



# Major

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**Category:** Romance, Action

**Description:** Major Carson and his former team of Rangers were home. At least they would be home eventually. Right now, it seemed as though nothing was going his way. Leaving Egypt without Elena was the most difficult thing he'd ever done. Every bone in his body was telling him to stay; telling him to make her come home with him. But he wanted it to be her decision. All that changed when her best friend called him from the hospital. Elena was in trouble and needed him. That was all he needed to hear. He would bring her home, find out what was happening, and ensure that she never left his side.

Dr. Elena Fayek was in pain and didn't like what the doctor was telling her. It was too much. Too much to think about. Too much to contemplate. Daphne kept trying to get her to call Major, but she didn't want him to feel trapped. It wouldn't matter. He was there, beside her. Now they needed to find out why someone wanted to open a twenty-year-old grave.

**Total Pages (Source):** 53

## CHAPTER ONE

Major Raine Carson was the only son of Jalen Carson and Stormy Blackwinds Carson. His parents met while in Iran. Of course, it was after they'd been taken captive by a crazy former teammate of his father's. No one goes to Iran willingly.

His crazy teammate was demanding to know where some historical jewels were hidden. Jalen knew the significance of the accidental find and refused to turn them over to the crazy man. But ensuring Stormy was safe was his main goal, even in a hostage situation.

His father was not to be deterred. An Army veteran, he knew the moment he laid eyes on Stormy that she was his. Of course, not everyone can claim to have their first date inside a box on a plane headed to Iran. But that was their way. The Belle Fleur way.

They married and almost immediately, Stormy was pregnant with their first and only son, Major.

Major and his closest friends at Belle Fleur did everything together. Alistair, Forrest, Garr, Walker, Sebastian, Brix, and Leif were all in the same grade as him. They walked to and from school together, always watching out for the other kids, especially the Stanton sisters.

The spontaneous quadruplets, Ellie, Magnolia, Em, and Maddie. Beautiful, identical, smart, and madly in love with four of his friends. Major didn't mind. He thought of them as sisters.

Major looked nearly identical to his father. By his eighteenth birthday, he was six-feet-five, two hundred and thirty pounds of well-honed muscle, dark hair, and green eyes. He was what many would call dreamy.

But Major was also determined. He knew that he was going to become an Army Ranger along with all of his friends. They were the boys from Belle Fleur. Big, smart, athletic, skilled, and trained by the best in the world.

While many of his classmates were already in what they believed was a serious relationship, Major knew that he wasn't ready for that quite yet. Ellie and Leif were dating, Walker and Mags were dating, and Sebastian was mooning over Maddie but too afraid to tell her. As early as the ninth grade, Major knew that he was going to be the odd man out.

"Hi, Major," smiled Alisha.

"Hey. What's going on?" he asked, seeing all the excitement behind her.

"Eighth-grade dance. You know, the one where the girls ask the boys."

Major nodded, swallowing hard. He knew the one. He'd been trying to avoid it. He was a freshman in high school, but the schools were connected, and many of the eighth-grade girls asked freshman boys.

Major wanted nothing to do with it. He didn't dance. He didn't date. And he didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings.

"So, are you going?" she asked, looking up at him.

Major was one of the boys that every girl wanted to ask to the dance. Many were intimidated by him, either believing he was stuck-up, big and scary, or only wanting

to date Belle Fleur girls.

“No. I don’t dance, and I don’t like dances,” he said quickly. He noticed the look on her face and felt terrible.

“Oh,” she said, swallowing down the emotion.

“I’m sorry. I really don’t like dances, and I don’t like dancing. You should ask Garr or Forrest,” he said, offering an alternative.

Alisha looked around him seeing Forrest, Garr, Alistair, and Walker standing at the lockers. She knew that Walker liked Magnolia, but for the life of her she couldn’t figure out why Magnolia didn’t know that.

“Maybe,” she said, looking up at him. “You know, Major, there are going to be lots of dances in high school, and some of them are actually fun. If you don’t learn to dance, you’re going to be left out of a lot of stuff. I mean, don’t you want a girlfriend?”

“Do you have to dance to have a girlfriend?” he laughed. She frowned at him, shaking her head.

“You’re being rude,” she said.

“I’m not being rude. I’m being honest. You don’t have to dance to have a girlfriend, and I don’t want or need a girlfriend right now. I have a lot of friends, and I’m happy with that for now. I have plans for my life, and you might think it sounds ‘rude,’ but I’m just focused.”

“No fourteen-year-old boy is focused,” she laughed. “Most are looking for a girl.”

“I’m not most.” He slammed his locker door and walked toward his friends, shaking his head.

“She asked you?” smirked Garr.

“Yep.”

“You said no?” asked Alistair.

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“Yep.”

“Dude, one day you’re going to pray for a girl to ask you to a dance, or a movie, or anywhere,” laughed Walker.

“I doubt it. I don’t dance. I’m too big and clumsy.”

“Major, you’re as big as we are, and I’ve seen your footwork on the football field and on the basketball court. You know how to move; you just don’t want to move like that.”

Major shrugged his shoulders, not looking at his friends. It was true that he had great footwork on the athletic field, but dancing just never made him feel inspired. He watched others dance. His parents loved to dance at the Belle Fleur parties. He enjoyed watching Lissa and Kat when they did ballet performances. In fact, he always thought it was extremely athletic.

It just wasn’t for him.

“Are you going to ask Magnolia?” he said, looking at Walker.

“Girls are supposed to ask boys,” he said, shrugging.

“Dude, I think she’d be okay with you doing the asking,” he smiled.

“Maybe not. I mean, she encouraged someone else to ask me, and I had to turn her down. I don’t want to go with anyone except Mags.”

“God, you guys are idiots,” frowned Forrest. “Just tell your girls you like them.”

Things worked out for Ellie and Leif and eventually for Walker and Mags as well. But Major stayed true to his commitment of finishing school, joining the Army, and becoming a Ranger.

In fact, the Belle Fleur boys were all placed on the same Ranger team. Over time, they would become the most desired team in the entire Ranger organization. The men were big, strong, intelligent, capable, and skilled beyond their years.

Living off-base, they agreed to room together for a while, then realized if they wanted to remain friends, they needed their own space. Major was especially happy about that space. He liked his quiet, alone time.

Over the years, he'd learned to dance. A little. Actually, it was more like moving from side to side. He figured out that what he hated about dancing with a woman in a bar or club was the crowds. He hated people bumping up against him or shoving and pushing for space. So, he stood taller, wider, and sturdier, barely moving and forcing others to move around him. He always chose a spot near the edge of the dance floor, saving himself an angry episode, and others from his wrath.

He'd been with a few women over the years, but nothing serious, and no one he was willing to take home to Mom and Dad. He was also honest about that. No one in his apartment. No last names. No details about his work. He explained to every woman, that he was fine with one night of good, protected sex, but he was not willing to go any further.

Some women chose to walk away, and he respected that. Others said they were fine with it but weren't at the end of the night. They thought their 'incredible' sex would make him change his mind. He didn't.

“Look, I was clear that we wouldn’t be seeing one another again,” he said quietly to the girl, knowing her roommate was in the next bedroom.

“But it was great sex,” she said, staring at him. “You have to agree the sheets were practically on fire.”

“Listen, it was good sex. It was sex. But I told you, I don’t want anything serious. One night only. You agreed.”

“You’re a dick!”

“I guess I am. An honest, upfront, tell it like it is dick.” He walked out of the apartment never to see the girl again.

Sometimes, he wondered if women were really worth the trouble. Then his dick would hurt, and he got tired of rubbing it, and he realized that he needed them, and they needed him. But only for a short time.

He’d watched as Leif became more and more miserable, aching to be with Ellie again, yet too afraid to call her. He watched as Walker desperately wanted Magnolia.

Did he want to be miserable?

“Absolutely, fucking not,” he moaned.

“Did you say something?” asked Garr.

“No. Just thinking about something. What are we doing in Egypt anyway?” he asked his friend and teammate.

“Not sure, but we’re definitely going to find out.”



It turned out that they were supposed to meet a CIA agent who had word about an asset who'd been taken. No one knew who the agent was until they showed up, and it was Ellie. Leif lost his shit.

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Words were spoken, phrases were yelled, but in the end, the two knew that this was meant to be. Especially as they realized it was Magnolia who was the kidnapped American. It was all they could do to control Walker.

Sent home together to ensure Magnolia's recovery, the team stayed put to try and find out what was happening.

When May and Thomas recommended that they connect with a friend of theirs who was an archaeologist, Major expected a short, fat, balding Egyptian man. What stepped into his path was anything but.

## CHAPTER TWO

Elena Fayek had spent her entire life watching her father dig in the dirt and sand. All for the hope of finding one sarcophagus, one ancient treasure, a piece of stone with ancient writing, bits of wood, cloth, or a gemstone. Anything to tell him that his digging was worth all the missed social events, all the missed birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays.

Spending her years in boarding schools in London, her summers were spent with her parents in Cairo, Luxor, Sakkara, Karnak, and so many more.

“Who are you looking for now, Baba?” she asked her father.

“Oh, hello, my darling,” he smiled, turning to lift her into the air. Her father was an Egyptian-born, Oxford-educated man. His accent was a beautiful blend of his culture and his education.

“Hello, Baba. What are you looking for?” she asked again.

“I’m looking for something old and something special,” he smiled.

“Everything you look for is old, Baba. You’re an achee-, um, archaeologist.” He laughed, tossing her into the air again. The men who worked the dig with him knew her well, and they laughed with him.

“That’s true,” he smiled. “But we’re looking for something very, very old. It isn’t older than anything we’ve ever thought to find before, but it is more important and might change the world. Where is your mother?”

“She said she had things to do, and I was to stay with you.” She noticed the sad look on her father’s face as he nodded.

“Would you like to dig?” he asked her.

“Very much!”

“Alright. You must be very careful and not step on anything or touch anything without Efram’s approval. Follow him and do as he says.” Efram smiled at the little girl, holding out his hand.

“Come, princess, let’s find something special.”

She dug with them all day, and then again the next day, and the next. It turned into weeks of preferring to dig rather than spend time with her mother. She found small amulets, a few small bones, pieces of wood from a sarcophagus, and some strange material that no one could identify. It was fascinating.

By the end of the month, she’d barely spent any time at all with her mother, only her

father. When he told her that it was too dangerous to enter the dig site, she had to sit back beneath the tent and watch from a distance.

Several of her father's assistants were beneath the tent, washing and cataloging the items that had been found. Arabel and Dominique were very smart and were archaeologists as well. She talked to them for hours about why they loved their work.

Suddenly, there was a rush of men racing toward the dig. She stood, staring at the site below.

"What's going on?" she asked the women.

"I'm not sure, darling," said Arabel wanting to shield the little girl from what surely was a disastrous situation. "Come. Let's go find some food."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Something is wrong."

"Elena, come, dear."

"No! No! Baba!" she screamed his name as she ran down to the dig site.

Efram caught her in mid-air, holding her tightly. As the sounds of alarms and warning sirens went off, Elena knew what had happened. The tunnel her father was in had collapsed.

While they searched and dug for her father, Elena sat with Efram.

"I'll go get Zia," said Arabel to the man. He nodded, and Elena stared at her. Zia was her mother, but no one ever seemed able to find her.

"How do you know where my mother is?"

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“I just know, sweetie. I will be back.”

Elena didn't know it that day, but apparently, everyone knew that her mother spent her days with another man. A man that she'd fallen in love with. He owned several grocery stores in the city, and Arabel knew just where to go.

Arabel entered the store, and the woman and man were laughing, having tea and sandwiches as if nothing in the world had gone wrong. She wanted to hate the woman, wanted to be angry with her, but her own marriage had fallen apart because she preferred sand to romantic evenings alone.

“Arabel! What are you doing here? Is Elena alright?”

“I'm glad you were at least concerned,” she said, frowning at the woman. She looked at the man, but he didn't move, didn't give them privacy.

“I don't need your judgment. Where is my daughter?”

“She's waiting for her father to be pulled out of a collapsed tunnel,” said the young woman. “Maybe you might find it in your heart to leave your lover and go to her.” Arabel turned and left the woman standing in shock.

By the time she made it to the dig site, it was confirmed that there would be no survivors. In fact, it would most likely be months before bodies could be recovered, perhaps not even then.

Elena was inconsolable.

There was a small service held for the men and one woman trapped in the tunnels, but no bodies to weep over. Not yet.

For Elena, that wasn't even the worst of it.

"We'll be living with Ahmad now," said her mother, holding the other man's hand. She might be only eleven, but she knew that having another man only weeks after your father died was not normal.

"No. No, I won't. I want to live in our house," she said.

"Elena, our house will be sold. We'll be living with Ahmad. You'll go back to boarding school in the fall but come home in the summers, just as you've always done."

"I hate you!" she screamed at her mother. Others turned to stare at the little girl. "I will never forgive you for this!"

She ran out of the small grocery store and down the street. With all of her savings in her small young lady purse, as her mother called it, she hailed a taxi and directed him to Efram's house. When she knocked on the door, he knew and grabbed her in his arms.

"Please let me live with you," she cried.

His wife cried with the little girl, holding her until she fell asleep. Efram called the grocery store and told her mother and her new husband that the child was alright. He would bring her home in a day or two when she was settled.

Her mother didn't even care.

“Thank you, Efram,” she said. “She’s so headstrong, and she’s just being unreasonable.”

“All due respect, she is hurting. Her mother introduces her to the man in her life just a few weeks after her father’s death. You can’t expect her to be happy about that.”

“Well, she needs to be happy about it. This is our life now.”

“No,” he said calmly. “It’s your life. Elena’s will always be sand and dirt and digging.”

Elena eventually had to go home. She never apologized to her mother or her stepfather, but she was more than happy to return to England. Refusing to come home on holidays or summer break, she found other things to do with her time.

When she was in college, she spent her summer traveling the world as an assistant at dig sites.

Ultimately, she knew that she needed to forgive her mother. She was happy. Happier than she’d ever seen her with her father.

Returning to Egypt to work on the dig sites was a dream for Elena. She would be able to complete her father’s life’s work and, perhaps, find her own as well. When her friend and colleague May and Thomas Bradshaw called her to help out some friends, she was more than happy to do so.

“It’s wonderful to hear your voice, May,” she said, smiling at the image on the screen.

“Yours too, Elena. Thomas and I would very much like it if you’d come and work with us here. The incident with Roderick was appalling,” she said to the woman.

“I know. I’ve learned my lesson. Never trust a senior archaeologist who tells you that he’s giving you your big break,” she frowned.



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“It was wrong, Elena,” said Thomas. “You could prove it and put him on the block.”

“Then what? Everyone will see me as the tattletale who turned in the famous man. No, I’m fine here at the museum. I get to teach university students, give tours on occasion, and help old friends. Speaking of which, what do these friends need help with?”

“We’re honestly not sure,” said May, “but it could be dangerous, Elena. You can say no if you want to.”

“Are you kidding me?” she laughed. “Danger is my middle name.”

They talked for a while longer, then Elena ended the call and headed to the museum. As she left her tiny apartment, she passed the storage unit that held all of her father’s belongings. They’d been there for years now. She’d hoped to be able to afford a larger place at some point, but so far, she was stuck in her one-room apartment.

The museum was busy, as always, with tourists and locals alike. The exhibit for Tutankhamun was the most visited, but other exhibits were just as spectacular.

“Dr. Fayek? There is a woman and several men here to see you,” she said.

“Of course. I’ll be right out.” She knew it was May and Thomas’s friends, but she knew nothing else about them.

As she stepped into the main lobby, her heart froze. The men were all tall, nice-looking, and the woman was beautiful. But one man stood out from the others. His

green eyes stared back at her, and her body ignited.

“Hello, you must be the friends of May,” smiled the gorgeous woman, walking toward them.

“Yes,” said Ellie, standing to take her hand. “My name is Ellie Stanton, and these are my friends, Leif, Alistair, Forrest, Garr, Sebastian, Brix, and Major.” She looked at Major, giving a big smile.

“Are you in the military, Major?” she asked.

“Oh, no, ma’am. Just a family name,” he grinned, nodding at her. Good lord, thought Elena, that man might get me pregnant just by looking at me.

“How can I help you all? Would you like a private tour of the museum?” she asked.

“That would be lovely on any other day. The pieces in here are magnificent, but this is a more delicate matter.” She nodded, waving them to the back of the hall and into a private room.

“This exhibit won’t be open for another few weeks. We’ll be alone here. How can I help you?”

“Well, Dr. Fayek,” started Leif.

“Elena. Elena is my name. Please, I’m only Dr. Fayek to my students,” she smiled.

“Thank you, Elena. This is going to seem unusual, but I have a story to tell you.”

“Egyptians love stories,” she laughed. Elena did listen to the story and helped the group as much as she could.

She never expected to fall in love.

“This is the best thing, the safest thing, Elena,” said Major. “Stay with your friend until all of this blows over.”

“I will,” she nodded. “Major? I regret nothing. I loved every moment with you.”

“Me, too,” he said, pulling her in for a hug. “We’ll see one another soon. I want you to come to Louisiana and visit me, visit us.” She smiled at him and nodded again.

As she walked through security, she didn’t dare look back. Her heart was breaking, tears streaming down her face. If she turned and saw pain in his eyes, she would turn around and never leave.

### CHAPTER THREE

“Darling, are you sure you’re alright?” asked Daphne. “This is the fourth morning in a row you’ve been sick. I hate to say this, but you need to take a pregnancy test.”

“No. No, it can’t be,” she said, shaking her head above the toilet.

“Elena,” she laughed, “you know very well it could be. You told me how spectacular your American hero was in bed. You very well could be with child.”

Elena finally gave in. Daphne made an appointment with her doctor and confirmed within the hour that she was indeed pregnant.

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“You have to tell him, Elena.”

“No, they have a lot going on right now. I’ll wait.”

She did wait. She waited and waited, hoping for some sign that said she should meet him in Louisiana. He texted her, called her a few times, and even asked when she would come for a visit. But it wasn’t the same as ‘hey, I’m pregnant, can I still come?’. She needed to make that statement, and she couldn’t muster the strength.

At seven weeks, she was feeling miserable. Beyond not being able to keep anything down, she was feeling pain in her abdomen and that had her terrified.

“Elena, you have to call him!” she said to the woman lying in the hospital bed.

“No. What if this is all a false alarm? I mean, it could be nothing. And if I lose the baby, then I put him through pain.”

“You’re being foolish!”

“Dr. Fayek?” said the man, walking into the room. “I, uh, I just saw your test results, and I have to say that I think the best thing would be to abort the child.” Elena paled, staring at him.

“You need to work on your fucking bedside manner,” snapped Daphne.

“I’m sorry, but there was no easy way to say it,” he said, frowning at the young woman.

“There was a damn sure easier way to say it than the way you did. What’s going on? How can it be fixed?”

“We don’t believe it can be fixed,” he said.

“Where’s Dr. Baram?” asked Elena.

“She had to take emergency family leave,” he said, not looking at them. “I’ll be taking over your care. Listen, you need to decide about this soon. It could endanger your own life. I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Elena, you need to call him,” she prompted.

“Daph, please. I’m tired. I need to think. Just let me rest.”

She watched over her friend for an hour before she finally fell asleep. Then she did the one thing she swore she would never do. She invaded someone’s privacy.

“When do you think Elena might come to visit?” asked Brix.

“I’m not sure,” said Major, shaking his head. “I’ve called her a few times, but she seems different. Maybe she’s moved on.”

“I can’t believe that,” said Sebastian. “That woman was smitten with you.”

“Smitten and in love are two different things,” said Major. He looked at his friends, realizing that he may have just shown his hand. Shaking his head, they just smiled at him.

“It’s alright, brother. We knew,” said Forrest. “The newly married couples seem to be doing well.”

They all turned to see Leif, Ellie, Magnolia, and Walker having breakfast together. She was still struggling with what happened to her in Egypt, but the counseling team was helping her and helping Walker manage the issues.

“I don’t suppose you’ve heard from your friend Burkhard?” smirked Garr.

“No,” laughed Major. “I don’t expect I will hear from him, but I damn sure bet we’ll see him at some point. I’ll never understand why he helped us, but we owe him one.”

“We let him walk away,” said Sebastian. “That was enough.”

Major nodded, then looked down at his phone as it buzzed. It was a London telephone number, but not the one he had for Elena.

“Hello.”

“Is this Major Carson?” asked the distinctly British voice.

“Yes. Who is this?”

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“Major, my name is Daphne. I’m Elena’s friend. She’s been staying with me for the last few weeks.”

“Is everything alright? Is she alright?” he asked.

“I’m sort of glad that your voice is panicked. I can tell that you care for her. She’s not well, and she wouldn’t let me call you any earlier.”

“Not well? What do you mean?” The others looked at him, frowning.

“She didn’t want me to call you, Major, but I think she needs help. Right now, she’s in the hospital, and they’re telling her she needs surgery.”

“Surgery? For what? What the hell is happening?” His voice was shaking with uncertainty and panic.

“I see. She didn’t tell you anything at all, did she?”

“No, she didn’t tell me anything. She said she was enjoying her time with you and might stay there. Please, just tell me what’s going on?” he asked.

“If you know a specialist, perhaps bring them with you. Elena is pregnant. The pregnancy is apparently high-risk, and they are telling her to abort the child. She refuses.” Before she finished her sentence, Major was up and walking toward Luke and the others.

“I’ll be there in five hours.”

“Five hours? That’s impossible unless you’re in Europe.”

“I’ll be there in five hours. Just tell her to hold on and don’t do a damn thing until I arrive. Oh, and Daphne. Tell her I love her.”

“What the hell is happening?” asked Brix.

“Elena is pregnant, and they’re telling her it’s a high-risk pregnancy, and she needs to abort the baby. I’m going over there and bringing her back.”

“Is this the archaeologist that helped you?” asked Cam.

“Yes. Please, Cam. I need to go,” said Major.

“I think we need to send a few with you. I’ll get Gray and Ally. You guys get your gear. Brix, Sebastian, Forrest, and Alistair. Just in case,” said Cam.

“Thank you, Cam.”

“Just bring your girl home.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

While in the air, Gray contacted the hospital in London to speak with the attending physician. She’d never been so angry in all her life. He refused to give her any information at all and warned her to stay away from his patient. A little professional courtesy would have gone a long way for her, but he wasn’t giving even a little.

“Something is wrong, Major. This guy refused to even speak with me. He should have at least afforded me some professional courtesy,” said Gray.



“Doctor-patient confidentiality?”

“No. He refused to say a word. He even threatened me if I came near his patient.”

“Shit. What are we going to do when we get there?” asked Brix.

“I’ve called an old friend who is head of oncology at the hospital. He’s working with the administrators and the hospital security team to let them know that we’re welcome. Something is wrong, though. He shouldn’t be acting this way.”

“God, what she must be going through,” said Major, running his hand through his hair. “I’ve been calling her, begging her to come. She must have thought I wouldn’t want her and the baby.”

“Before anyone says something stupid,” said Ally, “tech got me her records. She’s seven weeks pregnant, which fits perfectly with when she and Major were together.” He smiled at the woman, nodding a thank you.

“What else did the records say?” asked Sebastian.

“They’re claiming the pregnancy is ectopic. The fetus has attached itself outside the uterus.”

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“Can it be fixed?” Major quietly asked.

“I’ve done one before,” said Gray. “Successfully. It’s very risky, but we can open the uterus and place the fetus back inside through an incision. It’s more dangerous for her than the baby, but there may not be another choice.”

“Please, Gray,” he pleaded, swallowing back tears.

“Baby, don’t get ahead of yourself,” she said, squeezing his hand. “I have to see her and see the tests. All we’re looking at is a man’s handwriting telling me it is what it is. I want to see for myself, and we have all the equipment on this plane if need be.”

“You mean perform surgery here?” he asked in a panicked voice. “It’s just you and Ally.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said the big masculine voice, slapping the back of his head. Doc and Cruz plopped in the seats beside him. “We’re here. We were just making sure everything was ready in the back if we needed to do this in the air.”

“That’s too dangerous!”

“We may not have a choice, Major,” said Gray. “I need you to remain calm. You getting excited won’t help the situation. Try to get some sleep.”

He didn’t get to sleep. In fact, he wasn’t sure that he even breathed the entire time he was on the plane. By the time they reached the hospital, he was pumped full of caffeine and adrenaline. If anyone had tried to stop him, he would have started a war.

Luckily, Gray's friend was waiting for them and escorted them upstairs. Gray stayed in the hallway, reviewing all of the information given to her, as Major stepped inside the room.

Elena was sound asleep, her friend in the chair beside her. The woman turned, smiling at him.

"She was right. You're spectacular." Major grinned at her, giving a low chuckle as he shook his head.

"Thank you for calling me. I've tried to get her to come to me," he said.

"I know. She's stubborn," she smiled. "You'll have to deal with that now. I'm going to head home and pack her bags for you. You get her to leave this damn place before they hurt her."

"Hurt her?"

"Men have been coming in and out of here for days now. Men only. Don't you think that's weird?"

"Very," he growled. She patted his arm and started to leave. Major opened the door, waving over Brix. "Will you go with Daphne to get Elena's things?"

"Damn right, I will," said Brix. Daphne looked at the men in the hallway, then back at Major.

"What the hell do they feed you Americans?"

"Let's go, beautiful," smiled Brix. "I'd love to learn all about you."

Major just shook his head, then turned to head back into the room. He sat beside the bed, gently taking Elena's hand in his own. She moved slightly, then opened her eyes.

"Am I dreaming?" she whispered.

"No, baby. You're not dreaming." He kissed her sweetly, then kissed the back of her hand. "Why didn't you call me, Elena? Why? I made my feelings clear to you. I love you."

"You never said that," she sniffed.

"I told Daphne to tell you, but I should have done it. You're right. I'm sorry. I've never told a woman that I loved her before, except for my mother and that does not count in this scenario. I'm crazy about you, honey. We're going to be parents," he smiled.

"You're happy?"

"Happy? Are you fucking kidding me? I'm so happy I can't stand it," he laughed.

"The doctor won't let me leave. He said he would get a court order and force me to abort the baby."

"Not happening. I have a small army out there," he grinned. There was a knock on the door, and Sebastian smiled at them.

"Hi, beautiful," he grinned. "Feel like visitors?"

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“Hi, Sebastian. Yes.” Forrest and Alistair walked in, followed by two extremely large older men and two very beautiful women.

“Elena, this is Ally, Doc, and Cruz, all skilled nurses and medics. That’s Gray, our resident OB/gyn back home. She specializes in multiple births and high-risk pregnancies.”

“That’s me,” she frowned. “High-risk.”

“That’s just it, Elena,” she said, standing next to the bed. “It’s not high-risk. In fact, there’s nothing wrong. The original test results were still in the system, and we pulled those. They indicated a normal, healthy seven-week-old fetus.

“The results in the file out there are falsified, but we don’t understand why. Yet. They are not your results.”

“I-I don’t understand. Why do I hurt?” she asked.

“I think you’re experiencing normal pains from the pregnancy, but it’s enhanced because he’s been giving you something to make you cramp.”

“Where is he?” growled Major.

“Relax,” said Gray. “My friend has paged him to get him to come to the hospital. He’s agreed that we need to take you out of here for your own safety.”

“Daphne said there were men that came in and out of her room these last few days.

Several men.” Cruz looked at Doc and walked back out into the hallway. They contacted the tech team, asking them to get access to the hospital security cameras.

“Gray?” said the man at the door.

“Oh, Jonathon. These are my friends. Everyone, Dr. Jonathon Miller.”

“Thank you for helping us,” said Major.

“Not a problem, and I’m sorry this happened. Dr. Hijad is in the physician’s lounge now. He thinks I’ve got the team prepping her for surgery.”

“Well, then,” said Sebastian, “let’s go see what the good doctor has to say.”

“We’ve got her,” said Cruz, walking back into the room with Doc. “You boys take care of the doctor.”

“I’ll be right back,” said Major, kissing her lips. She smiled up at him, and he leaned down toward her ear. “I’ve been waiting to see that face beneath me again.”

Elena blushed, laughing at him as he left with Sebastian, Alistair, and Forrest.

“You’re stuck with us,” smiled Cruz.

“Why are you all so pretty? I mean, seriously, my girlfriends would be so jealous right now,” she said, smiling at them.

“My wife would make sure they kept their hands off,” said Doc. “But thank you. You’re pretty gorgeous yourself.”

“I’m just going to do a quick exam on you,” said Gray. “Are you okay with everyone

being in here?”

“Of course, but shouldn’t someone be guarding me? What if those men come back?”

“Sweetie,” laughed Ally. “Doc and Cruz are former Navy SEALs. No one is going to touch you.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

“They’re prepping her for the surgery now. I’ll make it look official and figure out a way to get the nurses out of the room. I’ve bribed the anesthesiologist, just like you said. He was more than willing to do what I asked. She’ll lose one of her fallopian tubes and, of course, the child, but she’ll be able to have other children. Once she’s in a weakened state, you can take her and do as you wish. I just don’t know why you need me to do this.”

They could hear a voice on the other end of the line but couldn’t understand what was being said. Standing inside the doctor’s lounge, Hijad never even bothered to turn when they entered.

“Yes, I know it’s not my place to question you. I promise she’ll be in a weakened state and compliant with whatever you ask. I’ll give you something that will make her tell you where everything you want is located. Yes, yes, I have it...” He stopped, turning to see the massive men in the doorway. “What are you doing in here? You can’t be here. This is for doctors only.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to need to come with us,” said Major. “It looks like you’ll be needing a doctor.”

Sebastian grabbed the cell phone, staring at the screen. It didn’t list a number, just an unknown caller.

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“Hello, this is the doctor’s brute squad. He won’t be able to help you any longer.”

“Who is this?” said the altered voice.

“Oh, you don’t want to know the answer to that. Just know that you won’t get near Elena. Ever.” The line went dead, and Sebastian stared at the phone, then pocketed it.

“That was rude.”

“Who are you?” asked Dr. Hijad.

“I’m the man that’s going to kill you for attempting to abort my child,” growled Major, moving toward him.

“Don’t kill him here, brother. We want him to bleed out in a ditch somewhere,” said Forrest. “Let’s go, Dr. Death. We’ve got some questions for you.”

Alistair and Sebastian gripped his arms, hauling him from the doctors’ lounge. He glanced at the nurses and security in the hallway staring in his direction.

“Do something! These men are kidnapping me!”

“Sorry, doctor,” said the security guard. “We have a different understanding of what these men are doing.”

“No! No, you won’t get away with this!”

As they hauled him toward the elevators, the doors opened, and two men drew their



weapons, firing not at the VG team but at the doctor. As he fell into a pool of his own blood, nurses screamed, security covering them. Alistair and Forrest raced toward the closing doors, missing it by seconds.

Turning, they sprinted toward the stairwell, then turned to Major and Sebastian.

“Get back to Elena!”

“Shit,” muttered Major, running down the hallway.

He and Sebastian took the steps to the floor above, racing toward her room. When they reached the door, Doc and Cruz were standing guard, their weapons drawn.

“We heard the gunfire from here,” said Doc.

“They killed the doctor but ran. They had no interest in killing us,” said Sebastian. “Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’s doing fine. Brix is back with her clothes. Daphne’s apartment was trashed, but she called the police and is going to file a report of a break-in. She was fine when he left her.”

“Should we bring her with us?” asked Sebastian.

“I don’t know,” said Major. “I just want to know that Elena is okay.” He entered the room, and Gray and Ally were smiling at the young woman. Her color seemed somewhat better, and they were laughing.

“Well, that’s a better picture than what I found earlier,” he grinned.

“Is everything alright?” she asked.

“Everything is perfect. If they say you can leave, we’re leaving now.” Major looked at Gray and Ally, and they knew at once that he would want to leave.

“She’s fine to travel. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with her,” said Gray. “You two are going to have a very healthy baby.”

“Do we know the sex yet?” he asked, staring from Gray to Elena.

“No. We haven’t done any of those tests yet. We’ll do that when we get home.” Major nodded, lifting her in his arms as Doc carried the IV bag. Sebastian had her bags when Alistair and Forrest walked in.

“Did you find them?” asked Major.

“No. We lost them in the parking garage. Dark hair, dark skin, dark clothing. They were trying to hide, and they succeeded,” said Forrest.

“We’re going to need two cars,” said Gray. The men all smiled at her.

“Silly girl, we’re being picked up on the roof.”

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Sure enough, Chipper and Evie were waiting for them on the rooftop landing pad. Their modified jet was able to land horizontally and vertically. When they loaded and took off, they didn't even see the two men across the street watching from the parking garage.

"Boss? We have a problem."

### CHAPTER SIX

"Why didn't you tell me?" whispered Major, holding Elena on his lap. "I had a right to know that you were carrying my child even if you didn't want a relationship with me."

"I didn't want you to think I'd trapped you, Major. I wanted nothing more than to have a relationship with you. We never spoke of anything beyond those few nights, and we didn't really talk about contraception. I was on the patch, but it obviously failed. I fell in love with you the moment I saw you, and then the way you protected me and your friends only made me love you more."

"Baby, I was falling in love with you, too. I'm sorry I didn't make that clear. I should have forced you to go to Louisiana so that you could be protected by my family."

"Protected from what?" she asked. "What's going on? I don't understand why that doctor would want me to lose a baby. I don't know that doctor at all. I'd never seen him before."

"We're not sure either, but we're going to find out. Did you notice anything strange

when you returned to London? Maybe someone was following you or watching you while you were staying with Daphne.”

“I didn’t pay attention. I have to be honest. We went out a few times for dinner, we went to a couple of museums, but that’s all.”

“Does Daphne work?”

“No, not really,” she said, smiling. “Daphne is a trust-fund baby. Her father is an Earl or something. She volunteers for a lot of projects and does some work with one of the auction houses. She has a degree in antiquities, which was why we connected in school and got along so well.”

“So, she’s not married?” asked Brix. Elena looked at him and smiled.

“No. She’s divorced. She was forced to marry a man when she was very young. He was thirty years her senior.”

“Forced?” frowned Brix.

“It’s not my story, Brix. I’m happy to give you her number if you’d like to call her.”

“I already have her number,” he said confidently.

“Major?” said Cruz, walking toward him. “Let me get her vitals and get her settled in the back. She needs to rest and sleep if possible.”

“Of course,” said Major, standing to set her down.

“Come on, honey. Let me make sure everything is still perfect,” smiled Cruz. Elena stared at him and sucked in a breath.

“Could you not do that?” she asked. Cruz frowned at her, tilting his head.

“Do what?”

“Smile at me. That is dangerous.”

“We tell him that all the time,” said Ally. “Good thing we’re married, and we love his wife.” Cruz just shook his head and gently led her down the aisle to the bedroom in the back.

“Is he really that good-looking to all of you?” frowned Sebastian.

“Good-looking? Honey, that doesn’t even describe that man, and I can attest because I’m married to one sexy beast,” said Gray.

“Me too,” said Ally.

“But that man makes me think sinful, lustful, heated thoughts. Those perfectly white teeth, with that dimple in his chin and the little one at the corner of his mouth, and all that dark hair sprinkled with a few grays, his tanned skin. And he’s a sweet guy! Holy shit,” she said, fanning herself. “It’s too much. Just too much.”

“I don’t see it,” said Alistair, shrugging.

“I think that’s a good thing,” laughed Ally. “It’s just proof that you don’t have to be the biggest, most muscular, or fastest man to be the hottest.”

“I wouldn’t say any of that,” laughed Brix. “Cruz is one of the fastest men I know. He was an amazing SEAL with an understated strength.”

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“One of the best,” said Doc. “He was clever. Not just smart. Clever. Do you know what I mean?”

“I think so,” laughed Ally, “but that only makes him hotter.”

“Who’s hotter?” asked Cruz, walking toward them. They all turned at the same time.

“You!” He jumped back, staring at them.

“What the hell have you people been talking about?” he asked.

“You,” laughed Major. “Apparently, all the women think you’re the hot one in the group. The smile, teeth, sweetness, intelligence, you got it all, brother.”

“I don’t have it all. I have good genetics. Besides, the only opinion I care about is my wife’s.”

“Which makes you all the hotter,” laughed Gray, turning to look at a magazine in her lap.

“You’re making me squirm,” he grinned. He slapped something on the table, and they all stared at it. “This was pinned to the inside of her gown. I’ve disabled it, but I’m pretty sure it was a tracking device.”

“Shit, I never thought to check for that,” said Major. “Why in the hell did they want her? They wanted the baby gone, her disabled, and then someone was coming to get her. Why?”

“I think that’s where you guys have to take over,” said Ally. “I’m going to the back to sit with her for a while and make sure she’s alright.”

“Hey, Ally?” called Major. He turned to the others. “All of you. Thank you for coming. Thank you for being here.”

“Don’t make me flip you the bird, Major. I’m a lady. We’re family, honey. That’s what we do.”

“Is everything okay?” asked Elena, watching Ally taking her blood pressure.

“Everything is perfect, sweetie. You’re going to be great now. Where we’re taking you is the safest place on the planet, and if I do say so myself, we have the best medical team our side of the Mississippi.” Elena stared at her, but Ally could tell there was more she needed to know. “Ask me whatever you like.”

“I know that Major said he was okay with this. He even said he was falling in love with me, too. But do you think that’s him feeling obligated?” Ally laughed, clutching her hand.

“Elena, let me tell you about our family. It’s a crazy family, and we’re not all blood-related. A long time ago, a man by the name of Nine started this security group called REAPER. They were all former SEALs, MARSOC, Rangers, all types of special operators, or Special Forces.”

“I understand,” she nodded.

“I met my husband, Vince, while he was undercover. He’d been an FBI agent at one time. A human trafficker kidnapped his wife and daughter, had them addicted to drugs, and was using them within days. His daughter died, and then the kidnapper killed his wife.”

“That’s horrible,” she said, shaking her head.

“It was horrible, but Vince was determined to find them. He’d formed an alliance with an unusual man,” smiled Ally. “In fact, that man is part of our family now as well. Anyway, while Vince was undercover, he, Nine, and their team reconnected. They caught the man responsible.

“During all of this, I was working at a clinic and had taken care of a young girl who’d been abused by a local motorcycle club. Vince brought her in. He was dressed as this big, badass biker. At first, I was terrified because I’d been part of that culture at one time. Not willingly. But he came back a few days later to check on me. He was so concerned for me that he wouldn’t let me take the bus home.

“Elena, I knew almost immediately that I was in love with that man. I’m not a very big woman, but he just made me feel like an elf. But I was safe, enveloped in his arms, in his masculinity. He brought me back to their compound and asked me to stay. Just like that. Three days, Elena. Three days is all it took for us to fall in love. Only a few weeks later, I was pregnant. Vince was amazing through it all.”

“That’s so beautiful,” sniffed Elena.

“I’m not the only one, honey. All of the men and women at Belle Fleur have similar stories. We fall in love fast, hard, and forever. It’s a common thread.” She pulled the blanket up around her, patting her shoulder. “Now, I can see very clearly that Major loves you so much it hurts. The question is, do you feel the same? Can you leave everything you know and be his wife, his partner? Are you willing to have a career with our family, with our team?”

Elena looked at the woman and smiled, nodding her head.

“I’ve dreamed of nothing else. I just wasn’t sure how he would feel about having



children. I should have called him, and I'm sorry I didn't. Daphne tried to get me to call him. I'm glad she hacked into my phone," she laughed.

"She sounds like a good friend," said Ally. "Get some sleep."

"Ally? Thank you."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:36 am*

“The footage on the hospital cameras is pretty grainy. Shame on them for not updating their security systems,” said Pigsty. “However, I got some footage of them running across the street to the parking garage for the medical buildings. They are either Middle Eastern or Egyptian. I’m still working on the faces.”

“They wanted that doctor dead. He was on the phone with someone, and in the timespan it took us to end the call and speak with him, they had someone there to kill him,” said Major. “That’s not a little thing.”

“No, it’s definitely not,” said Eric. “When Elena is here and settled, we need to ask some questions about her father.”

“Not her mother?” asked Brix.

“No. The mother is still married and lives with her second husband near the sea. They’re retired and, apparently, live a good life. There’s nothing that indicates that she has anything to do with this. But there’s something strange about the father and how he died,” said Eric.

“What do you mean?” asked Major. “She said he died in a tunnel collapse during a dig.”

“He did. But according to Egyptian authorities, that tunnel had been shored up just a week before. It was considered stable and safe. Whatever we might think, the Egyptian safety councils are serious about that shit on dig sites. They send some of their best engineers to look at those things and make sure everyone is safe. We’re trying to find out if any of the engineers are still alive. They wouldn’t have given it

the green light if it weren't okay. They don't want men dying in their historic locations.

"That tunnel was safe, and he was cleared to work in it. May is trying to help us find out exactly what he was looking for, but so far, it's nothing," said Eric.

"What do you mean? Wouldn't it be things like the other tombs? Maybe sarcophagi?" asked Sebastian.

"We don't think so," said Luke. "Or at least, May doesn't think so. There was no sign that it was the site of a burial. He was working under a special dig license by the Department of Antiquities, but it gives no information at all."

"Great. So we have a dig in a supposedly secure, safe tunnel that collapsed, killing one archaeologist..."

"Two," said Eric. "Another was killed as well. Dr. Yasmin Goldmeir. It was the two of them and six workers down there."

"Alright. Eight people total were killed in a supposedly safe area. Then suddenly, twenty years later, someone is going to come after Elena. Why?" asked Major.

"That's the question we're going to try and find out. In the meantime, we've sent Travis, Chris, and Carter to watch out for Daphne. We suspect that she might be watched or followed. Her apartment was a fucking mess, and someone was definitely looking for something. When you get here, if Elena feels up to it, we need to talk about all of this."

"We should be there in about two hours," said Sebastian. "We'll keep you up to date."

The screens went dark, and the men all stared at one another, then down at their notes. How in the world was all of this connected?

“What was Elena working on when you guys met her?” asked Doc.

“She was working in the museum because of something another archaeologist did. Something about giving her weak information that she passed along and then was blamed for,” said Brix.

“What’s with these assholes?” frowned Cruz. “Remember the jerk that did May wrong? Are they all egomaniacs?”

“It looks like it,” said Major. “But you bring up a good point. Maybe he had something to do with it. She was helping to create a new exhibit at the museum, but I don’t think she was actually working on any digs.”

“So, this could have something to do with this other archaeologist, her father, the museum, or none of the above,” frowned Alistair.

“That’s about right,” nodded Sebastian. They were all quiet for a long moment, then Sebastian looked over at his friend. “If we forgot to say it, congratulations, brother. She’s amazing.” Major laughed, shaking his head.

“Thank you. Yeah, she’s pretty fucking special. I knew it the moment we met and then spending more time with her, I couldn’t imagine letting her go, but I thought I had to,” he smirked. “I’m gonna be a dad. Oh, shit. I’m gonna be a dad.”

“Brother,” laughed Alistair, “you just figured that out?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I need to call Mom and Dad.” He dialed the number on the tablet then looked down at their faces.

“Something you forgot to tell us,” smirked Jalen.

“Dad, I’m so sorry. Mom.” He shook his head, smiling with tears in his eyes.

“It’s alright, Major,” laughed Stormy. “We’re so happy for you. I can’t wait to meet her. We’ve got your cottage ready for her, and we’re clearing out one of the rooms for a nursery.”

“You guys think of everything,” he grinned. “I’m gonna be a dad.”

“You’re gonna be a great dad,” smiled Jalen. “We can’t wait to meet her and welcome her to the family.”

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“Does she have any special dietary needs?” asked Stormy. “I mean, does she eat meat? Does she prefer fish to chicken?”

“Mom,” he laughed, “I don’t know that yet. I promise I’ll let you know when I know.”

“Alright, we’ll see you soon,” said Jalen. “And Major? Don’t worry about a thing. We’re going to protect your girl and the child.”

“I know, Dad. I know.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Hiro? Pigsty? What do we have?” asked Luke, sitting across from the nerds.

“Whatever her father was looking for was considered ‘classified’ by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities and the British Department of Antiquities.”

“Wait, he was working for both?” frowned Eric.

“He was working with both. We’re not sure how or why, but I can tell you that if this was about a sarcophagus, a tomb, a temple, a pyramid, anything remotely Egyptian, the British would not have been involved at all.”

“What about the other archaeologist?” asked Eric.

“Goldmeir. She was well-known and well-respected in the archaeology community.

But she did not specialize in Egyptian archaeology.”

“Then what was her specialty, Hiro? I mean, what else would she be doing digging in the desert of Egypt?” asked Luke.

“She was a biblical archaeologist.”

“Biblical? Like she dug up ruins or things mentioned in the bible?” frowned Eric.

“Exactly. She wasn’t a spring chicken. She was in her early sixties at the time and had been doing this for years. By all accounts, she was the expert on biblical archaeology. Anyone who wanted to know anything about the subject went to her.

“According to May, she discovered several lost scrolls and a crucified hand. It’s the only one ever found in the world to prove that the Romans did indeed crucify their victims.” Pigsty looked at the two men, who seemed utterly confused.

“Why would they be there? Why would they be in Egypt?” asked Eric. “I admit that I’m not a biblical scholar, but what would they be looking for there?”

“I can’t answer that,” said Hiro, shaking his head. “May is on her way back from a conference in San Francisco. Once she’s here, we can get better insight into what they might have been looking for.”

“What about things like finances, books, anything that might have been suspicious about either one of them?” asked Luke.

“Both made modest incomes. It’s not exactly a profession where they get rich. If you find true archaeological treasures, it usually belongs to the state or country in which it was found. You might get some sort of reward from the museum or government, but it’s not a lot. Most of these men and women are paid by their respective universities,

museums, governments, and sometimes private donors to conduct the digs. They occasionally write a book or participate in a documentary or something like that.

“Aasad Fayek had a life insurance policy of fifty thousand and a few hundred dollars in his bank account. That’s all. Goldmeir had similar, except she had about two hundred thousand in a savings account from an inheritance given to her by her parents. I’ve looked this over. There’s nothing suspicious financially for either one,” said Pigsty.

“And still nothing on why they were digging there?” asked Eric.

“No. Not yet. We’re hoping that they’ll give more information once we have May and Elena speak with them,” said Hiro.

“Hey, guys,” said Sly, walking into the room. “I got some hits back on our Dr. Hijad. He was an Iranian-born surgeon specializing in female care. Graduated from Oxford, did his residency in London, and has been operating a private practice for fifteen years. Five years ago, he bought a rather large estate outside of London.”

“Large. How large?” asked Eric.

“Massive. The home is thirty-one thousand square feet, a castle really. It’s more than four hundred years old with three hundred acres of gardens, forests, ponds, all of it.”

“Is he married?” asked Luke.

“Yes. His wife and son were both visiting her parents in Glasgow for the last two weeks. The press snapped this photo of them getting off the plane. She’s wearing dark glasses, but I’m not able to tell if she’s upset or not.”

“I might be a little behind times, but do doctors make that kind of money?” asked



Eric.

“No,” said Hiro, shaking his head. “The price tag on that home was eighty-seven million.”

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“What the fuck?” muttered Luke and Eric together.

“How is he affording that home? I mean, he can’t possibly be stealing enough money for it, so he’s got to be doing something on the side. Does he have any connections to Iranian officials? The military or government?” asked Eric.

“Again, we’re still looking. If you want my advice, send one of the boys guarding Daphne to the wife’s home and interview her. They’re in London now.”

“It’s a good idea,” said Luke. “Ask Chris to head over to their home. Hopefully, she’ll speak to him.”

“I’ll be back by nightfall,” said Chris.

“Be careful, brother,” said Carter. “I can get there quickly if I need to.”

Chris nodded at his friends, jumping on the train and heading north to his destination. Just north of Soham sat the historic home. The massive gray stone structure looked like something straight out of a Charles Dickens novel. There were a few cars parked out front, but nothing that indicated mass chaos inside. He rang the doorbell and waited. When it opened, he was surprised to see a little boy of about nine.

“Hello,” said the boy.

“Hello,” smiled Chris. “Is your mother home?”

“Yes, sir.” He left the door ajar and turned, running toward what Chris assumed was

his mother. When a young woman walked back toward him, he was surprised to be greeted by a fair-skinned redhead.

“May I help you?” she said in a heavy Scottish accent.

“I’m looking for Mrs. Hijad,” he said.

“That’s me. If you’re here to sell me something, it’s truly not the right time.”

“No,” he smiled. “I’m not here to sell you anything. My name is Chris Paul, and I work for a security agency that’s investigating something that we believe your late husband was involved in.” Her smile faded, and she nodded at him.

“Come in,” she said quietly. He entered the foyer and stared at the beautiful, massive structure around him.

“Your home is truly beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “My family owns several around the United Kingdom.”

“Your family?” he frowned.

“Yes. My family owns a number of businesses. Whiskey distilleries, offshore oil rigs, that sort of thing.”

“And you don’t have security here?” he asked, surprised.

“We do. Everything is on camera, and my team is strategically hidden. That’s how I knew it was safe to let you in. They must know you or have seen you before.” Now, Chris was even more confused. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned slowly.

“How you doin’, Paul?” smirked the man.

“I’ll be damned. Giamarco.”

“You know this man, Albert?”

“I do, Moira. We were both U.S. Navy SEALs but on different teams. Chris was on one of the best.”

“You called him Paul,” she said, confused.

“My name is Chris Paul,” he said. “Sorry, it’s confusing.”

“What’s up, man? What brings you out here to speak with Moira?” Chris noticed that for the second time he used the woman’s first name.

“Let’s sit,” she said, waving them into the living room. “I am curious what would bring you to England to speak with me.”

“Your husband was killed at the hospital, but we’d discovered that he was involved in an incident with a young woman. Our investigation told us that he was going to perform unnecessary surgery on the woman, abort a child she was carrying, and then turn her over to men that we believe wanted to harm her.”

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The woman said nothing, just stared down at her hands. Albert reached for them, giving them a squeeze like a father would. But Chris had the distinct feeling it wasn't fatherly affection at all. He looked at Albert, who said nothing at first.

"Moira and I have a special relationship," said the man. The woman looked up at him with admiration and love.

"I'm not here to judge, brother. I'm just trying to help keep a woman alive."

"I came here about eighteen months ago when Moira called asking for beefed-up security around the home. She'd asked her husband not to return, and he wasn't happy about that. He was living in a small flat near the hospital."

"I see," said Chris.

"I don't think you do," said Moira. "My husband was an egomaniac. He was a risk-taker in the operating room. Most of the time, it worked, but sometimes, he put the life of his patients in extraordinary danger."

"Was he reported?" asked Chris.

"He was. By me. I'm an anesthesiologist by training. I used to work with him but then refused. I was in the process of obtaining a divorce."

"I'm as old as you, Chris. Though you damn sure don't look a day over forty," grinned the man. Chris grinned back, nodding. "I couldn't help but fall in love with her. She's smart, beautiful, and a wonderful mother. You know what it's like. You're

an old salty SEAL for so many years you forget to give yourself a life. I think I have one now.”

“We have one,” she said, squeezing his hand.

“I’m happy for you both, really, I am. I’m just trying to figure out why your husband would be willing to do something so terrible to someone he didn’t even know. Money?”

“It could have been, although I was giving him alimony,” said Moira.

“Did he still have ties to anyone in Iran?” he asked.

“Only his family that I’m aware of, and they’re really nice people,” she said. Chris looked at Albert.

“She’s right. They’re hard-working people who gave their son a chance to succeed. He’s treated them like shit, but Moira bought them a home so they would always have a nice roof over their heads. As far as I know, he doesn’t contact any of them.”

“Then what he did, he must have done solely for money. Someone paid him to harm the woman.”

“I wish I could tell you that I was surprised by it,” said Moira, “but I’m not. He was obsessed with fame and fortune. I only wish I’d seen it sooner.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt your day or anything,” said Chris, standing. “I’ll be on my way.”

“Chris? I hope you’re all doing well,” said Albert. “Everything is kosher here; you have my word.”

“Brother, I trust you,” said Chris, shaking the man’s hand. “I really do hope you find your happiness. Good luck to you, ma’am.”

“Thank you,” she smiled.

Chris stood to leave the room and noticed a stack of books on the huge mahogany desk. He pointed to them, and she nodded. Picking one up, he thumbed through it.

“They were my late husband’s,” she said. “I was going to box them up and send them to his flat in London. As far as I knew, he had no interest in such things, but he bought those anyway.” Chris looked at them both, nodding.

“You’ve been very helpful.”

“Albert Giamarco? Are you fucking kidding me?” smiled Travis. “I haven’t seen that asshole in years.”

“He looks good,” said Chris. “Gray, weathered, but he’s solid as a rock and definitely in love. Good news is, she’s in love with him.”

“That is good news, but what do you think?” asked Carter.

“I think our doctor was working with someone to find something very, very special.”

## CHAPTER NINE

“Elena?” whispered Major. “Honey, we’re here.”

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She opened her eyes and smiled up at him, winding her arm around his neck and pulling him closer. He kissed her tenderly at first, then with such passion and desire, it took his breath away.

“I’ve missed you,” she smiled.

“I’ve missed you more,” he grinned. “Come on. Let me introduce you to everyone. Do you feel like walking, or should I carry you?”

“Major, I’m perfectly capable of walking. Gray said there was nothing wrong with me or the baby.”

“I’m just being careful,” he grinned. Tucking her hand in the crook of his arm, he walked down the aisle of the plane and stepped out to see his parents and about seventy-five other people smiling at them.

“Major!” said his mother, kissing his cheek.

“Hi, Mom. Dad,” he smiled. “This is Dr. Elena Fayek. The woman I’m going to marry.”

“Oh, she’s lovely,” said Stormy, wrapping her arms around the young woman. “You are a true Egyptian beauty.”

“Thank you,” smiled Elena. “You’re so young. How are you his mother?”

“See, that’s why you’re going to keep her,” laughed Stormy. “Elena, this is my



husband, Jalen.”

“It’s so nice to meet you,” she said, extending her hand. Jalen only pushed it aside and hugged her.

“We’re family. We hug here,” he laughed.

“Where is she? Where is she?” came the duet of voices. Claudette and Mama Irene were storming toward them.

“Oh. Oh, now, she’s just lovely, Major. Well done, baby,” said Mama Irene.

“She is a beauty with brains. My kind of woman,” smirked Claudette. “Alright now, we’re going to get this wedding taken care of. Preferences for flowers, colors, food, music?”

“Uh, Mama Irene, Claudette, maybe you could wait until we’re settled in the cottage for this,” smiled Major.

“No, no, it’s alright,” giggled Elena. “They’re lovely. I like lilies and crocus. My favorite colors are purple and green.”

“Mardi Gras colors,” whispered Claudette to her mother. “She’s a winner.”

“Food? Anything that doesn’t eat me first. And music, anything that makes people happy. I’m pretty easy to please.” She placed a hand on her stomach, then over her mouth. “On second thought. Nothing with milk.”

“Oh, dear. Those first few weeks can be a bother,” said Irene. “As Major said, I’m Mama Irene, and this is one of my six daughters, Claudette. I also have nine sons.”

“Holy cow!”

“Indeed,” laughed the older woman. “Alright, Major. You get your girl to the cottage. I’ll have Sage bring around the rings for you to look at there. Claudette and I will plan for the wedding, and Gwen will bring around some dresses. We’ve got it scheduled for tomorrow at four.”

“Mama Irene...”

“Don’t start with me, Major. You got that woman with child. You’re gonna marry her unless she don’t want you.” She stared at Elena, who was still giggling over the old woman. Elena looked at Major, frowning playfully.

“Well, he is kind of quiet and stubborn sometimes. But I do love him,” she grinned. He laughed, hugging her. “I think I’ll marry him if that’s alright.”

“That’s fine, just fine,” she nodded.

“Then there’s a party to plan,” smiled Claudette. “Let’s go.”

“I love your family,” laughed Elena, walking slowly with Major down the paths toward the main property. “This place is huge!”

“My family is wonderful,” he nodded. “And yes, this place is huge. Later, I’ll take you around and show you everything. We owe all of this to Mama Irene and Matthew.”

“Do they really have fifteen children?”

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“They do indeed. Although if you ask them, everyone here belongs to them. They’re extraordinary humans. Unlike anyone you’ve ever met before.”

“Your parents are beautiful. Truly. They’re stunning people,” she said. “I guess that means we’ll have beautiful children as well.”

“They’ll be perfect, just like you,” he said, kissing her.

“I should have trusted you,” she said, turning to look up at him. “I should have called you and trusted that you would do the right thing, that your feelings were genuine. I’m so sorry.”

“We’re not going to talk about that. I should have hogtied you and made you come to Louisiana,” he grinned. “I just preferred to give you the choice. We’re here now, and you and me are going to be Mr. and Dr. Major Carson.”

“Thank you for that,” she smiled. “I think I’m okay with taking a break from work for a while. I really am excited to see what May and Thomas are working on.”

When they reached his cottage, his parents were already seated on the front porch with Walker, Magnolia, Leif, Ellie, and Brix.

“It’s so good to see you!” said Ellie, racing toward her. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Me too,” she smiled. “You must be Magnolia.”

“Yes. I’ve heard so much about you,” she smiled. But Elena could see there was pain

in her smile.

“Let me get her settled, then I’ll come back out,” said Major.

“No, no,” she said, touching his arm. “I’d like to just sit out here and rock for a while if that’s alright.”

“Whatever you want,” he grinned.

“Well, that’s a sure sign that he loves you,” laughed Walker. “He doesn’t give in to anyone about anything. Stubborn as a mule.”

“Like his father,” laughed Stormy. “But they’re worth it. All of them.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I’ve been known to be stubborn as well,” smiled Elena. “When I get into my work, I can’t seem to leave it alone.”

“Speaking of work,” smiled the very handsome man walking toward her. In fact, it was two very handsome men. Both tall and wide, with a bearing that said, ‘I’m in charge.’

“Elena, this is Luke Robicheaux and Eric Bongard. They are our team leaders with Voodoo Guardians.”

“It’s very nice to meet you both. But wait, aren’t you still in the Army?” asked Elena.

“Well, that’s a long story. We all were up for reenlistment, and when Magnolia was taken, Walker asked for early exit, and it was granted. The rest of us sort of followed suit. We’re all retired from the Army and now working with our family.”

“That’s wonderful,” she nodded.

“Do you feel up to a few questions?” asked Luke.

“Of course. I’m so grateful to all of you for coming for me,” she said, nodding at the men.

“Elena, do you remember anything about what your father was working on when he died?” asked Eric. “Anything at all about the dig?”

“Not really,” she said, shaking her head. “I was only eleven, and I was more interested in just digging and discovering something than knowing what I was digging for. Why do you ask?”

“We think that doctor at the hospital was connected to someone who might have wanted information you have on the last dig your father managed.”

“That’s crazy,” she laughed. “That was twenty years ago. That tomb was closed by the government and never re-opened. They said it had no value other than a horrible grave for the men and woman inside.”

“Elena, that tunnel was deemed safe and had been shored up by the engineers just the week prior,” said Luke. The look on her face told him she knew nothing of it. “I’m sorry. But whatever your father was digging for was a joint effort between the Egyptian and British governments.”

“Honey, would you have anything of your father’s that might help us?” asked Major.

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“Yes. I mean, maybe. I have all of his papers, documents, books, all of that in a small storage shed near my apartment.”

“Is it secure?” frowned Walker.

“I mean, I think so. It has security. I mean, the security isn’t great, but they have it. I’ve never had anyone bother it.”

“They might not know it belongs to you,” said Luke.

“Oh, it doesn’t,” she smiled. “It belongs to my stepfather. It’s under his name, not mine. He had several units around the city for his grocery business. When I needed one, he gave me that one.”

“See if Carter or Travis can get over there and get into the unit,” said Luke. “Have everything shipped back here as soon as possible.”

“Won’t they need the keys to the locks?” frowned Elena. Eric gave her a sly grin, shaking his head.

“Not if they want to keep their jobs.”

## CHAPTER TEN

“You’re sure you’ll be okay here with her,” asked Travis.

“I’ll be fine, brother. I’m going to drive her out to her parent’s estate and make sure

the security knows that there's been a problem. When that's done, I'll take the train back and meet you guys at the jet at Gatwick. Just get that shit out of the storage unit, and we'll get it back to Louisiana."

Carter and Travis boarded the Osprey as Savannah took off toward Egypt. They'd been given special clearance to land in the middle of the night, hoping that they could avoid being seen while they emptied the storage unit.

As the chopper flew away, Chris loaded Daphne's bags into her tiny little sports car. He stared at the driver's seat, wondering if he would even fit.

"What the hell is this thing built for, a ten-year-old?" he frowned. She laughed, shaking her head.

"I didn't buy it so that a six-foot-three man could drive around in it. Besides, it's not mine. It's my sister's."

"Oh, is she living with your parents?" he asked as they pulled away from the curb.

"No. She passed away about fifteen years ago. I was just heading back to boarding school, and she got sick."

"I'm sorry. That fucking sucks," he frowned. "Do you mind if I ask how she died?"

"I wish I knew. The doctors told my parents it was an unidentified virus of some sort, but they had no name for it, no cure, and anything they tried failed. She was only sixteen. She had her entire life ahead of her."

"I'm really sorry about that."

"No, it's okay. This was her gift from my parents for her sixteenth birthday. They

kept it for years, and then I asked if I would drive it. I think they were happy not to have to look at it any longer in the garage. What about you? Wife? Children?"

"Yes, on the wife. No, on the children. Ironically, Elizabeth is a kindergarten teacher at our elementary school on-property. She's freaking amazing. We tried having children. Hell, we never not tried," he laughed. "I guess there were other plans for us."

"Sounds like she touches a lot of children's lives," smiled the young woman.

"She does. We met at Belle Fleur during a party that Irene was throwing."

"Irene?" frowned Daphne.

"Oh, sorry. Irene and Matthew Robicheaux are sort of our patron saints. They donated all of the land where we live, our businesses, all of it," he smiled.

"That's incredible."

"Yep. My Elizabeth was being forced into a marriage she didn't want and defied her parents. I made sure they knew that they'd have to get through me first."

"She's a lucky girl," whispered Daphne. Chris stared at her, seeing the pain in her face.

"What about you? Married?"



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“Obviously not, or my husband would be with us,” she smirked. She paused for a long moment, just staring out at the retreating cityscape and looking toward the country. “I was, though. Once.”

“Didn’t end well?”

“Didn’t start well. In a lot of ways, the aristocracy of Britain is still old-fashioned. We don’t marry our cousins any longer, thank goodness, but our parents often force us into proper, profitable, pretentious relationships.”

“Ah, the three p’s,” he grinned.

“He was thirty years my senior. And not a pretty thirty years. I suspect you’re about twenty-five years older than I am.”

“Sure, let’s go with that,” laughed Chris.

“Wait, you’re older?” she frowned. “Never mind. Don’t tell me. Anyway, he wasn’t a nice man. He believed the wife should be submissive at all times. I begged my parents to let me make my own choice. I was terrified of them and what might happen to me if they got angry.

“It was silly, really. Elena helped me to realize that later. They just kept saying that he was a good man, respectable. But they didn’t see what I was seeing in private. The night of my wedding,” she swallowed, staring out the window.

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to,” said Chris.

“Actually, it’s helping me, I think,” she smiled. He nodded for her to continue. “The night of my wedding, he beat me with his belt, telling me that if I were going to act like a child, I would be treated as one.”

“What the fuck?”

“He didn’t like that I danced with someone else at our wedding. A fast song. He raped me, beat me again for good measure, and left. He said he was going into London for a few nights to allow me to think about what I’d done.”

“What did you do?” he asked.

“I called my parents, and they came right over. My father was appalled. He called the police, and my ex-husband was arrested. Because it was his first offense, he was given probation, mandatory counseling, and a fine. I was granted an annulment at once.”

“That’s fucking pathetic,” growled Chris.

“Yes, it’s one of the many things I like about your American justice system. You tend to punish offenders.”

“I wish that were always true, Daphne. Different states have different laws, so you never know. But we do side with the victims more times than not. Is he still around?” he asked cautiously.

“He is. He had to sell his estate in the country and now lives in a townhouse in London. It damaged his reputation, and he blames me.”

“Does he bother you?” he asked.

“Once in a while, he shows up where I am as if to say, ‘I can get to you.’ But I try to ignore him and pretend it doesn’t bother me.”

“Are you sure you’ll feel safe with your parents? I can bring you back to Louisiana with us. Didn’t you and Brix hit it off?” he asked with a smug expression. Daphne laughed, shaking her head.

“We didn’t ‘hit it off,’” she smiled. “He’s very nice and was very helpful with Elena. I’ll always appreciate that about him. But I’m not sure. He seems to be looking for a fling. I’m afraid I’m a bit past that phase.”

“Listen, I’ve known all of the boys their entire lives. I was there when they were born. Brix is from an amazing family. His parents are both badass as they come. His father and grandfather were both Navy SEALs.”

“His eyes are startling,” said Daphne.

“His grandmother has eyes that almost seem other-worldly. They are a startling light bluish gray with swirls of other colors. His grandfather, Zulu, is an enormous man, built like a mountain. His father is a twin. His name is Tyler, but they call him Tiger. His mother was in the military as well, and they’re going to love you.”

“You really like them,” she smiled.

“I love the people I work with, Daphne. They are like family to me. I was an awkward, shy kid, hell, an awkward, shy man sometimes. Elizabeth changed me, my commander and team changed me. All of these men are special. All of them.”

“Perhaps I should visit Louisiana sometime soon,” she smiled.

“I’m going to bet that Brix would like that very much.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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“What the fuck? She said there were a few boxes. There must be four or five dozen boxes. Do we take them all?” asked Carter.

“Take them all, brother,” laughed Travis. “Good thing we rented a truck with a cover.”

Taking two boxes at a time, they were able to load the truck quickly. Before they left, they followed directions to Elena’s small apartment to see if she’d left anything behind that could be useful. As they walked up the steps, her door was slightly ajar, the lights on inside.

Travis held up a fist, reaching for his weapon beneath his stealth vest. Carter nodded, moving low along the wall until he was right at the door. Two men were speaking rapidly, but they couldn’t understand anything they were saying.

Carter held up three fingers, slowly lowering them one by one. Travis kicked the door in the rest of the way as two men jumped, turning toward them with knives.

“Gun beats knife,” said Travis. “Put them down.”

He waved his free hand toward the floor of the apartment, waiting for the men to comply. The apartment had been completely ransacked, with nothing left to save. Sheets, towels, pillows, everything had been shredded or destroyed.

“Who are you?” asked Carter.

The two men just stared at him, then he spoke again in Egyptian. Their eyes went

wide, and they shook their heads.

“Who sent you?” asked Travis.

The men were seated on the windowsill, eyeing the door, praying for an opportunity to escape. If they decided to jump, they would both be dead from the four-story fall.

Carter heard glass shatter but didn’t see anything in the tiny one-room apartment. Then both men fell forward, arrows straight through the backs of their necks, coming all the way through to their throats.

“Fuck,” muttered Carter. “Get to the truck!”

While Travis called General Bakkar, a friend of the team, to let him know of what happened, he assured the men he would take care of it all. Safely back to the Osprey, they loaded the boxes and headed back to England to pick up Chris.

When Chris pulled the tiny sports car through the massive iron gates of Bishop Manor, he nearly choked on his own saliva. This wasn’t a country house or average mansion. This was an estate, an ancestral castle, country house, and mansion all rolled into one.

“Holy shit,” he muttered. “Why in the fuck aren’t you living here?” She laughed, shaking her head.

“I love my parents, Chris, but they can be overwhelming. You can imagine, after losing one daughter and nearly losing me to the man they chose for me, they’re quite protective even at my age.”

“That’s not a bad thing, Daphne. They love you and want what’s best for you. Even parents sometimes make mistakes. I’m sure they’re very proud of you,” said Chris in

a fatherly tone.

“They are,” she said as they traversed the long drive toward the house. “I work for an auction house in London, and I’ve been able to secure some wonderful pieces. I know they love me, and I’m grateful that they care so much.”

Chris stopped the car and stepped out, grabbing the two bags from the back of the miniature car.

“I’ll take you back to the train station. Would you like to come in and meet my parents?”

“Let’s not give them the wrong impression,” he smiled.

The doors opened, and Chris shook his head, smiling at the older couple. Daphne looked at him, shrugging her shoulders as her reddish-brown hair came loose from the clip holding it on top of her head.

“You’re adopted,” he said matter-of-factly.

“By the best people in the world,” she smiled.

Two hours later, Chris hailed a taxi after disembarking the train and headed to the others. They’d just finished loading everything when he arrived.

“Everything okay?” asked Travis.

“Interesting, but yes. Okay. She’s a great girl, and I sure hope Brix doesn’t sit around on his ass and lose her.”

“You playing matchmaker?” grinned Carter.

“Let’s just say whatever Brix’s concerns are, they’re unwarranted. They’re lovely, lovely people. I am a bit worried about her, though.”



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“Ladies? Can we get a move on? We’ve got to get back to Belle Fleur,” smirked Savannah.

“Wow! Were you always this mean, or did your husband make you like this?” grinned Carter.

“My husband made me a lot of things, but mean is not one of them. I think you’re all too young to hear about all the other things,” she smirked. “I’m a bit surprised you didn’t make the woman come back with us.”

“I thought about it,” said Chris. “She’s been through a lot in her young life, and I think she really likes Brix, but I’m not going to interfere in that. He needs to figure it out and figure it out quickly, or she’ll be gone.”

“What do you mean?” asked Carter.

“She’s a society girl. Folks are loaded, and I do mean loaded. She’s the only child living. Sooner or later, they’re going to be screaming for babies.”

“This sounds vaguely like Mattie and her family,” said Travis.

“Kind of, although Mattie wasn’t interested in returning to England at all. I think Daphne has a good relationship with her parents. They just need her to start popping out heirs.”

“Well, Brix has to make that decision himself,” said Carter. “Are we supposed to dig through those boxes?”

“No,” said Chris. “We wait until May and Elena can look at them.”

“You got this, Savannah?” called Travis.

“I’m good, honey. You all get some sleep.” Travis nodded, giving her a wave in the cockpit.

“You heard the lady. Let’s get some sleep.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“It’s okay,” said Elena, looking at the men around her. “There wasn’t much left in the apartment anyway. I took all of my clothes to Daphne’s. But I have no idea what they were looking for.”

“We’re pretty sure it has something to do with your father, honey,” said Major. “The guys will be back soon, and we can start to look through some of the items.”

“You said that Dr. Hijad had some books that made you think something strange was going on, that could include my father. What were the books about?” asked Elena.

“His wife said he’d never had an interest in history or antiquities before. He wasn’t a weekend archaeologist. He didn’t even like planting in the garden. Yet he had eleven books on biblical excavations.”

“Biblical?” she whispered. “That wasn’t my father’s specialty. He never even uttered those words.”

“They might not have been his, but they were words that Dr. Yasmin Goldmeir used often,” said Luke.

“Dr. Goldmeir? No,” she laughed. “No. My father wouldn’t have worked with her; I can assure you.”

“She was in those tunnels with him, Elena. She was one of the people killed when the tunnel collapsed.” She shook her head, frowning at the others.

“This can’t be. They disagreed on everything. She felt certain that Jesus had spent time in Egypt after the time of the pharaohs, and my father didn’t believe it. They used to argue about it publicly.”

“Something must have changed,” said Eric.

“This is all so confusing. My father didn’t want anything to do with biblical archaeology. He said it was too controversial, and although it may have proven the existence of a certain sect of people and the existence of a man believed to be named Jesus, it wouldn’t prove miracles.”

Matthew and Irene were seated a few tables away, staring at the young woman with curiosity. Gaspar noticed his father and wondered if he was going to say something or perhaps argue with the woman. It wasn’t his nature, but then again, this was his topic.

“May I ask you,” said Matthew, “what do you believe?”

“Well, sir. I’ve read all of Dr. Goldmeir’s work, and she was brilliant. She found some extremely convincing evidence and promising clues.”

“But what do you believe?” asked Irene softly.

“I-I believe there was a man named Jesus. I believe he was crucified by the Romans. I believe that he had followers and that, whether science or miracle, he did things that others could not. Beyond that, only my heart can answer.”

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“And what does your heart say?” asked Matthew with an angelic smile. She smiled back at him, shaking her head.

“Forgive me, but you are an extraordinarily beautiful man for being a great-great-grandfather.”

“No forgiveness needed for a compliment.”

“I believe he was real. I think there’s too much that is unexplained to not believe he’s real. Even Dr. Goldmeir, who was Jewish, believed he was a real man with the ability to perform miracles.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear,” smiled Matthew. “We can all believe in different things. That’s okay. But at some point, we have to admit that there is a possibility.”

They heard commotion at the door of the cafeteria, and Chris, Travis, and Carter walked in, rolling two huge carts with the boxes stacked high.

“You found them!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, ma’am, we did. Your apartment didn’t offer us much to bring back,” said Carter. “We’re sorry, Elena.”

“No, it’s alright. There wasn’t anything there.” Carter and Travis stared at Luke and Major, then back at the woman. “What? What is that look for?”

“The two men who ransacked your apartment were inside when we got there. Before

we could question them, someone shot an arrow through their necks. Now, bows and arrows aren't my expertise, but that was one helluva shot. Two shots, to be exact," said Travis.

"They're my expertise," said Eagle Feather, coming toward them. Elena stared at the man, then back at the others. He was different. Cloudy.

"Uh, Elena, this is Eagle Feather. One of our ghosts on the property," said Major.

"A ghost? Like, really? I mean, a real ghost?"

"Yes," nodded Eagle Feather with a smile. "I was murdered on this property many centuries ago."

"Remarkable," she whispered, reaching out to touch his sleeve. It was cold, but she could feel the fabric of his buckskin.

"You're not shocked," smiled Eric.

"No. I mean, not really. Listen, I've spent my entire life looking for remnants of the dead, hoping that a pharaoh would wake and speak to me, tell me all his secrets, where the treasure was hidden," she laughed. "The fact that you have ghosts here to talk about history is remarkable."

"Modern bows are, of course, different than what I used, but the premise is the same," said Eagle Feather. "The men or women would have had to have great strength, keen eyes, and steady hands. How far was the shot?"

"If we assume they made it from across the street, about fifty feet, give or take. We figured they were on the same floor in the building across the street, since the arrow went straight through, no angle."

“Then the shot would have been easy for a skilled bowman,” said Eagle Feather. “But I might suggest you find out what the other building is used for. Perhaps there were cameras, or it has something to do with the owners of the building.”

“Good point,” smirked Eric. “Thank you, Eagle Feather.” He nodded and walked toward Genevieve, hugging her.

“Your ghosts can have relationships?” frowned Elena.

“Yes,” laughed Luke. “It’s a strange place we live in, but many of our ghosts have relationships. Only recently have they been able to touch us, and we touch them. They can also eat and drink our food.”

“Remarkable.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

With their wedding done, there was no time for a honeymoon. Boxes were waiting to be dug into, and Elena wanted to be sure she had a preview of everything. Walking with Major toward the offices, she spotted Walker and Mags. He tried to hold her hand, but she pulled back, and Elena felt the stab of pain in her heart.

“Will they be okay?” she asked Major.

“I don’t know, baby. Mags was raped multiple times by her captors. I think Ellie told you the whole story. She’s been seeing our counseling team, but I know that she’s struggling. I don’t think she believes that Walker could still love her.”

“It appears that he could love her no matter what,” said Elena quietly. Walker turned and left Mags standing at the edge of the gardens, walking in the opposite direction. “I’ll be with you shortly. I’d like to say hello to her.”

“Okay, babe.”

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He watched as his new wife walked toward the woman and then spotted Walker seated on a bench near the maze. His head was down, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably. Major sped up, stopping directly in front of him and holding out his hand.

Walker looked up to see the big hand and knew who it was. He gripped it, standing to hug his friend.

“She doesn’t want me,” he sobbed. “She doesn’t want to be with me.”

“It’s not you, Walker. You know that. She doesn’t believe anyone will want her. This is going to take a lot of time.”

“I told her I’d give her forever,” he said, wiping his eyes. Hiro, Mac, Axel, and Tango walked toward them. Someone must have whispered to the birdies that help was needed. “Am I that pathetic that I need help?” He tried to laugh but just couldn’t.

“You’re not pathetic, brother,” said Mac. “It’s just that we’ve all been there. All of us. Hiro, Axel, Tango, and me. We know what it’s like to have a woman we love that’s been so fucking damaged, so battered and abused that she can’t see a possibility of life for herself.”

“I don’t know what to do,” he sobbed, heartbroken. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Nothing,” said Axel. “You say nothing. You just have to be there for her. Touch her if she makes the first move. Speak if she wants to speak. Laugh if she’s laughing. But let her control everything, Walker. You’re used to controlling the shit. You can’t



control this shit.”

“What they did to her,” he said, shaking his head.

“We know,” said Hiro. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a stranger or someone they know. Rape is fucking brutal and leaves so many scars it’s incomprehensible. Some of them, we’re just now peeling back from Winter. But I don’t care. I’ll keep peeling those fucking scars back for another hundred years if I have to.”

“Walker, it’s not just going to go away,” said Tango. “Taylor was brutally attacked twice. It was so bad; she didn’t think I’d want her. Truth was, she was all I wanted. There would have never been another had I let her go.”

“Are you willing to let Mags go?” asked Axel.

“No! Fuck, no!” he yelled. People around the property stopped, staring in his direction. “I just want to make it better.”

“Alright,” said Mac. “You want to make it better? For her or for you?”

“Wh-what?”

“She’s making it better, Walker. Every day, she’s getting better by meeting with the therapy team, talking to you and her family, her friends. Each day is better. Some days are ugly, some are normal, others are perfect. But each day she walks this earth, it gets better.

“What you’re saying is that you need it better for you, easier for you. Fuck that, brother. It’s not going to be easier for you. It’s always going to be fucking hard. The question you need to answer is whether or not you’re willing to put in the work.”

“I can’t live without her,” he whispered.

“Then tell her that,” said Axel. He nodded toward the gardens where Elena and their own wives were seated with her. She looked down the tree-lined drive and stared directly at him. He slowly walked toward her as they watched.

“Comms call you guys?” asked Major.

“Nope,” smirked Axel. “Matthew.”

Magnolia sat on the stone bench sobbing uncontrollably. She felt someone take the seat beside her and thought it was Walker. When painted nails appeared on top of her hand, she knew it was a woman. She never expected Elena.

“Oh, Elena. I’m sorry I’m such a mess,” she said, shaking her head. Elena handed her a few tissues and just continued to hold her hand.

“I can’t get their faces out of my mind. I see them above me, and I just can’t breathe. They should have killed me!”

“Is that what you wanted?” asked Elena. Magnolia stared at her for a moment. Cait, Winter, Rachelle, and Taylor walked toward them. “Would you have wanted them to kill you, leaving behind a grieving man who loves you more than life itself, parents who adore you, three sisters who share a piece of your soul? Is that what you really wanted?”

The other women waited for her to respond. Just watching her.

“N-no,” she said, crying again. “No. I just don’t know what to do!”

“You’re doing it,” said Cait. “You’re grieving, you’re healing, you’re finding your

way. It's not going to happen overnight, Mags. It's going to take time. The good news is you don't have to do it alone."

"She's right," said Rachelle. "I had my family, but more than anyone, Adele helped me to get through it all. My twin. Your sisters, three-fourths of your soul, are willing to do whatever is needed. You expected to go to therapy a few times and suddenly be healed, Mags. I told you that it doesn't work that way. I'm still speaking to Bree and Calla several times a month. I still have moments of absolute panic."

"Same," said Winter. "There's so much I didn't get to learn when I was held by my grandfather's club. I didn't know basic things about the world. The other day, I learned all about Egypt from Elena. I didn't know anything about her country. It was amazing."

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Magnolia smiled at the other women, nodding her head. Taylor stared at her, wondering if she was truly understanding what had to take place for her to get well.

“We all had a different experience, Mags. Yet they were all the same. Violent. It wasn’t about sex. You have to get that out of your mind. If you’re worried that you won’t be able to enjoy sex with Walker, I can assure you that you will. If. If you’re willing to put in the work.

“Being raped by my stepbrother was not something I thought I would survive. Then, being taken again and beaten again, I thought that was the end of my life as I knew it. And in some ways, it was. My life got better after that because I married a man with the patience of Job.” The other women laughed, nodding their heads.

“All he did was try to hold my hand, and I pulled away,” she sniffed. “Why?”

“Because you’re scared,” said Rachelle. “It’s real, and you know it, and you’re scared.”

“You’re scared that he’s going to wake up one day and say, ‘why in the hell am I with her.’ Except he won’t say that. Not now, not ever. It’s not who he is,” said Cait.

“Do you love him?” asked Elena, still clasping her hand.

“So much. I’ve loved him since the eighth grade. I’ve never stopped loving him.”

“I think he feels the same way,” said Elena, nodding toward the men as they walked toward them. Mags stood and looked at the others, then hugged each one.

“Thank you for talking to me. It helped more than you know,” she smiled.

“Actually, we do know,” laughed Cait. “Come to us any time, honey.”

Mags took off, running toward Walker as he did the same. He stopped in front of her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. He gently wrapped his around her body, pulling her slowly against him. When she kissed him, he fell to his knees, sobbing as she rocked back and forth with him.

“Will they be okay now?” asked Elena.

“They’re on the right path,” said Rachelle.

“How did you all know what to say?” she asked.

“We’ve all been victims of sexual violence and abuse,” said Rachelle. “It’s my specialty in our practice here. She wants to forget, but she can’t. It won’t be possible. What she can do is move on and see what she has. I hope she will. If she doesn’t, it will kill Walker.”

“Did the communications team send you over here? Did they hear me?” asked Elena.

“No,” smiled Rachelle. “My mother heard everything.”

As the women walked away, Elena looked around the gardens, not seeing anyone except a few bees and some hummingbirds. Frowning, she whispered to herself.

“How?”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“There’s so much more here than I remember,” said Elena. “I knew that my father kept meticulous records, but for some reason, I thought he put everything on a computer. These handwritten notes should really be part of the museum’s property or the university that sponsored the individual digs.”

“What are we looking for?” asked Major.

“Anything that might stand out as something someone would want now,” said May. “If the notes are on a dig that’s been closed or no longer viable, we don’t need that. It would all be public record. We’re looking for something incomplete, perhaps.”

“Like the dig he was working on when he died,” said Elena.

“Exactly,” said May. “I have a feeling this is something that perhaps no one, except his sponsors, knew about.”

“But why?” asked Elena. “Not letting others know what he was looking for left it wide open for scrutiny and the possibility of someone else taking credit for the work. It’s why so many archaeologists film their digs now. I wish I had.”

“What do you mean?” asked May.

“I was young and foolish,” said Elena. “I was working with one of my professors, whom I respected a great deal. He was determined to find the tomb of Cleopatra. He’d been searching basically his entire career when he invited his students to participate in a dig where he believed he’d found the tomb.

“I was young and naïve and believed him. The tomb seemed real, and he claimed that he had a number of things that would prove it to be true. When he asked me to present the items to the Department of Antiquities, I thought this was my chance to prove that I was as good as my father.”

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“Except it didn’t work out that way, did it?” asked May.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “He said he was certain about the objects, which was why he had me present them and claim them authentic. Two of the items were forgeries. I was disgraced before my career even got off the ground. When I told them he asked me to present the items, they said that I was trying to make a name for myself, and he’d even told them I was often going rogue at the dig sites.”

“Rogue? What the fuck does that mean?” asked Major.

“I don’t know. I was the last person to go rogue. After what happened to my father, I was extremely cautious on dig sites. But he was the one with the name and reputation, and I was just a young, new archaeologist. They placed the blame for the frauds on me and relegated me to working at the museum and teaching classes at the university.”

“I’m sorry, Elena,” said May. “I had something similar happen a long time ago. It’s more common than people think with not just archaeology but all professions.”

“Could that be what happened with my father? Maybe he found something that someone else took credit for?” asked Elena.

“It’s possible,” said Major, “but whoever it was would have brought forth their findings and become famous. If no one did that, then it’s still hidden somewhere.”

“Well, all of those boxes are digs that were concluded or closed,” she said, pointing to the stacks behind them. “These six boxes are the only things that might hold what

we're looking for. You know, it's quite possible that this has nothing to do with my father. It could be anything."

"We know," said Major, "but it seems odd that you suddenly started to have issues after your face was seen with us and mentioned in the article about us thwarting the catastrophe at the airport. You were hidden before, and maybe that's what this person wanted."

"Maybe," she frowned, shaking her head. "It still seems far-fetched that my father found something and no one else knew about it."

"And you're sure that your mother has nothing that belonged to him?" asked Luke.

"I'm positive of that," said Elena, sighing as she shook her head. "When my father died, my mother was boxing up his clothing to be donated within a few days. All of his books she saved for me and are in these boxes. Anything that belonged to the last dig was given to the Egyptian Antiquities Department. Everything else, you see here."

"Alright, let's dig in," said May.

The two women clearly were lost in their work. The notes kept by Dr. Fayek were exceptional, and as they read through things, May was learning more and more about Egyptian antiquities and the culture.

If she wasn't certain about something, she would stop and ask Elena, who was more than willing to elaborate on what was written or found.

"Okay, time for a break," said Thomas. "You two have been at this for hours now."

"Oh, wow," said Elena, looking up at the clock. It was nearly two, and they'd missed



lunch. Suddenly, she was very hungry. “I didn’t realize it was already time for lunch.”

“You have to eat and keep up your strength,” said May, smiling at the young woman. “Let’s head over to the cafeteria.”

There were still a lot of people in the cafeteria when Dylan brought out plates of food for each of them. She’d made muffalettas, Cajun homemade spicy chips, and the most delicious pecan bars she’d ever eaten.

“This is so good,” moaned Elena. Major laughed at her, nodding his head. “I mean, I’m a woman who likes to eat, but this is really, really good.”

“We pride ourselves on good food around here,” said Luke. “My grandmother is probably the best chef I know, but we have several professional chefs here as well. My Aunt Sara, who is married to Wilson; Dylan, who is married to Gator; and Casey, who is married to Rett. They’re all professionally trained, but Grandma had fifteen children. She was trained by necessity.”

The room laughed, nodding their heads.

“You have a lot of multiple births here,” said Elena. “Have you tested the water and the soil? Sometimes, it does make a difference. Some of the highest rates of twin births are now in African countries. Many researchers believe it’s the climate, food, and soil that play a part in it.”

“That does seem odd,” said Major. “As far as we know, it’s all genetic. Mama Irene had four sets of twins; some of her children and grandchildren had multiples. But most of them come from those who are not blood-related. For instance, Magnolia’s parents. They had quadruplets. Spontaneous quadruplets at that.”

“Well, all I know is that I’m only carrying one,” she smiled. “Not that I don’t want more, but one is enough for now.”

“You want more?” smirked Major. Elena stopped with her sandwich halfway to her mouth.

“I-I. Yes,” she said confidently. “I’ve always wanted a large family. I was an only child, and it wasn’t any fun at all. All of my friends were researchers and archaeologists, dig teams. I want my children to have other children to play with.” May laughed, shaking her head.

“They’ll definitely get that here.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After digging through about half of the boxes, the team stopped for the day and decided to just give it a rest. They’d shower, have dinner, and start fresh in the morning. Walking back to their cottage, Elena and Major were happy to see Walker and Mags walking hand in hand toward the gardens.

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“Maybe they’ll be okay,” she smiled.

“They’re going to be just fine, honey. Things have a way of working out here at Belle Fleur.”

“Major? When are you going to make love to me again? You didn’t even make love to me on our wedding night.”

“Baby, I want nothing more, but I don’t want to hurt the baby,” he said, turning her to face him. “I would never forgive myself.”

“Major, the baby is fine. Gray said we’re clear for anything and everything right now,” she smiled. “I miss the hot lover I met in Egypt. I need that hot lover to help cool down my body.”

“Fuck,” he growled, taking her hand.

Major locked the door of their cottage, knowing full well that sometimes people just walked in. Elena was already naked by the time he got to the bedroom. She wasn’t showing at all, but he was fairly certain her breasts looked bigger.

It took only seconds for him to kick off his clothes and crawl between her legs, staring down at her exotic features.

“I’ve been dreaming of this,” she whispered. “Seeing your handsome face above me, feeling you inside of me, all of it, Major. You are everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Major kissed her forehead, leaning his own against hers as he exhaled, pushing inside of her. He stilled, relishing in the moment of her warmth and wetness.

“Baby, I knew that first night that we made love I wouldn’t be able to walk away from you. I thought I could. When I left you at the airport, I hated myself for letting you go. I wanted to scream out to you to come back.”

“You should have,” she smiled. “I would have. I was so scared when I found out I was pregnant. I wanted to call you, to tell you, but I was worried that you would think I’d trapped you.”

“Honey, in case you haven’t noticed, you trapped me with or without a baby,” he laughed. “I’m yours, Elena. Yours.”

Slowly, Major began moving inside of his wife. His wife. He marveled at the thought of him being married and soon to be a father. He gently suckled her nipples, tasting her flesh against his lips.

Elena raised her legs along his sides, gliding them upward, higher and higher, as he went deeper and deeper. Her first orgasm came quickly, fiercely. She arched her back, gripping his arms as he continued to thrust in and out.

When the second came, she thought they were done, but she was wrong. She’d lit the fire inside of Major, and he was going to have his wife. By the fourth orgasm, he carried her into the shower, massaging away the tension of her muscles. But the more he massaged, the more she wanted him again.

He lifted her small body, impaling her on his thick hard cock as she gasped another orgasm.

“Baby, baby,” he murmured in her ear. “Is this what pregnancy is going to be like for

you?”

“I think so,” she giggled.

“Fuck, yes. I think you need to stay pregnant,” he grinned. He looked at his phone and frowned at the time. “I think we’ve missed dinner.”

“Nope,” she said, shaking her head. “Dylan delivered some food earlier for us. I’m a woman with a plan.” Major laughed at her.

“You had all this planned?”

“Well, I was hoping you’d follow along,” she said. “I’ve been aching for you, Major. I’ve been wanting you since you walked into that hospital room.”

“Same, baby. Same,” he said, hugging her tightly. “Let’s go see what Dylan left us.”

Over the next few hours, Elena and Major took the time to truly get to know one another. He told her of his childhood and all his faithful friends. The stories of the ghosts, the stories of Mama Irene and Matthew, and even the story of how his parents met when she saved him.

“That’s amazing,” she smiled. “Your mother saved your father.”

“Literally and figuratively,” smirked Major. “My mom is truly a badass, for a weather girl anyway. The guy who’d taken them was really intent on getting to whatever was hidden, but Dad refused to tell him. My mom, she knew that the weather was going to create issues for them, seeing this massive sandstorm blow in. She’s pretty cool. I’m probably biased because she’s my mom.”

“I think it’s sweet that you think of her that way. I think I judged my mother harshly

when I found out that she was seeing someone while married to my father. As an adult, knowing how much time it takes to take part in a dig, to dedicate to the season, I can understand how she got lonely. Even I wanted to spend time with my father, not her.”

“Were you able to make amends?” he asked.

“I think so. My stepfather is a good man. He never pushed me to call him father or to try and take the place of my father. I would go back to England for school, then come home for brief breaks or holidays. When I was home, he always tried to find a way for me to participate in a dig with some of my father’s old team. He did that for me. Not my mother.”

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“I’m sure she was worried for you,” said Major, taking the last bite of the apple pie.

“How are all of you so fit when you eat like this?” she smiled. “I’ve eaten more since I’ve been here than I have in the last year.”

Major could only laugh as he gathered the plates, rinsed them, and placed them in the dishwasher. He wasn’t prepared yet to speak about the pond and the magic and all of it. In fact, he wasn’t even sure how to begin that conversation.

“When I joined the Army, it seemed everyone knew who we were, me and the others.”

“You all joined together?”

“Yep. Me, Walker, Brix, Alistair, Leif, Forrest, Sebastian, and Garr. The Belle Fleur boys walked in, knowing we would have to prove ourselves.”

“But why? I mean, if you were all known because of your family, why would you need to prove yourselves?”

“Just because we’re from here, from our famous parents, it doesn’t mean we didn’t need to show them that we were every bit as good. More importantly, we wanted our fellow Rangers to know how good we were. We wanted them to know that we would always be there for them.” He could see that she was still confused, so he continued.

“If you think about all the great men or women who have done amazing things on this earth, you don’t always hear of their children doing the same. Everyone from famous

athletes, actors, and politicians. People think it's easy to follow in the footsteps of greatness, but it can often break a man or woman.

"We were lucky that we had one another. We never tried to compare ourselves to our parents but rather to one another. Competing with each other in a friendly way."

"I guess I can understand that. I didn't have siblings, but Daphne had a younger sister that died. I think she was always trying to be two daughters to her parents," said Elena.

"That must have been hard for her," frowned Major, filing that little nugget in the back of his mind.

"Her parents love her very much, but they nearly made a fatal mistake with her when she was very young. I hope she's well," said Elena.

"Call her," said Major. "Give her a call tomorrow and check on her. Maybe you can convince her to come here. I know Brix would love to see her." She smiled at her husband, standing to rub against his body.

"I'll do that. Tomorrow. Tonight, you're going to take me to bed and make sweet love to me once again." Major grinned at her.

"I can do that."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Daphne! I'm so happy to hear from you," laughed Elena. "How are you? How is your family?"

"I'm good. We're good, really, Elena. How are you?"



“Perfect. Married, happy, getting fatter by the minute,” she laughed.

“I doubt that,” smiled Daphne into the screen. “How is everyone?”

“By everyone, do you mean Brix?” Daphne said nothing, just looking down at her lap. “He’s great. He asks about you all the time as well. I thought you two were staying in touch.”

“We are. I mean, we text and try to speak on the phone a few times a week. I just worry that it won’t last, Elena. I mean, how long will a long-distance relationship actually work when we’ve never even had sex,” she whispered.

“Maybe you should trust him a bit more and come and visit. He’s a wonderful man, Daph. I know you think they all want something from you, but this man definitely doesn’t. They’re all different here. Come and see us.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said. “Mother and Father are pressuring me again to get married. They’ve been parading groups of men through the house on the pretense of Father meeting with them, but I know what they’re doing.”

“Will they force you to marry again?” asked Elena.

“No. I mean, I don’t think so,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t know, Elena. Honestly, I’m not sure of anything anymore. I feel as though my brain is scrambled.”

“Well, I know you’d be welcome here. I’d be happy to have you near,” said Elena.

“I’ll think about it. Take care of yourself and that baby,” smiled Daphne. Elena hung up and walked over to the cafeteria to meet up with Major for breakfast. As she was walking in, Brix held the door for her.

“Good morning,” he smiled.

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“Good morning, Brix. Were your ears ringing?” He frowned at her, tilting his head. “I was just speaking with Daphne.”

“Oh,” he said, looking wide-eyed. “How is she? I mean, is she well?”

“She’s great,” grinned Elena. “She was asking about you as well. Maybe you should invite her over here.”

“Elena, I like her. I really do, but I’m not the guy for her.”

“Why would you say that? She likes you as well, and I think she’s hoping to hear from you.”

“Elena, she’s upper-crust English. The perfect Anglican girl from the countryside. I’m from mixed parents. I doubt that would go over very well,” he frowned.

Elena stared at him, not seeing a multi-racial person at all. He was exotically beautiful with greenish-hazel eyes, dark hair, and a kiss of caramel skin. She started laughing, and Brix just stared at her.

“Is that funny?”

“Oh, Brix. I’m afraid so. Did Daphne ever show you the photo of her with her parents?”

“No. We never really spoke about it.” Elena scrolled through her phone, then held it up for him to see. “They’re black.”

“Yes,” she laughed. “Daphne and her sister were adopted, Brix. Her parents are originally from West Africa. Call her.” She kissed his cheek and then made her way to her husband.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes, I think just a bit of confusion about Daphne,” she laughed. She showed Major the photo, and he looked at it wide-eyed, remembering what Daphne looked like.

“That just might make him feel better,” smirked Major. “Let’s eat and get back over to those boxes.”

“Why would he think she would care about his parents?” she asked.

“Something a girl said to him years ago,” said Major. “It doesn’t matter any longer, although obviously it mattered to him. Maybe this will help him to get over that.”

Back in the huge conference room, folders were spread all over the table as May, Elena, Major, Luke, and Eric began searching the files once again. Elena’s elbow hit a stack of books, and she frowned, stacking them once again.

“Why do we have that doctor’s books?” she asked.

“Those aren’t his,” said Luke. “Those were in one of the boxes from your father.”

She stood, looking through the titles one by one. Stacking them again in the opposite order, she shook her head.

“These wouldn’t have been my father’s. He didn’t study these things,” she said.

“Honey, these were in that box right there with those files. We took the books out

because the box was about to crumble.”

“These books are about the bible and biblical relics,” she whispered. “I don’t understand. He never spoke to me about this. Never.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to tell you about it yet. It makes sense, though,” said Eric. “Dr. Goldmeir was an expert in the subject. If they were in that tunnel together. Maybe it wasn’t about Egyptian artifacts at all.”

“I think we have to start going through those folders,” said Elena. Each person took a stack of folders, articles, and papers in the box and began reading through them, making notes. Hours later, Casey wheeled in a cart filled with lunch for them. They stopped briefly, just to eat as quickly as they could, then immediately went back to work.

When the last paper was read, the last note written, they sat back, staring at one another in disbelief.

“Could it be true?” asked May.

“All of the evidence points in that direction,” said Luke. “I’m not an expert, but it appears to be true. Elena? What do you think?”

She stood, walking around the table, glancing at each of the note pages from her friends. She looked at the stack of books, then thumbed through the files once again. When she was done, she returned to her seat.

“I think it’s true. I think Dr. Goldmeir and my father believed that they had found the greatest known artifact the world has ever known. I think they believed that they knew the location of the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy Grail, and Veronica’s Veil.”

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I’m so shocked, I don’t even know what to say,” said Elena. She kept staring at the books and documents, then would look at May, as if asking for help.

“You had no idea?” asked May.

“None. I swear to you, my father never spoke about things like this. Everything he did revolved around finding artifacts related to Egypt. Why wouldn’t he have told me?”

“You have to realize, that for many people they don’t believe these artifacts are real. Obviously, this is why the British and Egyptian governments were so secretive about the dig. They still have not released the details of everything. It would have been highly controversial for both of them and, quite possibly, could have damaged their professional credibility.”

“But if they believed it was in that tunnel, why hasn’t someone gone back inside?” she asked. “I mean, if the government officials knew, they would have hired others to go back in and find what they believed was there.”

“I think I have an answer to that,” said AJ, walking into the room. “Hi, Elena. I’m with the tech team.”

“Hello,” she smiled.

“Seven years ago, a dig took place on that very site, but through a different entrance.

It was literally on the other side of the mound, which made it appear as if it were going in a different direction. I think they were working their way through to the other side.”

“What have they found?” she asked anxiously.

“Nothing. The tunnel collapsed on the other side as well, and more than a dozen workers were killed this time. The government shut it down.”

“A dozen? More men dead. For what? For some potential artifact that was never even proven to exist. We knew that tunnel was dangerous. Others had died. My father died because of that dig.”

“Elena, there is information in these documents that say the articles could have been hidden in that tomb. It was a tomb made for a pharaoh but never used. That pharaoh was buried somewhere else,” said May.

“I understand that it seems obvious,” said Elena, “but in all the years that people have been tracing these things, they’ve never once mentioned that they could have come to Egypt. Israel, Italy, Tunisia, and a dozen other places but never Egypt.”

“Isn’t it possible, babe?” asked Major. “I mean, let’s just think for a moment about what the possibilities could have been. There was no pharaoh at the time of Jesus. The Romans were in charge, but they controlled Egypt.”

She paced back and forth, pushing her hair from her face. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a hair clip and twisted her hair on her head, securing it in place. May smirked at her.

“It’s the humidity, not the heat,” she smiled. “You’ll get used to it.” Elena turned and smiled at the woman, nodding her head.

“Sorry. I know it looks as though I’m frustrated, but honestly, I’m more confused than ever before. Maybe hurt. My father and I spoke about everything he was doing. Everything. I never spoke to anyone about his digs because the danger of theft was always real.”

“Maybe someone knows that,” said AJ. “If they knew that you and your father spoke about his work, about each of the digs, maybe they believe that you know something about this one.”

“But I don’t,” she said, shaking her head.

“What about your mother?” asked May. “I know their relationship was fractured, but is it possible he spoke to her about this?”

“I doubt it. She wasn’t interested, and while he was on a dig, he would often sleep in the area, not go home at night. I can ask her, but I know the response.”

“Do you mind?” prompted Luke.

“Of course not.” She pulled the speaker phone toward her, watching as it connected to the screen in front of her. It was early in the morning in Egypt, but her mother usually rose early.

“Elena! What a lovely surprise. How are you?” Major frowned, realizing that this woman had no clue her daughter was married.

“I’m well, Mother. I got married.”

“Oh, that’s lovely, dear. Is he Egyptian?”

“No, mother. I’ve moved to the United States. I’ll be living and working here.”



“I see. Well, it’s an awful place from what I understand,” she said, yawning with her tea at her lips.

“Mother, I’m here with my husband and his friends now. Try not to be rude. I’m calling about Father’s last dig.”

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“Elena, when will you stop speaking about digs and dirt and all the other mess?”

“It’s my job, Mother. I just need an answer to one question. Did Father tell you what he was working on during the last dig?”

“Good heavens, no,” she laughed. “Your father never told me about his digging or what he was digging for. Truthfully, I didn’t care. You’re not going into that tunnel, are you?”

“No, Mother. It’s closed. Permanently.”

“Good. That’s good. I believe it’s cursed.”

“What would make you think that?” asked Major. The woman stared at him. Her brows raised toward her daughter. “Apologies, ma’am. My name is Major Carson, and I’ve married this beautiful creature that you helped to create.”

“Well,” giggled her mother. She actually giggled, thought Elena. “Aren’t you handsome?”

“Your daughter thinks so, and that’s all I care about. What do you mean, cursed?” he asked.

“Efram told me. At your father’s funeral, he said that the entire dig was cursed, but your father wouldn’t listen to them. No one wanted to continue.”

“Efram said that?” she frowned.

“Yes. He and others. I know you loved your father, Elena, but sometimes, he was singular in his focus and didn’t listen to those around him.”

“Is this Efram still alive?” asked Major.

“I believe so. He’s still working digs, from what I understand. He and his wife brought their children down here a few years back, and we saw them in the marketplace. He’s not changed at all.”

“Thank you, Mother. Tell Ahmed that I said hello.”

“Will you be visiting us soon?” she asked hesitantly.

“I’m not sure, Mother. We’ll see. Goodbye.” Elena hung up the phone, her hand shaking as she did. Major covered it with his big, warm paw, squeezing her fingers.

“I need to try and find Efram,” said Elena.

“Let me see what I can do,” said AJ, nodding at her. She stood from the table and started to leave but noticed that the others were going to follow.

“I’d just like a few moments to myself. I just need some fresh air.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Hello, Elena,” smiled the handsome older man.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Matthew,” she said, nodding at him with a smile.

“Just Matthew, honey. How are you?”

“Honestly? Confused. I mean, I’m fine physically, the baby is fine, I’m fine. I’m perfectly happy in my marriage. It’s just that I learned something about my father’s last dig that has me utterly dumbfounded.”

“I see. Not what you expected?” he smirked, waving her toward one of the stone benches.

“I’m afraid not. My entire life, my father only spoke of the ancient treasures of Egypt. Pharaohs and their queens. Death masks and lost treasures. It’s all he ever spoke about. Then today, I learned that his last dig had nothing to do with any of those things.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“Y-yes. I mean, I think I am.”

“What was he searching for?” asked Matthew.

“Holy relics. Christian holy relics,” she repeated.

“Is that bad?”

“No, not bad. Just confusing. My father wasn’t religious at all. He never gave much thought to his faith or the faith of others. So, I don’t understand why he would be interested in finding holy or religious relics. I mean, he was an archaeologist, but his specialty was Egyptology, not biblical relics. He would have loved to have found anything significant, but this just doesn’t fit with the man I know.”

“Maybe it’s not about religion,” said Matthew. “Maybe this is about him needing clarity on some things. Or, and mind you, I didn’t know your father. Maybe it was about fame and money.”

Elena bit back a sharp retort, not wanting to offend Matthew. There was a grin on his face as if he knew she was fighting her response.

“He wouldn’t have cared about that, Matthew. My father let others take greater credit all the time. It infuriated my mother because he wasn’t worried about the money or fame associated with it. I think my mother would have liked to see a more driven husband,” she smirked.

“Oh, I’ll bet your father was driven. Just not by fame or money. He was driven toward discovery, adventure, finding the unknown.”

“If his notes are valid, if they’re correct, he was on the trail of the biggest find in history. It would confirm everything we know about Christianity,” said Elena. “I know that I was only eleven, but I would have understood this. Why wouldn’t he tell me?”

“Maybe he was concerned that if he told you, others could use you against him. I’m not sure, but I would feel that way if it were me and you were my daughter.”

“The Ark of the Covenant is believed to be in Aksum at the Church of St. Mary of Zion. Allegedly, a virgin monk watches over it and cannot leave until his death. But no one has seen it. Others have claimed that they found it and know where it is, but, of course, they refuse to tell anyone. It’s sometimes called the Ark of the Testimony or the Ark of God and is believed to have been the most sacred religious relic of the Israelites.”

“Fascinating,” smiled Matthew. “Tell me more.”

“Well, it’s described as a wooden chest coated in pure gold and topped off by an elaborate golden lid known as the mercy seat. In both the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament, the Ark contained the Tablets of the Law, by which God delivered the Ten Commandments.

“Here’s where it gets really interesting,” she smiled. “The biblical account says that approximately one year after the Israelites’ exit from Egypt, the Ark was created according to the pattern that God gave to Moses when the Israelites were encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. After that, it was lifted and carried in front of the Levites no matter where they traveled.”

“And do other archaeologists agree with this?” he asked.

“Some. Contemporary archeologists disagree about the history of the Ark’s movements and dating of the Ark narratives. Others debate what led to the creation of the Ark. Basically, everyone believes it holds the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the rod of Aaron, and a pot of manna.” She looked at Matthew and continued. “Oh, sorry. Manna was something the Israelites ate.”

“I see,” he smiled. “But you don’t believe this exists. Any of it.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe,” she said hesitantly. “It’s more that it’s hard to believe. I want tangible.”

“And are tombs thousands of years old more tangible? Even those that you know are there, but you can’t find them? Say, like Cleopatra.”

“Well, I-I,” she hesitated before answering, looking at him. “Honestly, Matthew, I’m not sure. As I said, my parents weren’t connected to any religion. I believe in religion of all types because I think it serves to give people hope and connection. But I can’t quite put my finger on a specific deity that I believe in. I know that sounds contradictory.”

“It sounds like an intelligent woman of science trying to make faith scientific,” he smiled.

“Oh, I have faith!” she said excitedly. “I know that there is something or someone guiding us all. I just don’t have a specific religion I attach to.”

“Faith is what’s important, Elena. I remember being in the South Pacific, trying to understand the tribes around me. Some believed in idols, some believed in gods. But I wanted to know why. In the end, it didn’t matter to me. We all had faith in something. My own sons struggled with their time in the service as well, and I suspect my grandsons and great-grandsons have as well.

“Many, many years ago, I stood beside my good friend Harry Beauvais at his wedding. His wife was Methodist, and he was happy to have their ceremony in the Methodist church. But I remember the reverend pulling them aside and saying, ‘when you get home, find a place of worship. Don’t look at the name on the building – just walk in, and if you like what you hear, go back next week.’ I never forgot that.”

“But you and Mama Irene are devout Catholics,” said Elena.

“We are. But if there was not a Catholic church near us, we would find another church where we liked what we heard. Here’s the real important lesson. You don’t have to enter a building of worship to have faith, to believe in something bigger than yourself. You feel it,” he said, placing the palm of his hand over her heart. “Here.”

Elena sucked in a breath, the feeling of warmth and pulsing light filling her body. She smiled at him with tears in her eyes.

“You know who your father was as a man. Follow his notes. Follow where he takes you, and you will at least know what it was he was searching for.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Major found his new wife sitting on the stone bench with a large smile on her face, just staring at the cherubic stone statue fountain. He watched her for a moment, making sure she wasn’t praying or deep in thought. She turned to look at him.

“Hi. Am I disturbing you?” he asked.

“Not at all. I just had the loveliest, most insightful conversation of my life with Matthew. I feel... lighter. Happier. I can’t explain it,” she giggled.



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“No need to explain,” he said, shaking his head. “Matthew is one of a kind, and I can tell you he has always been the ultimate moral compass for me. Babe? What do you want to do about what we found? If we can’t get back into that tunnel, what should we do?”

“I think there’s more there. There’s something else to find and figure out what it was he actually discovered.” She stood and walked toward him, taking his hand. “I think these men must have known about the original dig. I need to speak to those men that were on that dig team. Those that survived.”

“What about any other archaeologists on the team?”

“Arabel. But I don’t know if she’s alive or not. I think we start with Efram and see if he remembers anything at all.”

“Then let’s try to find Efram and go from there,” he smiled.

They went back to the offices where the tech team was still scanning the documents and notes from her father’s archives. Sly was able to find a phone number for the man and set up the call in the conference room. Major, Luke, Eric, and Hex were seated with her.

“Hello?” said the man looking confused, staring at his phone.

“Efram? Efram, it’s me. Elena,” she smiled. He stared at the picture on the phone then started to cry. “Efram, it’s alright. If this isn’t a good time, I’ll call back.”

“No. No, that’s not it at all. I was so worried about you.”

“Why? I’m perfectly fine,” she smiled.

“The museum said you no longer worked there. I called to be sure you were healthy and to warn you.”

“Warn me about what?” He looked at the other faces around her. “Oh. Efram, this is my husband, Major. These are his friends. I’m in good hands.”

“Thank you,” he said, nodding at the men.

“Efram why were you worried for me?”

“The others have all died, Elena. The rest of your father’s team have all been killed. I am only alive because I am in a remote location, away from Egypt.” Luke looked at Sly, and he nodded, holding up a sign.

Sicily

“How did they die?” she asked. “Arabel as well?”

“All of them. The archaeologists, the diggers, the engineers. They’ve all died, Elena. All except you and me.”

“Efram, what was in that tunnel on the last dig? It wasn’t Egyptian, was it?” she asked.

“I honestly don’t know. Your father and Dr. Goldmeir refused to tell anyone what we were looking for. They only said that everything was important. Scraps of cloth, wood, metal, all of it was important.”

“The day of the collapse, what happened? Those tunnels had been made safe by the engineers. How did they collapse?” asked Major.

“Collapse? There was no collapse. There were explosives in those tunnels. Your father would have never allowed that. They wouldn’t say anything because they didn’t want the negative press.”

“D-did my mother know of this?” she whispered. Efram just stared at her through the screen. “She knew. She knew, and she said and did nothing.”

“She did nothing because she worried that you would take up this cause and get yourself killed. Something was in there, Elena. Something we were not to find. A team dug from the other direction a few years ago and met with the same fate. The tunnel collapsed.”

“So, there’s no opportunity for us to get in there and start digging again?” she asked.

“The government dug the tunnel out, Elena. They excavated all of it and found nothing except the bones of those who had died. They spent millions to do this behind the scenes, unseen, by themselves. Why do you think that is?”

“There is, was something there,” she said. “The question is, who found it and moved it and why?”

“I don’t want to know the answer to that,” he said. “I’m staying away from it all. I have teenagers now who need their father. I won’t risk their lives or my own. I work in construction now. I still dig but dig for apartment buildings and roads.”

Elena smiled at him, nodding her head.

“I’ve missed you, Efram. You were my only friend on those sites,” she said.

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“You were so excited every time we found something,” he laughed. “It was like watching a child open a birthday present. Rocks, pottery, cloth, anything would make you so excited we could hardly contain you. She’s not easy to manage sometimes, Major.”

“I think I’ve found that out,” he smiled. “It’s one of the many reasons I love her.”

“I can see that, and it makes me happy.”

“Efram, did my mother know anything about this? Was she knowledgeable about anything my father did?”

“I wish I could tell you that she was aware, but she was not. She never came to the sites unless it was to drop you off or pick you up, and even then, for her, it was an inconvenience. She despised the sand, hated the amount of time your father spent at the sites, and began hating him for turning your mind to archaeology.”

“He didn’t turn my mind.” Efram stared at her with a daring glance. “Alright. Maybe he did. But I was happy there. I am happy discovering new things.”

“Let this one go, Elena. Whatever it was your father was looking for, let it go. It’s not worth dying for.”

Elena said her goodbyes to Efram, more confused than she was an hour ago. They needed help on the inside. Someone who could tell them if this was real or a hoax.

“Daphne? Darling, we have people coming for dinner tonight,” said her mother. She had a rich, beautiful accent of British and West African. It always made Daphne smile.

“Mother, I’ve had enough formal dinners. I’m going to have dinner in my room tonight. Please give my apologies.” Her phone started to buzz, and she recognized the number.

“Daphne!”

“Excuse me, Mother,” she said, walking toward the library. It was filled with books that were hundreds of years old, others new, and still others in various languages.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Daph,” smiled Elena.

“Are you alright? Married life treating you well?” she laughed.

“Married life is perfect. If you don’t mind, I’m going to put you on the speaker and video phone.”

“Of course.” She held her breath, hoping to see Brix. When his face didn’t appear, Major knew she was disappointed. Beneath the table, he sent a text to Brix. “Hello.”

“Daphne, it’s very nice to meet you. I’m Luke, this is Eric and Hex. We’re part of the leadership team here.” She nodded, smiling at them.

“Daph, I was wondering if you’ve heard of anyone attempting to sell biblical artifacts through the auction houses,” she said.

“Biblical? Anything in particular? Paintings? Sculptures?”

“No, nothing like that. I mean artifacts from the time of Jesus.”

“Elena, could you be more specific?” she laughed.

“Ark of the Covenant and Veronica’s Veil.” Daphne opened her mouth, staring at the people in the room. She laughed, then sobered when they didn’t laugh with her.

“Are you mad?”

“I’m afraid not. We think that my father was trying to find these items when he died, and we believe that someone thinks I have the answers to their whereabouts.”

“Dear God,” she whispered. “Sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.” The entire room chuckled at the woman.

“I take it that’s a no,” said Luke.

“I’ve taken some time off these last few weeks, so I’ve been a bit removed from the auction house. I don’t handle biblical or religious relics, but they do cross my desk now and then. I can check in with the auction house to see if anything has come up.”

“No. No, don’t draw attention to yourself,” said Luke.

“I can do it remotely just by checking what’s in the inventory. It will also list ‘possible’ items that could come up for auction.”

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“What does that mean?” asked Major.

“Well, someone could be expecting that they will acquire or inherit an item, and they’re feeling out how much the item should bring or how much interest there is in the object. Many times, these items turn out to be fraudulent or bought illegally. Stolen paintings, that sort of thing, have come up several times in the last few years.”

“I don’t want you to put yourself in danger,” said Elena.

“I agree,” said Brix. “Do not put yourself in danger.” Daphne smiled at the man as he walked closer to the table.

“Hi, Brix.”

“Hey, Daph,” he smiled. Luke, Hex, and Eric raised their brows, staring at the man as he grinned at the screen.

“When you’re done flirting, can we get on with business?” asked Hex. Daphne laughed, shaking her head.

“I’m sorry, of course,” she smiled.

“I wasn’t yelling at you, honey,” said Hex. “I was yelling at that idiot over there. Daphne don’t risk your safety. We can always send someone to get you and bring you here.”

“I’m safe.” She stared at Brix, who seemed to be chewing his tongue off. “My parents

have security here, and they've even added some men, considering what happened to Elena."

"That's good. We'll hope that they're capable at their jobs," said Luke. They watched as Daphne moved up a grand staircase and then down a long hallway. Luke smirked at the others, Hex and Eric laughing.

"Honey, do you need a map to get around that place?" asked Hex.

"Ha, ha," she smiled. "It's not my home. I mean, it is. Kind of. It's my parents' home. My father was knighted and given a lordship a number of years ago. He owns a lot of businesses in this country, Australia, Hong Kong, and a few others.

"I am an antiquities dealer at an auction house. That's what I do for a living. Brix has seen my apartment. It's modest, and that's how I live." She stared at Brix's face, and he nodded.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's right. She has a nice apartment." Eric slapped the back of his head, frowning at him.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"What?"

"Jesus, you're dense."

"Okay, I'm into the auction house. Let me filter everything by category – uh, this is strange. The site for religious relics, antiquities, and paintings is down."

"Is that normal?" asked Major.



“No. Not at all. It says the site is down for a major auction on undisclosed items. I need to get down there and see if I can find them in the auction house,” she said, moving around her bedroom suite.

“No!” yelled six voices.

“No,” said Brix. “It’s too dangerous. Do not attempt to do that, Daphne. They’re obviously hiding something or believe that they have something big. We’ll figure this out.”

“Alright. If you think it’s too dangerous, that’s fine. But if I can help, I want to. I want to make sure that Elena and the baby are safe.”

“You’re not worried about me?” smirked Major.

“No offense, Major, but no. I saw how you guys were at the hospital. I’m not worried about any of you.” She turned, silencing her phone, but they could see her lips moving. She appeared agitated but then turned back to the others. “I’m sorry. My mother is requesting my presence for dinner. If I find anything, I’ll let you know. I-I hope you’re all doing well. I’d love to see you soon.”

“Let’s make it happen, Daph. I want you to come over and see us all,” smiled Elena. Her screen went blank, and all eyes turned to stare at Brix. He was frowning like a petulant child, then suddenly turned and walked out of the room.

“Fucking idiot,” murmured Eric.

“I don’t understand. I thought he liked her,” said Elena.

“He does. That’s what he can’t deal with.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Elena had quickly gotten over her aversion to milk products during pregnancy. She drank three large glasses at dinner, asked for ice cream for dessert, then wanted pudding. Major could only laugh, smiling at his wife.

“Hey, brother. How’s it going?” asked Moose.

“Great, man. Moose, this is my wife, Elena. I think you and Erica were out of town when we got married.”

“We were brother. We hadn’t really had a good honeymoon, so we spent a few days in North Dakota in a cabin on a lake. Peaceful, quiet, and my wife all to myself. Well, her and the baby in her belly,” he laughed.

“I get that,” laughed Major. “Elena, this is Moose, but it might be a good idea for you to know that his real name is Major as well.”

“You’re joking?” she smirked. “Two men on this property with such an unusual name.”

“We have so many people it’s not surprising,” smirked Moose. “But don’t worry. I don’t use my given name. I like Moose better.”

“It suits you,” smiled Elena. “I think I met your wife earlier. You have a daughter and a son on the way.”

“We do,” he smiled. “Never thought it would happen to me.”

“I met her brother as well. He was very kind.”

“He’s, uh, different.” Moose nodded, trying to give his new brother-in-law the benefit of the doubt.

“Well,” laughed Elena, “he was very kind to me and seemed a loving husband to his wife.”

“I’ll tell him you said so,” smirked Moose. “It was great seeing you both. If you need help, brother, let me know.” Major nodded at him, then kissed his wife’s temple.

“Have you had enough, or do you want more?” he smirked.

“Are you making fun of my appetite?” she smiled.

“Not at all. You’re growing a very large baby inside your belly. My baby. If he’s anything like his father, he has an enormous appetite. Anything you want, we’ll get for you.” Elena had tears in her eyes, then shook her head.

“Baby? Elena, what’s wrong, honey?”

“Who made her cry?” came the big baritone voice. “Who made that gal cry?”

“George, I didn’t make her cry. She’s just, uh, crying,” he frowned.

“You made her cry. What did he do, honey?” Elena laughed at the older man, shaking her head.

“Nothing, George. I promise. He’s been very caring and loving. I think that’s what

made me cry.”

“Honey why would that make you cry?” asked George, sitting beside her and grasping her hand. He pushed Major aside, letting him know that he had control of this situation now.

“Because as much as I loved my father, adored him. He never showed love and affection to my mother in front of others. I don’t remember him ever asking her if she was hungry or wanted second helpings. I don’t remember him buying her a birthday cake or a gift. She didn’t either, but I didn’t see that. How in the world was I lucky enough to find a man that offers the things that my heart, my soul needs?”

“Oh, honey, that’s a Belle Fleur mystery. Love always finds a way and love always finds its target. At least here. It’s a strange phenomenon, but one we embrace with all our hearts.”

“How can that be, George?” George laughed, shaking his head.

“Oh, it might be faith. It might be magic. It might just be that we have been lucky enough to have the finest men and women on the planet find one another. They were raised in love and faith; they were taught to treat others with kindness first. Until kindness doesn’t work. Their fathers and mothers showed them how to treat their spouses. Either way, I don’t question it.”

“What if he wakes up one day and regrets this? What if he realizes that we barely knew one another when we married and had a child together? What if that’s what happened to my parents? They grew apart, George. My mother regretted having me.”

“Honey, your mama didn’t regret having you. She regretted choosing a man she didn’t love. She loves you. Always has. Just because she didn’t understand you doesn’t mean she’s not still your mama. Do you regret getting pregnant?”

“No! No, absolutely not! I’m thrilled about this. I never thought I would have children of my own. I always hoped, but I just never believed it would actually happen. I’ve loved Major nearly from the moment I met him.”

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Major just smiled at her, kissing her cheek as she spoke to the older man.

“I’ve loved you from the first moment as well, baby.”

“See, now that’s what I like to hear. Y’all are in love, honey. Everything else will work itself out. Love conquers all. Just ask Matthew.” He stood, waving at the kitchen staff. “Get this gal another bowl of ice cream. This time with caramel sauce and peanuts.”

“Ooohh! That sounds so good,” she smiled. Major could only laugh, watching as she dug into the ice cream. He didn’t care. If it made her happy, she could have as much as she wanted.

As night fell, Bull, Amanda, Erica, and Mia gathered in the grove to play some of their new music. The sounds of strings floated through the air as Erica played her cello, Mia her violin, Amanda her guitar. Bull sang a sweet melody about love healing all wounds, and there wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

Each of them played a solo, then Erica and Amanda played a duet on their violins. When they were done, it was as if the music had made them all relax, ready for a good night’s rest. For Major and Elena, it was a chance to enjoy another erotic shower together, expressing their love once again in their passion for one another.

Elena was sleeping so soundly she didn’t hear her phone buzzing beside her, but Major heard. At first, he was going to let it go to voicemail, but he noticed her mother’s name and decided to answer.

“Good evening, ma’am. This is Major, Elena’s husband.”

“Oh, dear. I’ve forgotten about the time difference, haven’t I?” He smiled at her proper accent.

“Yes, ma’am, but it’s alright. Elena is sleeping, and I’m in the living room now. Is everything alright?”

“Yes. I think so. I spoke to Efram earlier, and I wanted to tell Elena to let this go. Do not get mixed up in this nonsense.” Major frowned, unsure of what to say.

“Ma’am, I’m not sure I want to tell your daughter to drop anything. Whatever your late husband was looking for has followed Elena. We, my team and I, believe that someone wants her, believing she knows something about what was in that tunnel.”

“It’s all nonsense!” she said sharply. Major let out a low growl, not realizing he’d made the sound. She gasped, then calmed her breathing. “I apologize. This is nonsense. Holy relics in Egypt is absurd.”

Major was silent for a moment, just listening. He heard rustling in the background but couldn’t be sure if there was someone else there.

“Ma’am? Are you safe? Is there someone with you?”

“Are you listening to yourself? What an absurd thing to say. My husband is with me. There is no one here, no one searching for me or for Elena. It’s all accidental.”

“Accidental? Ma’am, a doctor tried to abort our child. That’s not accidental. It was intentional. Whatever your late husband was looking for is important enough for someone to want your daughter, want his old diaries. Doesn’t that bother you at all?”

Again, there was silence. He could hear her heavy breathing, and then she was speaking in a low tone to someone.

“My husband is overnighting a journal to you. Send the address to this phone number. If you’re intent on this foolish search, then perhaps this will help you both meet a quicker death.” She hung up, and Major stared at the screen.

“Note to self. Don’t have dinner with my mother-in-law.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

They all anxiously awaited the arrival of the journal. It didn’t arrive the next day but did arrive the following day. It looked exactly like all of the others.

“Well, honey. Go ahead and open it.” She just stared at it, looking from Major to Luke, then to Major’s father, Jalen.

“Elena, do you want us to open it?” asked Jalen. She looked at him, then back at the journal, and shook her head.

“No. No, I’ll open it. I’m just trying to figure out why my mother would have kept this one journal. One out of dozens that we went through. But I know the answer. She knew what was in this and tried to keep it from me.”

“It could contain something dangerous, baby. I mean, if your mother knew what was in this, if she read it or knew about it, then maybe she was trying to protect you.” Major didn’t believe a damn word he was saying. He just hoped Elena believed him.

She untied the leather tie that secured the cover and slowly opened the worn, yellowed pages. She read several pages quickly, noting that it was just about what the plans were for the dig, then found what they were looking for.



She paled, leaning back in her chair as she lay a hand on her abdomen. May moved around the table to sit beside her. She pushed the book away, shutting it.

“Honey, you’re not helping us here. What does it say?” asked Major.

“It’s not about relics. It’s not about anything that we believed it was. It’s something much different that explains why they were looking in Egypt.”

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“You’re killing me here, Elena,” said Hex. “What is it, honey?”

“Mummies. Two mummies.”

“Mummies? Okay, how is that different? It’s Egypt. There are mummies for everyone, some famous, some not. What makes this so different?”

“My father and Dr. Goldmeir believed that the mummies were the bodies of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.”

“What?” frowned Luke. “How? I mean, why? Why would they believe they were mummified?”

“I’m not sure, but it explains why Egypt. If someone believed that their bodies should be preserved and buried together, Egyptians were the experts at mummification. Perhaps they thought if they put the mummies in a tomb, away from the Romans, they would be safer.

“But think of the implications of this if it’s true.”

“What do you mean?” asked Major.

“It would prove whether or not Jesus was crucified. It could prove what killed Mary. It would, could offer DNA evidence that might show a lineage for Jesus and Mary. It’s long been speculated by some theologians that they were in a relationship and had a child together.”

“I don’t think I like where this is going,” said Luke. “Do you understand the number of people that would be angry about finding this? We’re talking churches, particularly the Vatican and the Roman Catholic church, templars, scientists, so many more.”

“If Daphne was right, and she thinks it could be sitting in her auction house, this will be an absolute fiasco, media circus frenzy!” said Eric.

“Do you think whoever wanted me knew that it was mummies? Or do you think they believed it was the Ark and Veil?”

“That’s something we won’t know until we find them,” said Major. “This only confirms that we need to make sure Daphne does not stick her nose into the warehouse of the auction house. If someone has made the connection between you two and where she works, this could blow up in her face.”

“He has something written here. It’s a passage of some sort.” She flipped through a few pages, May still reading over her shoulder as she did. “I found it. It’s from an alleged firsthand account of a Roman guard that converted to a believer.”

We trudged through the blistering desert sun for weeks, unsure of where we were going. The caravan is not aware of what we haul, and we mustn’t let them know. It could be the death of all of us. To get his body away from the Romans, we had to move swiftly and leave no trace. If it is to be believed, the Egyptians will help us conceal them forever.

“Is it possible?” asked Hex.

“I don’t know,” said Elena, shaking her head. “We know that when Jesus’s tomb was opened, he was gone. It was believed that no one had entered before Mary Magdalene and another Mary. The story says that an Angel told them to enter and spread the word that Jesus lived. He was gone. But did he rise and live, or was he dead and

removed? The Bible would say the former.”

“What does your gut tell you, honey?” asked Major.

“My gut says I’m a ‘gotta see it to believe it’ girl. I don’t know. I want to believe in what the Bible tells me. I mean, there’s a piece of me that says it tells me I’m part of something greater than what I can see, hear, and feel. Then the science part of my brain says I believe the bodies were removed.”

“But Mary Magdalene didn’t die until years later,” said May.

“That’s the other problem,” said Elena. “Did they hold his body until she died? Or did they mummify him and get her later? If I’m reading this information correctly, it sounds as if they had both bodies.”

“You know, the people looking for that diary may not be religious at all. It could be quite the opposite. They might be trying to prove that everything we knew from the bible is wrong and basically start a war with religions all over the world,” said Eric.

“Who would want to do that?” asked Elena.

“Scientists, academics, those who believe the world was created by ancient aliens, not God. This would make the world have a whole new something to fight about,” said Eric.

“What did he actually find? Where did he get all this information, and why, why on earth would my mother hide this diary?” asked Elena.

“It could be that she knew what would happen,” said May. “Your mother isn’t an uneducated woman. I’m sure she was well aware of what would happen if the information leaked out. Your father was a well-known archaeologist, and so was Dr.

Goldmeir. A find like this from the two of them would have turned the world of archaeology on its ear.”

“Look, we need to find out if they actually had something in those tunnels or if it was all a dead end,” said Luke. He looked at Elena, shaking his head. “Sorry. Poor choice of words.”

“It’s alright,” she smiled. “I understand. The problem is there’s no way for us to determine if there was anything in there or not. By the time this would have occurred, mummification stopped around the fourth or fifth century A.D., and there were no pharaohs any longer. I just don’t know what to do.”

As quickly as she expressed the thought, Brix came running into the room.

“I have Daph on the phone. She stuck her damn nose where she wasn’t supposed to!”

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“I did not!” she yelled at the room. “I mean. Maybe. Look, I just went into our database again to see if anything was up yet. It says there are two non-Egyptian mummies in their original sarcophagi that will be auctioned off. It says the mummies have, and I’m quoting, ‘extraordinary historical significance which will be discussed at the auction.’”

“Damn,” muttered Major.

“I’m going to try and get into the warehouse,” said Daphne.

“Damnit, woman! Do not do something so fucking foolish!” yelled Brix. Elena looked at him, giving a small grin.

“She doesn’t respond well to that tone,” she whispered.

“Fuck me,” he growled. “Daphne, please do not do that. Someone is probably watching you, and it’s too much of a risk.”

“The only people watching my every move are my parents! They’re driving me crazy sitting here, and I’m sick of having dinners with men they believe are good son-in-law material.”

The room was suddenly deathly quiet. Brix swallowed, staring at the phone, then at everyone else.

“I-I’m not encouraging them,” said Daphne. “I don’t want to have dinners with them, but as long as I’m here, I’m being forced to. I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Yes, you do,” said Brix. “Come here.”

“I’m not even sure that security would allow me to leave, Brix. Even when I try to go outside and walk around, they’re following me like dogs. I’m grateful that they’re here, but I have no privacy at all.”

“I can come and get you,” said Brix. He looked at the others in the room, and Luke nodded.

“We can send him on the jet and be there by tonight,” he told Daphne.

“Can I have twenty-four hours to think about it? I don’t want to hurt my parents. I know they’re scared for me after what happened with my sister, but they’re really making me crazy.”

“Claim to have the flu,” smiled Elena. “Stomach cramps, diarrhea, anything that will allow them to leave you alone in your rooms.”

“That’s a good idea,” she smiled. “Alright. I’ll try that today. I want to come there. Just give me some time to deal with them.”

“I understand,” said Brix.

“No, you don’t, Brix. I want to be there, not here. I’m all my parents have left. They’re getting older, and they worry for me.”

“I get it, really,” he said.

“Okay, I’ll keep in touch, but someone needs to be at that auction or figure out what they actually have.”

She ended the call, and Brix looked at the others, unsure of what to say.

“Brix, she’s telling the truth,” said Elena. “Her parents are very protective of her after her sister died. It’s not what you think.”

“Is that right?” he frowned. Major gave him a stare that said for him to back off. “Sorry, Elena. What is it you believe I think?”

“I think you believe it’s about race. You think because you’re from mixed heritage, that she and her parents care. They’re not the kind of people who would care about something like that and more than that, neither would Daphne. They don’t care.”

“Don’t they?” he frowned.

“Brix,” she laughed. “Her parents are black. Daphne is adopted. She is a white European woman, but her parents are West African.” He opened his mouth several times to speak, nothing came out. As the others smirked in his direction, he finally was able to utter one word.

“Oh.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“We may have some good news for all of you,” said Pigsty, standing in the doorway with Hayes, Nigel, and Spencer.

“Come on in, boys,” said Hex. “What did you find?”



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“Well, sir,” smiled Nigel. “Drones really weren’t around when all the stuff happened in the tunnel in Egypt. I mean, they were, but only our military was using them, and it was all top secret.” Hex smiled at him, nodding.

“We know, son.”

“Right. Well, the drones weren’t really used, but we did have satellites. The ones being used at that time were old and clumsy. They didn’t have great range.”

“Nigel, we’re growing old here,” said Luke.

“You guys are really impatient,” he frowned. “Spencer and me built a program that searched old satellite photos using specific coordinates in and around the collapsed tunnel. We were able to see everything the day of the collapse and everything that has happened since then at those coordinates.”

The room was quiet, staring at one another, then back at the boys.

“Hayes? Can you speed this up for us?” asked Luke.

“Sure,” he smiled. Pigsty connected the laptop to the screen and then brought up the still shots of the day of the collapse. “Miss Elena, this might be hard for you.”

“Thank you, Hayes, but it’s alright. I’ve run this through my head many, many times. Please. Continue.”

“Okay. These first few photos are from two days before the collapse. There’s

movement, digging, people working, but what's more interesting is the photo at night where four figures in black entered the tunnel, spent almost two hours inside, then walked out. They didn't steal anything. They didn't carry anything."

"Could they have set the explosives?" asked Elena. Hayes nodded.

"It's possible. This is the day of the explosion. In this photo, you see your father speaking to four men outside the tunnel."

"I don't recognize those men. They weren't part of his team," she whispered.

"They don't appear to be arguing. They're speaking calmly, and then your father shakes their hands. They appear to be friends." Elena appeared confused, but the others prodded for Hayes to continue.

"This might be hard, Miss Elena."

"It's alright, Hayes," she said, smiling at the sweet young man.

"Your father walks into the tunnels with Dr. Goldmeir and the other workers, then approximately eleven minutes later, the explosion occurs. We see people scrambling, military trucks entering the area, other dig sites running toward them.

"The next few hours are dozens and dozens of people moving around the site. It's the same for the next few days and eventually weeks. The site is closed, even the entryway is completely blocked. I moved to the date of the other team's entrance from the opposite side. We see a number of people digging, moving in and out, then engineers coming in to make sure that the site is safe."

"Hayes is there a reason for all of this?" asked Hex.

“Stay with me.”

“He’s telling a story,” said Spencer. “We found a video of the entrance at night. Four men in black entering the tunnel.”

“No,” whispered Elena. “The same four men?”

“We’re not sure,” said Spencer. “But this time, they enter and leave with two massive crates. The crates are loaded into trucks, covered, and they speed away. A few hours later, the tunnel collapses again.”

“What in the world is going on? Did they go in to try and find the bodies of my father and the others?” she asked.

“Honey, I think we all know the answer to that question. It’s unlikely that they were willing to risk their lives for people who’d died years before. They obviously went in there to find what your father couldn’t.”

“I think it’s important to note that prior to these men entering, the dig team assigned to this was telling everyone that they were close to finding something that would change the world,” said Hayes.

“Wh—who was in charge of the dig?” she asked. The boys stared at her, then back at the others. “Pigsty, Hayes, all of you. Who was in charge of the second dig?”

“Dr. Roderick Weathers,” said Hayes quietly. Major looked at her, her face pale.

“Babe, who is that?” he asked.

“He’s the man that ruined my career. He’s the one that had me present bogus information that kept me away from the dig sites.”

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“Where is he?” asked Major, looking at Pigsty and the others.

“We thought you would want to know,” smiled Spencer. “He’s teaching at Penn. That’s a university.” Hex laughed, shaking his head.

“We know, son.”

“Oh, okay. Well, he’s there for the summer, but he leaves in six days.”

“That’s okay,” said Major. “I’ll be seeing him before then.” Elena gripped his arm, pulling him back.

“Not without me.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“I love you, Elena, but listen to me, and listen good. You will not put yourself under stress, you will not get excited, you will not get near him without me.” Major stared at her seated beside him in the SUV. The jet landed at a private airstrip with Elena, Major, Brix, Sebastian, and Forrest. From there, they headed to Penn, knowing that Dr. Roderick Weathers was in a lecture hall for the next hour.

Elena was so anxious she wanted to leap from the vehicle as it was still moving. Sebastian opened the door for her, taking her hand and squeezing.

“Not without us, sweetheart. We will be between you and him at all times. Don’t run, don’t jump, don’t do anything without us.” He smiled at her, then kissed her forehead

to let her know she had support.

“I understand,” she nodded. “I won’t risk me or the baby. Or any of you.”

“Fucking glad to hear that, but don’t worry about us,” frowned Major.

The campus of Penn was absolutely stately. The beautiful buildings, landscaping, and the feeling of being on historic grounds were nearly overwhelming. Any other time, it would have been a lovely little adventure for them. Not today.

Entering the building wrote down from the information they’d gathered, they walked the long hallway, Elena in the center of their protective ring.

They quietly opened the doors to the lecture hall, the asshole at the front of the room trying to charm his students.

“The excitement and utter pleasure of seeing something for the very first time that no one else has touched in thousands of years is quite liberating!” he exclaimed. Young women giggled, practically swooning at the silver-haired man. He looked up to see the strangers and waved for them to be seated.

“Please take a seat. I welcome guests,” he said with a British accent. Elena moved to the front, and the professor froze. His jaw dropped open, and they could see his face turning red from the back of the room. He was not pleased to see her.

“Don’t let him fool you, ladies. He’s not from England. He’s from Arkansas originally. He’s quite adept at fooling others. It’s a game he plays very well.”

“I-I think class is over,” he said calmly. “I’ll see you next week.”

As the room slowly emptied, the students made sure they went around the huge men

and one very angry-looking woman. Whispering to one another, they were unsure of what the strangers were doing in their lecture, but they weren't about to interfere.

"Elena. It's lovely to see you." He fidgeted with his papers, gathering them and organizing them into a neat stack.

"Don't be any more of an asshole than you already are, Roderick. You ruined my career. Ruined it, and you very conveniently never bothered to tell me that you ran the dig that entered my father's tunnel from the opposite side."

He froze, closing his books and quickly gathering the rest of his things.

"If you think you're leaving this room without giving an explanation, you're dead-ass wrong," said Sebastian. "I've been reading up on mummification. It would be horrible to be mummified alive, don't you think? I mean, I'll knock you out before I do it, but when you wake, you're gonna be screamin' at the top of your lungs."

"I-I have another class," he stammered.

"No, you don't," said Major. "Explain. Now."

"Why did you ruin my career?" asked Elena. "I deserve to know."

"I was paid. Don't ask me who paid me. I don't know. I was in debt, and I needed money to continue the dig. Someone sent me a letter asking me to divert you. To do anything to keep you away from the dig sites. They offered me five hundred thousand dollars."

"You ruined my career for money?" she snapped, starting to move forward. Major never even looked down at her. Just grabbed her waist and lifted her off her feet, setting her back down behind him.

“Who was it?” asked Major.

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“I told you I don’t know. They sent the letter. I agreed, and when it was done, I had a certified cashier’s check in my mailbox.”

“And what if they hadn’t paid you, fuckhead?” said Brix. He opened his mouth to speak and then just shook his head.

“Why were you digging on the opposite side of my father’s grave? Answer me now, or so help me God, I will shoot you right here and now.”

“I wasn’t digging!” he yelled. They all looked at him, waiting for an explanation. “I wasn’t digging. I opened the dig under my name because the person who was digging couldn’t.”

“You opened a dig site for a nonprofessional? Who? Who did you do this for?” she asked.

“Elena don’t ask me this,” he pleaded.

“Don’t ask? I deserve to know. I’m so sick of lies and secrets, secrets and lies. My parents, then just my mother, the dig teams, you! Who!” she screamed at him. Major placed a hand on her shoulder, calming her shaking body.

“Your father.”

“I can’t believe it,” she said for the tenth time. “I just can’t believe it. He faked his death. He let me suffer, grieve all because of a dig!”



“Honey, we’ll figure this out. If he’s still out there, we’ll find him,” said Major.

“He’s out there. He’s out there and has been screwing with my life for the last five years. He let me believe that he’d died in that dig. He killed his team.”

“Look, I know it seems overwhelming right now, but give us some time to get through all of this. Maybe your father has a good reason,” said Forrest. She stared at him, rolling her eyes. Then she started to cry.

“What good reason, Forrest? What good reason would you have to fake your death with your family, your friends, your colleagues? What was in that tunnel that was so important he had to leave us, leave me?”

Forrest gripped her hand, Major holding the other.

“I don’t know, Elena. I wish I knew the answer to that. But if your father is still alive, we’re going to find him and figure out what the fuck he took out of that tunnel.”

“It obviously meant more to him than me and my mother,” she sniffed. “Whatever it was, I want him to answer for killing those people. Roderick said that Goldmeir was part of it and two of the original dig personnel. If they’re alive, I want all of them to pay for it.”

“I think what we need to know is how does he think he’s going to publicize these discoveries when everyone around the world believes he’s dead, they’re dead. I mean, unless they’ve all had plastic surgery, are they going to tell people they’ve been living in that damn tunnel for twenty years?” Elena shook her head, unsure of what to say.

“I don’t know. But I know that he’s going to look me in the eyes and give me an explanation, or I’m going to give all of you permission to kick his ass.”

“I’d volunteer for that job,” smirked Brix. “I hate to ask this, honey, but what about your mother? I mean, she sent that journal, so she knew some of this. Do you think she knew that your father was still alive?”

“Now, that’s a great question,” she said, taking out her phone. She dialed the number, not caring what time it was on the other side of the world. “Mother.”

“Elena. I assume you got the journal.”

“Did you know?”

“Know what, Elena?”

“Don’t play stupid with me, Mother. I’m sick of this. Did you know that Father was alive?”

There was utter silence on the other end of the line, and Major held up a finger, telling her to be patient and wait it out.

“I knew. We agreed it was best. He would allow me to move on with my life. I could collect what little life insurance was available and start new, fresh. He hated leaving you.”

“But he did. He didn’t hate it so much that he didn’t actually fucking leave me!” she screamed.

“Don’t speak to me that way! I’m your mother, and I deserve some respect. Do you know how many times I wanted to tell you about your precious father, your idol? Do you? Do you understand what it was like to watch you worship everything about him, knowing what kind of man he really was?”

“You didn’t seem to mind at all, Mother,” she said calmly. “You were more than happy to move on with your life, send me to boarding schools, ignore that I grew up without a father.”

“This is a waste of conversation. I don’t know how you found out but just leave it alone, Elena. He’ll bury himself once again.”

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“No. No, that’s where you’re wrong, Mother. I’m going to bury him.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“He’s out there,” she said, looking at the rest of the team in the boardroom. “My father is out there, and quite possibly, so is Dr. Goldmeir and some of the others. Whatever he found in there, he’s about to announce to the world and cash in on it. I want to find him and expose what he’s done.”

“Elena, do you believe he was capable of killing the others on the dig site? Efram said that all except him are dead,” said Luke.

“If you’d asked me that a month ago, I would have clawed your eyes out,” she smirked. She sobered, shaking her head. “I don’t, Luke. It’s obvious that I didn’t really know my father at all. I do think that if Daphne suspects the items are being held at the auction house, we need to try and find them. I can’t verify what they are unless I see them.”

“Nope,” said Major.

“Major...”

“Nope. I love you, Elena, and there will be very few times in our marriage that I am absolute about saying ‘no.’ This is one of them. You’re not flying to London, you’re not digging into that warehouse, and you’re damn sure not going to chase bad guys when you’re still in the first trimester of your pregnancy.”

“He’s right, honey,” said Hex. “It would be foolish to risk your life that way. We can dig into this and have you here in the comms center telling us what we’re seeing. You’ll still be involved.”

“I want to face my father,” she said, staring at the men.

“You can face him – virtually,” said Major. “I know it’s not ideal, but if he’s in London, you will be here.”

“I have to agree with them, Elena. I would have died in Tibet had the team not been there to guide me, protect me, tell me all the things I didn’t know. You’re a brilliant woman on many subjects, but the machinations of madmen is not one of them,” smiled her mentor and friend.

“May, I know all of that, but he’s my father. Mine. I want him to look me in the eye and tell me why.”

“Elena, I think you already know the answer to that. He wanted his big win. His big find.” May looked at everyone, then stood, moving closer to her. “I did some research on your last dig, the one that Roderick used against you. It wasn’t just getting you out of the dig sites, Elena. If everything we know is true about your father, he needed the site that you were working in.”

She looked down at the maps of the dig sites, then the area where her father’s last site was. They were close. Definitely close. If she had dug to the left, she might have hit an outer tunnel for the tunnel that her father was in. She’d never even made the connection before.

“Alright,” she said, resolving herself to the fact that she wouldn’t be going to London. “Alright. I’ll trust all of you and Daphne to find this. When you find my father, I want to see his face and have a conversation with him.”

“We promise, Elena,” smiled Brix.

“And Brix? Don’t lose out on Daphne. She’s the most amazing woman I know, and I’m certain that she cares for you as well.” He smiled at her, leaving the others as he went to begin gathering the gear they would need. Eric looked at the team, nodding.

“Okay, Major, Brix, Sebastian, Forrest, Alistair, and Garr. Take all the toys you need and take Doc, just in case. Find the artifacts, protect the girl, and find her damn father.”

“What do you mean she knows I’m alive?”

“Listen, I’m sorry. She showed up at the university with a bunch of beefy, oversized bodyguards, and she was pissed. They knew all of it. Everything.”

“That damn wife of mine. She gave her the journal. They cannot know what’s in that auction house. I have to be able to present this as my finding. Mine alone.”

“It wasn’t just yours,” said Roderick with a whiney tone. “Goldmeir and the others helped. I helped.”

“Are you joking?” he laughed. “You didn’t help. You kept my daughter away, which is what you wanted anyway. You knew that she was better than you, more intelligent than you in every way, and you wanted her gone. I helped you, not the other way around.”

“You killed the others,” said Roderick in a low voice.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” he laughed. “You really are getting old and senile, Roderick. You might want to think about taking a long sabbatical. Far, far away.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Of course not. I’m a friend, making a suggestion.”

“Need I remind you that you’re a dead friend who will need me when you suddenly appear alive and well,” said Roderick. “I’m all you have left.”

“Actually, you’re the only one left who knows all the details,” he laughed. “Interesting, isn’t it? You’re all alone, not certain if you can trust me or not. But you’re the only thing standing between me, fame, fortune, and a life that I deserve.”

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“I hate that I ever let you convince me to get involved,” said Roderick.

“It didn’t take much convincing,” smiled Fayek. “You were desperate, as I recall. Your dig was getting nowhere. You were losing funding. You had quite a gambling debt with a Tunisian who was amused. You needed me, not the other way around.”

“I’m done. Leave me alone. Send me what you owe me, and we’ll part ways. I want nothing more to do with this. Your daughter is happy. She’s married.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, and Roderick waited for that to sink in.

“Who? Who did she marry?”

“I don’t know who he is. But she’s happy and living in the states now. She’s far away from you and all your games. Leave it alone, Fayek. Just do what you have to do for yourself but leave her alone. She’s suffered enough.”

“Maybe. Maybe I need to speak with my representative at the auction house. We might want to move up the reveal.”

“Whatever,” said Roderick in frustration. “Just leave me out of it.” Fayek laughed, the sound sending chills down Roderick’s back.

“Take care of yourself, old friend. Accidents happen at your age.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“Hello?”

“Daph? It’s Brix.”

“Oh, hello. It’s great to hear your voice,” she smiled.

“Yours too, honey. Listen, we’re headed that way, and we need to get into that warehouse and see what’s there. Can you meet us and give us access? If not, we can figure it out. We just didn’t want to raise any alarms if it wasn’t there.”

“No, no, of course I can. It will give me an excuse to refuse dinner with my parents. They’re driving me mad,” she said with exasperation.

Brix was quiet for a long moment, working up his courage. She didn’t say anything, but he could hear her soft breathing.

“Brix? Are you there?”

“I’m here, honey. Daph, I have no right to ask this of you, but please don’t have dinner with anyone. I want to be the only person you want to have dinner with for the foreseeable future. I know that’s wrong and selfish, and...”

“Exactly what I was hoping you would say,” she laughed. “I’ve been waiting for you to say something that told me you wanted more than one night, Brix. I’ve never felt a stronger connection with anyone in my entire life. I want to spend some time with you, and it seems as though now is the right time to take a break from the auction house.”

“I think it’s a perfect time, Daph. Listen, I’ll text you when we land. Don’t leave the house right now. Wait for another, let’s say, ninety minutes. Find a restaurant or other public place to sit in until I text you. Do not go to that warehouse alone.”

“I promise. Brix? Is it true that Elena’s father is alive?”

“It’s true,” he said. “Hey, I’ll see you soon. We’re almost there. Be careful, Daphne. Don’t take any risks. If you have to turn around and go home, do it fast.”

“I will. I’ll see you soon,” she smiled. The call ended, and she quickly put on a pair of black leggings, hiking boots, and a warm sweater. It might be summer, but England was still cold at night.

Pulling an overnight bag from her closet, she packed several changes of clothes and took them downstairs and into her car. When she walked back inside, she could hear her parents talking.

“She’s got to take some responsibility here,” said her mother.

“She will, dear. She’s a good girl. She knows that we need an heir. I admit we made a mistake the first time, but we’ll do better this go around.” Daphne stood in the doorway, staring at them.

“Better this time around? You mean someone who won’t beat me to death?” They started to speak, and she held up her hand. “Don’t. Don’t attempt to make this sound as if you have my best interests at heart. I’m sorry you lost a daughter. Truly, I am. But this behavior is going to cause you to lose another.

“I am not going to marry anyone of your choosing. If I get married, and that’s a big if it will be a man that I choose, that I love, that I have a connection with. I will not be forced into another relationship.”

“We admitted that we’d made a mistake, Daphne. Your father needs a grandchild to give all of this to.”

“Give it to charity, mother. I don’t care. I make a good living. My trust is performing well in the markets. I don’t need this house or your money.” Her mother just stared at her, fuming from her alleged disinterest.

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“What are you wearing?” frowned her father. “You look as if you’re going to dig in the garden.”

“Maybe I am,” she smiled. “I’m not going to be here for dinner for the next few nights. I’m going to meet some friends in the city, and I’ll be there for a few days.”

“We’ll send security,” said her mother, racing toward the house phone.

“Nope,” said Daphne, waving at them as she walked out the door. “I’ll see you soon. I love you both but don’t do this, or you’ll lose me.”

Just as she opened the door, three men and a woman were standing there, ready to knock. Daphne knew exactly why they’d come. She turned to her parents.

“A woman?”

“We were trying to cover all possible bases,” said her father. She could only shake her head.

“Apologies, everyone. I won’t be joining you for dinner tonight.” She got into her sports car and sped away, spinning gravel with her tires as she did. When she felt certain no one was following her and that she was clear of her small village, she felt more at ease.

Traffic was moving in the opposite direction, with London workers catching trains home, driving their miserable commutes, and hopefully getting home in time for a hot meal. She weaved through the busy city streets, then took the roads that led her

around the congested portions of the city and to the warehouse near the airport.

She knew the area like the back of her hand. The Wicked Wick was a local pub with great food and a fun atmosphere. She'd been in it many times with coworkers and knew it would be a safe place to wait for Brix's call.

Daphne ordered a pint and shepherd's pie. She savored the flavorful gravy, hot vegetables, and lamb. The waitstaff and bartender knew her, smiling and chatting for a few minutes. When Brix texted her that they were ten minutes out, she paid her bill and drove to the warehouse.

She followed Brix's directions. Or at least she tried to. When she saw the bright bursts of lights inside the warehouse, she knew something was wrong.

"Shit," she muttered. She tried calling Brix but gave up, realizing that she had to get inside.

Using her key card and code to bypass the alarm, she entered the warehouse and slowly closed the door, trying not to make a sound. She removed her hiking boots, setting them on one of the dozens of crates. Walking in her stocking feet, she didn't make a sound.

As she neared the source of the lights, she heard two men talking but couldn't make out what they'd said. The lights were no longer flashing, only the overhead lights on. Thinking she could send Brix a message, she opened her phone and began to type. She never realized that her phone would send a light straight to the men in the warehouse.

"What are you doing here?"

"I-I work here," she said. "What are you doing here? Are you here for a pickup?" She

was scared to death but had to think of something. The man looked down at her feet and smiled.

“You are a foolish, foolish girl.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Let’s go,” said Major.

“Shit! Fucking hell!” yelled Brix.

“What’s wrong?” frowned Sebastian.

“Daphne. That stubborn, stupid, pig-headed woman! She saw lights inside the warehouse and went in!”

He didn’t have to say a word. The men ran toward the waiting SUV, tossed the gear in the back and literally spun tires driving toward the warehouse. They knew it was only moments away, but moments could kill a woman.

As they approached, they saw the flash of bright bursts of lights as well and barely parked before racing toward the facility. Sebastian placed the codebreaker against the keypad and watched as the numbers spun and the door clicked open.

Silently making their way inside, Brix moved quickly to the front, looking up and down the massive number of aisles. Spotting the hiking shoes, he cursed to himself and continued to move. When he saw a small figure on the floor, his heart stopped. He couldn’t breathe.

Not caring for his own safety, he ran toward the woman, scooping her up in his arms. Her face was bloodied, but she was alive.

“Get her out of here,” said Sebastian.

Moving further into the warehouse, they spotted two men near the dock doors. They appeared to be arguing, yelling at one another.

“Hands up!” yelled Garr.

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The two men turned, both with weapons in their hands.

“Where is it? Where is the crate?” yelled one of the men.

“Sorry, buddy, we have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Major. “But let me introduce myself, Dr. Fayek. I’m your son-in-law.”

Fayek stared at the man, shaking his head. He still had his pistol pointed at the men, but they had him outmanned and outgunned.

“No. She wouldn’t marry an American,” he frowned.

“No? Why? Because Egyptians are so honest and devout. Don’t fuck with me, asshole. I’d like to break every bone in your damn body for the pain you’ve caused my wife. All for what? Some fucking crate with a mummy. Pots. Cloth. She’s worth so much more than that.”

“You know nothing of this! Nothing! It is worth a lifetime of deaths and resurrections. It will change everything we know. Everything!”

“Because you believe it’s Jesus and Mary,” said Sebastian, staring at the two men. They both were wide-eyed, looking back at the men. How could they possibly know?

“You don’t understand. Where are the crates?” he asked again.

“Your guess is as good as ours,” said Major. “What did you do to the woman?”



“She was sticking her nose where it didn’t belong. We had to make sure we sent a message for her to be silent,” said Fayek.

“Not we,” said the other man. “Him. I didn’t touch her. I wanted to let her go.”

“Shut up, you fucking coward! You agreed to all of this!”

“I never agreed to hurt Elena or any woman.”

“Who are you?” asked Major.

The man shook his head, not wanting to give anything away. Fayek laughed, then jerked the man in front of him, firing his pistol several times. He was a shitty shot, missing all of them.

As they fired back, they hit the other man several times, watching him fall as Fayek slipped out the dock doors. Major kneeled next to him, holding his head.

“Who are you?” Tears fell from his eyes.

“Tell her I’m sorry. Tell her I didn’t know it all,” said the man.

“Who are you?”

“Get the crates. Someone took the crates,” he said with great difficulty. “Fayek is trying to destroy Christianity.” Major nodded but asked the question again.

“Who are you?”

“Efram. I was... Efram.” He uttered his name with his last breath.

“Shit,” said Sebastian. “Brix took Daphne to the jet. Doc is working on her now. She’ll be okay, but she looks fucking awful.”

“We have to find Fayek,” said Major. “Check this guy’s pockets and see if there’s another vehicle in the parking lot.”

“Oh, dear,” said an older woman, walking through the warehouse. “Our security company said that the alarm had been disengaged several times tonight. No one should be in here.”

Several security men were behind her, all pointing their weapons straight at them. The VG men raised their hands.

“We’re with a security agency. We were trying to stop this man and another, Dr. Fayek, from getting to the crates that you had.”

“The crates belonged to this man,” she said, pointing at Efram. “Where are they?”

“We don’t know. We arrived as Efram and Dr. Fayek were arguing about something. Apparently, the crates were gone when they arrived.” Major stared at the woman as she wrung her hands. “Ma’am, can you confirm what was in those crates?”

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“Mummies. Two unidentified mummies, but this gentleman assured us that he knew their identities, and it would change the world.”

“Where the fuck are those crates?” asked Garr.

“We have to find Fayek.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” smirked one of the security guards, walking toward Major. He turned, smiling at the others. “Give me your weapon.”

“Take it,” said Major.

Of course, the man was foolish enough to accept the taunt. He reached for the weapon, and Major gripped his forearm, twisting, then turning his body to face the others. He pressed at his wrist, just above his thumb, and his weapon clattered to the floor.

“Listen to me. We are not your enemy. We are with Voodoo Guardians Security. We are here to catch Dr. Fayek and find those crates. Now, you can help us, or you can try to come at us again, but it will not end well for you.”

The woman looked at him, then back at the guards.

“Lower your weapons.” They did as they were told then helped their friend to stand. “I never met this Dr. Fayek, only this man. He said he had a partner and that they had been working to find these two for decades.”

“Do they live in the area?” asked Sebastian.

“He said he lived near London, but I’m not certain of where. I do need to tell you that we authenticated the dating of the materials. It was from between 26 and 40 AD.”

“Shit,” muttered Garr.

“Hey!” said Forrest, standing below the dock door. “I searched his car, and I think I have an address. Let’s go!”

Major stared at the woman, then at the security guards. He thought they got the message, but he wanted to be sure.

“What will you do if you find the crates?” she asked. Major walked past the small group, tucking his weapon in its holster.

“I’ll make sure they’re in the right hands.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Daphne remembered the man coming toward her with a cane. For the life of her, she couldn’t think of why he would walk toward her with a cane. He wasn’t limping. What did he need it for?

He needed it to beat the hell out of her. He swung hard at the side of her head, then slammed it into her face. Falling to the concrete, she only remembered pain and blissful darkness.

Opening her eyes just a crack, a man in black leaned over her, kissing her forehead. He lifted her easily, then walked away. When she opened her eyes again, she was lying on a bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Don’t move, honey,” said the soft voice. “My name is Doc. I’m a medic and nurse. You’re quite a mess.”

“I h-hurt,” she murmured.

“Why did you go in there?” said the familiar voice. She turned, only one eye actually seeing anything. Brix. He was there. “Why, Daph? I begged you not to do this.”

“Lights,” she whispered. “Lights were flashing inside the warehouse. Then it went dark, and then a few minutes later, lights flashed again. I knew they were in there.”

“Baby, nothing is worth your life. Nothing.” She nodded, tears filling her swollen eyes as Doc worked on her nose and lacerations on her face.

“Maybe try not to be an asshole to the woman, Brix. She’s had enough for one day. He has no manners, honey. None. We’ve all tried to make him listen, even his mom and dad. Nope. He’s just an asshole sometimes.”

Daphne tried to smile, but it caused her tremendous pain. Brix reached for her hand, kissing the back of it.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be an asshole. I was worried for you,” he said, shaking his head.

“Home,” she whispered. Brix nodded.

“Yeah. Sure, okay. I’ll take you home.”

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“N-no. I don’t want to go home. Take me to your home.” Brix grinned at Doc, then leaned over her, placing a soft, gentle kiss on her lips.

“That I will definitely do.”

When they heard footsteps entering the plane, Doc and Brix both whipped around, weapons drawn.

“It’s us,” said Sebastian. Evie looked at them, frowning.

“Do you honestly believe I’d let strangers on my plane? For shit’s sake, have some confidence in me,” she snapped.

“Sorry, Evie,” smirked Doc. “Hey, we need to get her back.”

“Leave,” said Major. “We’ve got a trail to follow. Did she see anything?”

“Lights,” said Brix. “She said she saw bright flashing lights, then the lights stopped and, a few moments later, started again. That’s why she went into the warehouse.”

“Well, the crates are gone, but so is Fayek.”

“F-Fayek?” frowned Daphne. “Elena’s father?”

“I’m afraid so, honey. He used Efram as a shield. He was in on this as well. They didn’t know where the crates had been moved, and neither do we. Your director walked in on us with security. She said they were supposed to be unveiled in a few

days.”

“They weighed a ton,” she murmured through her swollen lips. “Need a forklift or something.”

“Get her home,” said Major. “We’ll stay here and try to find Fayek.”

“Keys,” she said, trying to reach in the pocket of her sweater. “Take my car. It’s small but it’s fast. My apartment keys are on there as well.”

“Thanks, Daph,” smiled Major. “You just get well. We’ll take it from here.”

“My clothes. My clothes are in the car.”

“I got ‘em,” grinned Garr. “I may not have a wife or girlfriend, but I’ve been around enough of them to know you girls always have extra somewhere. And before you ask, yes, I broke into your car, but I didn’t damage it.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Painkillers are kicking in,” said Doc. “You guys do your thing. We’re going to get her home and comfortable. Evie already called Savannah to head this way.”

“Thanks, Doc. Give my wife a hug for me,” said Major.

“I’ll do that.”

“What’s the address that was in the other victim’s car?” asked Sebastian.

“Looks like it’s in a suburb. Haringey,” said Garr.

“Hey, fellas? A few things about Haringey,” said AJ. “According to the data, 129.1 crimes per one thousand people. It’s green, lots of trees, but has a lot of violent crimes and thefts. Just watch your backs.”

“Thanks, AJ,” said Major. “Alright, let’s go. Brix? Take care of your girl.” He nodded at his friends as they left the plane. Doc stood, walking toward the front to sit with Evie as they took off.

He carefully lay beside her, making sure not to move her too much. Instead, he gently slid his arm beneath her, pulling her close to his warm body. He covered her with a blanket and listened to the soft sounds of her sleeping.

“Nothing to worry about now, baby. We’re going home.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The neighborhood was exactly as AJ had described. Lots of trees, small parks, and middle-class homes. But there was also a vibe of young men and women out of control, kids running and working the streets, not even caring who they hurt.

Parking a block away from the home of Efram, they locked the doors of the rented SUV, having left Daph’s car at her apartment. They could feel eyes upon them as if they knew they didn’t belong. It was easy to figure out which house was his. There were police cars out front and a grieving widow being held by her teenage children. She sobbed uncontrollably, and the female officer led them all to a car.



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“Probably taking her to ID the body,” said Sebastian. Major nodded.

“Wait until they leave, and we’ll go inside. There has to be something there that will tell us where he is.”

“What about the crates? If he doesn’t have them. Who does? And are there really mummies inside?” asked Forrest.

“I don’t know, and I have to be honest. I don’t care. This is all insane to me. Whatever is in those crates has already caused so much death, so much pain. It doesn’t need to be seen by anyone. It can’t possibly be that important,” said Major.

“They’re gone,” said Alistair.

“You’ve been awfully quiet this trip,” said Sebastian. He shrugged as they strolled across the street. “You alright, brother?”

“I’m good. All you guys falling in love and shit has me rethinking my life.”

“What do you mean? Are you interested in meeting someone?” asked Major.

“Maybe. I don’t know. Maybe I need to reenlist. It’s not too late. Rangers would want me back.”

“Are you fucking nuts?” growled Sebastian. “We went in at the same time; we got out at the same time, Alistair. We’ve done our time, and we’ve kicked our fair share of ass. We don’t need to do that any longer.”

“I’m aware, Sebastian. But Walker has Mags, Major has Elena, you’ve got Em, and Forrest has Maddie. That leaves me the lone man out.”

“Uh. Hello,” frowned Garr. “I’m still single, asshole.”

“Sorry,” smirked Alistair. “Don’t worry about it. It’s just a phase. I’ll get over it. I probably just need to get laid.”

They walked to the back of the house, the darkness helping to cover their movements. There didn’t seem to be any pets, and definitely no alarms. Sebastian easily picked the lock and opened the back door. They’d obviously been in the middle of cooking their evening meal when the police arrived. The pots were still hot, and the table was set.

The house didn’t have an office, but they searched the drawers of the buffet and any drawers in the kitchen. Upstairs, there were three bedrooms. The kids’ rooms were so dirty you wouldn’t have been able to find a dead body in there.

Efram and his wife shared a small bedroom with no room for any movement outside of sleeping and getting dressed. Back downstairs, they stared at the rooms, shaking their heads.

“Nothing,” said Garr, frustrated.

“There has to be something,” said Major. “See if there’s a basement.”

“There’s no basement, Major,” said Alistair.

“Damn,” he muttered. “This is like looking for a needle in a haystack. How in the fuck are we going to find him?” Alistair looked around the dismally normal home. There were fashion magazines, sports magazines, and several books. The kids had

left their gaming devices near their seats, the wife leaving behind her knitting in a basket beside a chair.

He slowly turned, feeling as though something was out of place. What was it? What was making him feel odd? That.

“That,” he said, pointing to a photo on the wall. “Everything in this house is about kids and family. Everything except that. A framed postcard.”

He removed it from the wall then removed the back of it. The postcard had an address on it. An address in Cambridge.

“Of course. He’d want to be near academics. He’d want access to libraries and research if at all possible,” said Major. “He’s there. I know he’s there.”

“Let’s go, brother,” said Sebastian.

They exited the back of the house, ensuring that they locked the door again. In this neighborhood, it wouldn’t matter that they were a grieving family. Someone was likely to take advantage of their distraction.

Near the vehicle, four young men stood with massive cricket bats in their hands. Sebastian laughed, shaking his head.

“You don’t want to do this, fellas.”

“Yer Yanks,” sneered one of the boys.

“Proudly. Yes,” said Alistair.

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The boy stepped forward, swinging the bat at him. Alistair gripped the handle, ripping it from the boy's hand. He shoved him backwards, causing him to fall to the street. The boy was wide-eyed but also humiliated in front of his friends.

"See, you went at him all wrong," said Sebastian, gripping the bat. "Never swing for the head. He's too tall, too big. Swing for the knees." He moved so quickly the boy couldn't move as the bat cracked when it hit his knees or the knees cracked. Sebastian wasn't sure. The boy screamed out as another boy came forward with his bat.

"Slow as shit, aren't they?" frowned Garr. He swept the boy's legs, causing him to fall backwards. Stepping on the hand gripping the bat, he took it from him and leaned into his diaphragm with the bat. The boy gasped for air, staring up at him.

"We told you not to do it, but you didn't listen." Garr gripped the bat in his hands and snapped it over his knee. "Come at me again, and that'll be you."

The boys wisely backed up, not willing to turn their backs on the enormous men. Entering the address into the GPS, they took off north toward Cambridge.

"I'm hungry," said Garr.

"Me, too," said Forrest. "Hey, there's a fish shop up there. Fish and chips, real fish and chips."

"I won't tell George you said that," smirked Major. "Alright, stop. Quickly."

Sebastian stopped to order several orders of fish and chips, including a few extras.

Just in case. With an orange soda for each man and their fill of fried food, they continued their drive. The entire car smelled of fried oil, but the men's bellies were full.

"What do you really think is in the crates?" asked Forrest.

"I don't know, brother," said Major, shaking his head. "I'm not sure I want to know, nor am I sure that others need to know. Sometimes things are best left alone."

"Aren't you curious?" asked Sebastian.

"A little, I guess."

"Man, I'm dying to know. I was disappointed that those crates were gone. But Daphne was right. Those crates were big and heavy. You couldn't just lift them out of there. They'd have to be placed in a large truck, covered."

"All I care about right now is finding Elena's father," said Major. "I won't have him haunting my wife's dreams." Text messages sounded throughout the car.

"It's Brix. They made it back. She's in pain but will heal. He says Elena is doing fine. He won't tell her about seeing her father or about Efram."

"I'll have to tell her sooner or later," said Major. "I won't keep secrets from my wife. Not if I don't have to."

"Spoken like a man truly in love," laughed Sebastian.

"Is that funny?" frowned Major.

"No, brother. Not funny. Ironic coming from the man who swore off women except

to scratch an itch now and then. Suddenly, you can't think of your life without her. I think it's cool, brother. I hope that Em and I have the same thing."

"You will," said Forrest. "She loves you, and you love her." The car was quiet, then the rustling of a paper bag made them turn to see Sebastian digging inside.

"What the hell do you have?" asked Garr.

"Sweets. Licorice Allsorts, they're a favorite here, and I like something sweet after dinner."

They could only shake their heads, laughing at the boyish antics of their friend. Major just smirked at his friend.

"You need to make an appointment with Londyn when you get back, or Em will never marry you. No woman likes a man without teeth."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Aasad moved slowly and carefully around his crowded apartment. He'd gathered items for years to prove his theory of what was in the sarcophagi. Books, papers, other artifacts, anything he could get his hands on.

Had people died? Suffered? Of course. Fame comes at a cost, and he was going to be sure it wasn't at his cost.

When he'd first heard of the possibility of what the tomb held, he laughed it off. He didn't believe in religion of any kind. He didn't believe in Christianity, he didn't believe in Judaism, and he didn't believe in the Egyptian gods. He believed in what he could hold in his hand.

When the Egyptian and British governments asked him to lead the dig, he was somewhat shocked. There were other more famous, more successful archaeologists. But there were none that were more willing to share credit and quietly go about his business than Aasad Fayek.

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For years, his wife had hounded him about working harder, putting himself out front during press conferences. Perhaps he should write a book, she would say. It wasn't about him and his success. It was about her wanting more. More money. A bigger house. Nicer clothing. The only person who was happy was Elena.

Satisfied with a new pair of dig trousers, a new trowel or shovel, she never complained. One year, he gave her a sifter that he'd made himself for three dollars. She squealed with delight and immediately went out to sift the sand.

His wife glared at him, shaking her head.

"I gave you forty dollars, Aasad. You said you would buy her something nice."

"I needed the money for something else," he said, grabbing his hat and briefcase. He opened the front door then turned to her. "Besides, I'm certain you can find more where you got that. Your grocer is a very generous man, isn't he?"

He'd known that she was seeing him for years, but he honestly didn't care. She stayed out of his way, and he had the freedom to do what he loved. But she was right. He allowed others to take credit for his work, often to the detriment of his career.

When the dig started to yield possible clues as to what was inside, he became more excited than he ever had before. This would make him world famous. And hated. And loved. He would make millions on movies, books, lectures. But he couldn't do that with a family.

When Yasmin discovered the sarcophagi, she did the right thing by clearing out the



tunnels. She wanted no one inside except the two of them.

Six boxes surrounded the bodies. They were filled with simple things. Cloth, pieces of wood, spices, and the most perplexing thing he'd ever seen. A thorny crown.

The two of them agreed that no one could know about it. No one could see this. They would dig through to the back, find another route out of the tunnels, and remove the sarcophagi from prying eyes.

They were a small, close-knit team. But even that made him anxious. What if someone told their wife or their friend? What if word leaked out? He couldn't risk it. When they planned the explosion, he knew what he had to do.

The treasure was moved to the far end, near the second entrance. Once that was done, they set the charges and agreed to move to the other end. Except not everyone could. Aasad blocked them in. Everyone was dead.

As his paranoia rose, he realized that not everyone was dead. Three people remained that might cause him issues.

Roderick was such an easy one to silence. Desperate for money and a way out of his predicament, he immediately bought into tricking Elena. Aasad recognized early on that his daughter was a good archaeologist. Very good. Perhaps better than he was. Getting her out of the dig sites was important in order for him to move around.

He should have killed him when the job was done. He'd have to rectify that situation later. He regretted hurting his daughter, but sacrifices had to be made if you were going to be successful.

Suddenly, he looked around one day, and he had no one that could help him. He decided to finally trust his old friend, Efram. Thrilled to see him alive, Efram was

excited to be working with him again. At first, Aasad lied to him, telling him that he'd been in touch with Elena. But when Efram pressed to know more about her new life, he finally told him the truth.

It was his first of many mistakes with Efram.

He felt bad for his family, but he would rectify that when he received his money from the auction house. He'd been smart submitting the sale under an alias. He had all the documentation, the studies, the DNA samplings, everything. They would tout him as the greatest that ever lived.

But first, he needed to find the crates.

When they arrived, there were lights inside the warehouse. He and Efram were concerned that the workers were still inside, but there were no cars. Entering using a stolen key card and code, the light was nearly blinding. Then suddenly, it was pitch black.

Quietly, they searched the entire place, finding no one and, more importantly, finding nothing. His crates were gone. Surely, the warehouse had security cameras. Perhaps the man claiming to be his daughter's husband took them. Maybe she knew about the find all along.

"No," he said, whispering to himself. "No one alive knew. No one except me."

"And me."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"That's it up there," said Sebastian, pointing to the apartment. "It's got frilly curtains."

“Maybe he likes it that way,” said Major.

“It says here the apartment is registered to Anele Keyaf. Sounds like a woman,” said Garr.

“Uh, sirs, this is Spencer. Anele Keyaf is Elena Fayek spelled backwards. He’s using his daughter’s name.”

“Holy shit,” smirked Forrest. “He’s right.”

“Of course I’m right, sir.”

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“Of course. My apologies, Spencer. Why are you up so early?”

“It’s 0530, sir. I knew you’d need some support. Besides, I don’t sleep much. My head is constantly thinking of things I need to do.” Major smirked at the others.

“We appreciate the help, Spencer, but Fitz and Zoe are going to be worried about you,” said Major.

“I’m here, brother. He at least did me the courtesy of waking me up to tell me where he was going. I’ll be on time for morning PT. Are we good here?”

“Yes, sir,” laughed the little boy. “Good luck, sirs.”

“Thank you, Spencer. You did good,” said Major. “Let’s go.”

“Are we sure this maniac doesn’t have weapons? He used dynamite in the tunnels. No telling what he might do in that apartment,” said Garr.

“Shit,” muttered Major. “Disrupt the cameras and then we’ll trip the fire alarms. We’ll wait until everyone exits and wait for him to exit or go up to him.”

“Let’s do it,” said Forrest.

To ensure the message was sent loud and clear, each man triggered an alarm on a different floor. Within moments, single people, families, children, even pets were running down the steps and out onto the grass. It was a comfortable evening, although a bit cool. When it appeared the last of the residents were out, the men walked back

inside.

“Cameras are disrupted,” said Garr.

“Anyone see him come out?” asked Major.

“Nope.”

“Fuck. I really don’t want to kill my father-in-law unless I have to.”

They walked slowly, carefully up the lone stairwell, checking the corners and hallway as they rose. When they reached the fourth floor, Major pointed to the apartment door.

With every man in place, they counted down and breached the apartment. With guns raised, they stared at the man in the chair, unable to comprehend what they were seeing.

“Is that real?” whispered Sebastian.

“I’m not sure. His mouth is open like he’s screaming,” said Garr. He moved closer to the chair and then reached out, gently touching the figure. A single grain stuck to his finger. Bringing it to his nostrils he sniffed, then touched his tongue to it.

“Salt. It’s salt.”

They all stepped back, shaking their heads.

“It’s like Lott’s wife. She looked back to see the destruction of Sodam and Gomorrah and turned into a pillar of salt,” said Forrest. “Is this possible? Is it real?”

“It’s real,” said Sebastian. “His shirt collar is sticking out, and his shoes are on his feet. Someone wanted us to know that this was for real.”

Major was breathing heavily, completely out of his element. He looked around the apartment, trying to see if there was a computer or stack of files or books. But there was nothing other than furniture.

“Fire department is here,” said Garr. “We have to go.”

“But. But where are the crates? Where is he?” asked Major.

“Brother, I think that’s him, and we’ve found exactly what we were supposed to find. We need to go. Now.”

The men made their way to the roof, then down onto the fire escape below at the back of the building. They moved as calmly as they could to the front of the apartment building, then leaned against their car to watch.

Police cars, investigators, and eventually the military showed up. Hours later, they watched as they carried a seated sculpture of a man covered in salt. When one of the men tripped, the sculpture hit the sidewalk, and the salt shattered. Beneath it was the terrified, frozen expression of Aasad Fayek.

“How? Who did this?” asked Major.

“I don’t know. But maybe we’re not supposed to know,” said Sebastian. “Maybe it’s time for us to go home.”

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For five hours, the men said nothing on the plane. They tried to sleep, tried to read, tried to distract their minds. When Luke and Hex called for an update, Major said he'd explain when they landed. Except he couldn't explain it. There was nothing to explain.

As they stepped onto Belle Fleur land, their hearts and minds seemed less heavy. Seeing their families, seeing those they fought for and loved, was what they truly needed.

Claudette and Mama Irene smiled at their boys.

"Come on now," said Claudette, "we have a feast of all your favorite things. It's time we celebrate."

"What are we celebrating?" asked Sebastian.

"What else," smirked Claudette. "Love."

The men just laughed, Sebastian finding Em, Major happy to see his pregnant wife, and Forrest holding Maddie close.

"I didn't know you were coming home," he smiled at Maddie.

"Something said I needed to. And if I'm being honest, I needed to touch you, Forrest. I just needed to be near you." He kissed her sweetly, smiling down at her.

"Same, baby. Same."

“How is Daphne?” Major asked Elena.

“She’s pretty beat up, but she’ll heal. I think she’s glad she’s here. Her parents have called non-stop, demanding that she come home. Of course, she refuses, and Brix won’t hear of it. Secretly, I’m happy he’s standing up for her. She needed that.”

“Well, I need you,” he whispered in her ear.

“Me too,” she smiled up at him. “Can we skip the meal?”

“Oh, hell no,” he said with a strict face. “I am eating, and so are you. Besides, we have some things to discuss.”

As the teams moved toward the cafeteria. Claudette kissed her mother’s cheek, patting her arm.

“I’ve got ‘em, Mama.”

“I know, honey.” Matthew walked toward her, and her heart lightened. “There you are. I was starting to worry for you, and I never worry for you. Did you have a good trip? Is everything okay?”

“Here I am, and yes, everything is okay. It’s better than okay, and you knew it would be,” he said, kissing his wife.

“Is it secured?” she asked.

“It’s in the most secure place possible, my love. All is well.”

“I knew it would be, Matthew. I knew it would be.”