



Hemmed

Author: *Mary Kennedy*

Category: Romance, Action

Description: Trying on a new suit or dress should be one of the guilty pleasures for all women. But when several young women notice something strange in the dressing room, the only place to turn is Gray Wolf Security. Finding the owners of the cameras is something they know how to do, but the deeper, more twisted mystery is why and finding the individuals pulling the strings. As the mystery deepens, the men find a new teammate for the boys at Voodoo Guardians and the women get a chance to strut their stuff. Bad ass is hot.

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CHAPTER ONE

“I hate to say this, but I kind of miss Gus,” smirked Angel. “He was a solid, good man, and it broke my heart that he couldn’t remember everything while he was here.”

“He remembers now,” grinned Gaspar. “He remembers everything now, and he knows the deaths of those people weren’t his fault. Pops said he was happy when he left him.”

“Left him where?” frowned Nine.

Gaspar shrugged laughing and shaking his head at the entire conversation. They were just getting used to the idea that their father was an angel and their mother was God knows what.

“I think we need to go out and check on the island animals,” said Bull.

“Island animals? Is that what we’re calling them now?” laughed Antoine.

“Well, your brother refuses to call it a zoo. I think animal sanctuary is a good one, but then again, we don’t ever release the animals, so maybe it’s an animal park.”

“Could we not talk about animals,” frowned Gaspar, rubbing his stomach. “Every time someone mentions an animal, another appears. It’s my worst nightmare.”

They were seated in the grove on Belle Île, enjoying a break in the oppressive summer weather. After storms blew in the night before, the air was comfortable. Not

cool. Not humid. Not scorching. Just a calm, comfortable summer morning.

Each man had his coffee, and there were plates of breakfast sandwiches, pastries, yogurt, and granola on the tables.

“Who the fuck ordered the granola?” frowned Miller.

“Me,” said Baptiste. “I need to watch my cholesterol intake and be more aware of my diet.”

“Are you sick?” asked Luc.

“No, I’m not sick. My last bloodwork showed it was slightly elevated, that’s all. Riley gave me a lecture and told me to watch what I eat. The pond can only do so much. It’s not a big deal. I’ve been eating a lot of fatty, fried shit lately. I’m good.”

His brothers stared at him, his twin Rafe frowning in his direction. Baptiste laughed.

“I promise, y’all. I’m good. It’s probably a good lesson for us all to watch what we eat. We’re not invincible.”

“Alright,” nodded Miller, “I’ll hold off on the jokes about the granola and yogurt.”

They heard the sounds of grass rustling and a loud hiss and turned. Gaspar jumped, gripping his chest as Alvin stopped a few feet away. Trak knelt beside him, stroking his leathery head.

“He wants us to follow him,” he said.

“Follow him? Follow him where?” moaned Gaspar. “Are we to take a dip in the swamp?”

“Don’t be rude,” frowned Trak. “He says that there is an animal in trouble.”

Alvin took off and Trak followed, the others close behind. Gaspar just shook his head, not believing where they were in their lives. Following alligators.

“No worries, brother,” said Ghost. “Just another normal day at Belle Fleur.”

“Shit, he’s fast,” said Rafe, jogging after Trak and the gator.

“They can move very fast,” said Dex. “It’s why people are afraid of them. They look slow, but they’re not.”

When they reached the eastern side of the island, Alvin stopped, waiting for the humans to catch up. Trak stared at the water but didn’t see what he was seeing. Then they all spotted it. A dorsal fin appeared in the waters.

“That’s a fucking shark!” yelled Ian.

“Yes, but these aren’t salt waters. He must have gotten lost in the Gulf during the storm. He’s trapped in a fishing net,” said Trak. He looked down at his alligator friend. “Alvin, tell him not to fear me. I’m going to cut him loose.”

Gaspar looked around at the others, all staring at the shark in the water.

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“Is no one fucking bothered by the fact that Trak is speaking to an alligator that is communicating with a shark! Do you understand the absurdity of this situation?” Baptiste smiled at his big brother, shaking his head.

“Careful, Gaspar. You may have to start eating yogurt and granola to bring down your blood pressure,” he grinned. Gaspar whipped around at his brother.

“I will beat the shit out of you if you say that out loud again.”

“Hold this,” said Trak, handing his service weapon to Gaspar. “And this.” He handed a small knife to Baptiste. Kicking off his shoes, he kneeled close to Alvin, touching his head. He nodded and then slid into the water.

At first, the shark flailed around, then the unthinkable happened. Trak touched his head and the shark calmed, rising to the surface to allow him to cut the net. Slowly, he took his knife, careful not to cut the shark, and released him.

When it was done, the shark seemed to just float at the top of the water. Alvin slid in behind Trak, and the others watched, concerned that their friend was going to become breakfast for the predators. Swimming to the edge, Nine helped him out of the water.

“Don’t worry. Alvin is telling him the way to the Gulf. He’s happy to go home now.”

Trak just walked away, headed toward his home for dry clothing. While the others watched Alvin and the shark swimming in a circle together, Gaspar stared at his brothers, wondering if they’d all gone mad.

“So help me God, if that alligator is telling the shark that he can stay, we’re eating shark steaks tonight.” Gaspar stormed off, the others just laughing at him as the shark swam in the direction of the Gulf and salt water.

By the time they’d returned to the grove, Trak had changed and was eating breakfast as if nothing had happened.

“I appreciate the love of animals,” smirked Bull, “but that was a shark, brother. A hammerhead. He was looking at you like you were dinner.”

“He was looking at me for help. He wanted nothing to do with my flesh. He was frightened, lost, and dying with the lack of salt water. Alvin assured me I was safe.”

“I need therapy,” said Gaspar, shaking his head. Nine laughed, slapping his back.

“If you do, we all do. It’s a strange world we live in, and the place we live is even stranger. It can’t be helped, brother. We’re going to see and hear things that others do not. I think it’s kind of exciting. Something new every damn day. Keeps us all on our toes.”

“Did Alvin give you any other secrets?” Gaspar asked Trak.

His dark eyes looked up, staring at his friend, wondering if he was being serious or sarcastic. Turned out he was being a bit of both.

“The lion’s claws are coming in. He’s very happy about that. He feels like his old self now but promises not to use them on anyone here.”

“Great. That’s great. Our elderly, toothless lion now has talons.”

“Claws. They’re called claws,” said Trak with a serious face.

“What the fuck did I do in a previous life to deserve this?” His brothers all laughed, shaking their heads.

“Previous life? Brother, you did shit in this life that deserved this,” laughed Miller. “We all have. Mama is about as strange as they come, but she loves more, harder, deeper than anyone I’ve ever met in my life. She’s forgiven us for all the stupid shit we did as kids. Gabe digging up her irises, Alec eating the pies for the fair competition, Jean for submitting their tax returns he’d modified.”

“The originals were wrong!” he exclaimed. “Geez, I was only nine. I thought I was helping.”

“My point is we all did shit that deserves Mama and Pops’ wrath. Just being in the Rangers and gone so long probably had them frazzled. I think we can put up with a few animals and strange happenings.”

“A few animals? Pierre, we have an old toothless lion, a baby elephant, two tiger cubs, an alligator, a giraffe, several strange birds that I do not like, and at last count, more than a dozen dogs that are not going anywhere! We don’t have a ‘few’ animals. We have a fucking zoo!”

“You forgot the horses and llamas,” said Alec, smiling at his oldest brother.

“Llamas?”

“Oh, shit,” he muttered to Tailor.

“I got you, man. Hide behind me,” he said to his oversized friend.

“Why do I get so frustrated by this? Why do a few animals make me so crazy?” he exclaimed, thrusting his hand through his hair.

“Because you care,” smirked Ghost. “You care about all of us, Gaspar. Maybe we don’t tell you often enough how appreciative we are that you do care. The animals are insignificant, brother. They add character to a place that feeds off of character. As long as we don’t have to worry about bad guys, then I’m cool with a few animals.”

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“I agree with Ghost,” said Ian. “The other day, after all that rain, the frogs were out in full force. It was like a fucking frog invasion. I thought I was drunk for a minute, but sure enough, Alvin started walking around, and before I knew it, there were dozens of frogs on his back. I don’t know where he took them, but they were gone, and my beautiful wife wasn’t afraid to leave the house.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange that your wife was afraid of frogs and not alligators?” grimaced Gaspar. Ian shrugged, laughing at his friend.

“As long as she’s not afraid of me, I’m good with it.”

Gaspar just shook his head, everyone laughing at his plight. One day, he would understand that he had zero control over anything that happened.

“Alright, let’s get to business.”

CHAPTER TWO

Nelly puttered around the house, straightening things up. She’d already cleaned out closets the day before, scrubbed the bathrooms, cleaned the kitchen, and now, she was wiping down counters and just making the house presentable with flowers.

Her husband, Craig, was a real estate agent for million-dollar properties in the area. They were hosting a huge party later in the afternoon for all of his top clients and business associates. It seemed very last minute to her, but then again, Craig wasn’t a planner. She was the one that paid attention to deadlines and details.

She'd bought the perfect outfit. A cute, short summer dress that showed off her toned legs. She worked hard for those legs, running five to six miles a day and taking kickboxing classes. At five-feet-ten, she appeared to be all legs. On the dance and volleyball teams in high school, she stopped all that when she went to college. Now, she just ran and took the occasional kickboxing class.

They'd both agreed to hold off on having children, focusing on his career in real estate and hers as a graphic artist. She knew that he wasn't ready, and she wasn't sure what was making her hold back. Actually, she knew. She just didn't want to admit it.

She loved her work and was grateful to have a job that allowed her to work from home. An office wasn't a place she would enjoy. Too many people. Too much drama. She needed quiet spaces.

By six, she'd changed, fixed her long auburn hair, tying it up in a high ponytail with gentle waves cascading down her back. Her big hazel eyes had just a touch of pale pink shadow. The thick black lashes blinked back at her. Turning in front of the mirror, she was proud of herself. She looked good for thirty-four, and she'd put in the effort to look this good.

Always late, Craig bounded up the stairs and raced to change his clothes.

"Sorry, babe! I had a late showing, and then traffic was a bitch."

She nodded at him, trying to give a genuine smile, but she knew he was lying. He was wearing his golf clothes, not clothes that he would show a house in. She also knew that he probably hadn't played golf. He wasn't sweaty or sunburned and his clubs were still standing in the closet where he'd last left them.

"It's fine. I hope you had a good game."

He turned back toward her as he entered the shower and gave her a glare. One of the other things they'd agreed on was that she wouldn't ask about his life away from the house. If he wanted to golf, he golfed. If he wanted a weekend away with the boys, he got a weekend away with the boys.

"I have everything done. The caterer is downstairs putting everything out, the house is spotless, and the flowers are placed where you wanted them," she said, smiling at him. He looked up and grinned.

"You look fucking amazing," he laughed. "Great dress." He kissed her, letting his hand slide up her inner thigh. Nelly laughed, gripping his wrist when she noticed the purple marks on his neck. An unexplained wave of nausea suddenly hit her and all she wanted to do was leave. She wanted to question him but knew that now was not the time.

"You start that, and we'll be in bed when the guests arrive."

"Fine," he growled, "but I'm headed up those legs when this is done." He might be. He might not be, thought Nelly. Chances were in her favor that he'd be drunk and head straight to bed.

A hundred people crammed into their Garden District mansion was almost more than Nelly could stand. She liked most of the people in attendance, but there were a few couples that just gave her a strange vibe. They'd never liked her, never allowed her into the clique. She always felt like an outsider.

Spotting two of Craig's closest friends across the lawn, she noticed them with their phones open, laughing and pointing. One of them looked up at her, staring up and down, and she frowned at him.

"What's wrong, babe?"

“I don’t know. Why are Tommy and Rich staring at me like that?” He looked toward the two other agents and frowned.

“I don’t know. Let me go see.”

He walked toward them, and they immediately put their phones in their pockets. She could tell that her husband wasn’t amused by their behavior, or at least she thought that’s what she was seeing. Then she watched as one of them brought out his phone again. A few moments later, her husband looked up at her, slowly walking toward her.

“What are they doing?” she asked.

“Looking at you.”

“Yes, I know. Why?” she asked.

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“No,” he said, turning his own phone toward her, “looking at you.”

She pushed the play button on the video on his screen and watched as a woman’s legs appeared. She wore only a thong, but her vagina was visible as her legs spread over the camera lens. A rush of fabric fell over her ass, and Nelly gasped.

“Wh-what is this? Is this a joke?” she paled.

“You tell me. You got a side hustle you want to tell me about?” he muttered.

“You can’t be serious. A side hustle? That’s the changing room at Lavelle’s Boutique! That camera is below me while I’m trying on dresses. Are you nuts? I’m going to sue them!”

“I should have known,” he said, tucking the phone back into his pocket, shaking his head in a show of disappointment. “Everyone warned me that you weren’t the right woman for me. You weren’t a woman who should be on the arm of a top realtor in a major city. You weren’t a woman that I could impress the crowds with.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” she said, trying to keep her tone low. “I am the one that impresses the crowds. For you! You’re that one that screws around, goes to strip clubs, hangs with the boys. You’re nearly forty, Craig, not twenty. Whatever game you’re playing isn’t funny any longer.

“I had no idea I was being filmed. You can’t possibly think I knew. And what about those two degenerates! They were looking on whatever that website is, and I can guarantee it wasn’t their first time.”

“I’ve heard enough, Nell. I’ll ask the guests to go home, but I want you to pack your things. I don’t need a stripper and whore for a wife.”

She slapped him so hard that he stumbled backwards, losing his balance. He fell into the grass, staining his white linen pants. When he jumped up, ready to charge at her, a huge body stood in between them.

“You touch that woman, I’ll break your legs,” said the big man.

“I suppose you’re fucking her,” he smirked. “You her agent for her porn site?” He stared at the big man, then swallowed, recognizing his face.

“I’m going to give you one minute to apologize to your wife,” said the man. “If you don’t, I’m going to make sure you understand how a man should treat a woman.”

Craig stared at the man in front of him, frowning. Nelly was shaking, her head down as tears filled her eyes. Not one of their friends came to her defense, not one. She found that telling. They weren’t ‘their’ friends. They were his friends.

“Fine. I’m sorry you’re a whore,” he sneered. The big man took a step toward him, and he backed up again, holding his hands in the air. “Alright. I’m sorry. Just get your shit and get out of my house.”

“Is this his house?” the stranger asked.

“Y-yes,” she sniffed. “He owned it when we got married a few months back.”

“Okay, then I’ll help you get your things together and make sure you’re safe. Just look into the whole community property law,” he said.

She nodded, heading into the house as all eyes turned toward her, staring. Women

were whispering, men were smirking at her. As quickly as she could, she took the stairs two at a time to their bedroom. The she stopped. Standing in the middle of their bedroom, she was frozen for a moment.

“Ma’am? Where are your suitcases?” he asked.

“Hall closet,” she said quietly. He grabbed the suitcases and laid them out on the bed. When she didn’t move, he began tossing anything that looked feminine into them. She gripped his wrist. “I’ll do it. Thank you. But I’ll do it.”

He nodded, giving her some space and standing in the doorway, watching for the asshole to make a move. Praying he would make a move.

“He wasn’t always like that,” she sniffed. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

“No telling,” said the man.

“I didn’t know there was a camera filming me. How could they do that?” She shook her head, wiping her tears, then looked up at him. “I’m sorry. Do I know you? Who are you?”

“My name is Mark Teller.” She looked at him then nodded.

“You’re Cara’s husband. I’m sorry, I didn’t remember meeting you. Is she here? I didn’t see her?”

“No. Actually, she’s at home packing at this very moment.” Nelly looked up at him, shaking her head. Then she stilled, staring at him. It hit her. Like a ton of bricks, it hit her.

“They’re seeing one another, aren’t they?” she whispered. He nodded.

“I believe so. It was my intention to confront your husband, but I didn’t get the chance. This may have all been planned,” he said to the woman.

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“I don’t know how. I never told him where I was going to buy my dress or when. Besides, those men were looking at a site that had all kinds of photos from changing rooms.” She grabbed one more suitcase and put her jewelry, perfume, and makeup inside.

“This is all for now,” she said. “My laptop and other things I need for work are downstairs.”

“Is there nothing in the house that belongs to you?” he asked.

“Nothing I need. Why are you doing this? You don’t know me; you don’t owe me anything.”

“Let’s just say we’re somewhat in the same boat. Cara let me know she was leaving me today to move in here.”

“Th-this was planned,” she whispered.

“Do you have anywhere to stay?” he asked. She shook her head, unsure of what she should do. “It’s alright. I own a fishing cabin out in the bayou. There’s air conditioning, electricity, even wi-fi. I like quiet, but I need to be connected.”

“That’s fine. Anything is fine, thank you. Thank you, Mark,” she said as he picked up the three massive suitcases beneath his arms. She grabbed a duffel bag and tote and followed him down the stairs.

“Sor.”

“Sor? I thought your name was Mark. Is Sor a nickname?” she asked.

“It’s a long story, Nelly. Let’s just get the fuck out of here before I kill your soon-to-be ex-husband.”

“You don’t know that we’re going to divorce,” she said, hitting the bottom step. As she did, Craig was standing there with a folded stack of papers.

“Just make it easy on both of us, Nelly. Sign the fucking papers and get out of my life.”

CHAPTER THREE

Getting custom-made clothing was not something Meredith would usually do, but she was treating herself after getting a huge bonus. She needed a killer suit and dress to impress her clients in Japan. They were very stiff about what women should wear to business meetings, and her business casual attire wasn’t going to cut it any longer.

She’d spent nearly an hour choosing the right fabric on her first visit. A classic-looking menswear plaid with a beautiful white linen for her blouses. She opted to have three other blouses made from the same linen but in different colors.

On her second visit, the tailor took some measurements that she found odd. Not the measurements themselves but the way in which he took them. The tailor seemed very handsy, always touching her flesh, guiding his hand along her skin unnecessarily.

The confusing thing for her was that he seemed very flamboyant, very gay. She didn’t care one way or another, but why all the touching and feeling? It just wasn’t normal.

Today was the last fitting of the garments. Just in time for her trip to Tokyo, leaving in three weeks’ time.

“What are you doing?” screeched the woman standing beside her on the short dais. Meredith stared at the woman, wanting to tell her she felt the same way.

“I’m just fixing the hem, ma’am,” said the gentleman. “I need for you to just open your legs a bit so that I can be sure everything will fall properly once we have it fixed for you.”

“I’ve never had anyone ask me that.”

“I’ll be right back,” he smiled. “Don’t move.”

Meredith smiled at the woman, and she shook her head.

“It’s so weird. He doesn’t need me to do that,” she said.

“I’m glad it’s not just me,” whispered Meredith. “I don’t understand any of this. It’s my first custom suit, but I know how suits fit and how measurements are taken. It all feels really weird to me.”

When she was certain he’d left the dressing room area, the other woman stepped off the small dais. Don’t move? She was uncomfortable having stood there for almost an hour. He fixed everything about the new suit and then fixed it again. She didn’t mind that her tailor was a male. After all, she suspected he was gay.

But the way his fingertips brushed her breasts and the inside of her thigh made her question everything. Now, asking her to open her legs wider for the hem of a straight skirt seemed absurd!

She stepped back, glancing at herself in the mirror. Turning, she liked the way the suit fit her and was pleased with her choice of fabric. At the bottom of the skirt was a small red dot.

“What on earth,” she whispered. She brushed the skirt, but there was nothing there. Standing up again, she saw the dot one more time.

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Slowly, she walked toward the dais, looking down at the tiled top. The red dot was coming from within the tile. It was a camera. A camera was beneath the tile. Kneeling down, she pressed her face against the tile, then stood quickly, tearing the zipper at the back of the skirt. Just as she stood, he reentered the room.

“Oh, no. Now look what you’ve done.”

“I’m sorry. I dropped my earring,” she said, panicked. Meredith stared at the woman, seeing the fear on her face.

“It’s fine, darling,” said the man. “I believe we’re done here. Go ahead and take everything off. It will be ready by Friday.”

The woman changed in record time, giving Meredith a strange look that made her feel wary. When the man came back to check on her, she was off the dais and waiting for him.

“Are we done? I’m sorry, I have another appointment,” she lied. “I need the suit by next Friday.”

“Of course, honey,” he smiled. She went inside the dressing room, turning her back to the mirror, unsure of why. “If you need help, love, I can help.”

“I’m good,” called Meredith. She pulled on her linen shorts and the t-shirt and stepped out of the room, handing him the garments. “I’ll see you Friday.”

“Sure thing, love!”

She left the shop on Burgundy and walked as quickly as she could toward Cosimo's Bar, a local favorite. She took a seat at the bar and jumped a mile when someone spoke to her.

"That was weird, wasn't it?"

"Jesus!" she gasped.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. But it was weird, wasn't it? I mean, the way he touched us, and I'm positive there was a camera in the floor of the dais, beneath the tile."

"Dear lord," muttered Meredith. "I've never had a suit made before, so I was hoping I was just being paranoid."

"Should we call the police?" asked the other woman. Meredith looked at her, then extended her hand.

"I'm Meredith."

"Jade. So, the police?"

"I think I know someone better than the police."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Gentlemen, this is Mark Teller, better known as Sor," smirked Abe. "We go way back, and he's a fucking stand-up operator. I should know because he saved my ass once upon a time."

"What branch did you serve, Sor?" asked Luke.

“Air Force. Pararescue.”

“A PJ,” smirked Eric. “First one we’ve ever interviewed.”

“Sor wasn’t your average every day, PJ. He was special,” smiled Abe. Sor just shook his head. “Combat medic extraordinaire, master diver, top-notch parachutist, expert rock climber, and known adventurer, and one of the best men I’ve ever seen in arctic conditions. He’s participated in dozens of national explorer expeditions as the lead climber and guide.”

“You’re big as shit for a jumper,” said Luke. “You’ve got to be as big as me.”

“I am,” he nodded. “Biggest on my team, for sure. But it didn’t prevent me from doing my job.”

“Says here you have an IQ of 141. You passed your medical training in half the time of others, scored higher on all your tests than anyone else, and once used Charge of the Light Brigade by Lord Tennyson as an example of what needed to happen to win a battle,” said Cam.

“Well, with Tennyson, I like literature. The other stuff is because my parents were both doctors,” he said, looking at the men. “They worked for a non-profit, traveling the world, and I was lucky enough to follow them and learn multiple languages, learn about cultures, and they fostered my love of learning and reading. They were killed in the earthquake in Syria a few years back.”

“We’re sorry, brother,” said Nine, seated in the front row. “Why do you want to join us?”

“I’ve only recently turned in my retirement papers, coming home to find out that my wife had already made her choice. And it wasn’t me.”

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“Damn, that fucking sucks,” said Hex.

“I think it says something that I was okay with it,” he nodded. “I’ve got about sixty days left, but I’m just trying to have something worth coming back here for. I loved being a part of the brotherhood and serving my country and my community. I’m not a guy that wants the spotlight. In fact, I prefer anonymity. I want to stay in the area. I’ve fallen in love with Louisiana, but if I don’t have a job here, I’ll move on. I’m not originally from here. My ex-wife was.”

“Well, you’ve got skills we can use, brother. We’d love for you to join us,” said Cam. He smiled, nodding at the men.

“Just one question,” asked Gaspar. “What’s with the nickname? Sor?” The younger man laughed, shaking his head as Abe laughed.

“I got this one. I used to run into Sor all the time. He’d kick ass on the other spec ops teams during testing. They’d be pissed that he scored higher, ran faster, shot more accurately, and he would always just say ‘sorry.’ When he took the IQ tests, there was an asshole lieutenant that bragged he had an undergraduate degree from Princeton. Sor’s IQ was higher – and he just said...”

“Sorry,” said the entire room.

“Yep. Always better, always smarter, always top of the class, and all he could say was sorry.”

“Not always smarter. I damn sure never saw my ex-wife cheating on me.”

“Anything we can do?” asked Luke. “We’ve got the best legal team in the country, in my opinion.”

“Nope. It was easy to end. No kids, no shared property. Done.”

“Well, welcome to Voodoo Guardians. When you’re fully out, come on back, and we’ll do all the paperwork and shit, but you’re hired, brother,” said Hex.

“Awesome,” he smirked.

“Dad? Anything interesting happening at Gray Wolf?” asked Cam.

“We’re interviewing a couple of women today who said they were filmed while changing in a dressing room or something.” Sor stared at him.

“That sounds eerily like something that happened to a woman I know. It caused her divorce. Someone filmed her from the bottom up, like the camera was between her legs, beneath the floor. Her husband accused her of doing it intentionally and selling it. Poor woman was distraught. She’s staying in my fishing cabin, trying to get her life back on track.”

“Do you think she’d speak with us?” asked Luke.

“I can send her a message. I’ll let you know and give you directions to the cabin if you need it. I’ve got to get back to Texas for my last sixty days. I’ll be seeing you all soon. Abe? Thanks, brother. I owe you one.”

“You don’t owe me shit,” he smirked. “You saved my ass once. I don’t forget things like that.”

“See you soon.” He waved at the room, exiting to head back to Texas and finish his

time in the Air Force. He felt lighter than he had in years, knowing that he would be one of the famous Voodoo Guardians.

“He seems solid,” said Ghost, looking at Abe.

“He’s one of the best. Dude was one of those guys that when shit happened, you’d look around praying for someone to help, and then suddenly he was just there. We’ll be glad we got him.”

“What about you guys?” asked Eric. “What’s with these women complaining about being videoed?”

“Don’t know yet,” said Ghost, standing with the rest of the Gray Wolf team. “But we’ll fill you in later.”

“I’m so nervous,” said Jade.

“I am too,” nodded Meredith. “My friend said they helped her, and they’re the best. That’s all we can hope for right now.”

“Meredeth? Jade?” said the man at the door. “Come on back, ladies. My name is Jean, and I’m part of the team here.”

“Thank you for seeing us.”

“Of course,” he said, opening the conference room door. “These are the men of Gray Wolf. We’re here to help you.”

“We appreciate this. Jade and I met at a tailor’s shop,” said Meredith. “We were both having custom suits made for work. But we noticed something weird.”

“At first, the tailor was touching in places he shouldn’t,” said Jade. “Gliding the back of his hand along the neck of my shirt, feeling as much flesh as he could. Then, gliding his hand between my thighs. I thought he was gay when I met him, but apparently, he wasn’t.”

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“Unfortunately, that means nothing,” smirked Doug.

“God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No, no. Don’t be sorry. Just because a man or woman is gay doesn’t mean they can’t have perverted tendencies. And they don’t always have to be with the same sex.”

“This is just so weird,” said Meredith. Ghost nodded at the women.

“Tell us the rest.”

For more than an hour, the women walked them through every step of their experiences at the tailor’s. They were detailed and calm in their explanations. When they were finished, both women were shaking, wiping tears from their eyes.

“Are we crazy?” asked Meredith.

“No. You’re not crazy. You’re being cautious, and you should be. I know you’ll be out a lot of money, but don’t go back there for your garments,” said Ian.

“Listen, I understand,” said Jade, “but I spent a fortune on those suits, and I can’t afford to buy more. I need those for work.”

“I can pick the suits up with them,” said Tailor. “I’ll pretend to be their brother.”

Both women stared at him, then laughed. He frowned in their direction, confused by their reaction, and then they sobered, trying to hold the laughter.

“What?” he asked the others.

“Maybe I should pretend to be the brother,” said Alec. “You don’t even look like you’re from the same species, let alone gene pool.”

“Hurtful, man. Seriously hurtful.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Miller and Jean knocked on the door of Sor’s cabin. They’d called the woman to see if she would speak to them, and she agreed.

“Nice place,” said Jean. “Not your average camp in the middle of the bayou. It reminds me of the bachelor pads we had.”

“Yeah, he’s done a lot of work on this, and it shows.”

The drapes fluttered, and then they heard the locks disengaging. Both men stepped back, not wanting to intimidate the woman. She cracked the door, and they were greeted by puffy, swollen eyes.

“Nelly?” asked Miller, trying to keep his voice low and soft so as not to scare her.

“Yes. Are you the men that Mark said were coming?”

“Mark? Oh, Sor, yes,” smiled Jean. “Sorry, we know him as Sor.”

“I forget that he uses a nickname,” said the woman, opening the door wider for them.

“Please come in.”

The cabin was definitely a man’s cabin. The furniture was mahogany brown with

only one lamp in the room. It had a decent kitchen with a full-sized refrigerator and stove. It was clean and well-maintained but not exactly feminine in any way.

“Ma’am, are you comfortable here?” asked Jean. “We could move you somewhere more, uh, bright.”

“I’m fine. Thank you, though. I’ve become used to this. It’s actually comforting and warm in a strange way. I owe Mark, Sor, a lot for letting me stay here. I don’t know what I would have done. He said you wanted to talk about what happened to me?”

“Yes. We have a few other women that have had a similar experience, and we’re investigating this.”

“Well, at first, I thought my soon-to-be ex-husband set me up, but there was no way he could have known which boutique I would go into that day and where I would buy that dress. He would have divorced me either way.”

“We’re sorry to hear that. It’s his loss,” said Miller.

“Did Sor tell you that my husband and his wife decided to leave us on the same day and get married?”

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“We heard something about it,” said Miller. “Listen, I’m Pierre, but everyone calls me Miller. This is my brother Jean. We want to stop whoever is doing this to women. Can you tell us about your story?”

“I can,” she said, waving them toward the sofas. “I had no idea that anything had occurred. My ex-husband, Craig, called me just two days before and said I needed to get things together for a huge party at our, at his house in the Garden District.”

“Was that normal? Last minute decisions like that?” asked Jean.

“He wasn’t exactly worried about whether I could make the time for his business parties. I’m a graphic artist and work from home, which translates to him believing I have all the time in the world. We dated three years before we got married. Ironically, we were married less than a year. I think that’s what I really don’t understand. If he and Cara were seeing one another, why marry me anyway?”

“No telling about people’s foolishness,” said Jean.

“Anyway, he came home from showing some houses that I knew immediately was a lie. He was in his golf clothes, and I guess playing ‘golf,’ apparently now comes with hickies,” she frowned. “Everything was exactly as he asked. I was outside, and two of his friends kept staring at me, looking at their phones.”

“What were their names?” asked Miller.

“Tommy and Rich. I’m sorry, I don’t know their last names. I don’t have a lot of interaction with his friends. Anyway, Craig asked me what was wrong, and I told him

that Rich and Tommy were staring at me, making me feel uncomfortable.”

“What did he do?” asked Jean.

“He went over and spoke to them, then brought his phone over and showed me what they were looking at. It was me – from below,” she said, swallowing back the tears. “It was clearly a camera in the floor, looking straight up my legs. Y-you could see almost everything.”

“Where was this video?” asked Miller.

“On some website. I even mentioned to Craig that I found it odd that his friends were looking at things on the site. I found the video myself later and contacted the website, but their e-mail came back as undeliverable, and they have no phone number.”

“What’s the name of the site?” asked Miller.

“UndressForYou.com. There are thousands of photos and videos of unsuspecting women and men changing clothes in dressing rooms, bathrooms, gyms, even hotel rooms. It was sick! Why would someone do that?”

“Because they can, and they can usually get away with it,” said Jean. “What boutique did this happen in?”

“Lavelle’s. I went to the store and confronted the owner, but she said I was crazy and kicked me out. She said if I came in there again, she’d sue me. I’m at my wits’ end. I just don’t know what to do. Craig filed for divorce, and honestly, I’m happy to sign the papers and be rid of him so he can go off with Cara.”

“Did you sign the papers?” asked Miller. She shook her head. “Would you mind allowing us to take them to our attorneys? My wife is an attorney, and we’d be happy

to review this for you and see if everything is done properly.”

“That would be so helpful! I have no idea what I’m doing.” She handed the papers to Jean, and he pointed out something right away that he didn’t like.

“These papers are saying that you did something improper that caused embarrassment to him. They’re putting the blame on you. Just at first glance, he’s taking everything away from you.”

“God,” she whispered, holding her stomach. “I don’t have anything! I’ve got some old books that belonged to my parents, a few antique pieces of furniture, my car. That’s it!”

“He’s obviously trying to send a message to his community that you’re the guilty party. I’ll take these papers to my wife, Kari Robicheaux, and she’ll be calling you soon. I wish you’d change your mind about coming to stay with us. You’re all alone out here.”

“It’s okay. I’m enjoying the peace and quiet right now. Besides, I wouldn’t want to put anyone out, and I’m already infringing on Sor’s space. Once I can get everything settled, I’ll think about what I want to do and where I want to go.”

“We’ll let you know what we find,” said Miller, standing to leave.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t more help, and I’m sorry this happened to those other women. I’m so confused by everything right now. My gut tells me that Craig planned it all, but honestly, I don’t think he’s that smart.”

The two men laughed, nodding at her. At the door, they noticed that Sor had installed several exceptionally good locks and an alarm system. They grinned, knowing that they would have done the same. The locks and alarm probably cost more than the

cabin.

“You’re sure you feel safe out here?” asked Jean.

“I’m sure. Sor left a weapon if I need it. I know how to shoot a gun, and I have Wi-Fi and phone service, so I’m good.”

“I’ll leave our card here on the counter,” said Miller. “We might be out in a few days just to check on you. If you remember anything else, or if you just get scared or want to talk, let us know. I’m sure Kari will be reaching out to you as well.”

“Thank you. I hope you catch whoever is doing this. I can’t imagine how anyone would find this entertaining.” The brothers nodded, frowning at her.

“You don’t have to worry about that. We will definitely find out who did this.”

CHAPTER SIX

“What do you think?” asked Jean.

“I think she’s right. The husband probably didn’t set up the whole camera thing, but I’m going to bet that he knew where the cameras were placed. If his buddies were looking at that site, it probably wasn’t the first time.”

“Maybe we pay a little visit to Craig,” said Jean. Although younger than Miller, Jean was taller, wider, and solid like a block of granite.

“Can you control your temper?”

“My temper? Don’t you think you should be asking yourself that question? I’m not the brother with the frowny face and uncontrollable temper.” He stared at Jean, his brows furrowed, his face already changing colors. “See, that’s the face.”

“Shut up and drive.”

When they arrived at the Garden District home of Craig Graylon, they were surprised to see empty beer bottles and paper cups strewn around the yard. It looked like a frat house party had taken place.

“I bet the neighbors love that,” said Miller.

“This is an area that’s pretty tame,” said Jean. “Is this guy going through a mid-life crisis?”

“He might be suffering from more than that when I’m done talking to him.” Miller knocked on the door, and he could hear voices laughing inside. He knocked more forcefully, and the voices stopped. When the door opened, a man they assumed was Craig stood with a woman in a bikini beneath his arm.

“Can I help you? If you’re selling shit, we don’t want it. We’re headed to our lake home.”

“Must be nice when you kicked your innocent wife out of her home,” said Jean. Craig’s face sobered, the woman beside him shrinking somewhat.

“Who are you? She wasn’t innocent,” he scoffed, trying to make himself appear bigger. Unfortunately for him, it wasn’t working. He had the midlife life preserver around his middle, and it wasn’t working for him at all.

“She was innocent, but you aren’t. You knew that the cameras were in Lavelle’s because you’d watched film on that site before, didn’t you?” He wisely said nothing; then, the woman skittered away. “Don’t go, Cara. We have some questions for you as well.”

She stopped in her tracks, turning to stare at Craig.

“I want nothing to do with this. Listen, we’re just two people who were unhappy in our marriages and now are happy together. There’s no crime in that.”

“Yeah, right,” frowned Miller. “What gave you the right to destroy another person? Did you set her up at Lavelle’s?”

“She had nothing to do with it. So what if my buddies and I looked at that site? We look at a lot of sites. All men do.”

“We don’t,” they said in unison.

“Our wives are more than enough to keep our attention. I don’t need to be some creepy fucking peeping Tom. And something for you to think about, Cara. If he’s looking at those sites while he’s married to his ex-wife, he’ll be looking at them when he’s married to you. See, they’re addictive. Men can’t help themselves. It makes them feel good, and they don’t give a shit about how the women feel. They’re just peeping Toms.”

“It’s not peeping!” he yelled.

“It is, and the law would see it that way. How did you get her to go to Lavelle’s?” Craig was quiet for a moment, then Miller turned his head left and right, the big cracking noise at his neck making the other man swallow back his fear.

“She shopped at the same places all the time. I knew she’d hit one of them. All I wanted was something that would make it easy for me to divorce her.”

“Easy? Well, you’ve fucked that plan,” said Miller. “See, my wife is one of the best attorneys in the state. Hell, in the country. In fact, we have a whole legal team that’s going to bury the two of you. Whatever she is owed, she will get, and you will be fucking done. I’m going to make sure no one ever buys another home from you again. Let’s see if sweet little Cara likes a broke Craig.”

“Wait!” he yelled as they started back down the steps. “Wait! One of my buddies was an investor in the site. Maybe he can help you.”

“Funny that you suddenly remembered that. You’d better hope that he can. And you’d better hope that he’s there when I arrive. If you warn him I’m coming, if you call him, I’ll know.” Jean started to walk away, then turned back, staring at the woman.

“By the way, that bathing suit looks like shit on you. Cover up and act your fucking age.” He hated himself for doing it but felt like that was one for Sor. As they sped off in the car, Miller looked at his brother.

“Temper got to you?” he smirked.

“No. Their self-righteous, entitled behavior got to me. What’s really sad is that they’ll be sick of one another within a few months. Or worse, they’ll do to one another what they did to their exes. Makes me glad that I’m married.”

“Me too, brother. Me too.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alec and Tailor allowed the two women to walk in first so they could see the man’s face when they did.

“Ladies! You’re here for your final fitting,” smiled the man. “Please head to the dressing rooms. You know what to do.”

“We’ll be taking our suits now,” said Jade.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you take something that’s unfinished,” he frowned.

“You don’t have a choice,” said Tailor, ducking through the doorway, Alec close behind him.

“What is this? Who are you?” asked the man.

“I’m their friend, and this is their brother. We’ve got some things we’d like to talk to you about.”

“You’re related?” he asked, looking from the women to Alec. “The suits aren’t done. I’ll need more time.”

“That’s not what you just said. You said it was a final fitting. Where are they? I’ll take them somewhere else to be finished,” said Meredith.

They could tell that the man was seething behind the counter. He wanted to force them to put those suits on, but there was no way he would be able to do it with those men there. He turned to the rack behind him and grabbed the suits and blouses, handing them to the women.

Tailor gripped his wrist, causing the man to cry out in pain.

“Sorry. I was trying to help.” He grabbed the clothing and watched as Alec walked to the back, where the dressing rooms were.

Alec pulled out a small device and ran it along the walls of the dressing rooms, beeps and buzzes sounding throughout the space.

“What are you doing? Get out of there!”

Alec turned to him with a growl, then slammed his fist through the wall, finding what he wanted. Behind the mirrors were small cameras. He went ahead to each room, removing the devices and crushing them beneath his heel.

The small dais was raised about eight inches off the ground, but instead of being covered in carpeting, as most would be, it was covered in a shiny glass tile. He immediately spotted the red dot that the women had seen.

Slamming his heel into the tile, he gripped the camera and pulled it out. They could see the absolute panic on the man’s face. When the phone rang, Tailor looked at the strange international number, grabbing the phone from the man.

“Hello.”

“Something is wrong. All of your cameras aren’t functioning.”

“Something is definitely wrong,” said Tailor. “Maybe you should come and fix them right now.” He was met with silence.

“Who is this?” asked the man.

“I’m the man who has all your cameras now. Come and get them.” The caller hung up, and the man behind the counter just shook his head.

“You have no idea what you’ve done. You’ve destroyed my business. They’re going to destroy me,” he said.

“Are you fucking with me right now? You’ve destroyed more women’s lives than I can even imagine,” said Alec. “You’re going to jail, and your only hope is to tell me who put those cameras in.”

The man shook his head, not willing to say a word. Alec just shrugged, opening the door to allow three police officers to enter the business.

“The cameras are in pieces on the floor, but the wiring is intact. He won’t tell me anything, but I’ll bet when he hits the jail cell, he’ll squeal like a pig.”

“Thanks, Alec,” said the officer, nodding at him. They walked the women to their cars and helped them with their items.

“When you’re ready to have these finished,” said Tailor. “Just come on out to Gwen N’hana’s place. She’s a friend and will complete the tailoring for you.”

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“Thank you!” said Meredith, hugging the big men.

“Really, thank you,” said Jade.

A few minutes later, their twisted friend was led to a police vehicle in handcuffs. The doors of the tailoring shop were locked, bolted, and a sign on the door telling everyone it would be closed for the foreseeable future.

“His name is Felix Vestor. Says he’s owned the business for the last eight years after his uncle passed. Claims he didn’t know about the cameras.”

“He’s lying,” said Alec.

“I know he is, but unlike you, we have to follow certain procedures. I’ll take him downtown and see if we can get some information from him. Nicely,” smirked the cop.

“Yeah, yeah, nice is overrated,” said Tailor. “When you really want to get some information from him, give us a call.”

“Look, we can’t let you back in there, but you might want to get your tech boys back inside. I mean, accidentally, of course. It looks like there was a camera pointed at the door and at the register.”

“Maybe a screening camera?” frowned Tailor.

“You tell us.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What’s the friend’s name?” asked Jean.

“Thurston Sawyer,” frowned Miller. “Is that a real fucking name?” He looked down at the text and shook his head.

“Are we going to his home or place of business?” asked Jean.

“Business. He owns a mortgage lending company and, obviously, gets all of Craig’s business. Seems fishy to me, but I couldn’t give a shit about that. I want to know about this investment in the website.”

Pulling up to the small home converted into a business location, they parked on the street and then watched as men in suits walked out of the building with boxes of files. Three black SUVs were parked across the lawn.

“Feds. What the fuck is happening?” asked Miller.

“If we’re right, those are definitely the feds, and he’s in big trouble,” smirked Jean. He walked toward one of the men and introduced himself.

“This is my brother, Pierre Robicheaux. We’re part of...”

“We know,” said one of the agents, raising a hand. “Sorry, I recognized your names. Are you here to take over?”

“No. Not just no, but fuck no,” said Jean. “Not at all. We were here to discuss an investment this guy made in a site that films women undressing in dressing rooms, bathrooms, that sort of sick shit.”

“Well, that stands to reason. He’s under investigation for mail fraud, loan fraud, falsifying documents, tax fraud. Let’s just say fraud,” said the exhausted agent.

“He’s probably got four or five million in charges on his business credit card for the last ten years that involve strip clubs, massage parlors, all of it,” said another agent. “It doesn’t surprise me that he’d be involved in something sick like that.”

“Is he here?” asked Miller.

“I wish. No, someone tipped him off, and he ran. His secretary is in there crying like he died,” the agent said, shaking his head. “He’s not at his home either. We’ve frozen his credit cards and other assets, but I’m going to guess that he had a stash of cash somewhere and is long gone.”

“Well, if you find anything about the video site, let us know. We’ve got a few women who are pretty upset about what took place.” The agents nodded, shaking their hands and then getting back to work.

“We’re not going to find him,” said Jean. “I’ll bet he had an escape route the entire time. He knew someone would find him sooner or later.”

“Do you think Craig gave him a heads up? I’d like to go back and break his face,” frowned Miller.

“No,” laughed Jean. “You can’t break his face, but yes, I do think he did that. I think this guy is a piece of shit and probably was going to get caught either way. Although it does seem to be a pattern for Craig old boy.”

“I’m gonna see if we can get the tech boys to perform some magic at the tailor’s. Maybe they can backtrack and figure out where all of this is coming from.”

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“If you ask nicely, the ‘tech boys’ might tell you that Thurston is a moron. He has video cameras on the inside and outside of his building. I’ve got him coming and going non-stop for the last two days. I’ll pull it all together and have it ready for your review when you get here,” said Code.

“Code, you’re the man, brother. What about the tailor’s shop? Anything there?” asked Jean.

“Yes and no. Thurston and Craig both frequented the tailor often. The challenge will be proving why they were there. They always entered with a garment in hand.”

“Well, it’s a place to start. We’ll head back so we can review the videos. Any word from our three victims? Anything else that they remembered?” asked Miller.

“No. Sor gave us permission to add some security on his property. He has alarms and cameras on the cabin but nothing on the road leading to the cabin. We sent some boys out to install those. The woman knows and is fine with it.”

“Alright. Is there any happy news to tell us?”

“It’s not happy news, Miller. I’m working on finding the source of the site. You know it’s become a specialty of ours, but this one is tough. I’ve got Hayes helping me, only because he’s eighteen now. I can’t ask the little ones to work on this. Even Hayes is struggling with it.”

“Don’t let him work on it,” said Jean. “It’s too much for us half the fucking time. He’s still a kid in a lot of ways.”

“He’s only working on the coding and tracking. I’m not letting him look at the site. Hoot’s sitting with him just to be sure.”

“Okay. That makes me feel better,” said Jean.

“Listen, we’ve seen shit like this before, but to me this one is worse. These women are completely unaware that they’re being filmed. It doesn’t seem to matter their size or weight. In fact, women who are plumper are often filmed, and then bubbles of comments are added to shame her.

“You can see them staring at themselves in the mirror, not happy about how they look. Even the thin ones. It makes me ashamed to be a man. The harder part of this, and I cannot figure out how it’s done, is that they’re filming these women using the toilet.” Code was silent, waiting for the reaction that he knew would come. It was difficult for him to see the footage, and he’d seen a lot of horrific footage in his life.

“Is that a fucking joke? Are you fucking with me?” growled Miller. The silence told him that Code was not fucking with him. “What kind of sick fucking people are out there? I think we need to pay another visit to our friend Craig.”

Jean smirked at his older brother, shaking his head.

“Alright, but if you break it, you buy it.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Why are we leaving?” pouted Cara as she watched Craig tossing items into his designer luggage. He’d paid a fortune for it, just for their trip. “I thought we were going out to the lake house and then leave for the islands in a few days.”

“Fuck the lake house! Didn’t you hear me? Thurston skipped town with the money.

All I have is what's in our accounts, and those guys that came earlier today are going to rake me over the coals. You should be fucking grateful that Mark had nothing!"

"It wasn't that he had nothing. He was just smart about where he put it. I couldn't touch it," she frowned.

"Pack faster," he snapped.

"Stop yelling at me! This isn't my fault. You promised that if I left Mark, we would have smooth sailing to do whatever we wanted."

"Well, guess what?" he snarled, gripping her upper arm. "We won't. You're going to have to go back to work until I get my business off the ground in whatever city we land in."

"I don't want to go back to work. You promised!" she said, stomping her foot.

Craig came at her so fast she didn't have time to evade the backhand she saw coming. He hit her so hard she stumbled backwards, tripping over the suitcase on the floor. Stumbling backwards, he just watched as she screamed, staring at him. When her head hit the corner of the nightstand, he watched as the blood amassed on the floor beneath her.

"I guess that solves one problem," he frowned. His phone rang, and he recognized the number. "Where the fuck are you?"

"Leave whatever you're doing and get to me. I'll text you the address," said Thurston.

"I've got a clean-up on aisle five," he frowned. "Cara won't be coming with me."

“She was a pain in the ass anyway. Just leave the bitch and get to me. We can make this work somewhere else. They love this shit in Asia. I’ve got a couple of fake passports and enough money for plane tickets. Plus, we can live like kings on almost nothing.”

“I’m on my way.”

Grabbing his Louis Vuitton duffel bag and rolling bag, he looked back at Cara. She was a good lay, always willing to suck and swallow when he wanted her to, but she was a whiney bitch. Thurston was right. They could do better.

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Hearing a car door slam, he peeked out the window, seeing the two massive men who'd come earlier.

"Shit," he muttered. Racing downstairs, he left through the garage at the back of the house and took off down the alley. If he could get to Thurston, they'd be home-free.

"You think they're still here?" asked Jean.

His brother pounded on the door several times, then looked through the glass of the front door. When no one answered, he gripped the doorknob and twisted as hard as he could, breaking the lock.

"I guess not," smirked Miller.

"You know this is breaking and entering," smiled Jean.

"Yep."

"Okay, cool. Just wanted to be sure we were on the same page. I'll take the office, see if there's anything that belongs to Nelly."

"I'll look in the closets and drawers downstairs first."

For the next hour, they gathered as much as they could in a box. Some they would use for their investigation, and some they would take to Nelly. Standing at the dining room table, Miller had a number of papers spread out, staring at them when Jean walked up.

“Ready to hit the upstairs?” The floors creaked beneath his weight and Miller smiled.

“Man, I love these old houses with the original floors. That creaking is like comfort to me. The big house creaks no matter where you move, and that just feels like home for me.”

“I know what you mean...” Jean stopped mid-sentence, looking at the two crimson drops on the papers. Both men looked up as another drop fell. Drawing their weapons, they slowly crept up the creaky stairs, shaking their heads. If someone was still here, they would know they were coming.

Standing at the entrance of the master bedroom, they both knew that the woman was dead. Jean straddled the body, leaning forward to feel for a pulse to be certain. He turned to his brother and shook his head.

“Call the police. We’ve got to come up with something good of how we got in here.” Miller looked around the rooms, then at Jean.

“Cameras. He’s got cameras everywhere. Code? Get the feed on these cameras ASAP and then shut ‘em down.”

“I’m here, sir,” said Hayes. “Mr. Code thought I should work on other things for a while. The other stuff was making me kind of sick.”

“I know, buddy. If you can help us with this, that would be great,” said Jean compassionately.

“Yes, sir. Doing it now.”

By the time the police arrived, the feeds from the cameras were downloaded, and the entire cache and history were cleared. Everyone would believe that they were dummy

cameras.

With blood on the corner of the nightstand, it would appear an accident. At least, that's what the detective was trying to make everyone believe. Until Jean spoke up.

"That's great," he frowned, "but how do you explain the mark across her cheek? I'm not a professional, mind you, but it looks like she was hit and then fell."

The detective stared at the two men, then looked down at the body again.

"Right. Of course. I mean, I saw that, I just didn't get to writing it all down yet. I mean, it could have happened a few days ago, or maybe she accidentally did it earlier in the day." Jean frowned at the man, giving him the look that said, 'you're a fucking idiot.'

"Right, I had that in my notes. I just didn't mention it yet." He walked off, scribbling something on his tablet as the coroner hauled the body away. Miller slapped his brother on the back.

"Let's go. We've got movies to watch."

CHAPTER TEN

Jean and Miller stopped by the fishing cabin to drop off the items for Nelly. She was happy to have the few photos remaining from her parents' home, as well as a few personal items. When she pulled out a red velvet box, she frowned, opening it to reveal a diamond heart.

"It's lovely," said Jean.

"It's not mine," she said, smiling while trying to hide her pain.

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“Fuck, I’m sorry, Nelly.”

“No, it’s alright. Every time I see something like this, it reminds me that this was a good thing. Can you take it? Maybe sell it for me or something?”

“We’ll do that, honey. Anything else you need?” asked Miller.

“Thank whoever it was that put up the added security on the long driveway. I didn’t want to complain to Sor, but it did bother me being out here alone. Also, they brought a bunch of food from someone named Mama Irene. Totally unnecessary, but it was delicious.”

“That’s our mother,” smirked Jean. “She’ll be happy that you enjoyed it.”

They left the young woman feeling as though she were on the road to recovery. Perhaps when all this was done, she would be able to start a new life somewhere else. By the time they arrived at the office, Code had the videos set up for them to review from the security cameras.

“Let’s start with Thurston,” said Code.

“Is that his real fucking name?” frowned Miller.

“Afraid so. Apparently, his parents were fans of the old shipwreck show with the rich dude and his wife.” Jean and Miller stared at him. “What? Hayes found it in a birth announcement in the society pages.”

“Rich people,” laughed Jean, shaking his head.

“Brother, I hate to tell you this, but if anyone knew what was in our bank accounts, we’d be classified as rich people. We just haven’t figured that out yet,” laughed Code. “Anyway, the cameras at his office show a lot of activity the last few weeks. Two days before the party at the mansion in the Garden District, Cara and Craig show up hand in hand, as you can see. They go into the office and close the door to Thurston’s office which, lucky for us, has a camera.”

“At first, the two men appear deep in conversation, but Cara isn’t involved. She’s looking at her phone, texting someone back and forth, then showing them something on the screen. Hayes was able to narrow in on the texting.”

Please be out of the house by the time I get home. I don’t want this to be messy, Mark. Just leave.

Fine. You’re doing me a favor.

You’re an asshole! I should have never married you.

Same. Good luck with Craig, Cara.

“Gotta love that he knew everything,” smirked Jean. “I hate that he went through that shit, but at least he wasn’t caught off guard. Craig obviously had never seen the brother if he didn’t notice who he was at the party. Big ass bastard to piss off.”

“Agreed,” said Code. “Thurston opens the safe and puts a few things inside, but you can see stacks of cash, both U.S. and foreign currency. It looks like there are some passports in there as well. I’ve notified TSA and Homeland to be on the lookout for fake passports with their photos.”

“Good job,” nodded Miller. Code nodded, moving to the next photo montage.

“I placed the videos in sequential photos so you can see each act more clearly. I know it’s kind of an eye chart to see, but it actually helps. It appears that Thurston and Craig, or at least Thurston, wanted to cover his own ass. There are multiple printed e-mails and text messages in the folders in front of him. I can only make out a few, but it looks like someone was directing them to add more cameras at different sites. The sender is from an e-mail that doesn’t exist any longer. I suspect they’re rotating e-mail addresses so that no one can track them. But we will.”

“Would either one of those idiots know how to install cameras?” frowned Jean.

“No. Absolutely not, which means that someone else is involved. These cameras had to be placed properly and without detection. The ones placed, uh, in and around toilets make my head hurt. They would have to be pinhead cameras, which are easy to find these days but also waterproof.”

“This is just sick,” muttered Miller. “How were they making money on this?”

“Easy. Someone was paying them for every business they brought online and then a percentage of the subscribers. They were easily making six figures per month.”

“Are you fucking with me?” growled Jean.

“I wish I were, brother. These kind of sites are wanted by all kinds of creeps. Like I said before, they’ve got them in men’s and women’s dressing rooms and restrooms, but I hate to say it...”

“Don’t say it,” said Miller, staring at him. Code just looked at him.

“They’re in kid’s clothing stores too.”

“Fuck!” he yelled. Gaspar, Ian, Ghost, and Nine came running down the hall. They popped their head in to see the three men, then nodded.

“He told you,” said Gaspar.

“You knew?”

“He told us about an hour ago. We didn’t see you two come back,” said Ian. “We need to find all of the locations and get those fucking cameras out of there. We’re looking for a way to notify stores across the nation, but if they’re doing it to make extra money, then I’m not sure how we’re going to stop it if we don’t stop the site.”

“Um, sirs?” said Hayes.

“Hayes, you don’t have to call us sirs,” said Ian.

“Oh, yes, sir. I was thinking that we could write a program that checks an algorithm for retail businesses that have unusual deposits, or it could be listed as a purchase but doesn’t match their inventory.”

“Can you do that?” frowned Ghost.

“Of course,” said Hayes.

His father was seated beside him, smiling. Hoot was extremely proud of his adopted son and tried to support him in everything. With the sensitivity of this information, he wanted to be there for him if he got in too deep. He turned to his father.

“Can I tell them?” he said quietly.

“Yeah, buddy. They’re going to be even prouder than I am.” Hayes smiled at his father, then looked at the other men.

“I’m working on my PhD in mathematics and computer science, as you know.” The others all smiled, nodding at him. “Well, sirs. I wanted real-world experience, like all of you. I’ve been accepted to a new division of Naval Intelligence dedicated solely to the protection of our Special Forces community.”

“No shit!” smiled Nine. “Fucking amazing, Hayes. We’re enormously proud of you!”

“Same, Hayes. Absolutely awesome, son. Speak with Ace. He was involved in something similar. Unsanctioned of course.” Ghost hugged the young man, the others all doing the same.

“I leave at the end of the summer, but I want to help with this while I’m here. I can have the program ready in a few hours,” he smiled.

“A few hours?” screeched Ian.

“Yes, sir,” he laughed. “I kind of already started on it.”

“Alright then. Get to it, boy genius.”

“Hey, that’s my title,” smiled Code.

“That was your title. You’re old man genius now,” said Nine.

“Oh, shit. You’re right.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Mom, I don’t want to go to the wedding,” said the young girl. “There’s no one going that’s my age, and it will be boring!”

“Sonja, this is your first cousin’s wedding. I know that you’re only seventeen, but one day, it’ll be you getting married, and you’re going to want others to be there.”

“For the gifts and cash, right?” she smirked.

“Sonja, that’s not nice,” smiled her mother. “But sometimes that’s the truth. Your father and I had more than two hundred people at our wedding, and I swear to God, I barely knew thirty.”

“Then why invite them?”

“Because,” she laughed, “my mother made me.”

“Oh, great. So, I’ll have to invite people you tell me to invite,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Afraid so, kiddo. Look, you get this dress. Just pick one you’re comfortable in, and I’ll let you take the car to school for your first day as a senior.” The girl smiled at her mother, picturing herself in her mother’s little convertible.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Okay.”

For the next hour, she would grab a few dresses and go into the dressing room, then come out shaking her head. Her mother would hand her a few more, and she would do the same. In the end, she found the perfect thing for her.

“What do you think?” asked Sonja.

“Well, it’s very you,” smiled her mother. “I like the pants and tuxedo jacket.” Her daughter frowned, hearing her mother’s tone.

“You don’t like it.”

“Actually, I love it,” said her mother. “I think it’s reflective of you, it’s formal, and it fits you beautifully.”

“Really? Thanks, Mom.”

“You bet. Now, let’s get changed, and we’ll finally get some lunch before I fall over.” Her daughter went back into the dressing room and a moment later, walked out with the pants still on, but the jacket replaced by a t-shirt.

“Sorry, but the t-shirt is a no.” Her daughter shook her head, looking around to see if anyone else was there.

“Mom,” she whispered.

“What’s wrong?” frowned her mother. “Did you start your period?”

“No,” she said in exasperation. “No. Mom, I think there’s a camera in that dressing room. You have to stand at the perfect angle, but there’s one behind the mirror.”

Her brave daughter, who was afraid of nothing, had tears in her eyes, her face pale and drawn. She nodded at her, walking into the dressing room.

“Let me see if I can find the earring, honey,” she said casually. “Are you sure you lost it?”

“Y-yes,” said Sonja.

“I’m looking,” she said casually. “Oh, I see it now. I’ve got it.”

She left the dressing room, handing her daughter her shorts. She held up the tuxedo jacket and nodded for her to change behind the jacket. She tossed the pants to the floor and put on the shorts.

“Mom, what are we going to do?” she sniffed.

“I’m going to buy this outfit and have someone return it later and look in that room. Don’t say a word. We’re going to take care of this.”

Her mother paid for the suit, smiling the entire time as the woman checked them out. When they were in the car, she drove straight back to their home and called the person she knew could help.

“Grandma? I need you to help me with something.”

“Hey, Ruby. What’s up?” asked Ghost.

“Ghost, my granddaughter just called me to tell me somethin’ I don’t like at all. Somethin’ involvin’ my great-granddaughter.”

“Okay,” he frowned. “How can we help?”

Ruby told the story as the men started to lean forward, staring at her. They interrupted several times, asking questions, then finally, Ruby stopped.

“You ain’t actin’ like this is new to you,” she frowned.

“It’s not, Ruby. We’re working on something that we believe is related right now. What was the name of this boutique?”

“Evolve. It’s off Canal. My great-granddaughter is beside herself with embarrassment. She said she was in and out of that room for nearly an hour tryin’ on clothes.”

“We’ll head down there right now,” said Ian.

“Thank you, boys. Thank you.”

Ian and Ghost walked down the hall and out of the building to see their wives seated in the grove. They waved them over, and the women grinned at them.

“We going on an adventure?” asked Faith.

“A shopping adventure,” said her husband.

Ian and Ghost explained what was happening as they drove into the city. Pulling into the parking lot of the little shop, they both looked at their wives.

“Don’t take anything off,” said Ian. “Just hold it up to you and turn several times. See if you can see the camera in the same spot that Sonja did.”

Faith and Grace nodded, getting out of the car with their husbands and stepping inside. It didn’t escape notice that this was the third place they’d found cameras in, and they were all smaller, independent shops. None of them were chains.

As the women looked around for something to wear, they noticed a man in his late twenties and a woman in her early thirties whispering to one another. Finally, the woman walked over and offered to help them.

“I think you should try these on,” said the woman. “They’ll really enhance your assets, and I’ll bet your husband would love that!”

Faith laughed, shaking her head.

“My husband likes all of my assets. Don’t you, babe?”

“I do,” he smirked.

“Well, then, let’s try these on. When you’re done, we’ll get you to sign up for our mailing list,” she said, leading her to the dressing room. “Would you like some help undressing?” Faith turned to the woman, cocking her head with a strange look.

“No. I think I know how to try clothes on all by myself. If I need help, my husband or my friend can help me.”

“Okay, just offering,” said the woman, backing up.

Grace stepped into the dressing room with her, and both women smiled at one another. She held up a few dresses, turning in the mirror.

“Hey, I can see that you haven’t removed your jeans,” said the saleswoman. “You can’t know if the dress will look good with your jeans on.” Faith snapped the curtain back, staring at the woman.

“Are you watching me beneath the curtain? Are you observing me?” she said.

“What? No, it’s just that I can see your jeans,” laughed the woman.

“Really? What else do you see?” said Faith, stepping out.

“Oh, shit,” muttered Ian. “I think my wife is about to go off.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said the woman.

“I mean, what else are you looking at, you sick, twisted bitch! Did you think we

wouldn't see? Did you think I wouldn't notice the cameras inside the mirror, the one in the ceiling? Did you think I was that stupid?"

"I think you need to leave," said the woman. The salesman at the desk reached for the phone and screamed so loud the woman turned.

"You touch that phone, and I will break every bone in your body," said Ghost, gripping his wrist. He pulled him from behind the counter and threw him in a chair. The woman tried to run around Faith, but Grace stiff-armed her, forcing her backwards. Faith held out her leg, the woman tripped over it and hit the floor.

"You're sick," said Faith. "Sick and about to be a felon."

"No! N-no! Please, I didn't know," she said.

"You're lying. You knew, and you tried to get me to remove my clothes." Faith looked up to see Code and Ace walking in the door.

"We'll take care of it," said Ace.

"What are they doing? No! You can't touch anything," said the woman. She heard the sounds of sirens and placed her face in her hands, crying. "You don't know what you've done." Ian just stared at the woman, shaking his head.

“Neither do you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Same as the others,” said Ace. “Multiple cameras in each dressing room behind the mirrors, in the ceilings, and several in the floors, looking straight up. It’s all being fed live to a server in the stock room, but it only uploads at the end of each day. It’s like their security footage. They gather footage of those walking through the doors every day, and then it goes to storage.”

“In theory, they could be watching for repeat customers and targeting them,” said Ian. “They asked them to sign up for their mailing list. That’s how they could keep track of who was coming and going. If someone saw something they liked, they could target them and ask them to return.”

“Sirs? I have the algorithm data,” said Hayes. They all just smirked, too tired to tell him to stop calling them ‘sir.’ Besides, he’d be calling everyone sir in a few weeks’ time.

“How many stores are we looking at?” asked Gaspar.

“More than nine thousand.”

“Nine thousand!” yelled Nine. “Are you kidding me? Nine thousand stores across the country?”

“Yes, sir. Nine thousand eight hundred and one to be exact. They are all small

boutiques. From what I can tell, they're getting paid between eleven thousand and a hundred-and-seven thousand a month. It depends on the city, location, that sort of thing.

"Stores in New Orleans, Chicago, New York, all make more because of the volume coming in and out of the stores. Those in small towns make less, but there's something else you need to be aware of."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" said Ghost.

"I don't think so, sir. I think they're also using this to target women, mostly young women, for trafficking or prostitution. I had the system run a program that looked at potential customer counts for each of the stores, then cross-referenced for young women who had disappeared from the immediate area.

"Of course, I can't be positive, but it seems pretty damning. In more than seven hundred of the cities, at least three young women between fifteen and twenty-one, who had shopped at the boutiques, disappeared within two months of shopping there."

"Hayes, that's pretty fucking incredible," said Ghost, shaking his head.

"Yes, sir. I think the other thing that puts the nail in the coffin on this is that in those locations, the stores and boutiques appear to have been given bonuses. I think they rewarded them when a woman was found that they wanted and kidnapped."

"Holy fuck, what have we uncovered," said Jean, staring at everyone. "We thought this was just a few cases here in New Orleans. Now, we learn that it's nationwide."

"It is, and we need to stop it," said Gaspar. "Ace, Code, you too, Hayes. If we coordinated a shutdown effort with local authorities, can we get the video data off all

of these stores.”

Hayes turned to look at his computer, the scrolling screen of numbers and letters flashing so quickly it gave the others a headache. When it stopped, there was a loud ding, like the bell at a boxing match.

“We have it,” he smiled. “I figured you’d want it downloaded. I have it on our servers, dated, alphabetized by location, boutique, and owner.”

Nine shook his head, looking at the others. Ace and Code just smirked at the kid, shrugging their shoulders. Hoot was the one with tears in his eyes, knowing that his adopted son was going to do amazing things.

“Alright,” nodded Gaspar, “let’s get on the horn and coordinate this.”

“An astounding story has come across our desk tonight, Bill. Local law enforcement, sheriff’s departments, FBI, Homeland, and other law enforcement agencies coordinated a nationwide effort today in shutting down local women’s clothing stores and boutiques.

“Based on an anonymous tip, more than nine thousand stores were raided, finding thousands and thousands of hidden cameras, video footage, and other disturbing information. It is alleged that these stores filmed their customers dressing and undressing, even in some cases, using the restroom. It’s just too disturbing to even talk about, Bill.”

“I’m horrified, Jack. My wife and daughter shop at one of those stores, and I can tell you that if I find out who is behind this, they’ll be prosecuted to the furthest extent of the law. Whatever sick, twisted pervert finds this entertaining will find a whole new realm of entertainment behind bars.”

“Way to tell him, Bill,” smiled Ian. “Now, we just have to find who was behind all of this.”

“Hey, TSA got a hit on Thurston and Craig,” said Code. “They tried to board a plane to Bangkok and were stopped. They panicked and ran, but they didn’t get on the plane.”

“Where?” asked Gaspar.

“San Francisco.” Nine nodded at his friend.

“Sounds like we’re going to San Francisco.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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By the time the jet landed in San Francisco, Code and the tech team had secured a rental home for the rest of the team, two SUVs, and made them dinner reservations. Ace had tagged along, hoping to be on-site tech help if needed.

California was a dog-friendly state in general, but San Francisco was especially friendly. Dogs were allowed in grocery stores, restaurants, just about anywhere.

Of course, Zulu and Beast might be a test of that welcome.

“Security cameras had them arriving by taxi, so they must have either driven a rental or flown into the city. When they ran from the airport, they got into another taxi. I’m tracking down both drivers now,” said Ace.

“What about old college friends and business associates?” asked Jean. “Anyone in the area that they might run to for help?”

“I might have something,” frowned Ace. “Thurston was engaged about five years ago, but the fiancée broke off the engagement abruptly, leaving New Orleans. She settled in Marin. Has a small house on the bay.”

“She’s gotta have money if she owns a place there,” frowned Jean. “Average median home price is north of two million. Let’s drop the bags, and Miller and I will go check it out.”

“Sounds good,” said Ghost. “We’ll take in some of the upscale hotels. I have a feeling Thurston and Craig aren’t the motel types.”

“Me and Alec are gonna visit the wharf,” said Tailor with a smile.

“You’re not fooling anyone, asshole. You’re going to the wharf to get chowder in a sourdough bowl and eat crabs,” growled Nine. Tailor shrugged, smirking at him.

“I mean, we gotta eat. We might as well eat and work at the same time. It’s a busy place. Them two might be takin’ in the sights or somethin’.” The men just laughed, shaking their heads.

The house rental turned out to be a good idea. There were no recording devices, no cameras, but it had a decent security system. There were five bedrooms, but each room had two beds, allowing for all of the men to have their own space. Knowing he needed it, they allowed Ace to have a room to himself.

“We’ll leave Beast with you,” said Nine. “Watch your six, brother. We’ll take Zeus.”

Ace waved at them as they left him alone, allowing for him to set up his beloved computers. On four screens, he was watching traffic cameras, stores, restaurants, pedestrians, airports, bridges, and train stations, including BART, the transit system.

Thousands of locals and tourists alike were passing in front of him. But when left alone, Ace was so incredibly focused on who he was looking for nothing could have budged him from his station.

Well, nothing except a dog that needed a walk.

“Up ahead,” said Jean. “Cute place. Looks small as shit, but it’s got a great view.”

“Yeah, until an earthquake and then she’s got a tidal wave that’ll drag her ass into the sea, or the entire mountain of homes above her will come sliding down, crushing her and her house.”

“Wow, do you think you could be a little cheerier?” smirked Jean.

“Sorry. As I’ve gotten older, I hate being away from my wife. I love that we’re still doing what we love, but, man, I want my woman next to me at night. Not you,” he smirked.

“No offense,” laughed Jean, “but I feel the same way. I spent the first thirty years of my life rooming with either one of my brothers or teammates. I don’t mind rooming with my Ro at all. Besides, I get benefits from that.”

Miller laughed at his brother, shaking his head. They parked the car down the street, walking back toward the small, quaint home. The drapes were open, and they could see a woman seated on the sofa reading a book. Jean knocked on the door, smiling at the young woman when she opened it.

“Oh. Uh, hello,” she smiled.

“Kelly Ross?” asked Jean.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Miss Ross, my name is Jean, and this is my brother, Pierre. We’d like to speak with you about your ex-fiancé, Thurston.”

“What did he do now?” she frowned.

“Well, it’s a lot,” said Jean. She nodded, opening the door and waving them inside. “I have to ask you, has he contacted you at all?”

“No. Not at all, and I don’t suspect that he will. Why?”

“He’s in San Francisco,” said Miller. She looked a bit panicked at first, paling in front of the two men. Swallowing, she nodded at them.

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“Do you feel unsafe knowing that?” asked Jean.

“Let’s just say I don’t feel safe knowing that,” she smiled. “Brutus!” They both turned to see a large mastiff walking out of the kitchen.

“That should make you feel safe,” grinned Miller. “He’s a beauty. May I pet him?”

She nodded at the two men as they sat down, rubbing the dog in all the right places. She felt at ease seeing the dog cozy up to them. Brutus was known for his impeccable character awareness.

“I got him after I broke off my engagement. Thurston was pissed at me because I was the one with all the money. Family money, mind you. He’d been hounding me for the last year of our relationship to put the money in both our names, ‘just in case.’ Just in case,” she scoffed. “The bastard was probably hoping to off me.”

“Off you?” smirked Miller. “Sorry, that feels a bit mobster.”

“I’d describe him as a wannabe mobster,” said Kelly. “Everything he touched was illegal. I didn’t know that when we started dating, but he was obviously dumber than I thought. I’m a financial planner and analyst. You’d think he would know I would discover his schemes sooner or later.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t put him high on the intelligence tree,” said Jean.

“Is his friend Craig involved with whatever this is?” she said, waving her hand at them. They both nodded. “That makes sense. The two of them were always coming

up with some scheme. They wrote fraudulent loans, charged extra interest where they shouldn't, asked for more deposits than needed, of course, keeping it for themselves. Craig would tell sellers they would list the house at a million, but it would sell for one point three, and the two of them would keep the rest."

"How?" frowned Jean. "That's a tough scheme to pull off."

"When one is the lender and one is the realtor, it's not," she said calmly. "Are they doing something again?"

"Yes, but it has nothing to do with real estate from what we know. Thurston invested in an app that films women in dressing rooms, bathrooms, changing rooms at gyms and spas, that sort of thing. They're totally unaware that their videos are being posted on a website and sent out to the world."

"Is this that media story I saw last night?" she asked, surprised.

"It is. We worked with agencies all over the country to shut it down. But the problem is, we've shut down the boutiques and other businesses but not the actual site. We need to know who owns the site and where it's located."

"I wish I could tell you that I'm surprised, but I'm not. Thurston and Craig wanted to share money but also women. I refused. When I heard that Craig got married to that sweet girl, Nelly, I couldn't believe it. She's not that type of girl."

"He left her abruptly and hooked up with a married woman that left her husband just as abruptly," said Miller. "We found the other woman dead in Craig's house."

"Holy shit, this is getting bad, isn't it?" she frowned.

"Listen, they were trying to get to Thailand but were stopped at security in the

airport. They're here, somewhere. Any clue who else they might go to?" asked Jean.

"I can guarantee that they wouldn't come here. They know better," said Kelly.

"The dog?" frowned Jean.

"Hey, babe, I'm back!" A man walked into the living room, smiling at the group. He was easily six-feet-five, shoulders so wide he turned to fit through the doorway, and a head so large it looked abnormal.

"No," she laughed, "not the dog. Gentlemen, my fiancé, starting offensive guard for the 49ers, Wilton Brooks."

"Holy shit," laughed Miller. "A fan, brother. Love your work."

"Thanks," he smiled. "Who are they?"

"I'll explain later," said Kelly. "Anything else I can help you with?"

"Nope," said Jean. "Thanks for your time. Just be careful the next few days until we catch them. Looks like between Wilton and Brutus, you're good."

She stood, shaking their hands as Wilton tucked her carefully beneath his arm. The men just shook their heads, kind of hoping Thurston showed up here. They'd want a front-row seat with popcorn for that encounter.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"We're getting nowhere at the mass transit areas," said Ghost. "I think we might be better off checking to see if they tried to hire private planes."

“That’s a lot of money, and it would have to be a pretty impressive private jet to get them from here to Tokyo, which would be the closest. Even if they got to Tokyo, they’d have to get through security to a plane to Bangkok,” said Nine.

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“What about a ship?” said Ian. “What if they tried to stow away on a freighter or buy passage? In this area, they might find someone willing to sail them across.”

“Again, big ass ship or boat needed, but it’s possible,” said Gaspar.

“Let’s head down to the shipyards on the San Francisco side.”

Nine, Ian, Gaspar, and Ghost worked their way back over the Oakland Bridge and along the bay toward the shipyards. Although not as large as they once were, the shipyards were often the first stop for cruise ships and other vessels.

“Two freighters and a cruise ship, but the cruise ship would be checking passports,” said Ian. “Unless. Unless they somehow weaseled jobs on the ship. Ace? Can you see if any new crewmembers were hired in the last three days aboard the Majestic Sea?”

“On it.”

“Come on, we’ll check out the freighters first and then get back with Ace. Two freighters, but one is based in Alaska, and the other heads to Hawaii from here,” said Ghost, looking at his tablet. “I can’t imagine either of these would be what they needed.”

“We’ll check them out just to be sure,” said Gaspar, walking toward the first ship. He spoke to the guard at the bottom of the gangplank, and the young man nodded, pointing to the top deck. He radioed the captain, and he waved at them to board.

“Afternoon,” said the captain. “I hear you’re looking for two fugitives.”

“Yes, sir,” said Gaspar. He held up the photo of the two men, and the captain smirked, putting on his glasses. “Sorry. I’m old as dirt. I don’t recognize them.”

“Have you hired anyone new in the last few days?” asked Ian.

“Only a cook, and he’s from Trinidad. Doesn’t look anything like those boys. These ships are a lot tighter than they were years ago. You have to have proper paperwork, passports, work visas, all of it. It’s not easy to get a job on these things.”

“I appreciate it,” said Ghost.

They made their way to the second freighter and found the same response. It seemed both captains ran extremely tight ships and hadn’t had anyone new other than the one cook. The cruise ship was different.

“We arrived yesterday from Anchorage,” said the captain. “We’ll be heading back that way tomorrow.”

“Anyone that looks like these men on your crew right now?” asked Nine. The captain laughed at him, shaking his head.

“Gentlemen, I have more than a thousand crew members. I’d like to tell you that I know all their faces, but I do not. Let me call my ship’s human resource officer,” he said. “Please, have a seat in the lounge, and they’ll bring you something to eat and drink.”

The foursome sat in the sun-filled room, feeling the cool breezes of the Pacific blowing through the windows. At night, it would get extremely cold, but during the day, with the sun out, it was beautiful.

A server brought them waters, took their orders for other drinks, and came back with

two tiered trays of sandwiches, pastries, and cookies.

“It’s all I had prepared,” smiled the young man. “We do a welcome tea when the guests board tomorrow.”

“This is great, thank you,” said Gaspar.

There were several pots of tea but a large pot of coffee was what the men all reached for first. Thirty minutes later, the captain and an older woman walked up to them.

“Gentleman, this is Helen, my shipboard HR partner.”

“Hello,” she smiled. “The captain has shown me the photos. I haven’t hired anyone who looked like that. I have hired a few people, but they were all vetted by corporate. However, I did get a call last night from a man asking if they could work off their passage to Anchorage. He said that their families were located there, and they wanted to get home.

“I thought it might be a case of a homeless person or perhaps a military man down on his luck, so I referred him to several agencies that I know of. He obviously wasn’t happy about it, given the number of expletives he used as he hung up on me.”

“Was it a local number?” asked Ian.

“I honestly don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s all routed through a call center for us. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“It’s alright. If you hear from them again, please let us know,” said Ghost, handing her a card.

“What now?” asked Nine as they stepped off the ships.

“I don’t know,” said Gaspar, shaking his head. “Let’s head back to the house. We’ve got dinner reservations. Maybe the others have found something.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Have you heard from Krauss?” asked Craig.

“For the tenth time, no! I’m standing right here next to you. You would have seen me talking to him.”

“Don’t get fucking rude with me, Thurst. I’m the only one still standing here with you.”

“You’re standing with me because your fucking ass is on the line as well. You killed that bitch, Cara; you fucked up and told those two fucking neanderthals that I was an investor. You screwed this up!”

“It was already screwed up! Jesus, get off your fucking high horse, Thurst. This was screwed up weeks ago. Krauss is gonna have both our asses if we don’t give him something. We have to figure out a way to make this right, and if we can’t get out of the country, I don’t know how we do that.”

“I don’t know either,” said Thurston. “I just need to think for a while. Put a hat on and let’s take the cable car to the wharf and get some food. Maybe the sea air will clear our heads.”

They pulled on two cheap San Francisco sweatshirts and ball caps and hopped the cable car toward Ghirardelli Square. The ride was short but gave them both a chance to just be quiet and observe.

Wallen Krauss was not a man to be fucked with. When Thurston met him at a banquet in Miami, he knew immediately that this was a man that could make him rich. What he didn't recognize was that this was also a man who could take his life without a second thought.

Wallen Kraus was famous worldwide. A builder of submersibles for both business and pleasure, his small subs allowed people to fulfill their dreams of deep-sea adventure or to simply sail beneath the seas. Both men knew that he had a submersible that could allow them to get to Asia. The question was whether or not he was willing to take the chance on them again.

With ties to every major group of organized crime, stretching from Japan to Singapore to Bangkok to Malaysia and on to India, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. The only regions he didn't touch were the Middle East and Russia.

After meeting at the banquet in Miami, Thurston and Craig spent three nights partying with the man on his mega yacht. Naked women were everywhere, drugs, food, anything you wanted you could request.

Late one night, he started to tell the men of his ingenious new website that he wanted to expand into the U.S. He just needed a little help. Fifteen million in help, to be exact.

Neither man had that kind of cash. Thurston tried to get Kelly to fork over some of her money, and in the end, the bitch left him. That's when Craig stepped up. He could easily cheat older couples out of the equity in their homes. It wouldn't be fifteen million, but if they invested properly, it would grow rapidly.

For three years, they kept in touch with Krauss until two years ago, they were able to tell him they had the cash.

Thurston and Craig didn't just invest in the site. They ran the U.S. sites and thereby reported directly to Krauss. A madman with a penchant for violent deaths. They'd witnessed it firsthand on the yacht.

"Come with me, gentlemen," he smiled. "Business with me will sometimes be difficult. I expect perfection, and when I don't get it, well, men are punished. This one is personal to me. Paulo had the audacity to fuck one of my favorite girls."

The two men turned, seeing a man hanging by his ankles from a rope. He was naked, covered in blood, but it didn't appear to be his own.

"She came on to me!" yelled poor Paulo.

At the back of the boat, the two men watched as a group of Krauss's men dumped chum into the water. Sure enough, a few moments later, sharks were circling.

"Please, please, no!" yelled the man.

Krauss nodded as he was dipped into the water headfirst. The sharks ascended, biting and pulling on his flesh. They pulled him out, his torso and legs missing huge pieces. He was barely alert. Krauss nodded again, and he was dunked one more time. This time, when the rope pulled back, there was nothing left.

"I don't like people who screw me over. Is that clear?"

"Abundantly," said Thurston in a cocky tone. "I appreciate your style. I don't like to be fucked over either."

Krauss stood abruptly, glaring at the two men.

"Do not compare yourself to me. I've spent a lifetime achieving all of this. Sex,

women, drugs, men, commerce, all of it! I own all of it, and it's not because I was cocky. It's because I knew what I wanted in life, and I knew how to get it.

“Send your payment for investment soon, gentlemen, or I'll find other investors.”

Thurston and Craig had a taste those few days of exactly what they wanted out of life. The kind of life they wanted for themselves. They wanted to rule other men, have women drop to their knees at the snap of their fingers.

But now everything was screwed up. The entire U.S. operation was shut down, and Krauss wouldn't stand for that. They had to figure out a way to make it right, or they would be the ones hanging upside down.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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The restaurant where their reservation was made had a dress code of no shorts or blue jeans. Unfortunately for them, that's all the men were wearing. Frustrated, one of the bus boys ran up to them as they started out the door, pissed that they'd have to find somewhere else for dinner at the late hour.

"Sirs? If you want good seafood, Pier Market Seafood or Fog Harbor are both good options. They don't care what you're wearing," smiled the young man.

"Thanks, kid," said Nine. He handed him a twenty, and the young man smiled, nodding at them. As night descended on them, the temperatures dropped. They made note of the fact that one of the freighters had departed, the other two ships looking ready to go the next day.

Finally seated by a window with great views of the bay, the men stared at the menu, rubbing their bellies.

When the waiter began to take their orders, he was nearly overwhelmed with the amount of food being asked for.

"Sirs, that's enough to feed three times your table. Are you sure?"

"You just put that order in," smirked Alec. "We may be ordering more later."

Crab, scallops, shrimp, lobster, four different types of fish, fries, mashed potatoes, one order of spinach, and one order of asparagus. Tailor curled his nose.

"Your wife will tear my head off if I don't order some veggies," said Nine. "Just eat

some.”

Ace was seated closest to the window, allowing him to lean away from the others if they were too close to his space. For the most part, he was better than he had been in years. But every once in a while, he had an episode of panic.

Ghost watched as he tapped away on his phone, wondering if he was speaking to Charlie. He stared out the window again, then watched his phone a few minutes longer. He finally stood, pushing his chair in.

“Ace? Brother, are you okay? Are you leaving?” asked Ian.

“I’ll be right back. If I’m not back in a few minutes, just keep checking your phones.” They all stared at him, watching as he left the table and went downstairs. Seated closest to him, Jean moved into his seat and looked out the window. Below were tourists eating in an outdoor chowder spot. Everyone seemed to be wearing something with ‘San Francisco’ on it. What a market!

“Jean?” whispered Gaspar. He held up his finger then looked down at his phone. Nothing. “Jean, what the fuck?”

“He found them,” whispered Jean. “He’s making contact with them.”

“What?” Nine stood, but Jean waved him back down.

“No. Let him be. He obviously has a plan, and we don’t want to fuck it up. He’s coming back up.”

Ace came back into the restaurant and took his seat again, biting into a piece of hot buttered sourdough bread. He took a swig of his iced tea and then looked back down at his phone while the others continued to stare at him. He felt their eyes on him, and

he looked up, confused at first, then remembered he needed to talk.

“Oh. Yeah, that was them.”

“Fuck me,” growled Ghost. “Ace. Speak, son.”

“Yep, sorry. I forget sometimes. Hayes helped to create a program on the phone that scanned phones in my immediate area for certain words or phrases. You guys have no idea how many times a day someone mentions ‘internet’ or ‘site.’”

“Ace, you’re fucking killing me,” said Ian.

“I know,” he smirked. “The other thing I asked Hayes to enter is known traffickers and organized crime bosses. Those two were having a conversation about the site being down, losing money, and possibly their lives in danger if Krauss won’t give them another chance.”

“Shit. Wallen Krauss,” said Nine. Ace nodded.

“I told them that Krauss had been tracking them, and I was their point of contact. I explained how very, very upset Mr. Krauss was with them, and they assured me that they would make good on their mistakes. They even said that they would be happy to apologize in person to Mr. Krauss if he were at his home in Bangkok.”

“You’re fucking something else, Ace,” laughed Ghost.

“Thank you. I think,” frowned Ace. “Oh. We’re meeting tomorrow at Golden Gate Park. 1100.”

“There’s only one problem. How do we know where in Bangkok Krauss lives? It could be anywhere, and he may not even be there. He’s known to have residences in a

dozen major cities,” said Miller.

“That’s true, but they admitted that they were willing to help Mr. Krauss get something new off the ground here in the U.S.”

“Ace, what if Krauss does contact them, and they find out you’re not legit,” said Ghost.

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“Oh, that’s not a problem. Their phones are now routed through my phone. I see everything first with a sixty-second delay to them. I can delete it or allow it to go through. I’ll be acting as the two of them for the next few days.”

When the food arrived, the men were suddenly hungrier than they were when they arrived. Eating everything that was brought, they ordered another three dozen raw oysters, a half dozen crabs, and two more baskets of fries. When they were finished, Tailor and Alec ordered dessert.

The waiter gently, cautiously set the bill on the table as if afraid the men might eat his hand. Nine stared at it, nodding his head left and right.

“It’s not bad. I thought it’d be five or six grand. It’s a good night, boys.”

The waiter could not have been more relieved. When they got back to the house, Alec walked the dog while the others cleaned up. By midnight, they were sound asleep. All except Ace, who was fielding angry text messages left and right.

You’re going to fucking die. Both of you.

You cost me billions!

Make this right within 48 hrs.

Ace grinned to himself. Time for some fun.

We’re not going to die, but you might. Everyone knows this was you. I want my

investment money back or I tell the cops where to find you. All of the places to find you.

He waited, imagining Krauss throwing objects, shooting at people unnecessarily, and certain that these two had sold him out.

Meet me in Miami. Two days. You know where.

“Ace? What are you doing, son?” asked Ghost, standing in the doorway with Nine. “Don’t get yourself into something you can’t get out of.”

“I’m good,” he smiled. “I’m just charging up our friend. A few well-placed comments, a little prompting tomorrow at Golden Gate, and we’ll find Krauss and stop all of this.”

We’ll be there.

“There. Done. You’ll be with me tomorrow to get the information we need, and then we’ll head to Miami.” Ghost nodded.

“I hope you know what you’re doing. Krauss isn’t someone to fuck around with,” said Nine. Ace stared at him, pulling back the covers on the bed.

“Of course, I know what I’m doing. What a silly question.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Did you know that Krauss was tracking our phones?” asked Craig.

“No. It doesn’t surprise me, but I didn’t know. I should have been more careful. He knows where we are, so shut the phones down. Maybe he can’t track us that way.”

They both shut down their phones, tossing them onto the dressers of their hotel.

The man who approached them at the pier looked like someone that Krauss would hire to follow them. He seemed to know everything, and that terrified the shit out of them. Meeting at Golden Gate Park would be public and, hopefully, ensure that they weren't killed instantly.

With a good night's rest, they rose early and had a leisurely breakfast, hoping that it wouldn't be their last meal. Unwilling to help their own stupidity, they smirked and pointed out all the women who would do well on their site. Or at least on their new site.

"How do you think they found all the stores? Did someone snitch?" asked Craig.

"No clue," frowned Thurston. "It could have been a shop that was caught by someone, and they squealed to the cops."

"Still doesn't explain how they figured out all of them," said Craig.

"Well, I don't know," said Thurston between his teeth. "I'm not the nerds. I don't know how those things work. Maybe it was all connected somehow. It doesn't matter. We'll find a new way for him to get what he wants, and we'll be his golden boys again."

"No offense, Thurst, but I don't think we were ever Krauss's golden boys. He's hardcore, and even I know that we're just small fish in his big sea."

"No, man, I can promise you that we're important to him." Thurston just gave an arrogant shrug as if to say he had nothing to worry about. It wasn't the first time that Craig worried he was going to sell him out.

By now, someone probably had discovered Cara's body and was looking for him. A little voyeurism was vastly different than murder.

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“What are you thinking about?” asked Thurston.

“Just wondering how we get out of this. I mean, I think we might have fucked up.”

“Of course, we fucked up!” he snapped. “Have you not been following this at all? We royally fucked up, and he’s going to cut us into pieces if we can’t find a way to help him make more money and get what he wants. We need more ideas.”

“It has to be a pay site. Something that involves credit cards or money transfers. What about videos of cheerleaders? We get male cheerleaders to wear cameras, so when they’re looking up at the sweet little pussy in the skirts, everyone gets a view.”

“That’s not bad,” smirked Thurston. “Not bad at all, and I’d damn sure pay for that. We could expand it to dancers too. Ballet, ballroom, anything where the woman is lifted over their head.”

“Exactly,” nodded Craig, feeling a little better about having a plausible idea.

“Okay, okay, what else?” asked Thurston.

“City street grates. You know, the kind that Marilyn Monroe stood over.” Craig stared at him, waiting for a reaction.

“Not bad, not bad. Not all cities have those, but it could work. We could do train platforms.”

“Oh! What about airlines? Put small cameras in the seatback pockets. Those damn

seats in coach are so fucking small. Poor women sit down and have no room. Legs just have to open a little bit, and we get a good view.” Craig smiled, feeling very proud of himself.

“Yeah, yeah,” he smiled. “Or we could put them in the air vents. Perfect view looking down into their tits.”

“See, this is easy,” smirked Craig. “We got this. Oh, wait! Swim teams! You know, high school, college, all of it. Those tight little swimsuits with their ass cheeks hanging out. Or gymnasts!”

“Easy, man. We got this. Krauss is gonna be happy to see us.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ace waited at the top of Golden Gate Park near the pedestrian walkway that went over the bridge. The wind whipped across the bay, making others pull up their sweaters and sweatshirts around their necks. Ace was used to temperature variations, so stood stoically, waiting for their marks.

Below him in the park were Alec, Taylor, and Miller. Jean stood only a few feet away from him, taking photos of absolutely nothing, while Ian, Ghost, Nine, and Gaspar were spread out on the bridge itself.

“We’re here, and we’ve got some great ideas for Mr. Krauss,” said Thurston, walking toward him casually.

“I’m sure you do,” said Ace. “He wants to see you in Miami. The usual spot.”

“The usual spot? He’s got like fucking ten spots in Miami,” frowned Craig. “How are we supposed to know what that is?”

“You’re asking me? Well, I can give him a call, and you can ask him yourself,” said Ace with a sly smirk.

“No. No, that’s okay. I’m certain that he means the island mansion. That’s fine. We can go there.”

Ace stared at the two men, waiting for just the right moment.

“Well? What now?” snapped Thurston.

“Now, you either speak or die,” said Ace. The two men stared at him, wondering what he meant. Was there something else that Krauss wanted? Needed?

“We don’t know what you want.”

“Sure you do,” said Ghost, walking up to them with Ian, Nine, and Gaspar.

They stared at the other men, taking a step backwards, realizing they would be killed by traffic. They were trapped on the walkway between the men. Looking in the opposite direction along the walkway of the bridge, they spotted a large man standing guard in the path.

“Wh-who are you? What do you want?” asked Craig.

“Besides getting back at you for what you did to your soon-to-be ex-wife, for being such a dick?” smirked Ian. “Pretty much everything. Why is Krauss getting into vanilla porn sites watching women undress and use the bathroom? He’s trafficked women all over the world. Why this?”

“H-How do you know that?” asked Thurston.

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“Why?” growled Nine.

“Why? Fucking money, that’s why! Do you have any idea how much those sites make for him?” said Craig.

“No. Enlighten us,” said Gaspar.

“Craig,” warned Thurston.

“What? I’m fucking done. We’re dead either way. Haven’t you figured that out yet. People pay a shit-ton of money to watch those sites. Sick perverts who get off on seeing women in their underwear, or better yet, they have no underwear on. Some even like watching them piss. Sick to me, but whatever. They have to pay to watch any of it.”

“How much?” asked Gaspar.

“I don’t know. It’s like sixty bucks a month for a membership or something, or you can do it by the day.”

“That can’t be it,” said Nine. “That’s a lot of money, but not enough for him to risk his other businesses.”

They all noticed Thurston moving from one foot to the other nervously. Alec and Tailor stepped up next to Ace, and the two felons appeared to be ready to dart for the bay. Miller stood blocking the trail down into the park. Tailor growled at the man, a low, rumbling growl like an angry bear.

“What?” frowned Craig, staring at Thurston. “What are you hiding? What do you know?”

“Shut up!” yelled Thurston.

“Fuck no. No way am I dying for you. Tell them whatever you know!”

“You’d better speak up, boy, or I’m gonna give you a beating that you will not recover from,” said Tailor.

“He’ll kill us,” said Thurston.

“So will we,” said Ghost.

“It’s not just about the viewing site. I mean, it is, but there’s more. The site is just the way for him to get in.”

“I’m waiting, and I am not a patient man,” said Alec. “If you think he’s angry, you haven’t even seen me yet.”

“He collects the credit card data, addresses, details about their families, all of it.”

“Okay. So, he sells the credit card data,” said Jean.

“No. He collects it, hacks into their accounts, reviews their purchases, and then bribes them. If some guy is paying for multiple porn sites and he has a high credit rating, then he probably has a high income. He either pays up monthly, or they expose him to family and business associates.”

“Go on,” said Jean. The others stared at Jean, wondering what else there was. That seemed enough to them.

“The data tells him everything. If they buy lots of flowers, they have a wife or girlfriend. Toys. They have kids. Lots of business dinners. Well, you get it. He literally rips their lives apart piece by piece unless they give him everything. He’s not satisfied until they’re broke. If they don’t comply, he takes their wives and children as payment. He implants a tracking device in the hem of whatever they purchase. The buyer doesn’t see it because the store owner does it unseen.

“These aren’t just your average perverts. They’re high-dollar. CEOs, senators, congressmen and women, entrepreneurs, financial investors. They think they can outsmart him and not pay or ignore his threats. They have no idea that he’s tracking every female or young male in their families.”

“Wait,” said Jean. “Some of these people are financial investors?” Thurston said nothing as the others looked at Jean.

“He’s using them. He’s using them to get insider information. He gets more than money from them. A lot more.”

While letting all of that sink in, they didn’t notice Thurston backing up, taking a step into the street. A truck narrowly missed him, and he took off around the cars and then darted back along the pedestrian walkway. Jean and Ace followed, both much faster than he was. Before they could reach him, he stepped over the railing.

“I won’t go to jail! I can’t, and Krauss will carve me to pieces.”

“Don’t do this,” said Ace. “You won’t survive that jump.” The man just stared at Ace, shaking his head.

“I know.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Craig was turned over to the authorities, where he would face charges for murder, as well as a number of other things. Considering he was still married to Nelly, she would get the house in the Garden District, as well as any of his assets.

“Sell the house,” she said to Kari, shaking her head. “I don’t ever want to go inside that place again. The assets, I don’t know. I don’t want to touch anything that he earned from working for this man, Krauss.”

“We’ll try to figure out what was legitimate and what wasn’t,” said Kari.

They were seated outside a small café in the uptown area of New Orleans. It was hot, but there was a hint of fall breeze in the air and that seemed to make it okay. When two women started walking toward them on the street, Nelly groaned.

“Are you okay?” asked Georgie.

“No. These two women coming toward us were two of the wives at the party where I was humiliated. They actually laughed at me.”

“Well, this should be fun,” smirked Kari.

“Nelly,” said one of the women, clearing her throat. Kari was ready to pounce and have a little fun, but when the woman seemed to be showing some compassion and humility, she held back for a moment. “Nelly, we’re so sorry to hear about Craig and Thurston.”

“Are you, Trisha?” the woman stood tight-lipped, not saying anything. “It’s funny

that you have compassion and empathy for a couple of lying, cheating, stealing, disgusting pair of perverts, but you both thought the worst of me.”

“That’s not fair, Nelly,” said the other woman. “I mean, you have to understand how it looked.”

“How did it look?” asked Georgie. The two women stared at her. “Oh, I’m Georgianna Robicheaux. One of her attorneys, so I’d be very careful what you say.”

“I-I just meant that it looked as though you intentionally did those videos.”

“No, it didn’t,” said Nelly. “I was the one who always dressed conservatively at those parties. I was the one who was shy, removed from all of you. I was the one who rarely took a drink. I never ever gave anyone the impression that I would do anything like that intentionally. Ever!

“You and your friends were the skimpily clad, hooker-heel-wearing, drunken-mess women. Not me. Yet you automatically wanted to crucify me.”

“Look, Nelly, you weren’t part of our college crowd. We didn’t really know you.”

“Thank God,” she laughed.

“I couldn’t agree more with that,” said Kari. “I’d say you dodged the bullet not having these two in your circle. Ladies, I believe you’ve said enough. We know what kind of character witnesses you would be, but fortunately, Nelly won’t need that.”

“We are sorry, Nelly. In spite of what you might think, we are. It won’t change anything, but just so you know, Craig and Thurst had us on video as well. We had to keep our mouths shut and not say anything. I’m glad they’re gone.”

The two women walked away, and Nelly could only shake her head.

“I will never understand ‘mean girls,’” she said with a sad expression. “I was raised to be nice to everyone. My mother used to say, ‘you don’t know what they’re going through. You don’t know their back story. Be kind. It always wins.’”

“Your mother was wise,” smiled Georgie. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do next?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I spoke to Mark the other day, and he still has a little over a month on his contract, and he said he would be living with you all when he got out. I guess he’s joining your team.”

“Yes, that’s right,” smiled Kari. “You know, you could live at Belle Fleur as well. We could always use someone else on our team.”

“I know, and I appreciate the offer. I believe it was your husband and brother-in-law that came to see me. Very nice men, by the way. I’m thinking about it, believe me. For right now, that cabin is giving me a chance to just keep my head clear and think about what I want to do next. Maybe I’ll move out of state.”

“Well, don’t do anything drastic,” said Georgie. “Take some time for you. Maybe take a little vacation somewhere. You’re going to have a good nest egg after all this is done.”

“I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done for me,” said Nelly. “I really owe Mark. Not just for letting me crash in his fishing cabin but for stepping in between me and Craig at the party that day. I really think he would have hit me.”

“Mark would have never allowed that to happen,” said Kari, squeezing her hand. “Our men are different, Nelly. I know it’s hard for you to see that now, but they’re all

very different. I have a feeling about you and Mark, so I'm going to share some advice that we always gave the women who joined our team.

“These men, these men protect so fiercely, so devoutly it's all-consuming. And they love the same way. All-consuming. It's remarkable to watch and a blessing to be a part of it. If you want my advice, don't question anything. Just let yourself feel. These are special men, and if you don't mind me saying so, it will sound a bit conceited on my, on our part, but it takes special women to be with them.”

“The younger wives have their own advice,” smiled Georgie. “Love is so very hard to find that when you do, recognize it as the gift it is. You should hold it gently. Don't squeeze too hard, but don't let it go. These men are different in every way. Their lives have been entirely about protecting others, with no thought as to who would protect them. Expect that they'll be overbearing, alpha in every way. But recognize how unbelievably special that is and that they've chosen us to be by their sides. He will protect you, but you will protect him as well. He will drive you mad with his overprotection, but he will soothe you with his love and adoration of you. And there is nothing like the love of one of these men.”

“That's all beautiful advice,” smiled Nelly, looking confused. “But Mark and I barely know one another. We're just friends.” The two older women laughed, shaking their heads as they rose to hug their client. Kari smiled at her.

“That’s what we all said, honey. We’re just friends.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Did you find it?” asked Ace, walking into the comms room. “Did you find Krauss’s island mansion?”

“Hello to you, too, Dad,” smirked AJ.

“AJ, I’m serious about this one, son. Did you find it?”

“We did, or I should say, Hayes did. We’re gonna miss that kid when he leaves. Krauss, as we already knew, has multiple properties around the world. He has a yacht big enough to be called a mansion. It sits at the marina in Miami. He has a home in Quebec, near Quebec City, one in Seattle, one in Baja, and, of course, his mega-mansion in Bangkok.

“We know there are others. We just haven’t been able to locate them. The house you want is on Hibiscus Island. Twenty-seven thousand square feet of living space, hidden doors and hallways, lookout towers with guards. It’s a nightmare to get into. Right now, we can see almost forty men guarding the property. We’ve passed over it a few times with the drones and can detect at least another twenty inside the property.”

“Damn,” muttered Ace. “How do we get those men out of there?”

“That’s a problem. He calls his men Spartans. They die before they leave him, and

many have.”

“So, we have to take on sixty or so men in order to get to him?” asked Nine.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” said Ace. “We could create a large distraction that brings them out and pushes you in.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but,’” smirked Ghost.

“But I think we’d be better off getting him to Quebec City. He only goes there when he has to. He’s less comfortable in that mansion because it’s not his usual place to stay. It’s smaller, doesn’t have the space for as many of his Spartans as he’d like, and he doesn’t speak French,” smirked AJ.

“How can we get him there?” asked Gaspar.

“Easy,” smirked AJ. “We photoshop pictures of Craig and Thurston on his property. Let him know that someone can get to him but emphasize that they decided to take a Canadian vacation. He’ll be pissed, and that will force him to make mistakes. We already know that Thurston’s death and Craig’s arrest haven’t been made fully public.”

“What about the guards? I’m sure there are some there, and he’ll bring more,” said Nine.

“He does have five that are there permanently. He can’t bring all of his Spartans with him because most have been denied access to Canada. It’s another reason he doesn’t like going up there. There was an incident in 1998 where his guards killed four women, pedestrians who were out for a walk and lost their way. They ended up on the back side of his property, and they whipped them to death and threw their bodies on the side of the road. Near the mansion.”

“And he wasn’t found guilty?” asked Ghost.

“No. He denied any knowledge of the incident and fired the guards, of course, but he settled with the families out of court and was allowed to return. His bodyguards, for the most part, were not.”

“So that’s the reason you want us to go there?” smirked Ian. “Good job, kid.” AJ stared at them all with a strange look on his face.

“Ace, tell your son to tell us everything, or I’m going to beat the shit out of him,” said Ghost.

“Not if I do it first. AJ, what the hell, son?”

“Okay. This was difficult because I couldn’t use the baby geniuses. I could only use the teen geniuses.”

“Is that how we’re referring to them now? Baby geniuses and teen geniuses?” asked Nine.

“It helps us to figure out who is who,” said AJ. “Anyway, I could really only use Victoria and Hayes, and even then, I made sure that Hoot was with Hayes the entire time, and Mo sat with Victoria. I have to say, those damn kids handled that shit better than most adults.

“We knew that it wasn’t just Krauss involved in this. It couldn’t be. He’s got tech-savvy people working for him, but no one who could have created this program at the level it is. He has help, but I needed proof on what help he was getting. So, Hayes and Victoria didn’t just create a program to search for certain words or phrases. They didn’t make this something that we could have done ourselves. What they searched for was what we call micro-aggressions in their financial picture.”

“Micro-aggressions?” frowned Gaspar.

“Yeah, it’s a term used sometimes around behavior. Like saying to someone, ‘you have lovely hair for a black woman.’ That’s a micro-aggression or back-handed compliment. In finance, we use that term when we see strange purchases or deposits that seem out of character for the user.”

“I’m waiting, AJ. I’m trying to be patient, son, really I am,” said Nine. AJ laughed, shaking his head, and turned to Victoria and Hayes.

“I’ll explain, sir. Is that okay?” she smiled.

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“Victoria, I’d much rather listen to your sweet voice than AJ’s babbling. Go ahead, honey. Just do it quick. I’m aging by the minute.”

“Yes, sir. Krauss has billions. We already knew that. Most of it is spread around the world, but ironically, there wasn’t much in Canadian accounts. At first, we thought it could be the exchange rate preventing him from doing it, but we’re talking about pennies. He wouldn’t care about that.”

“Is he in trouble in Canada? Legal issues?” asked Gaspar.

“Close,” smiled Victoria. “He has an ex-wife there.” She smiled at the room, waiting for them to catch up. It was Jean that realized what she was saying.

“The ex-wife is his partner,” he said quietly.

“Yes,” smiled Victoria. “Her name is Yulia Federovavich.”

“No,” said Gaspar, shaking his head. “No, no, no. Don’t tell me that she’s the daughter of Yuli Federova.”

“She is the daughter of Yuli Federova. He died fourteen years ago at the age of ninety-one in a Russian prison. And not a good one, if there is such a thing. He always vowed to rise to the top again. About that time, Krauss divorced Yulia, leaving her in Quebec. She’s lived there for most of her adult years for her own protection from her father’s enemies.”

“Does she live in the mansion?” asked Nine.

“No,” smiled Victoria. “She lives in another mansion. This one.” The photo of the mansion was unlike anything that the men had seen before. Sitting on a massive property near water.

“Where is that?” asked Nine.

“It’s on Île d’Orléans, lying between the split of the St. Lawrence River. There are a couple of hotels on the island, a stable, an observation tower, but that’s pretty much it. That home is estimated to be forty-seven thousand square feet. Forty-seven,” she repeated. “I say estimated because no one actually knows. There are cellars, towers, safe rooms, all of it. According to my research, she rarely leaves the island. She went back to Russia for her father’s funeral and left immediately after the ceremony.”

“What’s her part in all of this?” asked Gaspar. Victoria looked at her adoptive father, and he smiled, nodding at her.

“Is this cool with you, Mo? If it’s too much for her, we can talk to AJ,” said Ian.

“No, it’s fine,” he smiled. “Victoria is obviously extremely mature, and she wants to stop what’s happening here. I’ll let her give you the details, but we think that Yulia is running the trafficked women through her island.” The whole room echoed with the same sentiment.

“Shit.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“If you think about it, she has the perfect situation,” said Victoria. “She lives on a remote island, by all accounts controlling everything that happens there. She has access to the St. Lawrence River, which would allow for ships passing through to take women off the island undetected and into the Atlantic toward Europe, India,

Asia, anywhere.”

“So Krauss and his ex-wife are in this together,” said Ghost. “Why? They’re both rich beyond belief and have their own little side ventures happening. Why coordinate efforts on this one?”

“It’s just a theory,” said Victoria, staring at the men.

“We like theories,” smiled Nine.

“Well, my theory is that she found out what he was doing and wanted in on it. She gave him an opportunity to either partner with her or she’d take all of it over, or turn him in. I don’t think he wanted her as a partner, but she didn’t give him another option.”

“We’ve met a lot of women capable of something like this, but if she had her own money, her own business, why do this?” asked Gaspar.

“Again, my theory, sirs, is that she didn’t want her husband to have any piece of this. Her father owned the trafficking in and out of Russia. She took it over from her base in Canada. When she found the ex was doing the same, but with a twist, she wanted in on that.”

“And Canada suspects nothing?” asked Ian.

“Oh, they absolutely suspect,” said Victoria. “She’s been brought in numerous times under suspicious circumstances. Women found dead that had been reported missing, girls abused and left for dead or addicted to drugs, all whispering her name.”

“Okay. Okay, Victoria. Beautiful job, hun. How do we get to her?” asked Ghost.

“Krauss. She needs him. He’s willing to travel the world, handle the dirty jobs. She needs him. If you have him, you’ll get her.” Nine shook his head.

“Victoria, are we going to lose you to Naval Intelligence as well?” he smirked. Victoria looked at Hayes and smiled.

“If it’s okay with you, sirs, I’d like to just stay here and work. I’m working on my second PhD, but I love what I’m doing here. Can I stay?” Nine looked at Mo, who had a sad expression on his face.

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“Honey, did you think we were going to make you leave at a certain age?” asked Gaspar.

She didn’t say anything at first. Then her lip began to tremble. Victoria was very petite, very small, and it made all of them want to wrap her up in a hug and rock her. Mo beat them to it.

“It’s okay, honey. I told you, you don’t have to go anywhere,” he whispered to his adopted daughter.

“Really?” she sniffed.

“Victoria, sweetie, we told all of you that this is your home now. We meant that. You never have to leave if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to,” she sniffed.

“Victoria, is there a reason you don’t want to?” asked Nine. “Is there something or someone you’re afraid of?”

“I don’t want to leave M-Mom and Dad,” she said, smiling at Mo. “I can call you that now, right?”

“Always,” he said proudly.

“I don’t want to leave them. This is the only stable home, stable environment I’ve ever had. I don’t need to leave to go to school. I’m already done. I can work here with

people I care about and trust.”

“You can do all of that,” said Ian. “No one will make you leave Belle Fleur. But, honey, sooner or later, you’re going to want to see the world, visit exotic places, do things outside of this property. If you want to do that, we can send an entire team with you for your protection.”

“You would do that?” she sniffed, still clinging to Mo.

“We would do that,” said Ghost. “I’d send your dad with you, probably a few others, but you’d be safe no matter where you went. We would make sure of it.”

“Can I think about it for a while?”

“Of course you can. You did great, Victoria,” smiled Gaspar. “Come and see us any time if you’re worried about something or want to talk. Think of us like your grandfathers.” She had a huge smile on her face as she jumped up, hugging each of them and kissing their cheeks.

“Thank you! I’ll see you at home, Dad.” He nodded at her, waving.

“Brother, why didn’t you tell us about that?” asked Nine.

“We’re working it through with Bree,” said Mo. “I’m not sure what it is at the core, but I’m not making that child leave this property if she doesn’t want to.”

“We agree, brother.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“How do we get Krauss and Yulia in the same space and prove what they’re doing?”

asked Nine.

“You’re not going to like this,” said AJ.

“You’re pushing buttons today, son,” said Ace.

“Look, we need someone on that island. I can do the photoshop of Craig and Thurston on the property in Quebec City to draw Krauss up there. That’ll move him there. Then, I think we need to figure out a way onto the island.”

“How do we do that?” asked Ian.

“Technology,” said Ace. He looked at his son, nodding. “We can use the drones to interfere in their electricity, computers, televisions, all of it. There’s only one way off that island, and it’s by boat. You can see the spot on the other side of the river where her large boat docks.”

“Okay, but how do you get on there? You can’t sneak on the boat,” said Ghost.

“No, I’ll be there, at the marina, in a tech truck. Put some junk on the side about what I fix, etcetera. If they’re looking for someone to repair her issues quickly, it’ll be me. I’ll be handy.”

“It can’t just be you, Ace. Bring Hiro with you or Code.”

“Code,” he said flatly. His son stared at him, almost hurt. “I can’t risk your life, AJ. I can’t. Code has been doing this a lot longer than you.”

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“I get it, Dad. It’s fine,” he smirked.

“Once Code and I are coaxed onto the island, we’ll have free reign to plant cameras, listening devices, everything. We’ll fix the issues we created, then hope we get what we need and can get off. Most likely, they will have us travel to and from the island on their boat. When we dock, we’ll disable her boat so that she’s stuck on the island. I’ll figure out a way to get Yulia on the yacht and on the mainland.”

“But what about Krauss?” asked Nine.

“That’s going to be on you. You need to get to him, hold him hostage, and send her photos or a video or something demanding her presence at his mansion. With her boat disabled, she’ll need to get to him on land, and she won’t be able to get off. She’ll be in the house with him, and you guys can handle it.”

Ian, Ghost, Nine, and Gaspar stared at one another, looking at the other seniors in the room.

“You had this plan in your head the whole time?” asked Ian.

“No,” said Ace, shaking his head. “It’s just the way my head works when it’s time to work. I think we have to be very careful with this one. We have no way of knowing if they are partnered with other people.”

“Craig and Thurston said that they were bribing senators, CEOs, and other bigwigs. Do we know who they are? We might be able to use them as well. I mean, we’ve shut down the camera feeds.”

“Yes, but we didn’t shut down the site. It’s still up, repeating videos taken earlier. Every time we’ve tried to get it down, it has a safety on it that reloads it. We’re working on what to do next,” said Code.

“Fry it,” said Hayes.

“Fry it?” frowned Gaspar.

“We burn the system. It will shut down other things using the same network, but it will bring it all down, and I think you’ll be okay with that,” he smiled.

“Explain, Hayes,” said Ghost.

“Yes, sir. The web system that’s running the site isn’t a mainstream system. It’s not one that you would have heard of because it’s something you would only know as part of the black web.” They all nodded for him to continue. “If I shut it down, I’ll be shutting down black market shops, clothing, jewelry, music, everything. I’m going to make a lot of people angry.”

“Sounds exactly like what we do,” smirked Gaspar. “I vote for you to proceed, Hayes.”

“I second,” laughed Nine. “We are going to piss off some people. This is going to be fun.”

“Find us someone who was being bribed by Krauss,” said Ian. “It’s time to attack.”

“I’ve got two potential people that can help us,” said Michael. A former senator and former president of the country, Michael was a long-time friend of the men at Belle Fleur. Although out of politics, he maintained contacts and friends.

“We can use all the help you have,” said Gaspar.

“Ted Driver, head of the SEC,” he frowned.

“Are you shitting me?” growled Nine. “The head of the SEC is being blackmailed? And he didn’t report it?”

“Listen, he was wrong for not reporting it, but he’s willing to do anything to help us. His daughter got married two years ago. A huge affair with twelve bridesmaids. The daughter and all of the attendees were filmed. Then Krauss got ahold of his finances and found his Achilles. A high-priced call girl in D.C. who he visited twice a week for almost seven years.”

“Jesus, when will these guys learn,” groaned Ian.

“He learned just too late. His wife divorced him quietly, but he was still stuck paying Krauss with insider information. He knows that he’ll lose his job, but he’s willing to step forward on this.”

“Alright, and the other person?” asked Gaspar.

“Dr. Joan Morgan. She’s head of research and development at the National Institute of Health. She gives a final thumbs-up on drugs for certain conditions. Dr. Morgan was also filmed in a dressing room but was then blackmailed because of her external relationships with other women. She’s married to a man, and they have no children.”

“Why be afraid of that?” frowned Ghost. “I mean, who gives a fuck. Get a divorce and be you. Why do people do this?”

“I wish I could answer that,” said Michael. “I survived a divorce and still became president. Either way, they’re both willing to talk to you and help if they can.” Nine

nodded at the others, then looked at Michael.

“Set it up, brother. Angel and Jean will speak to them. They’re much nicer than we are.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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“Dr. Morgan, Mr. Driver, thank you for speaking with us,” said Jean.

“When Michael said that your team was trying to stop these people, I felt a sense of relief I hadn’t felt in years. I’m ashamed that I didn’t reach out to someone sooner, but there are extenuating circumstances,” said Dr. Morgan.

“We appreciate your faith in us, ma’am, but I am wondering why you wouldn’t just come out to the world and to your husband. I mean, the world is more than accepting these days,” said Angel.

“It wasn’t about me,” she said, staring into the camera. “My husband has Lou Gehrig’s disease. We married knowing that we weren’t a love match, and he was okay with that. I will not leave him when he’s stood by me all these years. We’ve always lived our own lives but supported one another in our careers. He was a sports agent for many years. I will stand by his side as he’s done with me.”

“My apologies for asking, ma’am. I think that’s admirable on both of your accounts, but it definitely gave Krauss more ammunition.”

“I know that,” she nodded. “That’s why I’m willing to help you now. My husband has only a few days, maybe a few weeks at this point. I won’t subject him to this any longer. He’s not aware of everything any longer. But I’ve never kept anything from him, and I don’t want to do that now.”

The two men nodded, staring at the screen, noticing that Driver was looking down, not up at them.

“Mr. Driver?” said Jean.

“I’m ashamed. I’m sorry, but I don’t know any other thing to say. I’m ashamed of what I did, but I was trying to protect my daughter and all her friends. I ended the relationship with the woman years ago, but it didn’t help. Krauss still had all the ammunition he needed and was threatening to not only expose me but to get to my daughter and her bridesmaids.”

“It might have helped, ending the relationship, I mean. At least you weren’t exposed fully,” said Jean.

“I know. But my marriage ended because of it, because I told my wife the truth, and I’m grateful every day that my wife didn’t say anything publicly. It was all very quiet. She told the world she wanted a different kind of life. I bought her a small farm in Virginia, and that’s where she is. Happy without me.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Angel.

“I have to ask,” said Jean. “Were you giving insider information to Krauss or his ex-wife?” Driver said nothing, swallowing back the tears and humiliation. It told them everything they needed to know.

“They often wanted to know if drugs were being launched or approved, technology upgrades were proven successful, overseas businesses that were going to be allowed to do business in the U.S., that sort of thing. They used the information to buy up stock and pad their bank accounts. Right now, they’re trying to control utilities in the Northeast and Canada.”

“Shit,” muttered Angel. “They’re hoping to hold the country hostage, aren’t they?”

“That would be my guess,” said Driver. “They own a forty-eight percent share. The

rest is owned by multiple stockholders. I wish we could find someone to buy up the other fifty-two percent.”

“Let us worry about that. How do we stop them from getting there?” asked Jean.

“If someone else owns the majority, they won’t be able to control anything. They’ll still own a lot of stock, but they won’t be the majority shareholders. If they get to these individual shareholders, they’re going to use every means necessary to get them to sell their stock.”

“I’ll handle this,” whispered Jean. He stepped outside the room, and Angel heard the first few words. “Pops? We need your help.”

“He’s going to handle that issue,” said Angel. “What else can you tell us about Krauss and Yulia?”

“I’ve never understood them,” said Dr. Morgan. “They despise one another, cuss at one another furiously when they’re on the phone or in a room together, yet they continue to work together because they have to.”

“Why? I mean, both are capable of doing this on their own,” said Angel.

“They are sort of. Krauss has a lot of tech support and certainly doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty. He travels to other countries. He’ll make public appearances when he has to. He even sits down with other criminals when needed.

“Yulia has the manpower support. She’s stuck in the loop of heinousness that her father left for her. But she also seems to enjoy it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he promised the Russian mafia a certain number of women every month. The mafia has promised that number to their clients in Bulgaria, Romania, China, Taiwan, Thailand, you name it, and they’re in that country. She could have refused, but it would have been her death and her father’s reputation.

“There was no way she could do it without Krauss’s help. She has the muscle, and in some ways, so does he, but she doesn’t have the technical abilities or the social skills.”

“I don’t understand. Why would she need social abilities?”

“I’m sorry, I thought you knew. Yulia is a recluse with severe social anxiety and tendencies toward paranoia. Most people never knew that Krauss was ever married because she refused to come out in public. The one time he forced her, it was a disaster. It’s why she lives on that island in the middle of the river. It’s freezing cold in the winter, temperatures plummeting well below zero. In the summer, you’re eaten alive by black flies and mosquitoes. She doesn’t care. She has a hoard of big bodyguards around her, and they keep her safe.”

“What about security?” asked Angel as Jean walked back in, nodding.

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“There is a security system that Krauss installed for her, including sensors on the island, cameras, everything. Once in a while, she’ll get on her yacht and go back and forth to the mainland. But for the most part, her men do all the shopping, errands, that sort of thing.”

“What about all the women that have been found dead that call out her name?” asked Jean.

“I’ve asked someone at the bureau about that. Yulia conveniently has a home for wayward young girls. She’s been able to convince the authorities that they’re calling her name out because that’s where they were headed.”

“I can’t believe this bullshit,” snarled Jean. “I think we’re going to be able to make them both raise their heads. We’re going to shut down their network system.”

“No one has ever been able to do that before,” said Dr. Morgan.

“We know, but our team is better than theirs. I guarantee it. The other reason they’re going to raise their heads is that we just bought fifty-two percent of the shares controlling Canadian Energy. They won’t get near any decision-making.”

“Do you understand that they will come for you?” said Driver.

“They’ll have to find us to come for us. Once we have their network system down, I’m going to ask that you call them and announce to them that you will no longer be a part of their scheme. Make them angry,” said Angel.

“I-I’m not sure if I can do that now,” stammered Dr. Morgan.

“You can because we’re going to protect you and your husband,” said Jean. He heard the echo of a knock on her office door, and the doctor turned, staring at the two men. “You’re related to him?”

She pointed to the screen, and Jean laughed, wiggling his fingers in a friendly wave at his baby brothers.

“Antoine and Luc are my brothers,” said Jean. “They’ll be with you until this matter is settled. Do everything they ask, and you’ll be safe.”

“And me?” asked Driver. He no sooner spoke the words when Rafe and Baptiste entered his office.

“Hey, asshole,” smirked Baptiste. “Oh, sorry, sir. We’re his brothers.”

“Yes, I can see that,” he smirked. “You all look identical.”

“Great genetics,” said Angel. “Them. Not me.”

“Alright. We have a plan. My brothers will keep you both safe. Once we know the network is down, you call Krauss and tell him its done. My brothers will ensure that you’re safe. What about your daughter, Mr. Driver?”

“She lives in London with her husband now. He’s a professor at a local university there.”

“Good. That’s very good. With the network down, they won’t be able to track anyone. Hold on,” smirked Angel. “We’re about to have some fun.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Alright, is everyone ready?” asked Hayes, looking from Ace to AJ to the rest of the tech team and seniors.

“Ready. Fry it,” said Gaspar.

Hayes nodded as they watched the disgusting displays on the screen, then suddenly, everything was being deleted, pixel by pixel. He entered code after code after code until, finally, the screens were black.

Except for one image with a message:

Mr. Krauss and Ms. Federovavich apologize for the interruption in service. Your local authorities will reach out to you soon.

The entire room exploded in laughter. Ghost slapped Hayes on the back, shaking his head.

“Son, you’ve just pissed off two of the most dangerous people in the world. I’m so fucking proud of you,” he grinned.

“No chance of them getting it back up?” asked Nine.

“Not this network. They could create another, but it would take a while and the videos that they were sending out on a loop are gone. I did find what they were doing that was making my early attempts unsuccessful,” said Hayes.

“But you didn’t override it?” asked Gaspar.

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“Oh, I could have. This was just way more fun, sir.” Hayes gave a big smile, and they all laughed at him.

“Way to go, Hayes,” smiled Nine. “Angel? Jean? Call our VIPs and tell them to make their call now.”

Each man made a call, and within moments, they heard back from their brothers. Krauss was pissed beyond belief and, of course, threatened death and exposure. Neither of them cared any longer. They just wanted it all to end.

“Ace? Code? Time to gear up. Do you have a van lined up?” asked Ian.

“We have a van, and we got some magnetic signage we’ll put on it.” He held up the big signs that would go on the sides of the van.

“TechTitans,” read Ghost. “Cocky, aren’t we?”

“Well, they won’t want to hire TechToddlers,” frowned Ace. Ghost laughed, shaking his head at the man he still considered to be like a son to him.

“You two be careful,” said Nine. “The photo of Craig and Thurston at Krauss’s mansion has been sent along with a message that will surely piss him off. We’ve sent Alec, Tailor, Max, and Dex on ahead. The four of us will be joining them, along with a few backups. We have some questions we’d like to ask Krauss before we send Yulia over the edge.”

“Hayes, are we able to send out messages to the victims that their videos have been

removed and the system is down?” asked Vince.

“Yes, sir. I just sent a mass communication to everyone who was in the database that Krauss used to blackmail them. They’ve been notified that they no longer have to make any payments or deposits, and the authorities have been notified.”

“Alright,” said Nine. “Let’s go to Canada.”

“What just happened?” screamed Krauss. “Why are all of my fucking screens black?”

“We’re not sure, sir. The network is down, completely blown. I think someone got to it and disabled it,” said the man, looking frightened.

“Disabled it? So, we’ve lost everything?” frowned Krauss.

“Y-yes.”

He didn’t hesitate to shoot the man, then turned to the other nerd he employed.

“Fix it.”

“Mr. Krauss, it can’t be fixed. We’ll have to build an entirely new network, and that’s going to take some time. But, sir, we’ve lost all of the videos. All of them.” He shot him as well and then turned to the others.

“Do it.”

“I-I...” started the girl, staring at him.

“Do it, or you’ll end up the star of the show for the next video loop.” She started to cry, and Krauss slapped her. “Keep crying and watch what I do to you. Fix it.”

“Sir? We have another issue,” said one of his guards.

“Where are those two fucking idiots? They were supposed to be here hours ago,” he said with a sour expression.

“That’s just it, sir, they’re not here. They’re at your mansion property in Quebec City.” He held up the phone showing Krauss the photos, and the man nearly had a stroke. His face turned a strange shade of purple and red, his entire body ready to explode.

“Tell the guards to kill them!”

“Well, sir. The guards can’t seem to find them. They’ve searched the grounds and can’t find where they came in or left.” There was a pinging on the phone, indicating a text message, and Krauss snatched the phone out of the guard’s hand.

Meet us here. We’re not coming to Florida.

You little pricks! Get your asses here.

Come and get us

“Get the jet ready,” said Krauss.

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“Yes, sir. We only have about eight men that can go with you. With the four there, that’s a dozen, and it should be enough if anything should go wrong.”

“Listen to me. I pay you to ensure that nothing goes wrong. Grab a bag for me just in case, but I want out of that shithole by tomorrow morning. And for fuck’s sake, don’t tell my ex-wife I’m there. I have no desire to see her.” He stormed off toward his suite, and the guard just stood, staring at his back.

“Ed, I don’t have a good feeling about this,” said another guard.

“Me neither, but we have to go. And whatever happens, keep that psycho bitch away from him. And us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Where are the new batch of girls?” asked Yulia. Her voice was always so soft, so quiet, many had a hard time hearing her. Except when she totally lost her cool. Then, she was completely unreasonable, uncontrollable, and irrational.

“They’re in the house across the pasture,” said the guard. “We’ve got five men on them, but there’s no need for more right now. They’re all young and scared, less than fifteen.”

“Any younger than ten?” she asked casually.

“Two. Nine and ten. We’ve given the men orders not to mark them. They’re spoken for. They know what will happen if they touch them.”

“Good. Be certain that they don’t fuck up. Where is my ex-husband?” she asked. She didn’t really care where he was, but she liked to keep tabs on him so that she could be certain he wasn’t screwing her over once again.

“Still in Florida at the mansion there,” said the man.

“Alright. Good.”

“Ma’am, if you don’t mind me saying so. You could do all of this without him. Our team could make sure we pick up the slack on everything he currently handles for you.”

“I appreciate that, but Krauss and I have an agreement. For the time being, I have to abide by it. I don’t know the technical aspects, and he doesn’t understand the connections I have with Russia.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Richard?” He turned to stare at the woman. “Thank you.”

He was so shocked he wasn’t sure how to respond, just nodding at her as he left the room. He made his rounds with all of the men on the property, driving the thirteen square miles of the island.

Several small hotels were on the island but knew to never allow their guests to come near the private property at their end. As he reached the gates of the compound, he pressed the button to allow him in, but nothing was working. Looking up at the mansion ahead, he noticed there were no lights.

“What’s going on? Why aren’t the gates working?” he asked through his walkie-talkie.

“We’re not sure. The tech guys said something interfered with all of it. The computers, phones, alarm system, everything is down. Even our cell phones. The walkies are working because they’re battery operated.”

“Start the generators,” said the man.

“The generators were destroyed in the last storm of the winter. We needed to buy more, but she didn’t want anyone to leave the island.”

“Fuck!” he snapped. “I’ll be right there.”

By the time he got back to the massive mansion, Yulia was in utter panic. She was pacing the floors with two flashlights in her hands, stopping every few moments at the windows to stare outside.

“Yulia, it’s just a power outage,” said Richard.

“No. No, it’s more than that. I can feel it,” she said. “My father’s enemies are here. It’s them, or Krauss has finally decided to kill me!”

“Yulia, remain calm. Please. One of our tech people can fix it.”

“He said he can’t. The little one. Simon. He said he can’t. The other one isn’t here today.”

“Okay. Just remain calm. I’m going to go to the mainland and find someone that can fix all of this.”

“No! No, you can’t leave me!” she said in a panic.

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“Alright. I won’t leave you,” said Richard. “I’ll send two of the other men. I’ll be with you, and everything will be alright.”

She nodded her head, pacing back and forth with her trusty flashlights. Richard called two men on the walkie and ordered them to take the boat to the mainland and find someone good.

Immediately.

Code watched the screens as the drones flew above the island and its mansion on the southern end. He had the exact count of men and a sense of how large the mansion was. But when he checked the heat signatures, he saw no women in the home other than one.

“Across the field,” said Ace. “There. That’s a farmhouse or something.”

Code nodded, steering the drone toward the other building. As he scanned for live bodies, he looked up at Ace.

“A dozen, maybe more. Young females, at least two are just children.”

“How many men?” asked Ace.

“Four. No, five.”

“Trak? You read?” said Ace.

“Yep.”

“We’ve got at least a dozen young girls in a farmhouse across from the mansion. Five men inside. Once we get on the island, they’re going to be watching us. Get the girls out before they even know they’re gone.”

“I know.”

“I know. I know, he says,” smirked Ace. “Alright, Code. Let’s unplug them.”

“In five, four, three, two, and one,” he said, looking across the river as the entire compound went dark. “Now what?”

“Now, we wait until they come and pick us up. We’ll be standing right here waiting for our yacht ride,” said Ace, standing outside the van. “After all, what do two geeks know about changing a flat tire.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Alec, Tailor, Max, and Dex went around the back of Krauss’s mansion, double-checking the number of guards that were present. As predicted, there were only five guards on duty. With each man taking one, Alec and Tailor played rock-paper-scissors for the fifth one.

“Children, can we hurry this along,” growled Max.

“He won,” frowned Tailor. Dex only shook his head.

“This is why I prefer working with the animals. Let’s go. The dim light is on our side.”

The men at Krauss's mansion were definitely not the cream of the crop. They'd barely been able to utter a word before they were subdued, gagged, tied, and thrown in the cellar. While Ian, Ghost, Nine, and Gaspar waited inside for Krauss to arrive, the others stayed hidden on the mansion grounds.

As darkness fell, Krauss's private car pulled up with a second behind him. Krauss plus eight men. This should be easy. Stepping through the front door, he turned for just a moment to the other men.

"You stay with me. The rest of you, see if those idiots are still on the property and kill them. I want to leave here as soon as possible." He slammed the door and began walking toward his office. "Are you coming?"

Before he could turn, he heard the cocking of the weapon. Slowly, he turned around, seeing his guard with a pistol at his head, and a man holding his fingers to his lips.

"Not a word, or you'll both be dead," said Ghost.

"Do you have any idea who you're fucking with? Do you know what kind of pain I'm going to put you through?" sneered Krauss.

"Oh, we get it," said Ian, coming up behind him. "You're Wallen Krauss. Criminal extraordinaire. Or at least you think so."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Us?" smirked Gaspar. "We're just the old men that brought down your website, fried your videos, stopped your little game with the dress shops and the tracking of the women, of course."

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“Don’t forget he’s a hostage,” said Nine.

“Oh right, sorry. You’re our hostage now.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are? I’ve got seven men out there...” The door burst open, and the bodies were tossed on the floor. Alec and Tailor each carried two. The four heads cracked against the marble floors. Max and Dex each carried one, dragging the seventh behind them by his ankles.

“We’ll just tie these boys up and put them in the cellar,” said Alec.

Krauss looked ready to explode, glaring at the men with an incensed expression. Seven of his best men taken down like ragdolls, the eighth one being taped to a chair.

“What do you want?” he asked calmly.

“Simple. We want you and your ex-wife in the same room. See, we don’t like what you do for a living,” said Gaspar. “And although it might sound silly to you, you hurt a young woman we know. Now, in the end, it was okay because she was married to a fucking asshole.”

“Do I know this woman?”

“Probably not,” said Gaspar, “but you know her pathetic piece of shit ex-husband. Craig Graylon.”

“Yes. I agree with the piece of shit piece. Where is he? They were to meet me here.

Did you kill them as well?" asked Krauss.

"No. Thurston, old boy, took care of that for us. He jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. Craig is awaiting sentencing for murder." Krauss was mulling that over in his head, trying to figure out how he got text messages just a few hours ago from the men.

"I see your wheels spinning," said Ghost. "Don't hurt yourself. We sent the messages." Krauss raised his brows with an expression of being impressed.

"Yeah. We're that good," said Ian.

"I'll ask again. What do you want?" Krauss ground out between clenched teeth.

"Well, beyond you dead, we want your ex-wife dead as well. That's the only way to stop a cancer like this. The only thing we can do," said Nine.

"Kill her. I don't give a fuck. It would save me some misery."

"True," smirked Nine. "But you're going to die with her."

"I deserve to know who you are," he said, trying to stand from his chair. He felt the grip of a massive paw and winced beneath the pressure.

"You don't deserve to know shit," said Gaspar. He pulled out a camera and panned the room, then narrowed in on Krauss's face. "Say hello to your ex-wife."

He said nothing, just staring at the man. When Alec smacked the back of his head, he went flying onto the floor.

"Don't kill him yet! We need the wife here," said Nine.

“Sorry, but that was fun. I’m all worked up now. Can we go hurt some more people? It’s been a while.”

“Not right now. If you’re good, we’ll kill all of the wife’s guards. Maybe blow the island.”

“Naw, Miller’s on the island with Trak. He’ll blow it. You know he will,” frowned Alec.

“You’re mad. You’re all raving mad. Do you really think my business associates are just going to look the other way? Do you really think they’ll just let my murder be overlooked?” said Krauss.

“Yes,” came the chorus of voices, laughing.

“You think awfully high of yourself, Krauss. Your business associates, as you call them, we call them pieces of shit, but whatever. Your business friends won’t give a fuck that you’re gone. Yulia’s Russian friends will finally get all of her father’s business, and you’ll be out of the way.”

“The human trafficking is her idea,” he said, throwing her under the bus without a care in the world.

“Maybe, but your idea of owning all the Canadian Energy stock was all you.” Krauss said nothing, but they noticed him nibbling on his lower lip. Gaspar just smiled. “Yeah. We know about that. Unfortunately for you, you’re too late. We own fifty-two percent of the energy stock. Not you. We hold the majority. You never will.”

“Give me the stock, and I’ll give you Yulia.”

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“You don’t get it. We’ll keep the stock, and Yulia will come here. You have what she needs. She might be a paranoid, psychotic bitch, but for whatever reason, she likes keeping you close,” said Ian. “Let’s see how close.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Code and Ace stood by the van, the flat tire perplexing their geeky brains. Or so they portrayed it. They could see the big yacht beginning to move from its dock on the island toward the small private marina where they were parked.

As it got closer, a man stood on the deck, staring at them suspiciously.

“Team Charlie? Are you on the island?” asked Ace calmly into comms.

“If you’d give us five fucking minutes, we will be,” said Miller. “You forgot to tell us how damn cold the water is.”

“Oops,” smirked Code.

He walked around to the back of the van, casually digging out the spare tire and jack. When the yacht docked, the man who had been standing on the deck came directly toward them.

“You look like you need help,” he said calmly. Porter was second in command to Richard, although often felt removed from the operations. Richard was her favorite, and he was beside her twenty-four-seven.

“Just a flat,” said Ace. “We’ll be fine. Thank you.” Porter looked at the van, staring at the gear inside.

“Can you fix complicated computer systems that run lights, security, computers, everything?”

“That’s what we do,” grinned Code.

“Come with me.”

“Listen, we’d love to,” said Code with a boyish grin, “but as you can see, we’ve got to fix this flat, then we have another call that we’re already late for.”

“Ten thousand if you come with me.”

“Dollars?” said Ace with a stunned expression.

“Yes. Dollars,” said Porter. “I’ll take you out to the island and bring you back. It’s that easy. You just handle all of the issues, and you’re free to go.”

“No tricks?” asked Ace suspiciously.

“No tricks. You will stay where we can see you, get things fixed, and then leave. It’s that simple. I don’t have a lot of time here. The woman who owns that mansion is not well and needs you to do this quickly.”

“I see,” nodded Code. “Poor lady. Yeah, we can do that, right, Ace?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Let’s go,” said Porter, pointing to the yacht.

The two men gathered several tools, none of which they would need. They needed to make this look as legit as possible. Filling a backpack for each of them, they then gathered a duffel bag with items in it.

“What’s in that?” asked Porter as they boarded.

“Meters to check your voltage output, feed security, that type of thing. If we’re there, we might as well make sure everything is perfect for you. I can’t imagine that place is easy to get to in the winter,” said Code.

“We don’t leave in the winter.” Porter frowned, staring at the darkened mansion.

“That must be pretty damn cold,” said Ace.

“Just fix what needs to be fixed, and we’ll bring you back,” said Porter.

“And if we can’t?” asked Code.

“You better know how to swim.”

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“Cool,” nodded Code.

He stared at Ace, his expression blank and dark. Ace wasn't a guy you often feared, but when he was in the zone, he was a man that you didn't want to piss off. Something was brewing in him, something that was going to come out.

The St. Lawrence River stretched more than nineteen hundred miles, connecting the Great Lakes to the North Atlantic. Her waters flowed in a northeasterly direction from Lake Ontario to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, through Ontario and Quebec in Canada, with a section of the river marking the border between Canada and the U.S.

With more than 1,864 river islands in the Thousand Islands area, it would be easy to get lost even in a river such as this. Right now, Code and Ace just wanted to be sure they could get off the damn thing if necessary and survive.

When the boat docked, they were led onto the massive dock space, and their bags were searched once again. There were hidden weapons beneath the bottoms of the backpacks and duffel bags, all wrapped in stealth netting.

“Hey, that stuff is expensive,” said Code.

“We'll replace it if it's broken,” said the new man. “I'm Richard. Come with me.”

Ace looked at Code, his eye twitching to the left just a hint. Code nodded, seeing the woman in the window staring down at them. The massive property had guards everywhere. The two men said nothing, just mentally counting the number of bodyguards they could see.

Inside the mansion, they realized just how dark it was without power.

“Don’t you have a generator?” asked Ace.

“We did. We have several, and they were all fried during the last blizzard last winter. We have a tech team. Sort of. They aren’t very good, obviously. They were supposed to get new generators before the winter, but that hasn’t happened yet.”

“Obviously,” said Ace.

“Look. Just fix whatever the fuck is wrong here,” growled the man. Ace looked up at him, not intimidated, nodding.

“Where are your servers?” he asked calmly.

“There’s a server room in the basement,” he said, pointing to the door.

“Not telling you your business, but you’ll need to move that out of the basement. It’s too damp down there,” said Code. “In old houses like these and being so close to the river, water is going to always be a problem, as well as possible rats or mice.”

“Fine. We’ll move it later,” he said. Code just shrugged, heading downstairs.

“I’ll handle the server issues. Show my partner where the security systems are located and the cell receptors.”

“Cell receptors?” he frowned.

“Yeah, the things that allow you cell reception on the island,” he said, lying through his teeth. “I mean, there are land cell towers, but out here, you should have mini cell towers of your own.”

“Yeah, we don’t have that. Can you install it?” asked Richard.

“Sure. It will just be temporary until you can get a permanent one, but it might help your reception.”

“Great. Do it.”

Two separate guards led Ace in one direction and Code in the other. As they followed the other men, they used this opportunity to plant devices. Since none of the cameras were working in the mansion, they were free to do whatever they wanted.

With Code in the basement, he immediately went to what he knew was the issue with the lights since it was of his own making. He tapped a few keys on his keyboard, pretending to connect it to their system, and then brought up the lights.

“And let there be light,” he grinned. The guard smiled at him.

“Thank fuck. The boss was about to lose her shit. She doesn’t like the darkness. Just get the cameras and security pieces working, and we’ll be okay.”

“Well, my buddy is working on the phones and computers, so he’ll fix that, and you’ll be all set.” Code stared at the system, then back at the man. “Hey, your boss upstairs asked me to make a few improvements. While I get started, do you have a water or soda I could have?”

“Sure, man. You deserve a bottle of champagne just for getting the lights back on.”

The guard disappeared, and Code quickly went to work on the system, ensuring that the lights would go out once again, hopefully stranding everyone out on the island except Yulia and her closest guards. Speaking into his comms, he messaged the others.

“Get busy. Clock is ticking.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“You want me to what?” frowned Krauss.

“You’re going to beg sweet Yulia to come to your mansion,” smirked Ghost. “You’ll tell her that you’re furious about something, desperately need to meet with her and figure some things out. Simple.”

“She won’t come. She’s paranoid and won’t leave that damn island.”

“She will if she thinks she’s going to lose you and your support,” said Ghost. They watched Krauss squirm, and they knew that he was feeling the heat. Tailor slapped the back of his head.

“Do it, boy. Or I’ll have to use computer generated technology.” Krauss stared at him as if in awe. “What’s the matter? Didn’t think an old country boy like me knew about AI?”

“What do you want me to say?”

Ian sat across from the man with his tablet on a mounted stand. On a separate stand was the message they wanted him to send her. It took several tries before he got going, but once he did and they were satisfied with his performance, they saved the video and waited.

“What now?” he asked the men.

“We wait,” said Nine. “We’re patient men, Krauss. We’re not in a rush. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

“Even if she comes, even if you turn us over to the authorities, we’ll get out. We always do.”

“You won’t this time,” said Ian. “We won’t be calling the authorities when we’re done. We’ll be ensuring that you and your crazy as fuck ex-wife don’t ever get near another human being again.”

“Someone will be there to take our place,” he said, suddenly feeling cocky. He smirked at the men, crossing his legs casually. “There is always someone willing to take our place. Do you know how many business associates we have around the world? Men and women ready to buy whatever we have to sell?”

“We’re well aware,” said Max casually. “That’s why we exist.” Krauss frowned at the men as if contemplating the statement.

“You know, as sick as you are, I get that there’s always someone twisted enough to sell children, sell flesh, but why the sudden interest in stocks?” asked Dex.

“Money. Power. Control,” said Krauss. “If we own the majority of the shares for power companies, telecommunications, artificial intelligence, we will own the world. We can send out the messages that we want, we can track the public’s phone calls, internet searches, all of it.”

“You plan to hold the entire world hostage,” said Ian.

“It’s a lofty goal,” he smirked. “Even I admit that. Trafficking here in North America

is less than in previous years. People like you have made it more difficult for us. But I don't worry about that. Are you aware of the poverty levels in third-world countries? The thousands and thousands of children born every year to parents who cannot afford them.

"They have no access to birth control. No access to fancy adoption agencies. So, they put their children in orphanages, or better, for me anyway, they place them on the streets and walk away from it all. Tragic, truly, but not everyone has the luxury of wealth."

"Yet you do, and this is what you choose to do with it," said Gaspar. "I'm curious why you and Broomzilla didn't have children."

"Don't speak of her that way. She can't help the way she is."

"Do I detect the voice of a man who still loves his wife?" grinned Nine.

"She couldn't help the way she was. Her father made her that way. Torturing her every night, making her fearful of every sound she heard, every person. He did this to her. Bastard deserved to die in that prison. Didn't matter how many times we sent someone to kill him, he survived."

"The worst always seem to," said Ian. "But you didn't answer my friend's question. Why didn't the two of you have children?"

"We did. It wasn't meant to be."

"Little man, if you tell me you sold your own child, I'm gonna rip your limbs from your body," said Tailor.

"No. We didn't sell our own child."

He said nothing else, just staring at the men. Nine nodded to Ghost, grabbing the small device that Victoria had instructed them to place behind his ear. She said that it would ensure they could track him if he ran.

“Any word from Code and Ace?” asked Ian. Dex shook his head. “Sounds like they’re getting close. Once they’re ready, we’ll send the video and hopefully, his lovely bride will come calling.”

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“How many did you get planted?” asked Code.

“All of them. Even if this doesn’t work, we’ll have full view of what’s happening here.” The two men walked down the big staircase, acting as if they were checking connections and circuits. When they were met by Richard at the bottom of the steps, they stopped.

“Are you done?” he snapped.

“Yeah. Everything should be up and working fine now,” said Code.

The bodyguard looked down at his phone, realizing that there were a number of messages rolling in. None that were critical, but at least it was working. The power was fully restored, and all of the computers were working as well.

Code stepped to the front of the house, tapping on the keypad that controlled everything.

“Heat and air are working. Security gate is functioning, as well as the security cameras at the gate. Feeds in the house are working. Everything should be good.”

“Let’s go,” he said, pointing toward the back of the property. “Time to leave.”

“Richard! Richard!” came the scream of the woman. The man rolled his eyes, biting his lip.

“Don’t fucking move.”

Grateful that the lights were back on, Yulia kept checking her phone and e-mail to see if there were any messages. As other things started to come back online, she heard the beeps and hums of the familiar machines in the house. Then she received a message she didn't expect.

"What now?" she said sharply. She opened the e-mail and gasped.

"Yulia, I need you to come to the mansion as soon as possible. I've had an issue with our two friends from Louisiana. I need you here to help me with this. I know it's a lot to ask, but just bring Richard with you. We can figure this out together."

"Richard! Richard!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Code and Ace took a seat on the back veranda, staring at the big yacht. With any luck, the video is what caused the woman to panic, and she would be joining them on the boat.

Through comms, they could hear the team led by Miller and Trak coming onto the island at the south end. They heard commotion behind them and stood.

"Get your shit to the boat," said Richard.

"Is something wrong? Is something not working?" asked Ace.

"It's working. We have to go, and the lady of the house will be with us, but she doesn't like strangers."

"Oh. I get that," said Ace. The two men walked toward the yacht, boarding first as they were directed to the outdoor decks on the back of the boat.

“Stay here and don’t move.”

“Where are we gonna go?” laughed Code. “Does the dude think we’re gonna swim all the way to the shore?”

Ace nodded at him, tapping the icon on his phone as they listened in on Richard speaking to Yulia.

“Come on, Yulia. I’ll be with you the whole time. Jimmy and Ivan are coming with us. That’s three of us to watch over you. I promise everything will be fine.”

“I don’t like leaving the island.”

“I know. But obviously, he needs you to be there. It will be fine.”

They watched as Richard held her arm as if she were a woman of eighty instead of fifty. She looked pale and, in some ways, frail. As she boarded the yacht, she only glanced their way but said nothing as he helped her below deck. When the yacht left the dock, Ace looked at Code.

As soon as the boat was away from the docks, they disrupted the signals on the island once again, ensuring the other team had access to the home in the field. With any luck, no one would notice until they were gone.

The river seemed blacker than the night sky as they pulled up to the marina. With another flip of a switch, the engines were suddenly shut down, smoke billowing from the engine room.

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“Get her off!” yelled Richard to Ivan.

He carried the woman off the boat and down the dock toward the waiting car. As Ace and Code stepped onto the dock, the man handed them an envelope with ten grand inside.

“Do you need any help with the boat?” asked Ace innocently.

“No. The captain’s got this. Thanks for your help on the island.”

They both nodded, watching as the limousine pulled away with the neurotic woman and her three bodyguards. Ace looked at Code and tapped his comms device.

“You’re clear.”

“About fucking time,” growled Miller.

“You’re welcome, captain grouchy,” smirked Code.

“Shut up. I’m too old for this shit.”

Miller, Trak, Angel, Gibbie, Rory, Trevor, Whiskey, and Zulu crept onto the island donned in their dive gear. They were black from head to toe. Faces painted, hands covered, and the itch in their fingers ready to kill.

Although Yulia employed nearly forty men on the island, it seemed that they were either lazy or complacent. Or both. They were lounging around outside, enjoying a

fire by the farmhouse. In the distance, you could see the mansion and others just standing out front, smoking and talking.

“Maybe when the cat’s away, the mice play,” said Whiskey.

“Maybe,” nodded Trak. “Rory, Zulu, and Miller with me. The rest of you, get into that house and get those kids. Get them off the island. Don’t worry about us.”

“How will you get off?” asked Gibbie.

“There’s a small fishing boat docked down on the beach at a little hotel. We’ll get to that and work our way around the island.”

“You’re the boss,” smirked Trevor.

“Just get the kids,” said Trak.

Working their way inward from the perimeter, the four men took the guards down two at a time. Whether they were trained or not, they were loaded with weapons, and had they been faster, they could have easily killed the four men.

But they weren’t faster. Not even close. With the silence of Trak and Zulu, the skill and power of Rory and Miller, they didn’t have a chance. Not a chance in hell. When Trak killed the first man, the others realized his intent. There would be no one left to sound an alarm.

Angel, Gibbie, Trevor, and Whiskey got closer and closer to the house as the guards were easily brought down. Trevor held up the heat scanner and moved it slowly over the house. Holding up two fingers, he indicated that there were two guards inside the home.

With a quick nod, Whiskey and Angel breached the front door. Whiskey whipped the knife across the room, catching the man in the throat.

“Eddie? Is that you?” called the second man from the back room. “Brother, I got this sweet little one ready for us.”

Angel practically blew smoke from his ears, Gibbie and Trevor right behind him. In the small bedroom off the hallway, a young girl of about fifteen was lying on a dirty bed. Her nightgown hiked up around her thighs.

“Fucker, you’re gonna die,” said Trevor, pointing his weapon at the man.

He tried to reach for his own weapon, and Gibbie put a bullet through his hand. When he tried to reach for the walkie-talkie, Angel put a bullet in his other hand.

“You’re gonna fucking die!” he snapped at the three men.

“Get the girl out of here,” said Trevor. “I have something to do.”

Angel carried the girl out of the room while Gibbie helped get to the other children, leading kids down from the second floor. Some were crying. Some were so spaced out on drugs they couldn’t comprehend what was happening.

“There are probably ten more up there, Gibbie.” When Zulu, Trak, Rory, and Miller came in the back door, what they saw before them made them see red.

“Where are the men that did this?” asked Trak.

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“Dead,” said Trevor, wiping his hands as he came into the hallway.

“Get all the kids from upstairs. Some need to be carried,” said Angel.

He looked at his old friend, Trak, and saw the anger in his eyes. It had been a while since they’d been on a mission like this, and the warrior was prepared to kill everyone.

“I know what you’re thinking, brother,” said Miller. “Let’s get the kids to safety, and we’ll take care of the guards at the mansion.”

Trak hesitated for just a moment, then saw the next group of kids coming down the stairs. Two young girls seemed more alert than the others, holding the little ones’ hands.

“Are you going to hurt us?” asked the girl. Trak tried his best to soften his face, but it had been in a picture of anger for so long it wasn’t working. She repeated her question. “Are you going to hurt us?”

“No, little one. We will not be hurting any of you. We are going to get you to safety,” he said calmly, releasing his pent-up breath.

“Let’s go,” said Rory. “We have some people we need to say hello to.”

The eight men led the twenty-one children down the beach, hidden in the darkness. Rory had one on his back and two in his arms, the others following with one on their backs and one in their arms. Any who could walk held their hands and followed.

When they reached the small fishing boat, they looked at one another.

“It’s gonna be a tight fit, Trak,” said Trevor.

“You’re a SEAL. Figure it out. Rory, Miller, and Zulu are going with me.”

“You’re not leaving me out,” said Whiskey. “The others can handle the kids, and it will leave more room. Get them to the mainland and to a hospital.”

“Alright,” nodded Angel. “The gear is still stowed. You can gear up again and take the underwater propulsion devices across the river. Go get ‘em.”

Trak took off in a jog back down the beach, Zulu, Rory, Miller, and Whiskey following. One by one, the men handed the children to a man in the boat.

“I wanna go home,” said a little girl in Trevor’s arms.

“I know, sweet girl. Me too. We’re taking you home, I promise you. No one is ever going to touch you again.”

“Promise,” she asked, looking at him wide-eyed.

“Cross my heart.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

“What do you think is happening?” she asked Richard, gripping his arm.

“Yulia, I don’t know,” he said, trying to calm her.

Fifteen years of this. Fifteen years of working for this woman, hoping to keep her

alive. Although Krauss wanted nothing to do with her, he didn't want her dead, and his biggest fear was that someone from Russia would come for her. Yulia had something he needed. Richard just didn't know what it was.

"Those two men. The ones from New Orleans. We should have killed them a long time ago. They were both despicable men." Richard could only nod, trying not to point out the obvious that she and her ex-husband were far more despicable.

"It will all be fine. Krauss is just being cautious," he said.

"Do you think he knows?" Richard stared at her. He wasn't sure what she meant, but maybe if he played along, she would tell him.

"Maybe. What should we tell him?"

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head nervously. "Nothing."

Her neurotic behavior had only gotten worse in the last ten years. Never leaving the mansion unless forced to, not speaking to anyone except her main guards, Krauss, and once in a great while someone in Russia. A distant cousin that kept her up on what was happening there and any danger headed her way.

But it was the paranoia that made Richard's life hell. Screams in the middle of the night. Calls to his room, saying that someone was in her suite. Refusing to eat because she believed the new chef had poisoned her.

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Yet somehow, she never showed that side of her in front of Krauss or anyone else during business discussions.

Pulling up the long circular drive of the mansion in the city, Richard looked around, seeing a few dark figures watching them. Krauss's guards weren't always the most observant, but he dealt with them swiftly and violently.

"His bodyguards are pathetic," said Yulia.

"I'm sure they know that it's us," said Richard. When the car stopped, he opened the door and took her hand. "You two stay with the car. We'll be out as quickly as we can."

It would be the last time he saw the bodyguards.

Opening the door to the home, he spotted Krauss in the chair and waved Yulia inside. As he moved closer to the man, he spotted other men that he didn't recognize and tried to back up. Except he couldn't. He was blocked by two mountains staring down at him.

"I don't think so, sweet knees," smirked Tailor. Alec took the man aside, binding his hands and mouth as Yulia glared at Krauss, shooting daggers his way.

"It's a trap! You brought me here to trap me!"

"Shut up, Yulia. They brought you here to trap you. Them! Just shut up and do whatever they ask."

“Oh, we’re not really going to ask you to do anything,” smiled Ian. “We just want answers to some questions.”

“Fuck you,” she said, spitting on Ghost’s boots.

“Lady, don’t tempt me. I won’t mind hitting you full-on in the mouth. Right now, the rest of our men are getting those kids out of the farmhouse on your little safe island.” Her eyes went wide, and Krauss shook his head.

“No. My guards will stop them!”

“Your guards are dead,” said Alec, towering over the tiny woman. “We made sure of it. And from what I hear, the way some of them kids looked, you’re going to have a friend of mine to deal with, and it won’t be pretty.”

Alec shoved the woman into the chair beside Krauss, not worrying about being delicate at all. He pressed the device that Victoria had given them behind her ear, matching her ex-husband’s. This was a woman he wanted dead, and he couldn’t even explain why other than the obvious.

“Where else are your operations?” asked Nine.

“There are no others,” she said with confidence. She let out a scream, and even Krauss jumped beside her. The men stared at her, wondering what the fuck was truly wrong with her.

“What did you do?” growled Krauss.

“We didn’t do anything. Answer the question. Where else are you running from?” asked Ian.

“Nowhere,” said Victoria. The sharp pain came again, causing her to scream in agony.

“Stop!” yelled Krauss. “You’re hurting her.”

“Buddy, I don’t know what you’re looking at, but we’re on the other side of the room. She’s about as goofy as they come,” said Gaspar.

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up! She’s fine,” said Krauss.

“Anyone else feeling lost?” frowned Tailor.

“Very much so,” said Nine. “What the fuck is happening here? Victoria? Honey, can you hear me?”

“I hear you. She’s lying.”

“Yeah, honey, we know,” said Nine. “What is that thing behind their ears?”

“She’s lying.”

“Who is that? Who is that speaking?” asked a panicked, Yulia hearing the voice in her ears.

“What the hell are you doing to us?” asked Krauss. “Who is that speaking?”

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“You’re both liars. Tell them. Tell them what you really are. Tell them who you really are.”

The team was absolutely perplexed by the entire conversation. It was as if Victoria was losing her mind as well.

Then Nine stared at Yulia. Really stared. Short, petite, brown hair laced with a colored dye of blonde. She had interesting features, almost elfish. But it was her size that suddenly had him knowing.

“Oh, shit.”

“Tell them. Tell them everything. Come on, Mommy, Daddy, you can do it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Victoria, you’re not in trouble,” said Mo. “I promise, honey. But explain this to us. We’re all listening. The team is on the other end of the line.”

“You’ll hate me. You’ll make me leave!” she yelled.

“No. No, we won’t,” he said calmly. The shriek of her voice made them all worry if perhaps she’d inherited some of her mother’s illness. If, in fact, Yulia was her mother.

“Please, Victoria,” asked Nine as quietly as he could manage.

“I was four the last time I saw them, but I remembered. The minute I saw their faces, I knew who they were. I remember everything. It’s one of the many problems with being a genius. You remember it all.”

“You’re not a genius,” said Yulia. “You were a pain in the ass, always asking questions!”

“Lady, I will only say this one more time,” said Tailor. “Shut the fuck up, or I will rip your limbs from your body.” Yulia knew the man wasn’t just making a threat. He would follow through in a heartbeat, not worried about killing her at all.

“They yelled at one another all the time, fighting. He decided to leave her.”

“Leave your mother?” asked Gaspar.

“I won’t call her that. Or him father. My mother and father are here,” she said, turning to look at Mo. He smiled at her, wanting to weep for his adopted daughter.

“Alright, sweetie. Go on,” said Gaspar.

“He left us. Left me with her.”

“I didn’t leave you,” said Krauss. “I left your mother, but not you. I moved away for a while, starting a new life, and when I’d returned, she said you’d died.”

“I’m sure she wished that I had,” said Victoria. “I found out what she was doing with the books. She didn’t expect her four-year-old genius to figure out that she was cheating her own father and his partners.”

“You’re sick!” said Yulia.

Tailor hit her so hard he thought he might have broken her neck. Her head snapped to the side, then she wept, staring at the man.

“I warned you.”

“I sent an e-mail to Uncle Boris. I have no idea if he’s really my uncle or not. She got mad. Really, really mad and beat me. Richard stopped her from killing me.”

Nine turned to look at the man who was trussed up on the floor. He removed the tape from his mouth.

“Is she remembering everything right?” The man looked at his boss, then back at the man. His life was over no matter what happened here tonight.

“Yes. She was out of her mind and didn’t know what she was doing. I told her I’d take care of the kid. I took her to an orphanage that said it was for brilliant children. I never saw her again after that.”

“Well, your intention was good, but the result fucking sucked,” said Ghost. “That kid has been through hell.”

“You told me she was dead,” said Krauss.

“She is dead! She’s dead to me and to you,” said the woman, slowly losing her grip on reality. She felt the pulse of electricity at her neck again and screamed, writhing in the chair.

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“Victoria, honey, not too much,” said Nine. “I know you’re angry with her, but don’t kill her. Not yet. Is this why you didn’t want to leave the property? Because of them?”

“Yes. I always worried that she would come back for me. It terrified me.” Tailor could tell that Yulia wanted to say something, but he growled at the woman, warning her not to say a word.

“How could you keep her from me?” asked Krauss. “I would have taken her. I would have raised her and given her a normal life.”

“Normal?” scoffed Victoria. “You’re a crime boss. A violent, horrible man who abuses and uses others, killing them at whim. That’s not normal!”

Krauss had no rebuttal for his daughter.

“Tell them what you did,” she said, staring at the screen. Krauss just looked at his lost child, wondering what she was saying. “She knows what she did. Tell them!”

“What the fuck did you do?” asked Ghost.

“She sterilized the children,” said Trak, coming in the backdoor with the others. Nine had seen his friend angry before. In fact, he’d seen him looking deadlier than anyone he’d ever seen in his life. But this look was something new. Something more dangerous because it came with support.

Rory, Miller, and Zulu stared at the woman. Rory’s body was flexing, cracking with

every move he made he was so tense.

“The guards were more than happy to spill the beans on everything just for a little mercy,” said Miller. “They got none. They’re all dead. She kept a doctor on staff for it. As the kids were brought in, boys and girls, they were all sterilized. You crazy fucking bitch.”

“They don’t bring as much money if they can bear children,” she said quietly. “I get more for them when I sterilize them.”

That was all that Tailor could take. He gripped the woman’s neck like the handle of a broom and snapped it in half. The sickening sound made even the strongest men wince. Victoria just stared at the screen, not saying a word.

“I didn’t know,” said Krauss.

“You didn’t know about that. But you knew she was crazy; you knew she was selling kids. You were helping her to do that,” said Ghost.

“No. I was handling the websites.”

“Sites. That’s plural,” said Gaspar. “You said you were handling the websites. Where are the others?”

“You don’t understand what will happen. They’ll come for you. All of them will come for you.”

“They’ve come for us before,” said Nine. “We’re still standing. Not them. Who the fuck are they, and what are the sites?”

“They look innocent enough.”

“Who?” growled Ian.

“Mothers.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Mothers?” repeated Rory.

“PTA, Mother’s Day Out, tennis club, pickleball, book club, wine club. Mothers. Moms who can’t afford the luxury bag or shoes they want. They want the latest luxury SUV with the television screens in the back and the extra cargo space. They want the nine-hundred-dollar pair of sneakers, the four-hundred-dollar pair of sweats.

“When they show up at book club, they want the other women to see their new Rolex or diamond tennis bracelet. Asked how they could afford it, they simply reply, ‘I have a side hustle.’ They have access to children and parents who trust them with their children. They can watch them from school grounds, they can see them at kids’ birthday parties, and practically hand them over with a bow on their heads.

“These aren’t stupid women. They’re college-educated, motivated, and organized. They have a network of women that work with them, and they split the profits, all while turning in their neighbors’ children without blinking an eye.”

“He’s telling the truth,” said Victoria. She stared at the man who was her biological father, then felt the warm hands of Ashley and Bree at her back. “I’m going to hang up now. You’ll do the right thing, won’t you, Mr. Trak? Mr. Gaspar? All of you?”

“We’ll do the right thing, little one,” said Trak. The screen went black, and the men all looked at Krauss.

“Where is the head of this mom’s mafia?” asked Ghost.

“I don’t know her name. The name of the company is Gaia, like the Greek goddess of earth and mother of life. They’ve got some shit on their website about it. They use their platform to offer help and advice to overwhelmed mothers. If a mother is overwhelmed, she’s probably not watching her kids like she should. She naps, she reads a book in the park when she has her three minutes to herself. And in that time...”

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“Another mother takes their kid,” whispers Miller. “This is fucking sick.”

“Kids trust moms. They often don’t trust men, but these women have figured it out,” said Krauss.

“How many are there?” asked Gaspar.

“Eleven head up the group, but they get other women to help by giving them some fucking sob story. They tell them that the kid was taken from their real parents or stripped from the father and is now being abused. There’s nothing like a group of angry fucking mothers.”

“Most of these women have no clue what they’re actually helping with,” said Ghost.

“We’ve got the site up,” said Ace behind them.

“Shit!”

“Son-of-a-bitch!”

“Fuck me!”

“When did you two get here?” asked Gaspar.

“We came in behind the others. We’ve been listening to everything. I’ve got the site up, and I can shut it down. I’ll place a message on the site telling women who log in what it is. I’ll also let them know that they can expect a visit from the FBI.”

“We need to find the women that are in charge of the site,” said Ian.

“That’s easy,” said Krauss. “They’re all located in one neighborhood outside of Philly. They have a social media site as well.”

“Found it,” said Code. “Looks like the mommies are enjoying a girls’ weekend in Charleston.”

“I guess we’re going to Charleston,” said Nine. He looked at Krauss, and the man just shook his head.

“I get it. You can’t leave me alive. Yulia was right about one thing. There will be dozens more to pick up where we left off.”

“And there will be dozens more of us,” said Rory. “Dozens and dozens of men and women who have the same sense of justice, right and wrong. We will never stop until all of you are dead.”

With a final search to be sure that nothing was left behind, they bound the men in the basement, leaving Krauss and Yulia side by side in their chairs. It would appear as a murder-suicide if they recovered anything at all from the fire.

As the home behind them erupted in flames kissing the sky, the men looked back to be sure that no one would leave. Satisfied with their work, they headed to the airport, where Chipper and Doug were waiting for them.

“Gentlemen. We’re clear for South Carolina.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Mo stood outside the glassed conference room, watching his daughter spill her soul to

Ashley and Bree. Ophelia was seated beside her, holding her hand.

“She told you,” whispered Hayes. Mo stared at the young man.

“You knew?”

“Please don’t be mad, sir. I promised I wouldn’t say anything. I knew she was safe here and that I could leave without worrying about her. Now, maybe she can leave as well.”

“Hayes, I’m not mad at you, son. I’m glad that she had a friend she could trust with such a secret. But we try not to keep secrets here. We could have helped her. We could have found her parents and taken care of this matter months ago.”

“I know that now,” said Hayes. “I just didn’t want her mad at me.”

That’s when it hit Mo. Hayes was in love with Victoria. They might only be seventeen and eighteen, but for Hayes, he knew this woman was the one for him. One day.

“You love her?” smiled Mo.

“I’m not sure I know what love is, sir. My parents left me as well, but I don’t remember anything about it. Poor Victoria, she remembered it all. Sometimes, she would remember the beating her mother gave her and cry in my arms. It would kill me, sir. Just kill me. She was afraid that she’d have nightmares and wake you and Miss Ophelia.”

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“And we would have run to her side and comforted her,” said Mo. “She is everything to us, Hayes. We will ensure her safety and happiness going forward. Anything she wants to do, we will be there for her.”

“When I finish my training, if I make it...”

“You’ll make it,” smirked Mo.

“If I make it, sir, will you bring her to my graduation ceremony?”

“You have my word, Hayes.” He hugged the young man, slapping his back. “Hayes, you’re going to be a great SEAL, and your intelligence is going to make them love you.”

“Or hate me,” he smirked. “Sometimes nerds aren’t liked very much.”

“SEALs respect the nerds. They keep them alive,” said Mo. “We’ll be there for your celebration right beside your own parents.”

Hayes could only smile, nodding at Mo. He left Mo standing there, heading toward his home to tell Hoot and Scout of what had happened that day. Ophelia stepped out of the room, hugging her husband.

“Is she alright?” he asked.

“She will be. She knew exactly what she was doing, babe. She developed that device herself. It tells her when someone is telling the truth or lying and allows her to send a

pretty dangerous volt of electricity to their brains.”

“I can’t believe she’s held this in for so long,” said Mo.

“She was afraid if we knew who they were, we’d tell her to go,” said Ophelia. “I think she knows now that it would never happen. She’s stuck with us.” The door opened, and Bree and Ashley stepped out, smiling at the couple. Victoria was close behind.

“Are you mad?” she asked her father.

“No, honey. I’m so proud of you. I’m proud that you figured out how to get them to tell the truth.”

“But it resulted in them dying,” she said to the four adults. Mo nodded.

“Sometimes, that’s the outcome for the type of people we deal with. I wish that this had never happened. I wish that you had been born to Ophelia and me. But you weren’t. I’m damn glad we have you, though. That you came to be ours and ours alone.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” said Ophelia.

“Well, I missed out on a lot of stuff as a kid. I didn’t get to go to the zoo or the circus or the mall. I never had a sleepover or went to a dance. Do you think we could do those things?”

“We can do them all,” smiled Mo. “Every last one of them.”

“Cool! Can I go see where Hayes is?” she asked.

“I think he went to get some food,” said Mo. “We’ll see you later.” She started to walk away, then turned back to the couple.

“Am I going to be in trouble for this? Will the police want to talk to me?”

“Nope. No trouble, no police,” Mo assured her. She leaped into his arms, kissing his cheek, then hugged Ophelia. The couple just chuckled as Bree and Ashley laughed.

“This isn’t the last daughter crisis we’ll have, is it?” he frowned. The women laughed at him, kissing his cheek.

“Nope.”

“No way.”

“Positive thoughts, Dad. Positive thoughts.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“Mamas,” growled Miller. “Mamas stealing babies from other mamas and letting the traffickers know where to get them. What sort of fucked up shit is this?”

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The men were seated along the harbor in Charleston, watching as tourists passed by. They'd found the hotel that the women were staying in, but they'd gone out earlier that morning and hadn't returned yet. With Code and Ace watching the lobby, they parked themselves in the midst of the food and shopping, assuming they would catch sight of them sooner or later.

Eleven women. All stay-at-home moms, wives, daughters. Their husbands made good money, but apparently not enough. They'd convinced them that their side hustle of an online clothing and jewelry business was yielding them six figures a year. One woman was even married to an attorney.

"I can't imagine any of our wives ever doing anything so horrendous," said Nine. "Erin would sooner kill these women than hear their excuses."

"Same," said Rory. "And my wife would like to do it with her bare hands."

"There," nodded Trevor. "Coming up the street like a pack of wolves. Are you seeing this shit? They're pointing out children on the street." He started to stand, but Gaspar gripped his arm.

"We'll get our chance, son."

In the harbor shopping district, old homes had been converted into boutiques, souvenir shops, and coffee stands. The women stopped in front of a little white cottage with green trim, whispering and laughing. They entered the building, and the men waited once again.

“All those kids lost,” said Ian. “All those children that will never be seen again because of those women. They obviously don’t know that their site is down. That will play well for us.”

“We can’t find those kids, but we can help others,” said Alec. “It’s what we do. It’s what we did with our own kids. Jak, Luke, Carl, Ben, Adam, Violet, and Lucy.”

“Victoria and the others,” said Angel. “We’ve saved a lot of kids over the years. Hundreds of them.”

“We’ve lost thousands,” said Nine.

“Brother, we can’t go there. Angel is right. We’ve saved hundreds. Let’s not forget that.”

“The door is opening,” said Trak. He stood, then immediately sat back down, his mouth wide open. The other men all watched, thinking they were seeing things.

“What the ever-loving fuck is going on?”

“Hello, ladies,” said the friendly voice. “Welcome to All Luxury.”

“Hi,” said one of the women. “This is an unusual boutique. I mean, we all buy luxury, of course, but it’s usually only sold exclusively at the boutique brand store.”

“Well, that’s true,” said the beautiful blonde, waving her four-carat ring in their face as they caught a look at her diamond-faced Rolex. “We have a special arrangement with the luxury brands. My friend over there is the daughter of one of the founders of a particular brand.”

“Oh, really?” asked the several women, wide-eyed.

“That’s right. I can’t say it out loud, but her family makes this bag here,” she said, pulling it from the glass case. “It usually sells for twenty-three thousand, but we’re able to sell it for thirteen.”

“Let me see that,” said another woman. “I’m somewhat of an expert on these things. I can spot a fraud a mile away.”

“I’m sure you can,” smiled the gorgeous blonde. Three other women were milling about, as well as two additional saleswomen.

“It’s real,” she said, turning to her friends. “It’s real!”

“Of course it is,” she smiled. “Would you like to see the other colors? We have them all. We also have the shoes to match, as well as the other luxury brands in clothing. We only show those to our top clients from Europe.”

“We can afford it!” said one of the women quickly. “I mean, there’s no worries there. We can buy whatever you have.”

“I can see that. It appears that you all have excellent taste. We’ll put together some things for you and place them in the backroom so that you can try them on. I’ll have one of the girls open some champagne for you and bring in some snacks. Please, head on back.”

The women couldn’t get to the backroom fast enough. The saleswoman closed the door, jamming a piece of metal beneath the bottom. The other women all stared at her, and she smiled. When they got to the front door, they locked it from outside and walked across the street.

“What in the ever-loving fuck is going on?” said Gaspar.

“We need to handle this one,” said Alexandra. “You might want to cover your ears.”

The explosion was so loud, so violent that windows were blown out on both sides of the street, other buildings shaking from their foundations.

“I might have overdone that,” grinned Erin. “Hi, baby.” She kissed Nine, and he stared at her.

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“We got here yesterday after hearing everything on comms. They were pretty easy to find and had been going into only the high-end boutiques,” said Lauren.

“We bought that one from the owner,” said Piper. “We cleared everything out, brought in some fake stuff we found in another part of the city, and loaded up the store.”

“You did this?” smirked Rory.

“We all did it,” smiled Piper. “You can kill all the bad guys and occasional bad ladies when you want. But this group? This group belonged to us.”

“Amen,” said Lena.

“Agreed,” said Grace and Faith in harmony. They giggled, hugging one another.

“I’m hungry,” said Erin.

“Me too. How about some low-country seafood? Oh, I’m craving some shrimp and grits,” said Piper.

“You’re hungry at a time like this?” frowned Tailor.

“Yeah. This stuff takes a lot out of you,” said Lena. Tailor lifted his wife off the ground, kissing her.

“I’ve never been more in love with you than I am right now.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Krauss and Yulia were gone, but the team knew that more would be waiting for them. Although they tried to remove themselves from cases like these, this one just happened to fall in their lap. They didn't regret it at all.

The wives had shown themselves to be more than capable and effective. Just to be sure no one saw them, they stayed a few days in Charleston, pretending to be on a group couples trip. By the time they were home, the party to send Hayes on his way was already in full swing.

"He's gonna do great, Hoot," smirked Ghost.

"I know. I'm gonna miss the kid," he said. "I never thought I'd say that, but he's been amazing to be around. I've learned a lot from him."

"Kids will do that to you," smiled Ghost. "Did someone let Nelly know that she's safe now?"

"Yeah. We went out there yesterday and told her. She's doing fine, but I think she's okay staying right where she is. Sor should be here in a week or two. Hopefully, he can check in on her to be sure all is good as well."

"Those two seem fine," said Tailor, nodding at Hayes and Victoria on the dance floor.

"Yep. They're gonna miss each other," smiled Hoot.

They watched as Hayes and Victoria danced and danced. Every song made them happy, smiling with one another.

"It was really great of your mom and everyone to throw this dance for you," she

smiled up at him.

“It wasn’t for me, Victoria,” smiled Hayes.

“What do you mean? It’s part of the going away party.”

“No. The dance is for you. At my request,” he said, holding her in his arms.

Victoria just stared up at him, realizing how very tall he was. She was always going to be petite and tiny. He was probably only going to get bigger.

“For me,” she whispered.

“I asked them to give you a dance. It’s like your senior prom. Our senior prom.”

“Hayes, it’s perfect,” she said, hugging him. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“I’ll be home before you know it. In the meantime, you get better, and when you’re feeling like it, come and see me. I’ll be waiting.”

“I promise, Hayes. I swear. I promise.”