face of Glen Pinken. “Now!”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, releasing his hold. Glen fell to the ground, coughing and spitting, gasping for air. He crawled backwards, trying to make his escape, but Ghost stopped him.

“I prevented him from killing you once. Don’t test your luck with me. You’re going to explain to us about all this bullshit. What was she trying to do?”

“Fuck with your lives! That’s all she ever does,” he said, looking at Trevon. “She just wanted to fuck with your lives and your minds. She screwed with Petey and Debra. Told her that she loved the little birthmark on Petey’s ass cheek.”

“They were having an affair?” frowned Trevon.

“No! She filmed it while we had cameras in the locker rooms. She filmed all of you. It was a sick, twisted obsession of hers to look at your bodies, see the size of you,” he said in air quotes. “If she could fuck with your life, she did.”

“How much did she give Lara?” he asked.

“The equivalent of Butch’s payout on his contract. One-point-eight million.”

“Son-of-a-bitch,” muttered Trevon. “I trusted her. I thought she actually cared about me.”

“I think she did. I mean, for what it’s worth, I think she did,” said Glen. “I know that she didn’t want to do it initially, but my sister can be very convincing in a horrible, malicious, vicious way.”

“You know that the league is going under, right?” asked Nine.

“I know. Everyone knows, but my sister won’t listen to reason. She’s offered to buy me out.”

“You should take that offer,” said Ghost. “If you’re there when all this goes down, you’re going down with her, and we’ll make sure you serve time right beside her. Maybe y’all can get bunk beds or something.”

Glen swallowed hard, rubbing his neck as he stared at the men. He looked up at Trevon and, for the first time, understood why defenders feared him.

“She’ll buy out my shares if I ask. I’ll do that today.”

“Where does she keep the rest of the files?” asked Nine.

“I’m going to guess in her home,” said Glen.

“What about Butch? Did she kill him?” asked Trevon.

“I guess she did indirectly. I mean, she paid players in the league to take cheap shots on him, paid the refs to look the other way, and paid some of the o-line guys to miss their tackles.”

“Her contracts are illegal,” said Nine. The truth was, he wasn’t sure that they were illegal yet, but he damn sure thought they could be.

“It doesn’t surprise me. She never allowed Gwen or me to review them. Look, I’ll sell my shares and get out, but she wants the championship. She thinks that it will prove that she’s capable of running an NFL team.”

“Wait, this isn’t about our league merging with the NFL?” asked Trevon.

“No. Not even close. She knows there isn’t the talent to do that, and the NFL doesn’t respect our league. What she hopes is that she will have enough money to buy a team, and they’ll let her. That’s her dream.”

“Why? She doesn’t respect the game,” frowned Trevon. “She damn sure doesn’t give a shit about her players. Is this so she can play her sick games with us? See us naked?”

“Honestly? That is part of it,” said Glen, shaking his head. “She kept all the film from the cameras that used to be in the locker room. She has it saved somewhere in her home.”

“What’s the security like?” asked Ghost.

“Definitely better than the team facility. The house is gated, and she has a security guard on duty twenty-four-seven. There are multiple alarms, video cameras, and sensors. Even I can’t get into her house with a key and the alarm codes.”

“Write it down,” said Nine. “All of it. The alarm codes, the entrances, where the cameras are. Write it all down. By the end of today, I want to hear the news telling me that she is now the sole owner of the team and you have left the state. I don’t give a fuck where you go, but it had better be far away from that team and its players.”

Glen nodded, writing down all the information and sliding it across the table.

“I’ll be done by the end of the day. I’ll keep my phone on me. I know you don’t think so, but I truly didn’t want any part of this. I’m sorry, Trevon.”

The young man said nothing, just staring at the other man. As Glen left, Trevon took his seat once again, sipping on his coffee.

“Let me warm it up for you, hun,” smiled Jackie.

“I’m sorry, Miss Jackie. I hope I didn’t scare you,” he whispered.

“I’ve been around all these boys long enough to know that when you lose your tempers, it’s for a good reason. You catch your breath, eat your breakfast, and everything will feel a bit clearer. I just prefer no dead bodies in the café. It’s bad for business.” She kissed the top of his head, and he grinned as she walked away.

“Jackie’s a good woman,” smiled Nine. “Her husband died about five years ago, and she came to us asking for help because she was about to be evicted from her home. It’s one of the many things our team does. We stop slum lords, and other slum, if you know what I mean. We got her set up with something better, a nicer place, and gave her this job. She’s invaluable to all of us.”

“She might have saved his life,” frowned Trevon. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” smirked Ghost. “Now I know if I need someone to help out with security,

you're the man I'm calling."

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“Mr. Sheffler? Joe Sheffler?” asked Kari. The man turned, leering at her, looking her up and down. He started to step forward, and he felt a grip so severe on his shoulder that he thought he might be having a heart attack.

“You might want to think very carefully about your next move,” said Miller. “You see, that’s my wife, and I don’t like when other men touch my wife.”

Sheffler turned and was surprised when he actually looked up at a man. He was big, but this guy was bigger in every way. He was taller, wider, and the look on his face said, ‘I will kill you.’ He took that seriously.

“Sorry. I meant nothing by it. I’m Joe Sheffler.”

“Good. I’m Kari Robicheaux, and you’ve met my husband. We’d like to speak with you about that hit you made on Butch Cavet.”

He started to turn to leave the coffee shop, and Miller stepped in front of him, Jean and Antoine right behind him.

“Damn. Y’all triplets?”

“Nope,” said Jean.

“I’m not supposed to talk to anyone about it,” he said, shaking his head.

“Did your lawyer tell you that?” asked Kari.

“Lawyer? Fuck no.”

“Then I’m going to guess Glenda Pinken told you to keep your mouth shut after she paid you to make that hit on him.” Kari raised a brow, waiting for his response.

He looked at his coffee and nodded toward a sofa and some chairs. Miller watched him carefully, making sure he didn’t attempt to escape. Between him and his brothers, they would stop him, but this bastard would give a few good hits. He damn sure didn’t want to shoot him.

“How much did she pay you?” asked Kari.

“Seventy-five thousand.”

“Seventy-five thousand to knock a man out of a job,” said Antoine in disbelief, shaking his head.

“She wanted him dead,” said Joe. “She wanted me to hit him so hard in the head that he wouldn’t get up. I couldn’t do it. It was an illegal hit. My head was down, and I went straight for his head, but I couldn’t ensure that the impact would kill him.”

“Couldn’t ensure the impact would kill him,” repeated Jean with disdain. “You fucking asshole. It could have killed you!”

“I know,” said Joe, waving a hand to get Jean to lower his voice. “I’m well aware. She was pissed and only paid me half the money.”

“I should take you out back and beat the fuck out of you,” said Miller. Joe scoffed, giving him a knowing smirk.

“If you think you can, old man.”

“Okay, that’s enough. Listen to me. You might be some tough football player, but you have no idea who and what these men are,” said Kari. “My husband would eat you alive and spit out the bones, hiding them where they’d never be found. Do not fuck with us!”

He swallowed, staring at the beautiful woman, shocked by the language she was using. He tried to relax against the sofa, but Antoine leaned forward on his elbows, inches from his face.

“Why the fuck did she want him dead?”

“Same reason she wanted Hardesty and Rossi dead. They’ve got injuries and diagnosed lung disease from the asbestos.” He stared at them like they were stupid as he spilled the tea to them. “I mean, you know about all that, right?”

“Yes, we knew about all that. Rossi killed himself,” said Kari. “Trevon was there when it happened.”

“He might have pulled the trigger on himself, but believe me, she was the one pulling the strings in the background. Look, not all the owners are like her, but she’s the fucking worst. She made sure that every contract ensured that she didn’t have to pay out a dime if they left due to injuries related to anything, and I do mean anything.”

“That’s not legal,” said Kari.

“Tell that to her,” he scoffed. “Look, all I did was make a hit on Butch. It’s football. It’s what we do.”

“No. You intentionally made a hit on a man for money to his head. The same man and head that had received multiple concussions, and you were paid to actually make the hit so severe you would kill him. That’s assault with intent to do harm and

payment with intent to kill.”

“No one will believe you,” he smirked. Jean smiled at him, holding up his phone to show that he’d been recording the entire conversation.

“Wanna bet?”

“Hey! Hey, you can’t fucking do that!”

“Wanna bet?” laughed Antoine, repeating his brother’s words.

“What do you want?”

“Simple. I want you to help us nail Glenda Pinken. I want that woman behind bars, charged with murder and a myriad of other crimes.”

“And just how the hell am I supposed to help you do that? I’m not even on her team, and believe me, I have no intention of moving to her team.”

“We could arrange that,” said Miller. “See, I’m going to bet your owner would love to get rid of a man like you and happily give you to Glenda and her team.”

“No. No, please, don’t do that to me.”

Kari sat back, elegantly crossing her legs. She wiped her hand along her thigh, looking at her husband and brothers-in-law. She was a master at making men uncomfortable during interrogations.

“Lady, please.”

“Here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to go back to Glenda, tell her you

need money. Problems with a woman or something equally stupid that you might do.” He frowned at her, and Miller growled in his direction. “When she accepts, and we both know she’ll accept your help, you’re going to call me and tell me who she wants gone. Clear.”

“Clear.”

“Crystal clear?” asked Kari.

“Yes. Crystal clear.”

“When does your team play the Fire again?” asked Antoine.

“We have a game tomorrow night. If we win, we play them next weekend in the playoffs. If we lose, I wouldn’t have access to their players unless it was just as a civilian out and about.”

“You mean like in a bar or something?” asked Jean.

“Yeah, although most of us aren’t stupid enough to go to bars. We will frequent coffee shops but not bars.”

“Smart,” smirked Kari. They started to stand to leave when Kari turned back toward Sheffler. “Who else is she paying?”

“What?” he asked in a shaky voice.

“Who else?”

“Fuck, lady, why did you have to ruin my coffee this morning?” Miller slapped the back of his head, and his chin snapped downward to his chest. “Hey, that fucking

hurts!”

“Really. You mean like taking a cheap shot on another, going at full speed with a shitty helmet?”

“Okay. Point taken. She pays the refs or blackmails them. She’s notorious for catching the refs with strippers, hookers, hell, anything and everything. Two of them were caught in a room with a seventeen-year-old girl and a table full of blow.”

“Who else?” Sheffler rolled his eyes, shaking his head.

“The doctors, EMTs, trainers, anyone and everyone. She pays them enough that they keep their mouths shut, and if she thinks they’ll talk anyway, she finds something to hold over them. She’s good at that.”

“And what does she have on you?” asked Kari, tilting her head to the side. Sheffler froze, unable to look up at the men around him. Jean started to slap the back of his head again, but he jumped, moving out of reach.

“Please don’t hit my head again,” he said. Jean almost felt bad for him. It obviously was painful and uncomfortable for him.

“What does she have on you?”

“It was a party my second or third year in the league. I was drunk, so were the other guys. When I woke up the next morning, I had two naked guys next to me and a bunch of used condoms on the floor.”

“So, you’re gay?” said Kari.

“I’m bi-sexual. I like men and women,” he whispered.

“And she knows and will announce it to the world unless you do her bidding.”

“Yes.” Kari stood, tucking her purse under her arm.

“Call her and then call us. If we can get the footage from that party, I give you my word that I’ll burn it. All of it.”

“You’d do that?” he asked in surprise. The three men looked down on him, and Kari stared at the man.

“I’m not like you. I’m not in the habit of ruining men’s lives just for my own pleasure. It gives me no great joy to watch a man’s career go up in flames because of something I did. Call me or I will send these three after you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said quietly.

Back in the SUV, Miller turned to his wife grinning at her like a Cheshire cat. He grabbed her hand, kissing the back of her fingers.

“That was the hottest fucking shit ever.”

“Ewww,” said Antoine. “Please. I don’t need to hear this.”

“Seriously, bro. Make whoopie with my sister-in-law when I’m not around.”

“Fuck all of you. I’ll damn well tell my wife exactly how I feel about her whenever I want to.” Kari laughed, reaching across the seat to give him a big kiss.

“I love my big scary husband. And, I love his brothers.”

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It took some convincing, but Trevon was finally able to get Kurt to meet them at the café. Like Glen Pinken, he wanted something early in the morning when no one would see him or recognize him. This time, it wasn't three men waiting for him but five.

Ghost, Ian, Nine, Gaspar, and Trevon waited at two tables for the car to pull up.

"You gonna get mad at this boy?" asked Jackie. He chuckled, shaking his head.

"I can't guarantee I won't, Miss Jackie, but all these men will keep me from making a mess in the diner if I do."

"Mmhmm," she said with a side grin. "Look, you're a big man, grown full. Control your temper, or someone will get hurt. You want this boy to tell you things be nice, and maybe he will."

"Yes, ma'am," he smiled. She left his coffee and five plates with cinnamon rolls and walked back behind the counter. It wouldn't start getting really busy for another hour or so.

"Glenda bought out Glen yesterday," said Ian. "She's the sole owner. Sole person responsible for everything. If the kingdom falls, it's on her."

"It will fall," said Trevon. "I'm going to make sure of it."

"Trevon? Miller, Kari, Antoine, and Jean went to see Joe Sheffler yesterday," said Gaspar. "He was paid by Glenda to make that hit on Butch. She wanted him dead, but

Sheffler couldn't do it."

"No, he could just ruin his career and nearly kill him," he frowned. "It doesn't surprise me. He's been making dirty hits for a while now. I'm surprised he's still allowed to play."

"He's allowed to play because she's paying the refs as well."

"Damn," he muttered. "What is wrong with people?"

"That's a loaded question," said Ian. "There's a helluva lot wrong with people. We try to weed through it all but aren't always successful with that. Did you see Riley about an x-ray on your lungs?"

"Yes, sir. She said everything looked good but was pretty sure that your warm pond had something to do with it," he said, shrugging. The men all nodded, smiling at the young man. "Hey, I think that's him."

Sure enough, the bell above the door rang, and Kurt Michaels walked into the café. He wore jeans and a sweatshirt, looking like he'd just crawled out of bed.

"Kurt, thanks for meeting me," said Trevon.

"Sure. Sure," he said nervously. "You look good. Are you doing alright? Do you need anything?"

"Naw, man. I don't need anything except information." Kurt nodded, looking at the other men. "They're friends. They can be trusted. I just want to find the truth about what happened with Butch."

Kurt was quiet for a long moment. Jackie poured him a cup of coffee and set down a

cinnamon roll for him. He nodded but never looked up. Trevon started to speak, but Ghost gripped his hand beneath the table, telling him to remain silent.

“I couldn’t tell him no.” The other men frowned at him, waiting patiently for him to continue.

“What do you mean?” asked Trevon.

“Butch. I couldn’t tell him no. After practice that day, I found him in the training room in that damn ice bath. He said he’d help me better understand the defense of the team we were playing that week.”

“And did he?” asked Nine.

“Yes, sir. He was great. He knew everything and everyone. Told me all sorts of things I wouldn’t have thought of. He was amazing.” They noticed that Kurt was near tears and quieted, letting him collect his thoughts.

“When he finished talking about football, he gripped my arm and asked me to do one favor for him.”

“What did he want?” asked Trevon.

“He asked me to kill him.”

“What?” said the five men in unison.

“He said he had to die but and that an autopsy needed to happen on his body. He didn’t want to put a bullet in his head because he said they would want to look at his head. He didn’t want to take pills because he said they would write it off as an overdose.”

“So he asked you to slit his wrists?” said Ghost.

“Yes, sir. He said to do it and just leave. I tried. I swear to God I tried,” he sniffed. “I cut his wrists, and then I dropped the blade in the tub. He was pissed about that, but I couldn’t find it, and water and ice was sloshing everywhere. We thought Coach might hear us and find us. He told me to leave him there, but I couldn’t let him die alone. I just couldn’t.”

“You were there the whole time?” asked Trevon.

“I asked him about football and why he loved it so much. He said mostly because of all of us, the players. He said he felt like it was his family. He talked about Carigan and how much he loved her. Then he told me that he’d seen a doctor out of state. He didn’t want anyone to know until this was all over with. The reports are with the doctor.” He pulled a business card from his jeans pocket and slid it across the table.

“He’s in New York City. Supposedly one of the best neurologists in the world. Butch definitely had advanced CTE trauma, but he was also suffering from the effects of the asbestos in the locker rooms. He said when they did the autopsy, all of that should show up, and hopefully, Glenda would be found guilty.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Trevon.

“Because I killed him!” he said, openly weeping now. “I cut his wrists.”

“You did it at his request, son. He was dying anyway, and he didn’t want to die in pain and suffering. He didn’t want his daughter to see her father deteriorating a little bit every day. You did what he asked. I’m not saying it’s right. I’m just saying you did something that a lot of men couldn’t do,” said Ian.

“We all made pacts with one another,” said Ghost. “Each of us. If we reached a point

in our lives, in our careers, if our injuries were so severe, end it for us. End it or we would do it ourselves. I agree with Ian. It's not right, but it was his choice."

"I'm sorry, Trevon," he said, hiccupping as he spoke.

"I-I don't know what to say to this. You did what Butch asked of you, but why wouldn't you tell me? Why wouldn't you come to me so we could figure all this shit out together? Why didn't he come to me !?"

"I didn't think you liked me very much, and then you left the team too. I think he thought you wouldn't be able to do it, that you were too close."

"I didn't leave the team," said Trevon. "I was asked to move on by Glenda."

"She's such a fucking bitch," said Kurt. "I thought I would get a chance with her, but all I'm getting is sicker by the day."

"You have to leave, Kurt. Leave and get out," said Gaspar.

"I have to win that championship so I can get my bonus. If I do that, I can leave and, hopefully, go to another team."

"Kurt, I don't think there's going to be another team," said Trevon. "The league is close to shutting down. They're not making money, and the NFL wants nothing to do with any of us."

"Great," he said, shaking his head. "Just great. Am I going to jail?"

Trevon looked at his four mentors and shook his head.

"No," said Nine. "I don't think there's a reason to put you behind bars. You did

something not a lot of men could do for a man who was suffering more than we'll ever know. No. You're not going to jail, but we might need your help."

"Anything. Anything I can do, I'll do it," he said, looking at them. Gaspar nodded at him, waving Jackie over for refills of coffee.

"I'm glad to hear that because this is going to be fun."

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“You want me to do what?” said Coach, staring at Kurt and the men around him. He’d called him to ask him to meet them at the diner out on River Road. At first, he refused, but when Kurt said he was desperate and in trouble, Coach dropped everything and came.

“Coach, you and I both know this league is done after the championship game. She’s going to take her money, dump all of us, and try to do something else. We will all lose. I think we should give her something memorable as an exit plan.” Kurt grinned at the coach, turning to Trevon and the others, who were smiling as well.

“Alright, I’m listening.”

For an hour, they spoke about their plan, and the coach seemed reluctant, unable to comprehend how this could possibly work. These men weren’t professional football players. They looked like it. Hell, they looked better than some he’d seen, but given how old they said they were, he was seriously reluctant.

“I think we need to show you who we have in mind as your replacements,” said Nine. The coach heard the back door open and Jackie laughing, welcoming everyone. As men filtered into the room, the coach’s eyes grew wider and wider.

“What in the ever-loving, fucking hell are they?” he asked.

“See, that is what people see when we walk in the room,” smirked Tailor.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you, but where the hell have you all been hiding?”

“Coach, let me introduce you to our team,” smirked Gaspar. “My baby brother, Alec.”

“Baby? Baby what? Hippo?”

“Hey, that’s not nice,” frowned Alec. The coach threw his hands in the air, shaking his head.

“Alec, Tailor, Noah, Noa—former star player at the University of Hawaii, Rory, Cade, Bodhi, RJ—a former college star, Lars, Zulu, Skull...”

“Skull? You have a guy named Skull?” frowned the coach.

“It’s just a nickname,” smirked Skull.

“Anyway, as I was saying, Skull, King, Zeke—former star player at Florida State, Bron, and Ethan. All of these men played high school football but were Special Forces.”

“That doesn’t mean they can play semi-pro ball,” said the coach with a high-pitched shriek. “They need to learn the plays. They need to learn the players! How the hell am I going to get helmets and uniforms to fit them in just a couple of days.”

“We’re going to take care of all of that, including making your defensive line suddenly sick,” said Nine.

“Why? Why are you making my line sick?”

“Coach, we’ve found out that the defensive line has been paid by Glenda to allow touchdowns to occur. She’s taken out a bet. A bet against our team.”

“That fucking bitch!” he snapped.

“She is that,” nodded Trevon. “She’s responsible for all of this, Coach. There’s asbestos in the clubhouse and training rooms, she’s paid the refs, she’s paid other players to knock our players out, all of it.”

“Were you aware of the contracts?” asked Ian.

“No. I wasn’t allowed to look at the contracts. Ever. Players were told under no circumstances could they speak to me or other players about the conditions of their contracts.”

“The contracts don’t pay anything out if the players get injured. Nothing. Even if it’s in a game,” said Trevon. “Butch, me, all of us get nothing if we get injured and leave the team before the playoffs. She was knocking off players who could free up her money and not replacing us.”

“Damn,” he muttered. “She told me she was looking for available talent but that it was difficult at the end of the season like this. Shit. I just wanted to finish the season and get out. I’m too old for this bullshit any longer.”

“Then you’ll help us?” asked Gaspar.

“Oh, hell yes. I’ll help you. But how are we going to keep the defense off the field?”

“You let us worry about that,” smirked Ghost.

“Listen, no offense to any of these men, but you might be a bit old, I mean older than the average player. You’re going to go up against kids twenty-three, twenty-four years old. You guys could get hurt.”

A slow rumble of laughter started and rolled into full-blown belly laughs.

“I’m serious!” said the coach.

“We know you’re serious, and we appreciate your concern,” said Tailor. “No need to worry about us. We’re about to show those boys how real men play.”

“Are we certain the other side has been paid off by her as well?” asked the coach.

“Positive,” said Kurt.

He stood, pacing back and forth across the diner floor. There was a sign on the door saying it was closed for a private event. He stopped at his table, took another sip of coffee and a bite of the famous cinnamon rolls.

“You won’t kill anyone, will you?”

“We can’t promise that,” smirked Alec. Coach’s face dropped. “Kidding. Just kidding. We won’t kill anyone unless they try to kill us.”

“That doesn’t bring me a lot of comfort, but I appreciate your honesty.”

“Coach, we need access to the training facility today so that we can take care of some things. We want to gather the evidence of the asbestos being in the building, as well as see if we can find evidence of chemicals still below the building from the chemical plant.”

“Jesus, she really did a number on all of us, didn’t she?”

“Yes, sir, she did,” said Trevon. “I started out trying to find justice for Butch, but this is much more. This is about finding justice for all of us. Most of those boys don’t

even know what's happening to them. We want to stop this."

"I want to stop it as well. What about my assistant coaches? I've suspected for a while some of them were against me."

"They are, sir," said Kurt. "We've taken care of that as well. They'll be, uh, indisposed on game day."

"And I'm guessing you have coaches to take their place?" he frowned.

"You're looking at 'em," smirked Ghost. "Me, Gaspar, Nine, and Ian. Old enough to be coaches, big enough to have played, smart enough to know what to do." The coach let out a loud bark of laughter, shaking his head.

"I can't argue with that."

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“It’s their routine,” said Trevon, standing across the street from the Catfish Shack. “They come out here to eat, have a few beers, and get loose before a game.”

“Shame for them that we know the owners,” smirked Angel. “Stay out of sight, Trevon. We’re serious. The staff is going to start heading out back. Once they’re out of the building, we’ll be going in. We’re going to film and record the whole thing so that the news will know why this happened.”

“I trust y’all,” he said, nodding. “I’ll be waiting right here.”

Angel, Pork, Kegger, Otto, Wilson, Jean, Gabe, Rafe, and Cruz were dressed entirely in black, including black gloves and beanies on their heads. They had black grease paint on their faces and gas masks tucked into the backs of their trousers.

Gabe walked over to a large moving truck, nodding at the driver.

“You ready, Bubba?” he asked the driver.

“Always ready, cousin,” he smirked. “I don’t ‘dem fellas much, so we’re happy to hold ‘em for ‘ya for a while. Don’t worry. They won’t get nowhere fast.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it,” laughed Gabe at his cousins. He turned to the others and nodded. “Signal the staff.”

Jean dialed the number, telling the person who answered to exit out the back doors. They would be getting a very, very large tip for missing out on some diners for the next few hours.

They watched from across the street as the staff stepped outside, waving at them as they took a seat beneath the trees in the back parking lot. The defensive players were acting like complete animals, tossing food at one another and making a huge mess.

“Need some help?”

“Shit!”

“Asshole!”

“Fucking dick!” frowned Jean. “Trak, you’re a real jerk.”

“I know,” he smiled. “I’ll start this dance. You guys follow.”

Trak walked into the diner, turning to give a smirk at the other men as they slowly followed. Opening the door, the players all turned to see who was interfering with their pre-game dinner.

“Place is closed, buddy,” said one of the men.

“I’m not your buddy,” said Trak. Covered in black, his knives gleaming in the light of the diner, he almost hoped one of them would try something. He got his wish. A huge man stood from his seat, cracking his knuckles in an obnoxious show of superiority. Trak only grinned.

“Boy doesn’t know who he’s up against, does he, Danny?” laughed another man.

The bell above the door rang again. Jean, Kegger, and Rafe walked in. A few moments later, the rest followed. The man stood still at the table, counting heads. His cocky behavior said that he believed they could take the men in black.

Shoving his chair backwards, he decided to charge Trak like a raging bull. Trak only shook his head, easily moving out of the way.

“You’re slow,” he said calmly.

“Fuck you!” He charged him again, hoping to tackle him, but the man evaded his touch once again.

“You’re fat and slow,” said Trak.

The man couldn’t have been more than twenty-eight years old, but he’d let his desire for money overshadow his desire to be in shape and play good, clean football. When he charged Trak for a third time, he not only maneuvered out of his way but climbed his back, gripping his neck in a solid hold.

Falling to his knees, the other players watched in horror, starting to move forward.

“Uh, uh, uh,” grinned Cruz. He jammed a needle in the neck of the man, and he dropped, unable to move.

“What the fuck?” said another man. “Who are you guys?”

“Oh, we’re with the office of the Sandman, and you’ve been deemed bad boys. Taking money to blow games, allowing your team to lose,” said Jean, shaking his head. “Tsk, tsk, tsk.”

Wide-eyed and now ready to run, the men shifted from one foot to another. But it was too late. The men in black put their masks on, watching as the others struggled to keep their eyes open and breathe. When the last man dropped, they opened the doors. Jean looked at the man at Trak’s feet.

“Did you kill him?” he asked.

“No. I wanted to, but Mama Irene told me I couldn’t. She said it was too close to Christmas, and I had to let him go.”

“Alright,” laughed Jean. “Let’s load these assholes into the truck. They’re taking a little vacation out on a barge in the middle of the bayou. Even if they were to get by the cousins, they won’t find their way home by themselves.”

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The morning of the game, the replacements were in the locker room early, dressed and hidden behind their helmets just in case anyone questioned who they were. The coach calmly explained that several of the defensive players had come down with a horrible virus and wouldn't be able to play. To avoid forfeit, he'd brought in extras.

"No offense, Coach, but do they even know how to play?" asked someone.

"You wanna test me, boy?" asked Tailor. The man shook his head and took a seat.

"Where are the other coaches?" asked another man.

"Oh, they were all affected as well. I'd like you to meet the temporary coaches for this game. Nine, Gaspar, Ian, and Ghost."

"Ghost? Nine? What kind of names are those?" said Billy Buttrell.

"I don't know, what kind of name is Butt-rell?" The others smirked, and he blushed, nodding at the big old man. He didn't look like someone he wanted to screw around with.

"Alright, get out on the field and start running drills," said Coach. When the players were gone, he looked at his new coaches. "I sure as hell hope this works."

"What the fuck is going on with my team?" came the shrill voice.

"My team," said Coach, "is full of replacements because this shitty fucking facility has made my guys sick."

“No. No, that can’t happen. Not today,” she said in a panic.

“What’s the matter, Glenda? Afraid the defense won’t know what to do?” asked Gaspar. She turned to stare at the strange man and looked back at the coach.

“What are you doing? What is this?”

“This is me taking control of this team and protecting my players. This is me making sure that the whole world knows what kind of woman you are. This is me finally feeling like the man that I know I am.”

She was seething. Literally, steam was coming from the top of her head. Her hands were balled in fists, and she was more than a little pissed off.

“It won’t matter,” she smirked. “None of it will matter!”

“Why? Because you think you own the referees?” asked Nine. Her face blanched, and she looked from one face to another. “Don’t worry, Glenda. We’re going to do the Fire proud.”

As she stalked away, the coach stared at the four men, shaking his head.

“Y’all got some balls, that’s for damn sure. That woman would put a bullet in your head if she thought it would help her.”

“Well, she just might have to do that,” said Ian. “Let’s go. We have a game to win. Sort of.”

Every man knew enough about football to know the basic warm-up drills that needed to happen. For all his guilt, Kurt took control as captain of the team and was doing a damn fine job. When the referees walked out on the field, Gaspar nudged the coach.

“This is where it gets fun,” he smiled. Whiskey, Antoine, Bull, Miller, and Luc were wearing the black and white uniforms of the referees. Along the sidelines, acting as sideline judges, were Vince, Dex, Clay, and Mac.

“Who are they? You know what,” he said, raising his hands, “I don’t think I want to know. You didn’t hurt the refs, did you?”

“They’ll live,” smirked Ian.

“What about the stuff that Glen said she had in her house? You guys said that he told you there was a ton of evidence out there. She’ll burn it all before we can get to her.”

“No, she won’t,” said Nine. “I need you to trust me. She will not get away with any of this.”

“Did you kill him?” asked Sly, looking over at Baptiste and Rafe.

“Why does everyone ask us that? No, we didn’t kill him. He’s just going to have a helluva headache when he wakes up,” said Rafe. “Let’s go. Did you block the signals on the alarm?”

“Why does everyone always ask me that?” smirked Sly. Baptiste and Rafe frowned at him. “Yes. It’s blocked. Pick the damn lock. The cameras are down as well, plus the sensors are inactivated.”

The system of locks and alarms on Glenda’s home was impressive but not impenetrable. It seemed an awfully large home for one woman, but they were assured she had no men in her life, no children, no women, and no staff. She preferred a non-witnesses sort of lifestyle.

“Office is over here,” said Baptiste. “Got two safes.”

“Let me work my magic,” said Sly. It took him longer than usual, but within twenty minutes, both safes were open, and the stacks of materials inside were so damning Glenda would never see the light of day.

“Let’s go. We need to get this to the stadium.”

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“Folks, I’m not sure where they got the replacement defensive players today, but they are ruling the field. The Mustangs are hurting out there, and nothing seems to be working for them.”

“Great hit,” laughed Noah, slapping Noa’s back.

“It was my specialty,” he grinned. “I think that boy thought I was his mother.”

On the next play, one of the offensive linemen for the Mustangs thought he would get in a cheap shot, trying to thrust his fist upward into Tailor’s windpipe. Instead, he was met with an iron grip and pain that was unimaginable.

“Now, see. That wasn’t called for,” said Tailor, squeezing his hand. “You try to take a cheap shot on me, I’m gonna return the favor.” He twisted his wrist, forcing him to the ground. With his other hand flat on the grass, Tailor stepped on the back of his hand, satisfied that he wouldn’t be using it again for a while.

“Man, I haven’t had this much fun in a while,” grinned RJ.

“Me, too,” laughed Zeke. “Let’s see if they’re stupid enough to pass.”

It was as if they could read the plays coming their way. The quarterback for the Mustangs threw a long ball to his receiver, and despite their age, RJ and Zeke were there to intercept. RJ tackled the offensive player, and Zeke took off, scoring another touchdown for the Fire.

The entire defensive line turned toward the owners’ box, looking up and waving in

defiance, then they flipped her the bird.

“Who in the hell are they!” she screamed. Except she was screaming at no one. No one that mattered. Those around her just looked at her, not saying a word. “I asked you a question!”

“I’m just a marketing guy, Glenda. Remember? I don’t give opinions.” He turned, leaving the suite and leaving Glenda absolutely furious.

“Here we go, Chip. The Fire kicks off, and the Mustangs are taking it at the eighteen. Oh. My. Goodness! I don’t know who that defensive player is for the Fire, but that man just sent that poor receiver into next week! Where has this team been all year?”

“Stop the game,” said Glenda, pushing open the doors of the press box. The announcer turned off the mic and stared at her. “I said stop the game!”

“Ma’am, you don’t get to tell us to stop the game. We work for the network, not you. The game goes on. Now, please leave. Security? Escort Ms. Pinken out of the press box, please.”

She fought them the whole way, but she was locked out of the press box, screaming and kicking the entire way.

By the end of the first half, the Fire was winning 36-0.

“Well, boys? How does it feel to be up by so much?” asked Coach Osterhausen. The original players all smiled, nodding. “Good. We have a story to tell you.”

Kurt stood up, beginning by telling his teammates what actually happened to Butch. He wanted them to know. He needed them to know. They were astounded, but they also, in an odd way, understood.

“My turn now,” said Gaspar. “I need you to understand what Glenda Pinken has been doing to all of you. How many of you have been coughing lately? Short of breath? Maybe strange rashes?”

More than a dozen men raised their hands. Gaspar nodded at Doc, Riley, and Gabi, pulling the men to the side of the room.

“Here’s what you need to know.”

For twenty minutes, Gaspar explained what they were sitting in and on in the stadium. He talked about her plans to kill off players to free money for herself, he talked about what they all knew about their contracts, and he hoped they would support their efforts to stop her.

“I think we all agree to stop her, sir. Why not just let the Mustangs win?” asked someone.

“Because we want you to get your bonuses,” said Nine. “Until we can figure out a way to void the contracts, we have to do this so that you get your money. The way we’ve been playing will definitely ensure that happens.”

“Thank you,” he said, shaking his head. “Y’all don’t owe us that but thank you.”

“We still have to win,” said Kurt. “I think with these men, we can. The league is a farce, so I don’t think anyone will give a damn if they find out they’re not really our players. I just want this over with.”

“Let’s show them what we’re made of,” said Ghost.

As the team stood cheering and heading back out onto the field, Skull smirked at his old friend.

“Show ‘em what we’re made of? Who are you? Knute Rockne?”

“Bite me, asshole. Don’t get hurt, or Avery will kill me.”

“Are you kidding me?” smirked Zeke. “I’m having so much damn fun it should be illegal.”

“It is,” laughed Nine. “Keep that in mind. It is illegal.”

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“Hey, what is this? Open season on the press box. You can’t be in here,” said the announcer.

“I think you’re going to want us in here,” said Sly. He took a seat next to the announcer and indicated that the other man should proceed with calling the game. He opened the folders, one after another, showing the man the evidence against Glenda Pinken.

“How? How was she allowed to get away with this?” he asked.

“That’s for someone else to figure out, but this league will be done after this game. All we’re concerned with is saving those men down there and making sure that she pays for all of this.”

“What do you need?”

“Frustrations are getting the better of them,” said Ian. “They’re really starting to play dirty.”

“Starting to? Brother, they’ve been playing dirty since the minute the whistle was blown. I’d sure like to know what she paid them.”

“Not enough,” said Nine.

They watched as the Mustang’s quarterback threw another interception right into the hands of Lars. Lars began to take off, then stopped dead in his tracks.

“What’s he doing?” asked Gaspar.

“That defensive player has a fucking gun,” growled Ghost. “Hawk? Eagle? You got him?”

“ In our sights but... Oh! Damn!”

“What the fuck? Son-of-a-bitch!” yelled Gaspar, running toward the players. “Trak! I told you no to the alligator!”

Sure enough, Alvin was brought out onto the field by Trak. He leaped onto the player’s chest, knocking him backwards and the gun loose from his hand.

“You move, my alligator will take that hand,” said Trak quietly. “It would make the highlight reel, but I’m pretty sure that’s not the kind of highlight you were hoping for.”

“I had to! She made me!” yelled the player.

“ Mics on,” said Sly from the press box.

“Who made you?” asked Gaspar.

“Glenda Pinken,” said the player. The audience was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. “She paid all of us to play dirty and hurt her players. She placed a two-million-dollar bet against her own team that they would lose. If they lost, she wouldn’t have to pay their bonuses, which would give her another five-and-a-half million back.”

“Who else was paid?” Nine asked the rest of the players. He did a slow turn, and when no one answered, the sound of rifle shots hit the dirt in front of their feet. The men jumped back, screaming like children. “I won’t ask again. Who else was paid?”

Every man on the field, and half those on the sidelines, raised their hands. She'd bought the other team. Nearly the entire team.

"You idiots. She wasn't going to pay any of you."

"She would! She said she would!" yelled a man.

"Really? When she lost this game and got all her millions back, did you just expect she'd hand over cash? She would walk away, and you could do nothing. Nothing! You couldn't report her. You couldn't do anything because it would have exposed you."

"Make him stop!" screamed the man on the ground. Gaspar turned, seeing Alvin licking the man's face.

"Trak, let him up," said Gaspar exhaustively.

"I don't want to," said Trak in a definitive tone. "I don't like him. Neither does Alvin. He said he tastes funny, like poison."

Suddenly, the smell of feces made all the men scrunch their noses.

"Did you shit your pants?" he asked the player. "Jesus, he shit his pants. Let him up."

"Fine. You move, I let the alligator go," said Trak. Gaspar couldn't help but laugh. It was too much, and it was all being caught live on camera.

"Fans, we have someone here in the press box that you need to hear. This is going out live in the stadium, as well as on all broadcasts. Sir? Go ahead."

"You don't know me, and you don't need to know me. Here's what you need to

know. Glenda Pinken killed Petey Rossi and Butch Cavet. She made sure that Ed Hardesty could no longer play, and she denied these men the right to any payout of their contracts. She paid players from other teams to hurt her own team members.

“To top that off, you’re all sitting on top of an old chemical refinery that wasn’t properly leveled. Inside the clubhouse that these men have had to practice, train, shower, and meet is asbestos that has been slowly poisoning and killing all of these men.”

The rumble of shock and horror through the stands, and even by the opposing team’s players, was palpable.

“Hawk and Eagle, do you see Glenda in her box?” asked Nine.

“Negative. There is no one in the box. ”

“Find her. Everyone, find her.” The opposing team’s coach walked toward the coaching staff, all the while staring at Alvin.

“Keep that damn alligator away from me,” he smirked. “But I have to say that’s the best defensive play I’ve seen in a while. You’re up by almost fifty points now. I’d say we’ll call this a game. That will force her to pay your players, and we can be done with this bullshit. I don’t want to see anyone else hurt.”

“What about the players she paid to hurt our players?” asked Coach.

“There were circumstances with all of them that I’m sure you’ll understand. Let’s get this settled, and we can meet to figure it all out.”

“We know y’all want to get to her. I need support from comms,” said Eagle. “She’s driving a brand-new Range Rover P16, black, new tags on the back.”

“I’ve got it,” said Hiro.

“Angel? Your team has this. Find that bitch and bring her to us.”

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It seemed before they could even make a call, the EPA, local inspectors, sheriff, and police swarmed the stadium. Attendees were exiting, and the stadium was being shut down along with the outlying buildings and facility.

State police and local authorities were sent to Glenda Pinken's home, only to find it vacant. With an APB placed out for her, she wouldn't be able to hide for long.

"This can't be happening to me," she whispered to herself. She slammed her hand against the steering wheel several times, cursing her team, cursing the other team, cursing anyone and everyone. Hitting redial on her phone, she dialed her sister first.

"Gwen, I need help," she said in a demanding tone.

"I don't work for you any longer, Glenda. I'm sorry."

"You're my sister! You will fucking help me or so help me God!"

"So help you God, what? What, Glenda? Are you going to torment me like you did when we were kids? Are you going to cut my hair in my sleep? Take my clothes, my toys, my boyfriends? Well, guess what? We're not kids any longer, and I'm not afraid of you. This is your mess, Glenda. Yours. I hope they hang you."

The line went dead, and she screamed, shaking her head back and forth. She dialed her brother's number, waiting a long time for someone to finally answer.

"I'm not helping you, Glenda."

“Glen, you have to!”

“I don’t have to do anything. I will not be a part of this. You should be ashamed of yourself. I’m ashamed for not asking more questions sooner, and I will testify to that fact. Gwen and me agree that we have some guilt in this. We’ll testify against you and admit what we did and didn’t know.”

“You fool. You poor pathetic ignorant fool!” she screamed. “I will make you pay for this, Glen. You and Gwen both.”

“Do your best, Glenda. We’ll be waiting to speak with the authorities.”

When she was done screaming to herself again, she realized that she wasn’t even sure where she was. Normally, she would have a driver, but today, she ran so fast he was still in the bathroom or eating a damn hot dog somewhere. She just kept driving south, hoping that sooner or later, she would find something that looked familiar. Maybe she’d hop a boat somewhere. Anywhere!

“Lafitte? Where in the hell is this shithole?” she frowned.

Passing some small businesses, she continued to drive, seeing nothing except swamp on either side of her. When the rain started, she slowed down, not wanting to wreck her new baby.

With the wipers moving at top speed, she gasped, seeing shadows up ahead. Slamming on her brakes, she stared out her window, not believing what she was seeing.

“This can’t be real.”

“Sniff, Lucy? I need y’all’s help,” said Mama Irene.

“Okay. What do you need?”

She explained what she needed as they took the boat out to the island. Sniff stared at Lucy, shaking his head.

“Gaspar will kill me,” he whispered.

“No, he won’t. I’ll make sure of it. I need your help, and so do they. Trevon’s meetin’ me out there too.”

“But how will we...”

“Sniff, honey, I need you to listen to me. I need your help, and so do all those men. Now, no arguing. Let’s go.”

“What in the hell is that?” she repeated. “This can’t be real. Someone is screwing with the universe just to get to me!” Laying on the horn, she was getting no results. With no other option, she opened the door and stepped into the rain, right into a pile of bison shit.

“We’ll move along in a minute,” said the old woman in front of her.

“Move now! Do you know who I am? Move these animals now, or I’ll run them over, killing them and you!”

“Well, you could try,” smirked Sniff, “but they weigh more than your pretty car, so it would do a lot of damage to it, not them.” He was lying, of course. If she hit them hard enough, it would cause a lot of damage to the animals.

“Move those damn buffalo!” she screamed. She felt something slither around her waist and screamed, trying to break free.

“Oh, that’s not a buffalo,” smiled Lucy, “that’s an elephant.”

“This is a nightmare. A damn nightmare! Let me go!” she yelled. An old woman walked toward her in an absurd yellow raincoat and rain boots. She stopped at the elephant’s trunk, patting him gently.

“That’s a good boy,” she smiled. “You? Not so much.” Glenda stared at the old woman, wondering who in the hell she was.

“Do you have any idea...”

“... who you are... Yeah, yeah,” laughed Irene. “I know who you are, and I know that you hurt one of my boys.”

“One of your boys? Do you have a son who plays for me?” she asked, squinting in the pelting rain.

“He did. He’s mine now. My son and I will defend him to the end. In fact, I will defend all the boys that suffered at your hands, which is why you aren’t going anywhere.”

“You can’t hold me like this! Put me down!” Irene gave a signal to the elephant, who squeezed a little tighter, causing Glenda to cry out in pain.

“Okay, okay!”

“Good. That’s good. You’re learning about who is really in charge,” said Irene. “My boys will be here soon to take you away to a place where you belong.”

“I won’t go to jail,” she smirked.

“Oh, honey. I ain’t that kind of Grandma. You ain’t goin’ to jail. You’re goin’ to hell.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:41 am

“I’m telling you, Chris, this has been the strangest week in sports I’ve seen in my entire career. Glenda Pinken, former owner of the New Orleans Fire, was found dead of an apparent suicide in her home with a signed suicide note.”

“I know, Ed. Weird indeed. She admitted to trying to kill players for cash, attempting to buy an NFL team, and admitting her knowledge of the chemical hazards at the facility. So many players are now facing years of treatment because of her cruelty.”

“Well, I guess that couldn’t have ended any better,” smiled Gaspar.

“I would have liked for her to face a public trial,” said Trevon. “I wanted her to face all the people she thought loved her and see the hatred in their eyes. But. I understand why you did what you did. That’s not a woman that deserved to live.”

“If you think about all the time and money that would have been spent on bringing her to trial, this really was the better way,” said Nine.

“I know, I know,” he nodded. “What about y’all? Have you been able to keep your identity secret?”

“We have,” nodded Ghost. “We made sure our faces were disguised. Our tech team is the best at messing with anything electronic. They overlayed other faces on ours while we were in camera view. None of our men removed their helmets at any time, so that helped the situation big time.”

“Well, I’m gonna head down to the nursery. Miss Noelle has me moving some trees today and planting some new things out in the west garden.”

“Wait a minute,” said Nine. “Come with us.”

Trevon followed the men in the ATVs as they moved around the main property, finally coming to a beautiful Acadian-style cottage.

“What’s this?” he asked. “Sure is pretty. Love the azaleas out front and the porch swing. Always wanted a porch swing, but I was afraid it would bust under my weight.” He laughed, and the others laughed as well.

“I can guarantee that this one will hold your weight,” smiled Gaspar.

“Sir?” he said, frowning.

“Trevon, we want you to stay here, on the property, with all of us. Sor’s cabin is great for a guest, but you’re not a guest, son. You’re one of us. This cottage is for you. Here on the property so you can be available to help with whatever is needed.”

“For me?” he asked in shock.

“Yes, for you,” laughed Ian. “If you want. If you don’t want to be on the property with all of us, then let us know. We’ll keep you out at Sor’s place if you’re good with that.”

“No. I mean, yes. I mean, no! I want to be here on the property. I can’t believe this. You’re letting me rent the cottage?”

“Not rent, Trevon. It’s part of your pay, just like any other man or woman here. You’re one of the family now, son,” smirked Ghost. The door opened, and Erin, Claudette, and Alexandra walked out onto the porch.

“Oh, there you are! We’ve got everything set up for you. The beds are made, linens in the closet, refrigerator is stocked, and all your things have been moved from the

cabin.”

“Wait, what?”

“Babe,” frowned Nine.

“Don’t babe me,” she said with her hand on her hip. “You’re moving here, Trevon. You’re one of us, and you need to be with us. Besides, Zeke said he’s never slept so well knowing that you were with Noelle and helping her. You have to stay.”

Trevon slowly walked up the steps, ducking inside the doorway, afraid he might hit his head. He looked around at the rich furnishings, the decorated tree, and the smell of apples and cinnamon. Erin, Claudette, and Alexandra smiled, nodding at the men.

“That’s how it’s done.” They walked off, leaving the men with Trevon.

“What do you think?” asked Gaspar.

“I think it’s the most beautiful home I’ve ever had, and it’s the only place that’s ever felt like home. Thank you. Thank all of you.”

“You’re welcome,” they said in unison. “Come on. Let’s grab some lunch before Team Big eats it all. One game, and they think they can hog all the food.”

“Well, I gotta say even I was impressed at their play,” smiled Trevon. “I’ve never seen men their age move like that before. And that alligator? Is he trained?”

“I wouldn’t say trained,” frowned Gaspar. “He’s just adept at listening to Trak for some reason.”

“Because I respect him.”

“Shit!” yelled Trevon, turning to see Trak standing in his hallway.

“What? I was here the whole time,” smirked Trak.

“Dude, is that alligator in this house?” asked Ghost. Trak frowned at him, moving down the hallway to stand beside them.

“No. He’s with his wife and children.”

“His wife and children?” frowned Trevon.

“Trevon, don’t even bother to understand. Come on, son. Let’s get some food, and we’ll tell you a few more secrets of Belle Fleur.”

Christmas was fast approaching, which only made mealtimes even more frenzied, frantic, and fabulous. Even something as simple as lunch seemed to have a flair and finesse that Trevon had never seen before.

“You know, y’all got a lot of beautiful women here, but that young woman over there is something else,” smiled Trevon. They all turned to look, nodding at him.

“That’s Macie. She’s Sam and Mia’s daughter, but I think she’s smitten with Garr. He’s been a bit worried because of the age difference, but Mia’s always been an old soul,” said Ian.

“And just how the hell do you know all that?” growled Gaspar.

“I pay attention,” smirked Ian.

“Hey, Trevon! The guys and I were talking about something special for the holidays. Why don’t you come and join us,” said Dan.

“Go ahead,” nodded Nine. They watched him swap tables, and all grinned at one another. “He’ll do well with the boys and might one day actually decide to take part in the team.”

“He’s already a part of the team,” said Ghost. They nodded, digging into their lunch. Just as they were about to finish, Sly came walking in with a half-smirk, half-frown.

“What now?”

“Well, the investigators from the sheriff’s office, NOPD, and EPA are here to speak with you about Glenda.”

“Why?” they said in unison.

“Something about finding bison shit in Glenda’s vehicle.” While his three leadership partners burst into laughter, Gaspar stood, shaking his head.

“God, some days I hate my life.”