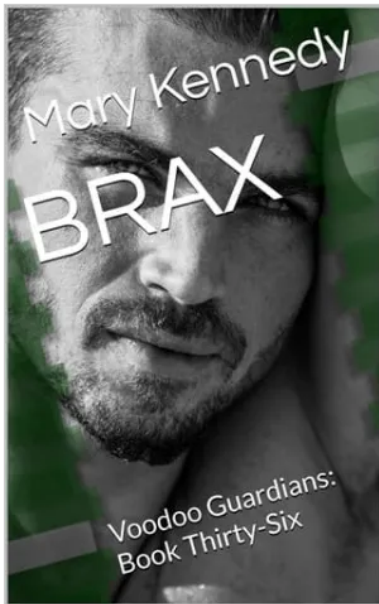




Brax (Voodoo Guardians #36)

Author: *Mary Kennedy*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Brax Pechkin has been carrying a secret with him for all of his adult life. A secret that he cant bring himself to tell the only woman hes ever loved. But when her life is threatened, and shes nearly taken from him, he knows that he cant allow her to leave again. However, things are never what they seem. Just when they were all prepared to go on the war path and kill her attacker, something changes their plans. Compassion.

Stephanie doesnt even have a last name. Why would she? Shes different, shes odd, shes a damn clone. Nothing about her is original. Or at least thats what she thinks. Shes surprised to find out that Brax feels different. Of course, it took her nearly dying for him to finally admit it. Now that theyre together, they have no plans of separating but theres a bigger problem to attack. Someone is after Stephanie, and they will do whatever it takes to get to her. Even if that means dying.

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Braxton Pechkin and his twin stared at the strange fish swimming in the tank in the lobby of the clinic. They were all different colors and sizes, so much so that they didn't seem real. Used to seeing fish from the bayous, strange and often delicious, the tropical fish felt a bit out of place.

The brothers had come in several days before for their annual check-ups for school, hoping for the all-clear to play football this season. It was still early, but they liked to get things over with so they could make their plans, begin their training, and move on.

Paxton had been given a thumbs up, but there was something about Braxton's physical that had Wilson concerned. He'd brought Brax back to the clinic four times for follow-up work.

"What if I'm sick?" he frowned.

"Don't be crazy. You're healthy as a horse. We're the same. Same weight, same height, same everything. You're good," said his brother with a positive tone and smile.

"What if I'm not, Pax? I mean, I've lost a few pounds, and I'm six pounds lighter than you now. I've never lost weight. Not even when I puked for three days after eating too much cotton candy at the parish fair."

"We'll fight it together. Whatever it is, it's going to be okay," he said, gripping his brother's arm. "I won't leave you, Brax. We have plans. Together. Brothers. Twins."

“You don’t have to remind me that we’re twins,” smirked Brax, nudging his brother’s shoulder. He looked up to see Wilson coming toward him, and for some reason, his stomach dropped, bottoming out somewhere near his knees. On a good day Wilson generally had a serious expression making his silvery blonde hair and intense eyes appear intimidating.

“Brax, come on back, son,” said Wilson.

“I want Pax to come,” he said, standing, feeling his knees shake.

“Of course,” smiled Wilson.

Wilson hated this part of his job. Absolutely hated it. They’d been spoiled with their equipment, people, and pond. They’d been given access to cure-alls and disappearing diseases. But some things couldn’t be treated that way.

They followed Wilson down the long, sterile hallway of the clinic to the small conference room where Riley, Gabi, Cruz, and their parents, Annie and Benji, were seated.

“God, what’s wrong?” whispered Brax, seeing his parents’ faces.

“Brax, have a seat,” smiled Riley. The brothers sat down together at exactly the same moment. Riley could see that they were holding hands beneath the table. “Brax, when we did your physical, we noticed that your testosterone and hormone levels were off. That’s not generally something we see in a young man like yourself.”

“Okay. What does that mean?”

“If you remember, Cruz had to do a prostate exam,” she said, smiling at him.

“Don’t remind me,” he frowned, turning flame red. Cruz chuckled, shaking his head. He then looked at Brax, hoping to make him feel better by getting the news from a man.

“Brax, it’s highly unusual for a young man such as yourself. In fact, I don’t think any of us have ever seen anyone with this at your age, but you have prostate cancer.”

He stared at their faces, waiting for the punchline, except it never came. He noticed the red-rimmed eyes of his mother, his father’s gray face void of expression, his eyes filled with worry and fear. Benji Pechkin was never short for words, and he was never afraid. Never.

“I’m going to die,” he whispered.

“No!” said Gabi and Riley in unison. Gabi smiled at her colleague. “No, Brax. You will not die. You’re young, strong, and we’ve caught this in time.”

“I can just go to the pond then. I can just jump in for a swim and this will all go away, right? I mean, everything goes away in the pond or gets healed. Isn’t that right?”

“The pond won’t work for this, son,” said Wilson. “For some reason, it didn’t work for you. You’ve been going every week, and it’s still there. Brax, the usual treatment is radiation, possibly chemotherapy, and a prostatectomy.”

“Prosta- You mean remove my balls,” he frowned.

“Yes.” Riley stared at the young boy and wondered if he truly understood.

“Mr. Harrison, our world history teacher, he had that done. He couldn’t have children after that, and he had trouble getting an erection and sometimes he struggled just taking a pee. Will that happen to me?”

“That’s true. That does happen for some people. Mr. Harrison is also sixty-five years old. He’s not a young man,” nodded Cruz. “You won’t be able to have children, but you’ll be alive and you’ll live a normal, healthy life just like you planned.”

“What about the Navy?” he asked, his face paling further.

“It won’t affect your ability to join the Navy. If the cancer is cleared, it won’t matter. We’ll write letters explaining what was done,” said Wilson.

“You mean you’ll ask for favors,” he grimaced.

“No, that is not what I mean,” said Wilson firmly. “We will inform them that you are healthy and cancer-free. Nothing else matters. It won’t affect your physical abilities, mental abilities, or anything else. It will not matter to them.”

“Will I be able to play ball this year? I-I mean, it’s my senior year. I want to be able to play my final year,” he asked.

“Brax, football seems like the last thing to worry about right now,” said Annie.

“Maybe to you, Mom, but it’s part of what makes me feel normal. Playing sports, going to school, being with my friends here and at school and definitely being with my twin. That’s what will make me feel like everything is okay,” he frowned. She nodded.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Brax, if we do the surgery right away and deem it successful, which we fully expect it to be, you should be able to get into the pond within a week and be cleared. It’s only July, so you’ll be good to practice mid-August,” said Riley.

“But I’ll be okay?”

“Yes, son, you’ll be better than okay,” smiled Wilson. “You’re young, healthy, strong, and there is nothing else wrong with you. This form of prostate cancer is rare and unusual in someone your age. That’s why we’re being so aggressive with it.”

“No one will know unless they see me, right? I mean you’re not going to tell everyone are you?” he blushed.

“That’s right,” nodded Cruz. “We can even write a note to your coaches letting them know that you’ll need a private shower space to a medical condition. They won’t ask any questions. One day, when you have a sexual partner, you’ll have to explain it, but it will all work down there if you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean,” he said, turning away toward his brother. Pax’s face was white as a sheet and he realized that his panicked expression was for him, but also for himself. “What about Pax? Is he okay? Did I give this to him?”

“Honey, it’s not something that is contagious. You can’t pass cancer from one person to the other,” smiled Gabi. “You didn’t give anything to anyone. It was just shit luck of the draw. Pax is okay.”

“It should be me,” said Pax softly. “Not Brax.”

“Pax, you can’t think like that,” said Benji. “You heard Riley and the others. He’ll be perfectly fine once this is all done.”

“Do you promise? Can you guarantee that I will have my brother back, like he is right now, minus his balls?” The room chuckled, nodding, and Brax laughed at his brother, shoving him.

“I promise,” said Riley.

Brax was in surgery the next morning and, by noon, had been wheeled into recovery and was doing well. For the next week, he was poked, prodded, scanned, and rescanned all to determine that they’d gotten all of the cancer, and he was a normal, relatively normal, healthy teenage boy.

By the end of the week, he was healed enough to go to the pond for a swim. Extremely sore but feeling alright, he was lowered into the pond with his twin, and they swam around for a few minutes.

“How do you feel?” asked Pax.

“Like a woman,” frowned Brax.

“Shut up! You do not,” laughed his brother.

“Actually, I don’t. I thought I would for some stupid reason. I feel like me. A little lighter and hairless right now, but I feel okay.”

“That’s because the testosterone and hormones you’re getting are balancing everything out,” said Cruz. “We want to watch your levels for a while because we suspect that the pond will help those to balance out as well. You’re going to feel like the man that you are.”

“I feel good,” smiled Brax. “I’m not hurting, and it looks like the wounds have healed. Can I get out now?”

“A few more minutes,” smiled Wilson. He turned to Cruz and frowned. “I damn sure hope we did the right thing here.”

“You know that Riley and Gabi wouldn’t have recommended this if it weren’t the right thing to do. He’s alive, he’s cancer-free, and he’s still a strong young man.”

“I know you’re right,” nodded Wilson. “I’ll never understand why dudes are so tied to their balls and dick. He handled this shit a lot better than I would have, and I’ve had the chance to have children. He’s been robbed of that.”

“Dudes are tied to their balls and dick for the same reason women are tied to their breasts and uterus,” said Cruz. “We’ve conditioned people to believe those things make you men or women. Your equipment is there to procreate. It’s ridiculous.”

With Brax out of the pond and dressed once again, they returned to the clinic for another round of tests and examinations.

“Well, young man,” smiled Riley, “I’d say that you’re about as healthy as your brother. You can practice with the team now.”

“Really?” he smiled.

“I never lie to my patients,” said Riley. “You’re good, Brax. We’ll need to check your hormone and testosterone levels on a regular basis to be sure you’re getting the right dosage. When you leave for the Navy, they’ll have to do the same.”

“Maybe by then, G.R.I.P. could invent something that lets me do that myself,” he grimaced.

“You know what?” smiled Gabi. “That’s not a bad idea. But I bet that Suzette could figure that out for you. Then you wouldn’t have to tell anyone about this because you could manage it on your own. You could adjust your medications as necessary, just like a diabetic would.”

“But the military wouldn’t accept a diabetic,” frowned Brax.

“I know, Brax. I didn’t mean to imply you were the same,” she smiled. “You’re good. You’re alive, you’re healthy, and everything will work out.” She walked out of the room with the others, leaving Brax to wait for his medications. Brax looked at his brother and frowned.

“Brax, it’s going to be okay,” said Pax. “You heard her. You’re healthy, you’re normal, and it’s all going to be fine. We’re going to join the Navy and become SEALs just like we planned when we were kids. It’s all going to work out and be just fine.”

“Yeah. It will all work out until a woman doesn’t see balls and realizes I can’t have kids.”

Page 2

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Stephanie stared at the people around her as they peppered her with questions about complex math and science equations. She knew the answers, but she'd also learned that these people didn't intend anything good to come from her knowledge.

They thought they were being clever by speaking behind the clipboards. She neglected to tell them that her hearing was exceptional, probably another side effect of their little experiment. The experiment being her.

The other children at the school, all girls, were undergoing the same types of treatments. A barrage of constant testing, quizzing, reading, and computing. It was utterly exhausting.

Some of the girls had been told that their parents dropped them off, making them believe that they were there because of their exceptional minds. Others were told that they were orphans. Many had arrived as infants, barely a few weeks or months old. She knew that wasn't normal.

Still others arrived by the time they were four or five, some a few years older. Everything seemed wrong about the school. They were all different. Even Stephanie.

She knew that she was different.

They made sure to tell her that she was different. A failed experiment created in a laboratory. She wasn't a sheep or a dog. She was a human. A cloned human who was supposed to become an exact replica of the individual used to create her but with even greater intellect, emotion, and IQ.

Exact physically but superior intellectually, her laboratory parents believed that they'd succeeded in creating a compliant genius. Compliance was key to their whole experiment working out. If she didn't readily, agreeably do whatever they asked then the whole thing was going to work out.

Insisting on greater intelligence, they'd injected her with a strange substance repeatedly, constantly pushing information into her tiny brain.

While the other girls were allowed some interaction with one another, she was forced to keep her distance other than for thirty minutes a day at lunch.

Unsure of how to speak to the others, not taught basic social skills, she struggled to connect with any of them. Only a few young women showed any kindness to her at all.

Katelyn, Chelsea, Victoria, and Marilisa always spoke to her, asked her to join them for lunch, and laughed about everything. She wasn't sure why they laughed about everything, but she determined it was normal, so she joined in.

Eventually, Victoria, Chelsea, and Marilisa disappeared. Taken in the middle of the night, she had no idea where they were taken. Just that they were gone.

But while they were there, they treated her like everyone else. Whether they knew it or not, Stephanie wasn't real.

Yes, she had a heartbeat, and blood flowed through her veins. She used the bathroom like they did. She ate and expelled food like they did. But she wasn't a real human, at least not in her own mind.

She understood all too well what these people were doing. She used her exceptional intelligence, the intelligence they shoved at her every moment of the day, insisted it

become more and more, to find the information about the school, and she knew that the CIA was running a factory for children, boys and girls, intending to use them for horrible things.

When the agency deemed the entire thing a failure, without warning and without fanfare, they packed up the children, sold them or discarded them, and left the school.

Stephanie saw this as her opportunity to run. She didn't know where. She didn't know how she would live in society. She didn't even know where she was. But she knew that she would no longer be a puppet and prisoner for anyone.

When the guards took her to the van where they were no doubt going to drive her to her demise, she took the opportunity to run. When they were certain that she'd run off, neither wanted to chase her down. In their minds, it wasn't worth the effort, and they damn sure wouldn't be rewarded if they found her. She was too much trouble.

"It doesn't matter. No one wants her anyway. She's a freak, and the docs already said we were to kill her. She won't survive out there without the medications, and she can't get those, so she'll just lay down and die one day. She has no fucking clue where she even is," said the guard.

Stephanie crouched low behind the overgrown garden shrubs, holding her breath with the small knife in her hands.

"She is a fucking freak," laughed the other man. "Have you seen her face when she's reading? It's like looking at a damn computer absorbing information. Who would want to fuck that?"

The two men laughed and went back toward the others being loaded into vans. Stephanie waited for hours to be sure the school was empty. She had to break into the building, but she was able to find a few blankets, some warm clothing, and a few

dozen cans of food in the pantry. She would need to be careful with her provisions, but she could make it until she figured out where she was and where she wanted to go.

It was weeks later before she finally knew her exact location. Living in fear for the first few months, she hid inside the school and refused to leave, even when the racoons and other animals started to make their way inside.

The problems were too many to count. She couldn't drive. She couldn't tell people who she was because, technically, she didn't exist. She had no job, no skills other than her brain, and almost no social skills whatsoever.

Brave enough to venture off down the road one day, she found herself in the small little village a few miles from the school. Everyone that she met, she would question about their business or their job to learn more. Finding the woman at the resale shop was a God-send for Stephanie.

When she absolutely had to, she snuck into the small village and would sell anything that was left behind at the school. She would simply tell the woman at the resale shop that she was a thrifter. The woman didn't care.

For Stephanie, her health situation was getting worse. Headaches, occasional seizures, and the loneliness were killing her. Which is exactly what the school wanted to happen. She was going to die by herself.

That is until the day she heard the voices of the men. She hid until they walked by her, then followed. Armed with an old pistol she'd found in the basement, she wasn't going to allow them to take her again.

“Nothing. No appliances, no pots, pans, dishes, nothing.”

“This was a stop-over,” said Saint. He held up a syringe, the needle still on it with the needle cover. He wrapped it in a bag and tucked it in his backpack. “They kept those kids drugged until they could get them to where they wanted them.”

They heard shuffling behind them and turned to see a young woman wrapped in an oversized coat and stocking cap. She held a weapon in her hand, rusted but damn sure loaded. The pistol looked to be older than she was.

“Leave us alone,” she whispered. They all held up their hands, shaking their heads.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” said Mav. “We’re here to help you. We have a company where three girls who were here at one time now live. Do you remember the names Victoria, Chelsea, or Katelyn? Maybe the name Marilisa?”

The girl frowned at him, her brows knitting together. She didn’t appear to be any older than fourteen or fifteen, but it was difficult to tell with all the clothes on her.

“Listen, I swear to you, we don’t want to hurt you. We want to keep you safe. This school and the one a few miles from here was run by the CIA. They were training geniuses to do their work,” said Saint softly.

“They weren’t training us. They were creating us,” she whispered.

“Creating you? Creating you to do their work, right?” She shook her head.

“Are you with them?” she asked in a shaky voice.

“No. No, we’re not,” said Mav. “My name is Maverick. These are my friends, Saint, Pax, and Brax. Did you know the names of any of those girls?”

“K-Katelyn,” she whispered. Her hands were shaking, and she looked at them, almost

pleading for help.

“What’s your name?” asked Brax, taking a step toward her.

“Brax,” whispered his brother. He held up a hand.

“I’m not going to hurt you. What’s your name?” he asked again.

“S-Stephanie.”

“Stephanie. That’s a beautiful name. We don’t want to hurt you. You’re cold, and I bet you’re hungry,” he said calmly. “Are there others with you?”

“No. No, they all left. I-It’s coming,” she stuttered.

“What’s coming, honey?” asked Brax.

He didn’t have to ask again. The pistol fell out of her hand, crashing to the floor. They were lucky it didn’t fire. She began seizing, her head hitting the hardwood floors. Brax immediately slid toward her, bracing her head against his thighs.

“Chipper? We need you now!” yelled Mav. “I need you to land behind this damn building. We’ve got an injured girl.”

“Stay with me, honey,” whispered Brax. He’d turned her on her side, gently holding her. When the others signaled that Chipper had landed, he easily lifted her, cursing beneath his breath.

“What’s wrong?” asked Pax.

“She can’t weigh more than eighty pounds,” he frowned.

Chipper turned to see the ashen face of the young girl. When they were on board, he closed the door and immediately took off at top speed. Mav grabbed the medical kit while Pax extended the seat to a bed. The coat was so pathetic Brax took the scissors to it to open it. He stared down at the prone body, then pushed back her ski cap.

“What’s wrong?” asked Saint, walking toward him with water and towels.

“This isn’t a child,” said Brax, staring at her. “She doesn’t weigh more than a child, but she’s an adult.”

There was no doubt. The curve of her body, the full sweeping roundness of her breasts, told them everything they needed to know. This was an adult woman. A tiny, frail, under-nourished adult woman.

By the time they reached Belle Fleur, the medical team was waiting at the runway. Cruz lifted the girl and took her down the steps, laying her gently on the gurney.

“She hasn’t woken,” said Brax, staring at her. “She convulsed, had a seizure, and didn’t wake.”

“She’s alive, honey,” said Gabi. “Let us figure this out.”

Stephanie could hear the strange voices. She couldn’t respond, but she could hear them. Whisked away to the clinic, she remembered nothing about the entire episode other than the man who’d carried her to the helicopter. She only hoped she hadn’t jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

Katelyn, Marilisa, Victoria, and Chelsea all came to the clinic immediately, wanting to know if they recognized the young woman. While Ajei and Kelsey got her clean, Cruz and Doc ran blood work, x-rays, and everything else that Gabi and Riley ordered.

Five hours of waiting, only to see the most somber faces they'd ever seen walk toward them.

"Is she alright?" asked Brax.

"She's alive. She'll live," said Gabi, unsure of what to say next. She'd never had to deliver news like this before.

"Good. That's good. What aren't you telling us? I didn't see any injuries other than the obvious. I mean, she's just a young girl who needs to eat and maybe take some meds, right?"

"Yes." Gabi stared at him. "No."

"Well, what is it, Gabi? Yes or no?" asked Saint. Gabi, Riley, Doc, and Cruz stared at one another.

"She's a clone."

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Her head was pounding. She must have hit it when she had her seizure. Her pills ran out three days ago, and she couldn't break into the pharmacy again. She just couldn't. Opening her eyes, she realized she was in a room with lights on and a bed with sheets. A moment of panic set in, then someone reached for her hand.

"You're okay, sweetie," said Kelsey. "You're safe here. Do you remember what happened?"

"Men. Those men..."

"That's right. They're our friends, and they work and live here. They brought you in. You had a pretty nasty seizure. Do you have those often?" asked Kelsey.

"About twice a month," she whispered. "I take pills, but I don't have any more. How am I clean? Where are my things?"

"Ajei, the other nurse, and I bathed you. No woman wants to wake up dirty," she smiled. "We had some clothes in our store that fit you. It's not fancy, but it will do."

She looked down and saw the leggings and long sweatshirt. That man. Those men, they would have seen her body.

"Stephanie? That is your name, right?" asked Kelsey. She nodded. "Stephanie, how old are you, honey?"

"I-I think I'm twenty-eight," she said.

“Do you not remember? Do you remember your birthdate?” A knock on the door interrupted them, and Mav, Saint, Pax, and Brax walked in.

“Well, you look a lot better than last time I saw you,” smiled Brax. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry,” she said softly.

“I was just trying to convince Stephanie to tell me her birthdate,” smiled Kelsey. “We’re pretty big on celebrating around here and wouldn’t want to miss yours.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Everyone has a birthday,” said Mav, trying to make her feel better.

“I don’t.” She looked at the men, then targeted Brax. “Are you really going to help me?”

“I swear to God, I am going to help you. All of us will,” he said, swallowing as he stared at her strange blue eyes. “It’s just a birthday. Won’t you share it with us?”

“I don’t have one. I’m not real.” Brax frowned and took the seat next to the bed. He reached out for her hand, noticing the clean nails, now clipped neatly.

“You feel real to me,” said Brax. “Soft skin, warm hand. You told them you were twenty-eight. That means you have a birthday.”

“No. That means I had a creation date. I was created in a lab. I am the clone of someone’s dead daughter.” Katelyn and the other girls pushed through the door, staring at the young girl.

“It’s really you,” said Katelyn. “I remember you.”

“Katelyn,” she whispered.

“You’re real, Stephanie. You’re as real as I am.”

“No. You were born from a mother’s womb. I wasn’t.”

Stephanie remembered everything about her arrival at Belle Fleur. Everything then, now, before, and in between. She forgot nothing. She wasn’t allowed to forget.

Slowly, she was discovering that she could have a relatively normal life. She had friends, connecting with the others who were at the school. She made new friends, and she had fallen in love. Unfortunately, her crush didn’t feel the same.

“It’s not a crush, you stupid woman,” she whispered to herself, sipping the coffee on her front porch. When she’d first arrived, terrified and confused, she was sharing a cottage with Braxton Pechkin, the man who was causing her more pain than she imagined possible.

For some reason, he seemed confused by her and by his own reactions to her. Stephanie knew that he liked her. The way he looked at her when she was dressed in jeans, or a dress, or anything really, was very telling. His cheeks became flushed, his veins pulsed in his neck, and he started sweating.

She knew enough to know those were physiological reactions to her being close to him. But then things changed. He started leaving before she woke in the morning and didn’t return until she was gone.

She would head over to the cafeteria for breakfast before going to work, and he’d already be in there eating. When she arrived, he would leave and head to the cottage.

She would go to the other island to work, and when she returned, he had already gone to dinner or he was out working a case.

It was all too much for her. She spoke with Claudette and Mama Irene and requested a cottage of her own. When he found out, he seemed angry.

“Where were you this morning?” he asked.

“Having coffee in my own cottage,” she said.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Luke called the meeting to order. She could feel Brax’s eyes boring into the back of her head.

He’d just have to get over it. She didn’t have time for his games, and she wasn’t about to stick around heartsick because he couldn’t see her for what she truly was. Then he showed up at her cottage.

A few days later, Stephanie poured herself a glass of iced tea and sat on her front porch, rocking as she looked out at the bayou slowly moving past her. She loved being near the water.

Mav and Katelyn were just two cottages over with a water view as well. She would go and have dinner in a little while, but for now, she needed the quiet.

“Why did you leave?” She turned to see Brax’s face and swallowed, shaking her head.

“You know why.”

“No. I don’t. I wouldn’t be asking if I knew why.”

“Are you kidding me? You were so uncomfortable with me in your space you couldn’t even look at me,” she said, standing on the porch. Brax swallowed, looking at her beautiful, tanned legs and swinging bob haircut. “You made sure that you were gone before I got up in the morning. You made sure that you came home after I was asleep at night. You avoided me every moment of every day, Brax. Do you have any fucking idea how that made me feel?”

“I-I didn’t mean to make you feel any sort of way,” he whispered.

“Yes, you did. And you succeeded. I wasn’t welcome in your cottage at all. You did it as a favor for someone, and you regretted it almost immediately. I get it. I was cramping your style.” She set the iced tea down and started down her steps. “Well, good news, Brax. You have your house back. All to yourself. I’m in my own space, and I’m just fine.”

“They said you were interviewing for other jobs, away from Belle Fleur, or thinking about it.” She looked at him as she stopped on the stairs leading to her home.

“It’s none of your business. If I leave or if I stay doesn’t matter to you. You’ve made that painfully clear. Just leave me alone, Brax. You’ve done enough damage.”

She tried to walk past him and head toward the grove, but he gripped her arm so hard she winced from the pain.

“I didn’t mean to cause you any harm or damage. I was trying to protect you,” he said, lessening his hold on her.

“Protect me? Or protect you?” she said, staring up at him.

Brax looked into her big eyes, seeing the tears threatening to spill, and it was gutting him. He didn’t want to hurt her. He wanted her to understand why he couldn’t hold

her back.

“I’m not good for you, Stephanie.” She laughed at him, shaking her head.

“That’s your response? After everything we’ve been through, everything that’s happened, your response is, ‘I’m not good for you’? Fine. You’re not good for me. I get it. Then stay away from me until I can find another job, Brax. I’m tired of you making me feel inferior. I’m tired of you ignoring me, avoiding me as if I had some sickness or disease. Just leave me alone.”

He pulled her arm again, forcing her body against his own.

“I can’t do that either.”

Bending down, he slammed his mouth against hers, gripping her waist and a fistful of the skirt of her dress, feeling it rise up. His fingertips touched her bare legs, his mouth exploring her delectable lips and tongue.

Finally pulling back, he stared down at her shocked face, tears filling her eyes.

“Why did you do that?” she whispered.

“I shouldn’t have to explain that.” He walked off toward the grove and the others, leaving Stephanie behind him.

Touching her lips, she was breathing so heavily she could hardly stand upright. She’d been kissed a few times, but nothing like that. Nothing that made her feel as though her world was turned upside down.

He was the most frustrating, confusing, obstinate man she’d ever met. She couldn’t continue this way. She just couldn’t. When all this was over with, she would transfer

to another company or simply go out on her own as a contractor.

No matter what, she couldn't remain here with Brax.

Brax was looking down at his feet as he walked into the grove. Saint and Pax looked up at him, both men frowning, knowing that he'd gone to speak to Stephanie.

"What happened?" asked his twin.

"I kissed her."

"And?"

"And what? I kissed her, and hopefully, that will make her stay," he said, filling his plate.

"Jesus, you really are stupid," said Saint. "You think because you kissed her, she's going to stay? Did you tell her how you feel?"

"No!" Everyone turned to stare at the three men. "No. I didn't. I kissed her, and that should tell her how I feel." Saint just shook his head in disbelief.

"She's going to leave. Just by kissing someone doesn't mean that they'll stay or leave. You have to tell them how you feel, what you feel, and what you want from them. She's not a mind reader, Brax. I'm telling you that she's going to leave this place, and it's going to be your fault when she does." Pax just shook his head in disbelief and left his brother standing there.

He watched as his twin and best friend walked away from him, then turned to see if Stephanie was coming toward the grove. When he didn't see her, he dropped his plate and walked toward his own cottage as others stared at him. At this point, a peanut

butter and jelly sandwich would be better than this torture.

“That boy is really struggling,” said Irene.

“He is. But he’ll get right soon enough. I just hope it’s not too late,” said Ruby.

“Me too, Ruby. Me too.”

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“I really wish you wouldn’t do this, Stephanie,” said Doug. “Give it some time. Just ignore him and things will turn around. I promise you. That man is crazy about you but he has to work through some things and come in his own time. Do your work, be with your friends, your family, but just ignore him and give him some space.”

“It’s awfully hard to ignore someone when they’re the only thing you see every time you open your eyes. I see him everywhere. I smell his cologne. I hear his voice. It’s annoying as shit,” she muttered.

“I know it is, honey, but don’t do this. You’re doing amazing work here at G.R.I.P. We need you, and more importantly, we want you here. I want you here. I adore you like you’re my own daughter.”

“Oh, Doug,” she said, hugging the older man. “You know that I love you all, and I want to stay. I’m just not sure I can do it. I have an interview in the city, and I don’t want to ghost them. I’m going to take an overnight bag and spend a few days in town just to clear my head. I’ll go hear what they have to offer, and then I’ll come back and talk to you.”

“Honey, let me send someone with you in case it’s something odd.”

“Doug, it’s Joab Aerospace. Everyone knows that they’re reputable and a great company.”

“Fine. Fine, but you call us if anything goes wrong.”

She kissed Doug’s cheek and then left on the boat to head to her own cottage to

change. She was happy when she didn't see Brax. She had no desire to explain anything to him, nor did she feel as though she needed to.

By the time she was ready to head out, she was dressed in a beautiful suit with an above-the-knee dark green skirt, ivory silk blouse, and matching jacket. The heels gave her an additional much-needed three inches.

Checking herself one last time in the mirror, she smiled at the blue eyes smiling back at her.

"I wonder if they're my real color or did they belong to her," she whispered.

Shaking it off, she headed to the SUV that was one of several on the property that anyone could use. Stepping out onto the porch, she looked both ways to be sure Brax was nowhere to be found.

Truthfully, she was a little disappointed that he wasn't there. Katelyn, however, was. She came running toward her.

"Don't do this, Steph. Please. We want you here. I want you here. We all belong here, together and that means you."

"I know, Katelyn. I want to be here, but I can't keep doing this with him. He has a problem with who I am, and I can't change who I am."

"Honey, I don't think it's you," she said, nibbling on her lower lip. She'd promised that she wouldn't say anything, but she didn't want to lose her friend.

"I have to go. I have an interview," she said. "Don't tell him, okay?"

"Okay."

Brax knew that Stephanie was thinking about interviewing off the property. He'd been told that she had an interview later that day, so getting back to Belle Fleur was high on his priority list.

Headed home on the jet, the others stared at him.

"What are you going to do about her?" asked Pax.

"I don't know."

"You love her, Brax. I know that you do," said Saint. "This shouldn't be that hard."

"I'm not good enough for her. You guys know that. I'm not good enough for her and I can't give her, or any woman what they probably really want. I won't do that to her."

"Brother, you're more than good enough for her. Just give her a chance. Tell her the truth, and she'll listen. Don't you think she carries her own insecurities about things? This won't matter to her," said Saint.

"I kissed her. It was a mistake because I'll never experience anything like it again," he said with a sad tone. He felt someone slap the back of his head, and it jerked forward. "Hey! That hurt."

"It should hurt," said Eric. "Don't be a fucking idiot. Everyone can see that you have feelings for the woman, and God help her, she's got feelings for you. Stop drowning in your pity party. Get your shit straight and talk to her. She's worth it, Brax."

"He's right," said Luke. "Did you know that she interviewed with the Comeaux brothers for their construction company, and she's interviewing with someone else this afternoon?"

“What? I knew about the one today, but the fucking Comeaux brothers?” he yelled. The entire plane turned to stare at him. “Why in the hell would she do that? That’s beneath her.”

“Why don’t you ask her? Nicely. She did it because she can’t stand to look at your ugly fucking face any longer and know that you don’t want her,” said Luke. “God, I swear sometimes you guys are dumb as fence posts.”

The others all chuckled, but Brax didn’t find any of it funny.

“Don’t worry, lover boy,” smiled Evie. “We’ll be home shortly, and hopefully, you can stop her.”

Brax immediately ran toward Stephanie’s cottage, barging inside only to find it empty.

“No,” he whispered.

“She left. It was supposed to be just an interview. But then she said she’d spend a few nights in town just to clear her head, but she took everything with her,” said Grip. “Something is wrong. I can feel it in my bones, in my soul. You need to find her.”

“Shit!”

Running toward one of the SUVs, he took off down the road, then heard someone in his comms.

“Brax? I have her on River Road, but the car has stopped. Something is wrong. All the warning lights are going off. I’m sending you help.”

“Oh, shit,” he muttered. “Please. Please, no. Please.”

As he sped toward the signal, he noticed the cars stopped on the side of the road, and Stephanie's car turned over on the road ahead.

"No. God, no," he whispered. "Please. Don't take her from me."

He raced toward the vehicle, sliding to his knees beside the window.

"We've tried to get her out, but nothing is working," said a man. Behind him, Brax felt a grip on his shoulder. Looking back, Flip nodded at him, and he stepped aside.

Gripping the handle, Flip realized that everyone was watching, even a few people filming the entire thing on their cell phones.

"Give me a hand," he said to Brax and the other men. "Grip the edge where it's pulled away."

They all nodded, knowing that Flip would be able to pull the door off all by himself. Within seconds, it was torn from the car and pushed aside.

"Baby? Steph, look at me, honey." Brax was literally pleading with an unconscious woman, praying that she could hear his voice.

"She's unconscious," said Cruz, kneeling beside her. "I need a neck brace and backboard. Let's move everyone!"

"I'm staying with the car," said Flip. "The shop tow truck is on the way. We're going to look at this thing."

"Why?" frowned Brax.

"Because it's not an accident."

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“Why won’t she wake up?” he whispered to Gabi and the others on the medical team.

“Brax, she’s had a significant head injury. Fiona has reduced the swelling in the brain, but we’re bringing her out of this slowly. I need you to be patient.” Gabi curled her nose at him. “I also need for you to be clean. Go take a damn shower. Your brother brought some things for you. Head to the surgeons’ showers and get clean. She doesn’t want to wake up to that smell.”

Reluctantly, Brax left the room and caught a good whiff of himself, realizing that he did smell. He couldn’t believe no one had said anything sooner. He’d been sitting beside her for a week, praying, talking to her, reading to her and apologizing with every breath he took.

“How is she?” asked Benji, poking his head in.

“She’s getting there, although if your son doesn’t give me some room to work he might be my next patient,” said Gabi, smirking at him. “Anything from the boys on the car?”

“Tires were shot out,” he said in a low voice. “Either someone wanted her dead or thought it was someone else in that car. We’re working on that right now. Don’t tell Brax.”

“Sweetie, that boy isn’t going to leave here no matter what. If I weren’t a doctor and knew better, I’d swear they were attached at the hip.”

“I brought some more books for him to read to her.”

“Still bringing the romance and sex books from Charlie?” laughed Gabi.

“Yep. Make him so damn uncomfortable he’ll be pleading for her to wake up.”

By the time Brax returned to the room, it was already dark, and there was no change in Stephanie’s status. Taking his seat in the most uncomfortable chair ever created by man, he began reading from Charlie’s latest book.

“And the lights were everywhere, shining and twinkling as the couple walked down the aisle. Everyone knew that it would be a wedding to remember, one for the ages. They just wanted there to be a happy ending somewhere,” Brax whispered, reading from the book.

He reached for Stephanie’s hand, feeling the soft skin beneath his own rough flesh. She’d been in a drug-induced coma for eight days now. Eight days without speaking, without opening her eyes, without waking on her own.

Too critical to move, they couldn’t even take her to the pond. Now, he was resorting to reading her Charlie’s books, and it was making him more than a little uncomfortable.

“I need you to wake up, Steph. I need to tell you what an asshole I’ve been, what an idiot I am. You probably already know that, but it’d be better if I said it first. You can’t leave me. You just can’t.”

“She’ll be alright,” said Adam, walking in behind him.

“How can you say that? Nothing has changed in the last week,” frowned Brax.

“She’s in a coma, Brax. We’ve been keeping her there for the pain but are slowly reducing the medications. Fiona reduced the swelling, and it just takes time.

“She’ll wake eventually on her own. Her injuries are no longer life-threatening as of this morning. Once she wakes, we can take her to this magical pond of yours.”

“Will she really live?” he asked in a choked voice.

“Yes, son. She’ll really live.”

“Did you hear that, Steph? You’re going to be okay. Please wake up, honey. Wake up so you can tell me that I’m an asshole,” he pleaded.

He felt her fingers move beneath his, and Adam raised a brow. As her eyes fluttered open, he heard the sweetest sound ever.

“You’re an asshole.”

“Say it again,” he laughed, wiping the tears from his eyes.

“You’re an asshole,” she croaked. “What happened? Am I dead?”

“No. No, you’re definitely not,” smiled Adam. “Let me get Gabi and the others. Welcome home, honey.”

“What happened?” she asked, slowly opening her eyes.

“A wreck. The SUV flipped, and you were trapped. Flip and the others got you out. Steph. Steph, you can’t leave. You can’t, honey. I love you.”

“Wh-what?”

“Steph, I need to tell you so much,” he started.

“Save it, lover,” said Gabi. “Step outside and let me take a look at her.”

Brax let out a long sigh and nodded. He looked down at Steph, then bent down to kiss her forehead.

“I’ll be right outside.”

Brax stepped outside, and Adam closed the door behind him. He leaned against the wall and then slid down to the cold tile floor, his face in his hands as he sobbed with relief. Suddenly, he felt familiar hands on his shoulders. He knew who it was.

His father, twin brother, Saint, and Mav.

“She’s alive and awake, brother. Now it’s up to you,” said Pax. He nodded as they pulled him to his feet.

“I was so stupid. So, so stupid.”

“Yep. You were,” smirked his father.

“Thanks, Dad,” he chuckled. “I love you too.”

“Listen, just talk to her. Tell her how you feel. Tell her why you’ve been so worried about the two of you.”

“I did. I mean, I told her how I feel, but Gabi interrupted before I could say anything else. I told her I loved her, and she looked confused. I guess for good reason.” The door to her room opened again, and Gabi walked out. “Well?”

“She’s good, honey. No sudden movements, no running, no jumping, nothing. She’s alive. She’s on the road to recovery, but she will need care for the next few days.”

“I’ll take care of her,” said Brax. As the others left, Brax walked back into the room, Stephanie staring at him.

“Can we start our conversation again?” she asked. He smiled at her, nodding.

“Yes. I believe we left off with you saying I’m an asshole, and I told you that I loved you.”

“Brax, why the sudden change of heart? I’m so confused right now, and I already have a headache.” He nodded, taking his uncomfortable seat again, holding her hand.

“I should have told you a long time ago, Steph. I just didn’t know how to bring it up. It’s just such an awkward, strange thing to speak to someone about. Especially a woman that I care for. That I love.” He took a deep breath, steeling himself for the conversation. “The summer between my junior and senior years of high school, I was diagnosed with a rare form of prostate cancer.”

“Brax, I’m so sorry,” she said, reaching for his hand.

“Thank you,” he nodded. “I had to – I had to have my testicles removed. Everything works. I mean, I can still have sex, but I can’t have children.”

“That’s what was wrong? You honestly believed that I wouldn’t love you, want to marry you because of that? Brax, surely you must know that wouldn’t matter to me.”

“Steph, you deserve to have babies. Babies that look just like you. Brilliant, beautiful babies.”

“Brax, I can’t have children,” she said, looking at him. He stared at her, shaking his head in disbelief. All this wasted time because he wouldn’t talk to her. “It was the big glitch in cloning me. I don’t produce enough eggs to have children.”

“Are you kidding me?” he laughed. “All this bullshit I’ve been putting you through, and we could have been living together this whole time?”

“Sorry, buddy. As I said, you’re an asshole,” smirked Stephanie. Brax just laughed, gently pulling her toward him, holding her, hugging her, feeling her against his body.

“Steph, I love you. I’ve loved you from the moment I saw you in that damn school. Please don’t leave. Please, honey.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I don’t want to leave here. This is the only place I’ve ever felt like I was at home. The only friends I’ve ever had are here. I love my work. I love Doug.”

“And?” he said expectantly.

“And, I love you. Even if you are an asshole.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” he smiled. “I’m going to go get us both some food. I think you can have soft foods and liquids. Let me clear it with Adam and the others, and I’ll be back. Don’t go anywhere.” He kissed her, and she smiled up at him.

“No plans to leave ever again.”

Brax left the room as Ajei entered to check her vitals, the fluids, and other things. As he walked toward the diner to grab some food, he noticed the group of men talking.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked his father.

“Brax, is she okay?” Brax smiled, nodding at him and the other men standing around him.

“She’s great. What’s happening? Why the pow-wow here?”

“We were at the shop,” said Pax. “We were taking a look at the car that Steph was driving.”

“Why?” Skull looked at the other men, and Benji nodded at the big man.

“Brax, someone shot out her tires. That wasn’t an accident,” said Skull. Flip nodded.

“I noticed it when I took the door off. They’d missed and hit the lower corner of the door on the first shot. Lucky it didn’t hit her. Then they got the front tire. Someone was a damn good shot, brother or the luckiest fucking shot in the world. That’s not an easy one to hit.”

“Who?” whispered Brax. “Who would want to hurt that woman?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” said Cam. “I take it you’ve convinced her to stay?”

“Yes. She’s not leaving, and she’s damn sure not leaving my cottage again,” frowned Brax. “This doesn’t make any sense. We ended everyone that had anything to do with the school. Who would want to kill her?”

“Maybe they didn’t want to kill her,” said Flip. “Maybe they wanted her out of it, unconscious, but alive. We got there awfully fast. Did you notice that the ambulances weren’t there, sheriffs, cops, nothing? We were the first, other than a few bystanders.”

“Damn. You’re right,” muttered Brax.

“Get your girl some food,” said Benji. “We’re going to look at ballistics and figure

out what we're dealing with. You take care of her."

"Did you tell her?" asked Pax. Brax nodded.

"Yeah. Turns out she can't have children either. Part of the cloning process that was faulty, I guess. Let me know if you find out anything else." He left them standing between the hospital entrance and the diner.

"Does anyone, for one damn minute, honestly believe that her being unable to have children was a faulty part of the cloning process? That they would go to all the trouble of cloning her and not allow her to reproduce so that they could clone her again and again?" asked Cam. The response came in unison.

"Nope."

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Brax walked back into the hospital room and set the food on the tray table. He started to open the lid on the tray, and then Stephanie stacked the books one by one on the table.

“Romance novels are your thing now?” she smirked.

“Ha, ha, very funny. No. It was all we had other than Guns and Ammo . Although, I will say Charlie’s books definitely kept me entertained. And, um, engaged,” he blushed. Steph actually chuckled.

“I love her books. They’ve helped me a lot over the years. We weren’t taught about things like relationships, communication, or sex at the school. It’s probably one of the many reasons they kept the boys and girls separated. I’m fairly certain they didn’t want us to think about anything except weapons and chemistry.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that any longer,” he said, frowning.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, staring at him. “Something is wrong.”

Brax didn’t want to tell her, but he also wasn’t about to keep any more secrets from her.

“The SUV that you were in didn’t just flip, Steph. Someone shot out the front tire. It was intentional.” She stared at him, swallowing, and nodded.

“I see,” she whispered. “So, what does that mean? Do I need to leave?”

“What? Abso-fucking-lutely not! You will never leave here again without me. This is your home. We are your family. I am your family, Steph.” She stared at him, and he shook his head. “I’m sorry. I suck at this. Please. Don’t leave me. I love you so much, and I want you to be my wife when you’re ready.”

“Well, that was a bit better,” she grinned. “Maybe I’m not the one that needs help with communication. I’m not leaving, Brax. I’m scared. I don’t know anyone, not really. Why would someone want to kill me?”

He opened the tray and started to divide the food up for her. He poured her a glass of water and apple juice and then handed her the fork.

“What are you working on at G.R.I.P.? I mean, Marilisa was working on something that someone wanted. What are you working on?”

“It’s nothing for anyone outside the property. I’m working on improving our weapons tracking systems and a new intercept system for the Ospreys. But it’s only for us. No contracts. No one outside of us knows about it. In fact, we’re actually manufacturing all the components for it right here on property.”

“Okay,” he nodded, taking a bite of his burger. “That’s good to know. So, it’s nothing to do with work. Maybe it was a mistake.”

“I mean, it could be,” she nodded, taking a bite of the creamy crab bisque. “It’s not like you could see through the windows of the SUV. All except the windshield are limousine dark. Someone would have to have seen me through the windshield if they were shooting at me, and if they wanted me dead, they could have shot through it.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “That’s true. Let’s not think about that right now. I don’t know what I would have done if, if something...” Brax just shook his head, unable to say anything.

“Brax,” she said softly, reaching for his hand. “Why didn’t you just talk to me? You knew how I was feeling about being so different. Surely, you knew that I wouldn’t have said anything about you being different as well.”

“I think I knew that in my heart, but my head was putting up a damn good argument to walk away. When I kissed you on your porch, I thought that would tell you how I felt and you’d stay. I was so stupid.” She smiled at him, shaking her head slowly.

“You weren’t stupid, but it would have helped if you’d have said something to me along with the kiss.”

“I know,” he nodded. “Damn, I’m so sorry.”

“So, if you can still get an erection and have sex, then you’ve had other partners, right?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “I’ve had a few. Some thought it was weird that I didn’t have balls, I mean, testicles.”

“Balls works,” she laughed.

“Others had pity for me, which I hated! I dated a girl for a few months, and she was wonderful about it, but I didn’t love her. I knew I didn’t love her, and she desperately wanted kids. She kept saying she wanted me to go to specialists, and I told her I’d gone to the best medical team in the world. I finally just stopped calling her, and she didn’t seem to care.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.” She took the last bite of the banana pudding and shoved the tray forward. Brax moved it to the small dresser and sat down beside her again.

“What about you?” he asked, holding her hand. “Was there ever anyone for you?”

“Two men. At different times. One worked in the pharmacy in Maine. He knew that I couldn’t afford the medications to keep me from having seizures, and he was giving them to me. We became friends and then more.”

“What happened?”

“I found out he was married,” she sighed. “It never occurred to me to ask that. I was new to the world, so to speak. I stopped going to him for the medicines, in a manner of speaking. I was stealing them, and he was looking the other way. The other guy worked in the grocery store and was trying to help me. He wanted me to move in with him, but I was terrified that I would be held captive again.”

“I’m so sorry you went through all of that. I obviously didn’t make things easier for you here. I just didn’t know how to approach it. I mean, you were hurting when you got here, we were trying to help with the seizures and your medications, and it always seemed like a rotten time for me to tell you how I was feeling. I wasn’t avoiding you at the house, Steph. I was scared out of my mind. Again, I’m sorry about that.”

“We’re all good now,” she yawned. “I think I need to sleep. When can I go home? To our home?” Her eyes fluttered shut, and Brax smiled, giving her a sweet kiss.

“As soon as they say we can leave, honey.”

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“Long-range rifle, probably with a scope. Definitely a professional or at least someone with the funds and ability to buy professional equipment. The car in front of her belonged to someone local. He said he noticed that she kept wiping her eyes, maybe crying or something. She leaned toward the passenger seat and swerved, which may have caused the first shot to miss.

“The second shot hit just as she was speeding up, which caused the car to hit the curb and flip. He stopped, ducking for a moment, worried it was random, then got out. He was there when we arrived. He checks out,” said Skull.

“Any thoughts on where the shooter was?” asked Luke.

“There’s not a lot along that section of River Road. She would have just appeared from our stealth netting, coming around that bend,” said AJ. “There are a few homes along there, but all are occupied. It’s more likely that the individual was in one of the trees.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Brax.

“Trajectory of the bullet. Both were on a downward slope. The shooter was either very tall or standing in a tree or on a ladder.” Brax nodded, staring at the photos of the SUV.

“So, we believe it was intended for her,” muttered Brax.

“Brax, we’re not sure, but he’s right. The windshield would have revealed the identity of the driver,” said Hex.

“But they must have been waiting there for weeks to see if she would drive by. Plus, someone would have had to have known she was here at Belle Fleur. How is that possible?” he asked.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out now,” said Luke.

“I don’t like this,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t like that someone knows she’s here. She told me what she was working on at G.R.I.P., but it doesn’t sound like something anyone other than us would know about.”

“That’s true,” nodded Ryan. “It’s not contracted for anyone. Only we know what it is because it’s for our Ospreys, which are unique to us.”

“Okay, then we cross off work as a motive for this,” said Eric. “Has anyone spoken to the others? Katelyn, Chelsea, Marilisa, Victoria, all of the genius kids.”

“Does that include me?” said the big, deep voice at the door. They all turned, smiling and shaking their heads at Hayes.

“I’ll be damned,” laughed Eric. “What the hell has the Navy done to you?” They all hugged him, welcoming him home.

“To answer your question, it’s not just the Navy. I’m a SEAL now,” he grinned.

“Are you fucking kidding?” smirked Luke. “Why wouldn’t you tell us that? Why didn’t you call us and ask for help?”

“No, sir. I wanted to do this on my own. I knew that’s what I wanted to do. Your training when I was here got me there. I’m still part of intelligence but through the SEAL teams.”

“Why are you home?” asked Hex.

“I had leave coming, and I wanted to see Victoria. I know she’s been nervous about me not communicating with her. I’ll be home for a few weeks, then gone again for a while.”

“Well, as long as you’re here, any thoughts on why someone would want to kill Stephanie?” asked Brax.

“She’s the girl who was the clone, right? Victoria told me. I never met her, but I can only imagine that it has everything to do with the fact that she is a clone. I mean, that alone makes her more unique than the rest of us. We’re all geniuses, but she’s a genius clone. Can you imagine if someone figured that out and wanted to make dozens like her?”

“Fuck me,” muttered Luke. Luke tapped a message to Riley and Suzette, asking them to come to the offices. It was only Riley that was able to come down.

“Hey, what’s up?” she asked.

“Thank you for coming, Riley. Can you explain the cloning process to us?” She stared at them, then burst into laughter.

“On that note,” smirked Hayes, “I’ll go see the love of my life.”

“Is that funny?” asked Luke.

“Yes,” she nodded. “Luke, cloning is extremely difficult. I can’t give a ten-second lecture on it.”

“Try, Riley. Please,” he pleaded. She nodded, taking a seat at the table.

“Alright, let me see if I can give you a freshman version of this. Cloning involves creating a genetically identical copy of an individual, cell, or organism. Like cloning an orchid or rose. Or in Mama Irene’s case, or Ivy’s, cloning a plant that is endangered.

“Now, we are all well aware that this can happen naturally, like with monozygotic twins, or artificially, using techniques like somatic cell nuclear transfer.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” said Brax. “Somatic what?”

“A somatic cell,” she smiled. “A somatic cell is any living cell other than reproductive cells.”

“So, maybe they didn’t use anything except those soma-whatever cells when making Stephanie. I mean, does that explain her being unable to have children?”

“It might,” nodded Riley. “In artificial cloning, a nucleus from a somatic cell, a body cell, is transferred into an egg cell with its own nucleus removed. The researchers would have needed a cell from the individual that they wanted to clone. Then, an egg cell, oocyte, a cell in an ovary, had its nucleus removed.”

“I’m getting a headache,” moaned Hex.

“Do you want to know about this or not?” frowned Riley. He swallowed and nodded.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“The nucleus from the somatic cell is transferred into the cell where the nucleus was removed. The egg cell, now containing the donor nucleus, begins to divide and develop into an embryo. If the goal is to create a clone of the entire organism, the embryo is implanted into a surrogate mother to complete its development.”

“Wait,” said Brax. “So, a woman would have carried Stephanie. She wasn’t born in a laboratory?”

“No, honey. Does she think that?” Brax nodded. “Huh, what do you know? Our genius doesn’t know everything. I’ll speak with her, but the embryo obviously develops into a clone, which is genetically identical to the donor.”

“So, if her donor is still out there, in theory, like Michelle, she’ll be identical to Stephanie in every way.”

“God, this is so scary to me,” said Brax.

“Imagine how she feels,” said Riley. “She’s walking the street one day and runs into herself. Pretty scary.”

“She was told that her donor was dead,” said Brax.

“Did it ever occur to any of you that there is more than one?” said Riley. The shocked expression on their faces told her that they had not even given that a second thought.

“Look. There was an original donor, and that donor could very well be alive or dead. But what if they tried several before they got Stephanie? What if the only problem with her was that she wasn’t compliant and couldn’t be easily manipulated?”

“Damn. We have to find all the versions of the woman I love.”

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“Alright, young lady,” smiled Gabi. “You are officially discharged to return to your cottage, but I have a few rules.”

“Our cottage,” smiled Brax. Gabi laughed at him, nodding her head.

“Right, sorry. Your cottage, together. No sudden movements, no jostling, no alcohol, no physical activity of any kind right now. Including sex.”

“It’s okay, Gabi. That can wait,” smiled Brax.

“Says you,” smirked Stephanie. They both chuckled, and Brax kissed her sweetly.

“If you get any headaches, sudden neck or back pain, call us immediately. Bleeding from anywhere, blood in your urine or stool, we need to know about it.”

“I get it,” nodded Stephanie. “Basically, sit still until told otherwise.”

“Exactly. You can take short walks either early in the morning or later in the evening when it’s cooler, but preferably with a partner, just in case.”

“I can do that,” she smiled. “I’m just ready to get out of here. Not that I haven’t appreciated all of your amazing care and, of course, the delightfully handsome nursing staff, but I’m ready. Should I visit the pond?”

“You definitely can,” said Gabi. “You don’t have any glaring injuries that it will heal, but it could help with the dizziness.”

“Wait, can we return to the delightfully handsome nursing staff?” frowned Braxton.

“Oh, come on,” giggled Stephanie. “You’re telling me that you’ve never noticed that Doc, Wilson, and Cruz look like the new Vegas show of naughty nurses?”

“Alright,” he said, tossing up his hands. “I do not want to hear about anyone thinking of those three as ‘naughty nurses,’ let alone handsome. I get it. They’re all nice-looking men. But they’re all old enough to be your grandfather.”

“Relax,” smiled Stephanie. “I didn’t say I wanted to date them. Just look at them.”

“I agree,” smiled Gabi. “We all joke about it around here, but we have the best-looking nursing staff, male and female, of any hospital I’ve ever been a part of.”

“See,” smiled Stephanie. “Even the doctor agrees.”

“Agrees with what?” asked Doc.

“They’re talking about you, Wilson, and Cruz being the best-looking male nursing staff around,” frowned Brax. Doc smirked, nodding his head.

“Well, while we all appreciate the compliments, we sincerely hope that you appreciated the great care, not the great-looking care.”

“Obviously,” smiled Stephanie. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“You didn’t embarrass me, honey. We’ve been dealing with women for a long, long time, and we can all tell stories of the very handsy experiences with female patients. In fairness, so can Riley, Gabi, Kennedy, Ajei, Lena, and Kelsey. Hell, even Virginia, Lucinda, and Khloe. I thought Irish was gonna lose his shit the other day when a concussion patient tried to kiss her.”

“Oh, nooo,” said Brax with emphasis.

“Oh, yes. We had to call security for help with him. He didn’t know what he was doing, but he was an oilfield worker. Big, strong, and, unfortunately for her, covered in oil. It’s a hazard of the job. Usually, the patients listen when we say stop, and thanks to our big, handsome, strong husbands and male nursing staff, we’ve learned a few moves that put them in their places.”

“This is why I love this place and don’t ever want to leave,” said Stephanie.

“Good. Then don’t ever leave again. I don’t like seeing you hurt or sick,” said Brax, kissing her temple. She frowned, sitting up straighter, and looked at Gabi.

“What’s wrong, honey?” she asked.

“Gabi, what if this person is sick and needs me? What if they’re connected to my donor original and needs something that only I can provide?”

“If she is, she should have asked for help nicely, not tried to kill you,” said Brax.

“I guess you’re right. I’m just thinking that we really don’t know all the details of what they did to us. Once I’m feeling better, I think I want to ask Regan about all those files he absorbed. I know it was twenty years ago or more, but there could be something in there that’s connected to the school in Maine.”

“Let’s not worry about that right now,” said Brax, helping her to get off the table. “All I want to do is get you home.”

“Then let’s go,” smiled Stephanie. “But if you don’t mind, can we go to the cottage I was using? I really liked being near the water.”

“We can do that, honey. I’ll get you settled and start moving my things over. With the help of my brother and a few others, we should be good.”

Brax wasn’t surprised that Stephanie fell asleep on the sofa almost as quickly as he tucked her in. With the help of Pax, Mav, Saint, and a few of the other men, they had all his things moved into the cottage by the water before she even woke. It wasn’t like he had closets full of clothing.

His uniforms were carefully packed in garment bags, but other than that, he possessed one suit, one tuxedo, a few pairs of jeans, military-style utility pants, and the rest were shorts and t-shirts.

“You seriously need to consider upgrading your wardrobe, brother,” laughed Pax.

“Yeah, I’m looking at it and thinking the same thing. Although, in fairness, Steph doesn’t seem obsessed with clothing or makeup right now, either. Maybe she will the more she’s around the others.”

“Maybe,” nodded Saint.

They all stepped onto the front porch, and Brax gently closed the door behind him. He handed the guys some drinks, and they sat down, enjoying the late afternoon sun and light breeze.

“Hey, Steph said something earlier that has me thinking. She asked if it was possible that if this shooter, or someone connected to the shooter, was a clone like her or a clone from her original, might need something from a medical standpoint.”

“That’s an interesting thought,” said Mav, “but why not just ask for the help? The others are able to communicate. They’ve sort of always been able to communicate. Why not try to find us in the right way?”

“I have to agree with that,” said Saint. “If you want our help, don’t try to kill someone we love.”

“I’m not sure,” said Brax. “But I can tell you this. They won’t come near her again.”

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It was a week later before Stephanie was allowed to return to G.R.I.P., but only part-time. Doug and the others watched her carefully but saw no residual effects of the crash. In fact, she seemed happier than ever before.

“I’m guessing that your enthusiasm for work has something to do with living with Brax,” smirked Paige, looking over her shoulder. Paige was nearly six-feet tall, and Steph was only five-three, so it was a comical sight.

“It definitely does,” she smiled. “It’s not just living with him, but he’s much more open about his feelings and our future. I think once he told me about his concerns, I mean, why he was concerned, he knew it wouldn’t matter to me.”

“I’m glad he told you,” said Paige.

“You knew?” she frowned.

“Honey, there’s not much here that we all don’t know. We’re family, but we also keep people’s secrets. They’re not our stories to tell. We knew Brax would say something eventually, but it had to be in his own time.”

“I wish you would have given me hints,” she said quietly.

“Steph, we did give you some hints. We told you that Brax had some issues that he had to work out and that you should be patient,” smiled Paige.

“I guess you did. I thought it was because I wasn’t family.”

“Honey, what would make you think that? You’ve been family since the day they brought you off that plane. You’re ours, and that means something here. We don’t just love that big, beautiful brain of yours. We love the woman on the outside as well.”

“I guess I’m still learning to accept some of that as well,” she grinned. “To go nearly twenty-five years, at least twenty-five that I can recall, without any sort of love, support, or comfort to all of this is quite a shock.”

“I guess it would be,” nodded Paige. “I was born into this. So was Ryan, in a matter of speaking. He was adopted by his aunt, Ella, and although she adored him and treated him as her own son, he struggled with his identity and feeling different. In fact, he made some pretty terrible decisions in his youth that ended up with the loss of his arm.”

“I remember him telling me about that,” nodded Steph. “I’m glad I haven’t stepped over that line. I’d like to keep all my limbs.”

“It’s perfectly natural to feel different at times but remember that we all have far more in common than we do that separates us.”

“Do you think some of that is because of Matthew and Irene?” she asked. Paige thought for a moment and then smiled.

“I wouldn’t doubt if our entire world is the way it is because of Matthew and Irene. I’ve been so lucky to have grown up with them as my surrogate grandparents. It was wonderful, and Dan had great-grandparents.”

“Well, I know that your parents are pretty amazing. Your mother is the best cook I’ve ever met, and your father,” she blushed, “I hate to say it, but he’s so handsome.” Paige laughed, nodding at the girl.

“I’m not blind to the fact that both of my parents are beautiful people. They gave Julia and I a head start on the genetic pool. We’re very lucky.”

“Wait a minute. If Ryan isn’t actually Antoine’s son by birth, why does he look so much like him? I mean, literally like a twin.”

“Now, that’s a question for my grandmother,” smiled Ryan, walking toward them. “Hi, babe.” He kissed his wife, smiling at Stephanie.

“I think I need to schedule a walk in the gardens with your grandmother,” laughed Stephanie.

“You joke, but it might help you more than anything else. Between her, Ruby, Aunt Claudette, and the other aunts, you’d be in great hands,” smiled Ryan.

Stephanie nodded as they asked her some questions about her work, then walked away to look at the other ongoing projects.

Out of nowhere, she suddenly felt a sharp stab in her head and touched her fingertips to her forehead. Hissing, Doug turned quickly, Thomas staring at her.

“Stephanie? Are you alright?” asked Thomas.

“Y-yes. I think it’s just a little bright in here today, that’s all.”

“Go home,” said Doug.

“No. Really, Doug. I’m getting somewhere on this, and I’d like to continue the work for today.”

“And I’d like you to be able to continue working with us for years,” he smiled. “It

will be here when you come in tomorrow. Why don't you go and talk to Regan like you wanted to or go for that walk with Irene."

Knowing she would lose this battle, she nodded at the man and walked out to the docks to catch the next boat to the main island. Waiting for her was Trevon, the gentle giant.

"Hi, Stephanie," he smiled, holding out his huge bear paw. "You feeling okay?"

"Hi, Trevon. Yes. A little headache, but all good."

Trevon, a former professional football player, had helped the Gray Wolf team to solve the mysteries of a few player deaths. In the end, he retired and was offered a job with the team. Half his time was spent at the bike shop, the other running shuttles back and forth from G.R.I.P.

"You need to take care of yourself, honey," he said, looking down at the tiny woman. She seemed a bit pale, and he worried that she might get seasick, although she'd never been sick before. Slowing the boat, they enjoyed the soft breeze of bayou.

Stephanie closed her eyes, lifting her face to the sun. While she was doing that, Trevon texted Brax to meet them at the docks. By the time he pulled up to the dock, Brax and Lena were standing there waiting.

"You called them?" frowned Stephanie.

"I was worried about you," said Trevon. "You don't look okay."

"I'm fine, but thank you for worrying, Trevon." He nodded at her, lifting her out of the boat into the arms of Brax.

“You’re pale,” he said, kissing her forehead.

“I’m just tired,” she said.

“Let’s go,” said Lena. “I’ll check you out at the cottage, but if I think there’s something wrong, you’re going right back to the clinic.”

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“She seems to be just fine. Her blood pressure, pulse, and heart rate are all fine. No fever, no tremors. She just seems to be having a little headache. It feels normal since she works with very tiny components. Take off the next few days and go back to work next week.”

In spite of her desire to get back to normal, Stephanie had to admit that she just wasn't feeling like herself. Maybe she'd rushed her recovery and should do as she was told.

“You're probably right,” she frowned.

“I heard my girl was sick,” smiled Irene from the door. “Would a walk in the fresh air help her?”

“It might,” nodded Lena. “Nothing too fast or too taxing.”

“Child, I'm over a hundred years old. How fast do you think I'm gonna walk?” They all just nodded, chuckling at the older woman as she held out her hand for Stephanie.

Brax watched them walk toward the gardens, smiling at Irene and her ability to be exactly where she was needed when she was needed.

“What do you think?” asked Lena. “There's nothing physical there.”

“I think she could be just exhausted,” he said. “But I am worried about the thought of someone connected to either her donor or even perhaps Stephanie herself. Is it possible that a clone can be a donor for another clone?”

“It’s possible,” said Lena. “Probably not a good idea, but I suppose it would be possible.”

“Why wouldn’t it be a good idea?” he asked.

“Stephanie turned out just fine. In fact, from what we know, she’s even better than her donor. Smarter, physically more perfect, if you will. But we don’t know all the details. At least not yet.” Brax nodded at Lena.

“Then I suppose I need to find the details.”

“Ines, you’re late again,” said her boss, walking toward her.

“I-I know. I’m sorry. I had car trouble this morning.” She turned in her chair, causing tremendous pain in her back and side. Wincing, he stopped and stared at her, frowning.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. I think I just over did things this weekend. I’m sore, that’s all. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Ines, this is the fifth time in four months. We can’t tolerate this. We run a very tight ship here, and our people are required to clock in before 8:30 a.m. You rarely make that. Now, I give you grace of a few minutes that I don’t give others, but one more time, and I’m going to have to make a change.”

“Please. Please, don’t do that,” she pleaded. “I’ll be better. I promise.” He nodded, staring at her and then looking toward the other desks that were scattered throughout the workspace.

“I e-mailed last week about the project, and you never replied.”

“I’m sorry. As I told you, I had a death in the family.”

He looked at her with suspicion and then shook his head. He didn’t believe a word coming out of her mouth, but human resources had advised him that she would have to be handled with kid gloves. One wrong move, one wrong statement, and she’d have a huge lawsuit against them all.

“Alright. I’m sorry for your loss,” he said through clenched teeth. “Could you please review it and get back to me? And, Ines? Last chance. Be here on time.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, nodding at him. A few minutes later, there was a carefully worded e-mail detailing their conversation and asking her to sign it, indicating her agreement and understanding. If she were late again, she could be terminated.

He had no clue what she’d been through these last few days. Finally finding the one person she needed, she’d driven to New Orleans, searched and searched for something or someone that felt right, and then hid on top of that ladder behind that damn tree. Her whole body was telling her what a fool she’d been.

“Jerk,” she muttered.

“He’s not being a jerk,” said the woman seated behind her. Ines carefully swiveled her chair to look her directly in the eye. Of course, the other woman didn’t give her the same courtesy. “If it were any of us, we’d be gone. You’re given special treatment.”

“I’m not given special treatment,” she scoffed.

“Yes. You are,” said the other woman, turning. “Look, I’m sure that you have your

challenges like everyone else. I mean, I'm a single mom with three kids. It's not exactly easy getting in here every day on time. But I do it. He's only asking for you to do what the rest of us do."

"You know what, Sybil? Mind your own damn business. You never know what could happen on your way home from work. Those kids need you."

"Are you threatening me?" she scowled. Ines smiled at the other woman.

"Me? What could I possibly do to hurt you?"

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“What happened today, honey?” asked Irene.

“I don’t know, Mama Irene. One minute, I was doing just fine, then the next, there was this sharp pain in my head. It wasn’t like a headache, just a pain. Lena said it was nothing. That I shouldn’t worry about it.”

“Well, then. Don’t worry about it,” said Irene, linking her arm with Stephanie’s.

“Why does everything here smell so amazing? I can literally distinguish between each of the scents.”

“Tell me what you smell,” smiled Irene.

“It’s strange. Some of it I know doesn’t have a distinct smell, but I know what it is. The smell of the wood or leaves, maybe the moss.”

“Mmhmm,” nodded Irene. “Go on.”

“Wisteria is always strong here. Dogwoods. The azaleas are insanely intense. Camellia’s, crepe myrtles, dahlias, and hibiscus.” Irene smiled, nodding at the young woman. “The hydrangeas are so gorgeous. All those different colors. And the gardenias! Oh, they smell so wonderful!

“Over there, the rows and rows of irises, lilies, jasmine, and roses. How in the world did you get so many colors of roses? Magnolia always comes through so clearly for me. But it’s the blend of it all. It’s as if I can feel your ancestors through all these smells and sights.”

“You can,” smiled Irene. “You see Martha, Franklin, Archie, Genevieve, and all the others, right?”

“Yes. I can. I love talking to them about the history of this place and this area. It’s like having a live Google search engine at your fingertips only it’s far more accurate.” Irene laughed.

“Yes. Well, they were here. I used to walk these gardens by myself when Matthew and I were first married.”

“Was he working?” she asked. Irene nodded.

“In his own way. He’d just returned from the war and things were different, new to him. He had to figure some things out. We eventually did that together. But walking these gardens made me feel at peace.

“With each of my babies, I would come out here and discover that one plant or tree was calling me. No surprise, with Gaspar, my oldest baby, it was the live oak trees. With Pierre, it was the cypress, strong, tall, and able to grow anywhere.”

“And what about the girls?”

“Oh, they were each different as well. Every child had their own scent, their own plant or tree that seemed to call me to it, bringing me peace. I found that to be true when they were off serving as well.

“One time, I came out here to discover that the hibiscus was looking awful. That was Baptiste’s plant. I called and called until I got Gaspar to answer me. He was still serving as well. I told him something was wrong, and of course, he thought I was crazy.”

“Was there something wrong?” asked Stephanie.

“As it turned out, yes. He and Raphael were both behind enemy lines and looking for a way out. It was one of many times that Nine and his team went in to help my boys. That’s why they’re all my boys,” she smiled.

“I love that,” whispered Stephanie. “I wish I’d had a mother that worried about me like that when I was younger. All I had were laboratory handlers, doctors, and scientists trying to see what I was doing right or wrong.”

“I’m sorry for you, child. But you have that now. In spades. You got me, Claudette, Ruby, Erin, Mary, both of ‘em,” she laughed.

“I get your point,” said Stephanie, smiling at her. “But I won’t ever have core memories of the kind of love that your children grew up with.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, you won’t, and I wish I could change that, but I can’t. I know it doesn’t make you feel any better, but there are a lot of folks here who didn’t have that. Trak, Winter, even your fellow geniuses.”

“That’s true,” she whispered. “I didn’t think about them. In fact, we’ve never talked about it. They must feel terrible sometimes as well.”

“Yeah, I reckon they do,” said Irene. She nodded toward the maze, watching as Hayes and Victoria walked hand-in-hand, disappearing between the hedges. Stephanie laughed.

“I think they love one another.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt,” said Irene. “That young man has changed considerably since he got here. So has she. She’s just doing it more slowly.”

“Slow is okay. Right?” asked Stephanie, nibbling her lower lip.

“Are we talkin’ ‘bout Victoria or you?”

“Maybe me. I mean, Brax and I haven’t been intimate yet. I know it’s new, but I’m not sure when it’s okay to ask or to do, or, well, you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean,” nodded Irene. “It’s okay when you feel like it’s okay. You and Brax. You’re adults, and you know when it will feel right. There’s no rush for either of you.”

“What’s my flower or plant or tree?” she asked Irene.

“Oh, that’s easy,” smiled the older woman, leading her down the rows of gorgeous flowers. “The Helena Rose. It’s one of my own creations. See, I took parts of several different flowers and merged them together to create something completely new and different. There will never be another like her.” Stephanie smiled at Irene.

“Are you telling me that to make me feel better?”

“Does it make you feel better?” smirked Irene.

“A little.”

“Then, yes. I’m telling you that to make you feel better. Ain’t nothin’ that’s perfectly original, Stephanie. Everything was created from or in the image of something else. You’re no different, honey. You just came out a whole lot smarter and prettier.”

“Thank you, Mama Irene. I suddenly feel much better.”

“Good. Then how about some tea and a piece of lemon cake in the gardens?” She

waved toward the old, ornate iron furniture. It was already set for tea, with cakes and sandwiches and several different teapots.

“A tea! I’ve never been to a tea,” she squealed. “This is so lovely!”

“Then let’s enjoy this beautiful day. Stormy weather will be here soon. Then we’ll have to take cover.”

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Stephanie spent the afternoon with Irene, enjoying the beautiful summer weather. Until it wasn't so beautiful any longer. The thunder was so loud and intense she felt her bones shaking. Then the lightning started, and the rain came down like a waterfall had been turned on somewhere in the heavens.

Most of them were in the cafeteria when it started and saw no reason to rush home, only to get wet. Many years ago, the cafeteria staff decided to line one wall with books, videos, and games to entertain anyone stuck in the space during storms.

The children played some games while a few adults grabbed a book and tucked into the seats or booths. Stephanie sat with Brax, Pax and Deanna, Mav and Katelyn, and Saint and Marilisa. Trevon was sitting with Nash and Jenna as she was contemplating returning to Arizona.

"I feel so terrible for her," said Stephanie. "Do you think she'll be alright?"

"I think Nash is going to make sure that she's alright," said Brax. "It's what we do around here. Care for those around us, especially the women we love."

"He loves her?" asked Stephanie.

"You can't tell?" smirked Deanna.

"No. I guess I'm still not very good at that. I wish they would have taught us about emotions, love, hate, all those things when we were in that school," she frowned.

"In a way, they did," said Katelyn. "They taught us what not being loved felt like and,

in the process, showed us what hate felt like. It wasn't ideal, and whether or not it was intentional, they damn sure showed me a few things."

"When everyone left the school, I looked for anything that would tell me where I was or who everyone was that had been there. They didn't leave anything. No letterhead, no business cards, nothing with an address, city, or state on it. I was terrified to speak with anyone or to attempt to find anyone. I just didn't want to chance it.

"They did leave a few books behind, mostly textbooks, but it kept my mind occupied when I was alone. There once were thousands of books, and yet they only left a handful behind."

"Didn't it get cold in that school?" asked Marilisa. "I don't remember a lot about Maine, but I remember it always felt cold to me."

"It was cold, but I was able to start fires in the fireplace when I needed it. They had cameras on the outside of the building, at the perimeters, but nothing on the inside. That seemed odd to me as well. I found the tunnels that led from the main school building to the medical buildings. That's what allowed me to go into town when I needed to."

"We didn't see any tunnels," frowned Saint.

"You really had to know what you were looking for. There wasn't anything or anyone in them. It was clear they were using them to move girls from one place to the next, or my worst nightmare, that someone was moving from place to place to watch us."

"That's the nightmare I have," said Katelyn. "I always felt like someone was watching me. I mean, I know they were watching me on cameras, but this was different."

“Hey, do you guys feel like talking about something?” asked Regan.

“By something, I assume you mean something to do with me,” smiled Stephanie.

“That’s why you’re a genius,” he smirked. “It has to do with you but also with everyone. I went back through all those records in my head and used the files that we were able to pull from the databases and internet that we found in the agency files.”

“Did you find something?” asked Mav.

“I’m not sure. There are several attempts at cloning as far back as Mary, our teammate that we lost a few years ago. We always believed that she was the first person at the Depot. She was also the first to figure out that she could communicate with others without speaking.”

“That’s what prompted them to not have more than a few kids there at a time,” said Pax.

“We think so. Then, when the Depot came under suspicion for a whole bunch of things, it looks like the agency started building these schools. They hired this man. The name always stuck out as odd to me because he had nothing to do with weapons. His name is Dr. Felix Rubenstein. He was a geneticist.”

“Oh,” whispered Stephanie.

“Yes. It didn’t fit, but I didn’t think about it until I learned about you. The thing is, he died before you were born.”

“Thank you for saying that. Born. Most would have said created.”

“You were born, Stephanie,” he said adamantly. “You were grown inside a surrogate

and born like any other child. Dr. Rubenstein had a daughter, but she never lived with him. She lived with her grandmother, Muriel, in Houston. Luke sent a few guys over to speak with her. She might have some of her father's old records or notes."

"I'm not sure what that would tell us," said Stephanie.

"It could be anything from the name of the donor and the surrogate to something else. There's no mention of a wife, but surely the daughter didn't live alone in Houston. I'll let you know if we find anything."

"Regan? Who did the leadership team send?" asked Saint. He grinned at him.

"Carl, Joseph, and Kiel."

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“Look at this house,” whispered Carl. “It’s huge!”

“Either she’s done very well for herself, or her father left a handsome little estate,” said Kiel. “She’s got security. This is not a normal home.”

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” asked the guard at the gate.

“We’re here to see Ashley Rubenstein. We called earlier about her father.” The guard nodded, looking at their licenses.

“It’s actually Ashley Rubenstein Carter,” said the guard. “She’s expecting you. Just park on the left of the driveway.”

“Thanks.” Carl drove the SUV toward the spot he’d pointed out, then looked at his teammates.

“Ashley Carter. She’s the wife of tech giant Mason Carter. That’s why the house,” said Kiel.

“Let’s go,” nodded Joseph. Before they could even knock, the door opened, a big security guard standing in the entryway.

“Gentlemen, Mrs. Carter will see you in the library.”

“Thank you,” said Joseph, following the big man in front of them. And he was big. Bigger than the three of them and every bit as wide as Tailor or Alec.

“Mrs. Carter, the gentlemen that called earlier are here.”

“Ah, wonderful,” she said, standing from her desk.

She was a woman easily in her fifties, her hair cut short, styled in a way that flattered her fine features. She’d had at least a few injections, probably more, but nothing that was so severe you were appalled by it.

“Mrs. Carter, thank you for seeing us,” said Carl.

“It’s not a problem. No one has ever asked me about my father or his research. I have the feeling it was quite taboo.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Joseph.

“My father was attempting to clone children long before Dolly the sheep,” she smirked. “I have no idea where these children came from or what their background was, but I know that they suffered.”

“Were you there?” asked Carl.

“No. No, I was sent to live with my grandmother and my mother’s sister and her husband. I was raised as their daughter. I had a wonderful life and didn’t really know much about my father.”

“And your mother?” asked Kiel.

“My mother died giving birth to my sister,” she said sadly.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. I don’t remember her at all. My aunt used to say that she thought my father was trying to bring my mother back to life. I don’t know how that would have been possible since I was the only living relative of my mother’s, and he never once touched me or took blood, tissue, or DNA samples. My aunt was adopted so she wasn’t a viable candidate.”

“Sometimes, we reach for the obvious,” said Carl.

“Yes, well, I don’t really know what’s obvious or not. Set those on the table, please,” she said to the two men carrying the massive trunks. “Those are filled with all of my father’s notes. This was long before things were kept digitally. He wouldn’t have believed in that anyway. I’ve never opened those trunks. Not once.”

“Not something you’re interested in?” asked Carl.

“I’m interested but also afraid. I don’t want to find out that my father is the monster everyone said he was. I don’t remember much about him, but he was kind to me and a good father. I’d like to keep it that way if you don’t mind.”

“We understand. May we take those with us?” asked Joseph.

“I’d rather you not,” she said. “I know I’m asking a lot of you, but I’ve arranged for you to have rooms in the east wing. You can stay a week, then my husband and I leave for Italy for a month. Make all the copies, all the notes you want, but you cannot leave with those journals.” Carl stared at the two men and nodded.

“Wait, can we ask one more person to come?” asked Joseph. “He’s another member of our team, but his brain might understand this better than we can.”

“Of course,” she said, walking toward the entryway. “I’ll arrange for another room and send someone in with food for you. If you need anything else, just ask Bruno.”

“Bruno?” frowned Kiel.

“My personal bodyguard that escorted you in,” she smiled. “He’s really quite sweet, but I’m not supposed to tell anyone that.”

Two hours later, Thomas was seated beside them sifting through the stacks and stacks of journals and loose notes.

“I’m not sure I was the right person to review this,” he said, shaking his head. “Maybe Regan should have come.”

“No, we think you’ll understand this better than Regan. He’d be able to catalog it in his head, but we need someone to understand what they’re looking at. You’re the genius, Thomas. Just tell us what you need from us.”

“I’m looking for anything where a cloning was done but didn’t work. Anything that mentions names of potential successful clones. And, if we’re really lucky, how he did it.”

After several pots of coffee and more than twenty-three hours of not moving from the table except to use the bathroom, the men were becoming exhausted. If they thought something was valuable, they would stack it near Thomas and move on. But there was so much it was difficult to determine what was worth looking at.

“I think I found something,” said Thomas. “A lot of this is written in some language I cannot figure out. It doesn’t make any sense. But this, it doesn’t fit with Stephanie’s age, but it says that he successfully created a clone of a young woman, but there were complications.”

“What did he do?” asked Carl.

“It doesn’t say. It just says that he knows what not to do next time and that his mistake will help the next one to be perfect. It’s one of the last entries. According to what his daughter gave us, he died a month later.”

“So, there really could be another one out there,” said Kiel. The others all stared at one another. Joseph nodded.

“If there is, we need to find her.”

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“Ines, I can’t keep giving you the pain medication without more tests,” said the doctor.

“Please, you know that I’m in pain. Look at me! I can’t be anything but in pain. I just need a little more. I don’t want to do the tests. I know what they’re going to say. I’m dying. Just help me to be comfortable.”

“You don’t know that you’re dying. Let me do these tests, and we’ll figure it out together.”

Ines bit her lower lip, knowing that she couldn’t keep coming to him without allowing him to conduct the tests he wanted. But she also knew what he would find and even he couldn’t fix what was wrong.

Instead, she’d be another experiment. Poked, prodded, and tortured like the lab rat she was.

“Alright,” she nodded. “Can we do them on weekends? I can’t take more time off work. I’m already going to be late today, and they’re angry with me.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll give you a doctor’s note explaining that you had to be here this morning. If you have any issues, just let me know.”

Ines really didn’t care about any of that. She just needed the medication. He handed her the prescription, and she thanked him as he reminded her of her promise to return on the weekend.

Leaving the medical building, two young men were walking toward her, and she immediately ducked to the side, lowering her head. She allowed them to walk past her, and then she heard the inevitable.

“Damn. Did you see that? What the hell does she have?” said one man.

“I don’t know, but I hope it’s not contagious.”

It didn’t really bother Ines any longer. She knew that they were stupid children who didn’t understand anything. Making her way to her car, she watched as people turned away, afraid to stare at her. Mothers hid their children’s faces, afraid that they’d scream or, worse, ask, ‘what’s wrong with that lady.’

She’d heard it nearly her entire life.

That’s not true, she thought as she headed toward the office. Once, she was a normal, healthy young woman. Then, they started their biopsies and surgeries and blood draws. It was never-ending.

Then, one day, she looked in the mirror and noticed something was wrong. Her left eye was drooping, and her right shoulder was raised with a large hump on it. The doctors said it was nothing, just go back to the laboratory. She knew it was something.

Parking her car, she shuffled into the office only to be greeted by her boss once again.

“I have a doctor’s note,” she said before he could speak.

“Ines, I’m sorry. We can’t do this any longer. The company will be very generous with you and provide one year of severance. After that, you’re on your own.”

“But I need the medical insurance!” she yelled. He shushed her, waving his hands.

“We know. We’ll provide medical benefits for one year. You’re a smart woman, Ines. Maybe you can get a job where you’re working from home.” She was quiet for a moment, glaring at him.

“You mean, get something where the public won’t have to see me. That’s what you mean.”

“No. No, that’s not what I mean,” he said emphatically. “Don’t put words into my mouth. I’m just saying you’re sick a lot, and you’re moving slower lately.”

“Wouldn’t you!” she screamed. The entire office turned to look at her. “That’s right. Stare at the freak! Wouldn’t you move slowly if you looked like this? Wouldn’t you be sick a lot? You have no idea how much pain I’m in every day. I asked for an ergonomic chair to accommodate my disability, and you gave me that piece of shit that does nothing for me!”

“Ines,” he whispered.

She shoved him, causing her to scream in pain at the effort, then swept an arm across the desk, sending everything to the floor.

“Ines,” he said calmly. “I know this is difficult for you, but you haven’t been happy here in a long time. You’ll find something better. You’ll get a good recommendation from the company.”

“I bet I will,” she laughed. “Anything to get rid of me.”

“Ines...”

“Stop! Stop saying my name. Don’t ever say my name again. You’ll regret this. I do more work and know more about what happens here than anyone. You’ll regret letting me go.”

He said nothing just stared at the woman. He did feel pity for her and compassion, but he also had a business to run. Her physical features were difficult to manage, but it was her outbursts, tardiness, and absences that really caused the issues.

She turned and left the building, slowly as always. She couldn’t move quickly, or the pain would send scalding daggers through her bones. He watched as she got into her car, concerned that she might do something stupid. She sat for a few minutes, and he could tell that she was crying.

“Should I call the police?” asked the receptionist.

“No. She’s just grieving. Let her have that. Lord knows the poor woman has enough to grieve about. She’ll need a lot of time.”

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“I don’t know, Thomas,” said Suzette and the others on the medical team, shaking their heads. “His handwriting is atrocious, and I’m struggling to understand what he’s written.” Thomas looked up at the others.

“Don’t look at me,” said Lucinda. “I can barely read my own handwriting, let alone that chicken scratch.”

“Hi,” said Hayes as he walked toward the small group of people.

“Oh, hi, honey,” said Riley.

“What’s wrong?”

“We’re trying to read these notes and struggling. The boys took great photos, but I swear it’s not English,” frowned Gabi. Hayes looked over her shoulder and nodded.

“No. It’s not.”

“It’s not what?” asked Riley.

“English. It’s not English. It’s German.”

“Holy shit,” muttered Thomas. “We were so focused on thinking it was all in English, we didn’t think that it was actually another language.”

“It’s actually three languages,” said Hayes. “He wrote his notes in a mix of German, English, and Danish. It’s fascinating, really. Like he was thinking in three different

languages. It's random. I don't think he meant to do it. It just happened that way."

"We need to get these translated," said Thomas.

"Send the photos to Victoria, and I'll help her to get them translated for you. It shouldn't take the two of us very long."

"Thank you, Hayes. When do you have to leave?" asked Suzette.

"Four days," he smiled. "It's alright. I love being a SEAL, and I love my team. I'll be back soon."

"You come and say goodbye before you leave," said Lucinda. "Take care of yourself."

"Yes, ma'am. I will." They watched as he left, headed to the offices where Victoria was working.

"He's turned into a wonderful young man," said Riley. "I just hope he really does come back to us."

"He will," said Thomas. "He's got it all. Brains, brawn, and a keen mind that sees things that all the smart people in this room didn't see." They all laughed, nodding at Thomas.

With the rain still coming down, albeit lighter than the last few days, they ran toward the cafeteria, splashing water and mud along the way.

"Did you figure it out?" asked Stephanie.

"Not yet, honey," smiled Riley. "Hayes figured out that it was written in three

different languages, which was why we were struggling with it.”

“Oh. That’s interesting. I wonder why he did that?”

“Confuse other people?” shrugged Lucinda. “It definitely confused all of us.”

“I don’t think that’s why,” said Suzette. “Hayes thought it was random, like he was doing it and didn’t realize he was doing it. If that’s true, he had a brilliant mind. I’ve seen people move from one language to another easily. Trak does it, Ivan does it, even Mama and Pops will slip from English to French now and then. Your brain has to completely understand both languages thoroughly.”

On the televisions in the cafeteria, the news was showing horrible photos of a business in Houston that had been bombed by a disgruntled employee. The business was GTR Genetics.

“Hey,” said Brax, “turn that up.”

“It’s a tragic scene here. GTR Genetics conducts research into rare genetic disorders and diseases. According to the police, preliminary interviews indicate that an employee who was recently let go returned, demanding access to the files that they were working on. When her manager refused, she shot him in the leg and walked out. Before authorities could arrive, she’d driven her car through the front window and tossed three explosive devices into the business.

“Fortunately, there were timers that allowed two full minutes for the remaining staff to get out. It seems the employee didn’t want to kill anyone, just destroy GTR.”

“Anyone feel the warm fuzzies when you hear that?” asked Brax.

“I damn sure do,” said Saint. “This can’t be a coincidence. We know that he was

from Houston, and his daughter still lives there. Does she have any connection to the business?" AJ shook his head.

"Not that I can see," he said, scrolling through his tablet. "It was owned by a private equity group out of California. Has a great reputation in the medical community, and they do what the reporter said. Their specialty is researching and trying to find cures for rare genetic diseases and disorders."

"Anything on there about clones?" asked Stephanie.

"Nothing on their information pages, but that doesn't mean anything."

"Well," said Saint, "looks like we're going to Houston."

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Asa Lawrence stood outside the offices of GTR Genetics, watching as the FBI and ATF agents sifted through the destruction. Almost everything they had was saved on a secure server that backed up to the cloud, but there was also all the experimental equipment they were using.

“Mr. Lawrence?” asked Brax.

“Yes, that’s me. What agency are you with?” he asked.

“We’re not with an agency. We’re a private security firm that’s looking into a school that potentially abused children who were highly intelligent, possibly even cloning them.” He stared at him, frowning, and shook his head.

“We don’t work with any schools, and that’s not something we would ever condone. We very specifically look at genetic markers that cause certain diseases.”

“I understand that, sir, but we recently met with the daughter of Dr. Felix Rubenstein. Are you familiar with that name?”

“I’d say. He did some pretty groundbreaking research twenty, maybe thirty years ago. He was obsessed with trying to create a clone of his dead wife and daughter. He had a living daughter, whom you obviously met, but apparently, he wanted to get the other daughter and his wife back.”

“That sounds like him,” said Mav. “Is there any possibility that your disgruntled employee was somehow connected to him?”

Asa started to speak and then closed his mouth. He looked at the destruction and devastation of their place of business and then back at the men.

“I want to say ‘no,’ but I have to be honest. You just put a thought in my head that won’t go away. Confidentially, her name is Ines Ruben. I never made a connection before. There wasn’t a reason to.”

“Why would she do this?” asked Pax.

“She’s been disciplined several times for consistently being late to work, not calling in when she was scheduled to be here, asking for four days off, and taking five or six or even an entire week.”

“No reason given?” asked Brax.

“Ines was an interesting individual. Brilliant, but we had to be careful how we treated her.”

“Why?” asked Brax.

“She was also a patient. We have a research clinic that looks into the rare diseases that we spoke of. She’s been seeing the clinicians and researchers there for two years. The problem has always been that Ines is very vague about where she came from, her disease, that sort of thing.”

“Jesus,” muttered Saint.

“That’s not the worst of it,” said Asa. “She was getting worse right before our eyes. That’s why I was trying to give her some grace. As I said, she’s a brilliant researcher, but she’s obsessed with her own disease, not all the ones we’re working on.”

“Just what is her disease?” asked Saint.

“That’s a great question. We’ve yet to be able to identify it or put a name to it. It was yet another reason we were so tolerant of her behavior and outbursts. She was valuable to the research and was willing to do anything to find a cure.

“There is no name for it. None. We’ve never seen anyone with her deformities before, and as I said, she’s getting worse. When she first arrived, we noticed that her bones seemed to be twisting in on themselves, like a tree limb.”

“Jesus,” muttered Brax. “She must have been in extraordinary pain.”

“You have no idea. I’m not sure how she was able to walk or even drive. Her organs were slowly calcifying, causing repeated shutdown and repeated hospitalizations. Her shoulders have started to twist, and poor woman, her facial features. I don’t mean this to be cruel, but she resembles images of the hunchback.”

“Are the outbursts a side effect of this?” asked Saint.

“The research team believes so. Since the rest of her organs are calcifying, we decided to do scans of her brain to see if that was affected. Pockets of calcification are everywhere.”

“Will she survive?” asked Brax.

“No. Not without an identical donor to give her genetic material. Blood, bone, marrow, proteins, enzymes, hell, even DNA.”

The men stood, silently staring from one person to the next.

“I know this is a lot to ask,” said Brax, “but is there any way that you would allow us

to see her files?”

“That violates everything we’re about. The HIPPA laws are very clear about patient records.”

“We know that, but we have a research team that might be able to help this person and, in the process, help someone in our family.”

“Are you telling me you have someone with this same disease?” he asked.

“No. I think we might have her clone.”

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“Dear God,” muttered Gabi, looking over Suzette and Riley’s shoulders. The entire medical staff was in the conference room of the clinic reviewing the data. Kennedy, Cruz, Doc, Wilson, Lena, Ajei, Kelsey, Lucinda, and even the medical techs.

“Look at that poor woman,” whispered Ajei. “I don’t know how she’s moving her body is twisted so unnaturally.”

“Can you imagine the scrutiny she receives when out in public?” asked Kelsey. “Just the people walking by her every day either sneering at her, avoiding her, or laughing at her. I’m not condoning what she did, but if she has calcifications on the brain, she’s probably not thinking clearly.”

“It’s the worst thing I’ve ever seen,” frowned Doc. “It looks like a cross between Proteus syndrome and neurofibromatosis.”

“Isn’t Proteus what Joseph Merrick, the elephant man, had?” asked Kennedy.

“It is. Poor man lived an awful life,” said Gabi. “But they checked for all of these things and didn’t see those markers. This is something else.”

“When we tested all of the geniuses, including Stephanie, we saw increased levels of certain proteins and enzymes. Their DNA was in unusual strands but relatively normal. Stephanie’s was the only one evident to be a clone,” said Suzette.

“What are you thinking?” asked Riley.

“What if this poor woman was the DNA donor for all the clones? What if, in order for

him to get just the right mix of DNA, tissue samples, all of it, he was using this one person and, in the process, robbed her of her own body?”

“Jesus, you could be right,” whispered Gabi. “If she has a defect that doesn’t allow for the reproduction of those things, the recovery, this might be the end result.”

“We could help her,” said Cruz.

“Honey, we might be able to, but if she’s the person who’s been trying to get to Stephanie, that’s not something the team is going to like,” said Riley.

“But maybe she wasn’t trying to kill her. Maybe she just wanted to replenish her own body,” he said compassionately.

“I love where you’re going with this,” said Gabi, “but we have to be damn sure we know what we’re doing. I need anyone and everyone who can read these files and understand them to focus on this. Stephanie is not out of the woods yet as long as this woman is out there trying to get to her.”

They heard a shuffling behind them and turned to see Brax and Stephanie standing in the doorway.

“She wanted to know what was going on,” he said, shrugging.

“I could help her,” whispered Stephanie. “I mean, if what you say is true, if it’s correct, my body could help hers.”

“Maybe,” nodded Wilson, “but it also might damage your own. We won’t know any of that until we figure out what he did to her to get the clones.”

“Plural? There’s more than me?” she asked.

“We kind of always knew that, but yes, there appears to have been more than just you,” said Gabi. “But it doesn’t appear that they are alive. They’ve searched for them and never found them.”

“Then I’m her only hope,” said Stephanie quietly.

“Honey,” started Riley, shaking her head.

“I know what you’re going to say. It’s a risk. She’s dangerous. I could hurt myself. I get it. But that poor woman has suffered immeasurably because of that madman. I will never again complain about this body I was gifted. I want to help her.”

“Well, we have to find her first,” said Wilson. “She destroyed that complex in Houston and disappeared, which is quite a feat considering how she looks.”

“You forget that she’s also a genius,” said Brax. “She thinks like all of our geniuses do. We need for them to help us figure out where she would go.”

“Well, it’s obvious that she has some idea of where Stephanie is located, which means she may come back to this area,” said Doc. “We could put an ad for a scientist to do genetic research.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Suzette. “It would have to be very specific, and we’d need to have a facility away from the property. That will take us some time.”

“I’ll talk to Cam and Luke and see if we can get this moving,” said Doc, moving toward the door. “If we can use an empty warehouse, we have enough manpower to get the equipment in and set up for her to see if we can draw her in for an interview.”

“Man,” said Cruz, shaking his head, “it makes me wonder how that poor woman has done interviews in the past or anything that required face-to-face meetings.”

“That’s my point,” said Stephanie. “She didn’t deserve what happened to her. She was an unwilling participant just like the rest of us.”

“Honey, we get it,” said Wilson, “but that doesn’t mean we’re going to risk your life for her. We will try to help her, though, if we can.”

“That’s all I can ask,” said Stephanie. “She’s suffered enough. How old is she?”

“Umm,” said Suzette, searching the file. “It looks like she’s fifty-four, almost fifty-five.”

“So, she’s more than twenty-five years older than I am. That means that they may have extracted everything from her and released her from the school.”

“Or the Depot,” said Brax. “We need to see if we can show her photo to the others. Is there a way to alter the photo to what she may have looked like as a young girl?”

“Sure. We can do that,” nodded AJ. “It’s a best guess, but it might be close enough if I can find all of her original statistics like height, weight, eye color, that sort of thing.”

“Eye color? Why would that change?” asked Brax.

“We’re not sure, but she has two different color eyes. That could be how she was born or could be an effect of what they did to her,” said Riley. AJ nodded at the others in the room, and Stephanie smiled at him, giving a soft nod.

“Let’s find out.”

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The pain for Ines was the worst it had ever been. Just the effort of throwing the homemade bombs into the office had nearly crippled her. She made sure there was enough time that everyone could run out of the building. She didn't want them all to die. She just wanted them to understand how desperate she was.

Twice today, she'd soiled herself, unable to get to the bathroom in time. Whatever was happening inside her body was accelerating.

She'd spent nearly her entire miserable life researching how to return what was taken from her. She wasn't even sure that it would actually work, but the studies she'd conducted on albino mice and rabbits showed that if the right things were placed back in the body, it would at least slow the disease process.

Of course, that didn't really help her a whole lot. Her body was so disfigured, so twisted and wrecked, there was nothing that would make it right again.

All she wanted to do was to have pain-free days and perhaps continue working in a lab where they wouldn't bother her. Was that too much to ask?

"Apparently so," she muttered to herself.

Years ago, she'd begun purchasing laboratory equipment for herself to have in her home. She'd spent hundreds of thousands of dollars of her own money to ensure that whatever happened, she would be able to continue her research.

Looking at her situation now, she wished she'd paid more attention to compounding pain medications. Then, she'd be able to formulate her own drugs. Unfortunately, that

wasn't her forte, nor was it wise. Ordering those types of things on the internet inevitably brought the authorities to your door.

Remembering the day that she went to the school in Maine, she couldn't help but be filled with anger.

Thirty-five years ago...

"Hello, Ines," smiled Dr. Rubenstein.

"Dr. Rubenstein, it's such a pleasure to meet you. Am I the only one here?" she asked.

"For the time being," he smiled. "The school is a new concept, and we're only just getting things started here."

He walked around her, looking at her intensely. Up and down her body, then staring at her face.

"Dr. Rubenstein?"

"I'm sorry," he laughed. "I knew that you were brilliant, but I didn't realize how lovely you are."

"Oh. Y-yes," she stammered.

"Don't worry, young lady. I have no interest in anything other than my work. Let me show you to the facilities and your room."

They toured the buildings only seeing three other people. It would be months before the first students arrived, some just infants. Ines couldn't figure it all out, but there

was always a believable explanation.

In truth, she didn't really care. She had a state-of-the-art lab and was working on her passion. Genetics.

"Ines? May I see you in my office?" said Dr. Rubenstein.

"Yes, sir."

She quickly stood and followed him into a glassed-in office. She wasn't nervous. Everyone could see them speaking to one another. He took a seat on the opposite side of the desk and began speaking.

"This work is very important to me, Ines. You're a brilliant, beautiful young woman, and I'd like permission to look at your own genetics."

"Mine?" she asked, shocked.

"Yes, of course. Why wouldn't I?" he smiled.

"I-I don't know. Are you wanting DNA?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "DNA is part of it. I would want to do blood samples, tissue, all of it."

"Gosh, I'm not sure," she frowned. "I mean, I love the research, but actually having someone research me is a little scary. I don't like needles. Ironical, isn't it?"

"A bit," he smiled. "I'll tell you what. We could plan it for four times a year, and we'll do it under anesthesia. Nothing big. Just something local. What do you think?"

“I-I guess that would be alright,” she said quietly.

“We could have your family come in for you,” he said, looking away. “Perhaps your mother or father, a sibling.”

“Oh. I don’t know who my parents were, and I don’t think I have any siblings.”

“Yes, yes,” he nodded. “That’s right. You were an orphan, just like many of our poor young girls here.”

“Yes. I guess I was,” she nodded. “Alright. I’ll do it.”

Present day...

“You fool. You idiot!” she yelled to herself. “He took it all from you without any worry of what he was doing to you. You should have seen it.”

Opening her banking, she realized that there was enough to get her through for a few months, but after that, she’d need to find a job. The problem was, if she didn’t find the clone, there wouldn’t be an ‘after that.’ There would only be an end.

“Okay, Ines. Find a job.”

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“Hey? Are you okay?” asked Brax, coming up behind Stephanie in the kitchen. She was staring out the window at the incessant rain.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m actually pretty good. It all makes sense now. I mean, it makes sense why someone would be after me. She needs me, and I’m not sure I can refuse to help her.”

“I get that. You’re here partly because of her,” he nodded. She turned in his arms, smiling up at him.

“Thank you for saying that, for understanding,” she said, kissing him.

“I’m not always good at this stuff, but I get it right on occasion,” he laughed.

“You’re better than you think,” she smiled. “Brax? When will it be time? For you and me?”

“It will be time when you tell me you’re ready and not before. I will not push you in this. I know we’ve both been with other people, but I love you too much to risk this relationship for sex.”

“Is that what it will be? Sex?”

“No. No, absolutely not. It will be love. I will make love to you, and you will make love to me. I will be the last man you will ever be with. Tell me when you’re ready for that.”

“I’m ready for that.”

“Wait. What?” he asked with surprise.

“I’m ready, Brax. I’ve been ready for a while, but wanted to make sure my head was right. Mama Irene and Claudette have helped me so much. Them and those damn gardens,” she laughed. “I can’t believe flowers, plants, and trees somehow make your head clear, your heart to beat correctly, and your body strong.”

“Stranger things have happened here,” smiled Brax, kissing her softly. “We’ll be expected at dinner.”

“I know,” she nodded. “I think I can wait until after dinner to make love to you.”

With a large umbrella between them, they made their way toward the cafeteria, following the stone paths to avoid the mud and puddles of water. Alvin seemed happy with the water lying in the middle of the large pathway lined with live oaks.

Ahead of them, they could see Victoria and Hayes arguing.

“Oh, no.”

“Trouble in paradise,” frowned Brax. “Looks like they need to be separated.”

“I’ll take her.” Stephanie walked closer to the couple. “Hi. I’ve been looking for you. Will you walk with me to the cafeteria, Victoria? I need to ask you some questions.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure. I don’t have all the translations done yet,” she said, wiping her tears. Brax waited until they walked off and then looked at Hayes.

“It’s not what you think,” said the younger man.

“What is it you think I think?”

“I wasn’t going to hit her.”

“Fucking right you weren’t, but it damn sure looked like you were angry enough to do it.”

“I wasn’t. I swear. It’s her obsession with not leaving the property. I mean, she’ll do short little trips into the city or if Angel, Miller, or Trak are with her, but that’s all.”

“She’ll get there, Hayes.”

“I want to get married and have her living with me off-base,” he frowned.

“Why?”

“Why? Because I love her,” he scoffed.

“No. I mean, I know you love her, but why would you do that to her? You bring her across the country, away from everything she knows, leave her in an apartment by herself with nothing and no one. Why?”

Hayes frowned, shaking his head.

“You’re fucking selfish, that’s why,” scolded Brax. Hayes stared at the other man, offended by the statement. “That’s right. I said it. It’s selfish of you to want that. What you want is a woman there for you when you are home. Someone easily accessible to satisfy you.”

Hayes said nothing, continuing to get soaked in the rain.

“Are you tempted?” frowned Brax. “Are you thinking of cheating on that girl?”

“No! No, I’m not,” he said quietly. “Girls approach us all the time, but I haven’t done anything.”

“Yet.”

“It’s not like that, Brax. I don’t want anyone except Victoria, but I need her to not be afraid to get off the damn property now and then. I want a life with her, but I want a life where we can travel together, do things other than walk the gardens here.”

“Hayes, that girl has had a miserable life. Just like you. But she’s absolutely terrified that someone out there will know who she is and take her. She’s watched all the others, Marilisa, Katelyn, Chelsea, and now Stephanie. Their past is following them.

“She sits here worrying herself to death over you every damn day. She tries to keep track of where you are, but you’ve obviously figured that out and turned off your tracking devices on occasion.”

“I have to,” he frowned.

“Bullshit. The military can’t see them or find them. You do it because you don’t want her to know where you are. Let me guess. Strip clubs? Bars? Partying with the boys?”

From Hayes’ silence, Brax knew he’d hit a chord. It wasn’t that he blamed him. He was a twenty-four-year-old young man, alone, with urges. He was doing what every young man in the military tended to do.

“Listen to me, Hayes. If you’re gonna fuck around, you tell that young woman that you need a break. You want a break from her, and you need her to date other people to be sure that you’re actually the one.”

“Date other people! No fucking way!”

“Oh, I see. So, you want to play with the strippers and hookers, but she’s not allowed to have dinner with someone?”

“I’m not seeing hookers and strippers!” he yelled. Before they knew it, six men were standing around them. Luke, Cam, Hex, Eric, Pax, and Saint stared at the young man. Luke pointed across the path.

“Office. Now.”

“I haven’t done anything,” frowned Hayes, shaking off the water from his hair and clothes.

“Yet. You haven’t done it yet,” said Luke. “You’re obviously tempted.”

“Of course I am! Weren’t you?”

“No,” said Luke. “I was not. I knew that the only woman for me was Ajei. End of story.” Hayes looked at Eric.

“Sorry, buddy. Sophia Ann was always the woman I loved.” He looked at Cam.

“I was a man-whore,” he said, frowning. “I’m ashamed to say it now, but it’s the truth. I was lucky that Kate saw the real me and loved me. I’m grateful.” He turned to Hex.

“I was an older man when I found Gwen. I’d been with other women, but not while I proclaimed love for one back home.”

“Well, I guess you’re all boy scouts,” he frowned.

“We didn’t say that, Hayes. Listen, you’ve had some time out there in the world now without anyone hanging over your shoulder,” said Luke. “We get it. We get being tempted. The problem with that is that Victoria hasn’t been out there in the world. She doesn’t know how beautiful she is, how enticing. We see it when the men at The Well look at her.”

“You take her to The Well?” he yelled.

“Fuck, yes. The girl needs to get away from here. We agree with you on that,” said Eric. “But there is always a half-dozen men around her when we go, and she does not move. She won’t even take a piss without two women going with her and a man outside the door. She is terrified, Hayes. Have you thought about that at all?”

“Of course I have! I mean. I know she’s scared, but she has to get over it.”

“She really doesn’t,” said Brax. “You need for her to get over it, but she doesn’t have to. She loves her life here, Hayes. She loves living with all of us and working here, and she loves you. But asking her to do something that will cause her immeasurable pain before she’s ready is not okay.”

Hayes stood and shook his head, heading toward the door.

“What will you do?” asked Brax.

“I don’t know. I have no fucking clue, but I can’t be trapped in one place forever, and I can’t live without her.”

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“He didn’t hurt me,” sniffed Victoria. “Not physically.”

“What do you mean?” asked Stephanie, the other women huddled around her.

“He’s tired of me being scared to leave the property. He wanted me to just get over it and come and live in San Diego with him. I’m just not ready for that,” she said, wiping fresh tears.

“Oh, honey. You have to find a way to get over that,” said Ajei. “He means well, and I’m going to guess he’s lonely. And. As awful as it sounds, he may be tempted by women coming on to him.”

“Wh-what?” gasped Victoria.

“I didn’t say he’s done anything, but he is a man. A very handsome, well-built young man who is also a Navy SEAL. Luke and I knew we loved one another. While he was at Annapolis, I was in nursing school in Baltimore. We saw one another all the time. But believe me, I noticed the women watching him all the time.

“Then we came back here and married. I lived near base for a while, and then when I got close to delivering Garrett, I came back here until he retired.”

“It was the same for Eric and me,” said Sophia Ann. “But everyone is different.”

“Cam and I definitely were,” frowned Kate. “I had his son and kept that from him. It was so wrong of me, and I regret it every day.”

“Hex and I met later in life,” said Gwen.

“We all have different stories,” said Lia, Scout, and Lucinda, seated beside her. “Yours is unique, Victoria, because of your fear of leaving the property.”

“I agree with that,” said Julia, “but you can’t expect him to have a ten- or twenty-year career as a SEAL, and the woman he loves lives across the country or the world unable to come to him if he needs her.”

They all looked at Julia, surprised by her direct approach.

“I don’t mean to be cruel, Victoria, but you can’t expect him to not see anyone else if you’re not willing to go and visit him now and then. Think about all the weekends and days off that he has, but it’s not enough time to come home. You’re here, able to go and see him, but you won’t.

“I know it’s difficult for you. I know it’s an awful thought, but you have to find a way to do it for him or let him go. Even if it’s just for now.”

“I don’t want to let him go,” she said in a shaky voice. “I love him.”

“But do you love him enough to let him go?” asked Julia in a soft voice.

“I know you love him, honey, but there needs to be a give and take in this relationship,” said Ajei.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, looking out the window.

She watched as Hayes emerged from the offices, the other men following him. When he entered the cafeteria, she stood and walked toward him. He said something to her, and she nodded.

Leaving the building, the team watched them head toward Victoria's cottage, watching them closely.

"I guess she told you guys what happened," said Brax.

"She did," nodded Stephanie. "We tried to convince her to either let him go for the time being or figure out a way to meet him halfway."

"That's more or less what we said to him," said Luke.

"He's being tempted, isn't he?" asked Ajei. Luke nodded. "I knew it. He's such a good-looking guy, and it has to be difficult for him."

"It is difficult, but we all did it and ignored the temptations," said Eric. "I think the difference is that he hasn't figured out that what he has at home is what he really needs and wants."

"Maybe it's not," whispered Stephanie. She looked up at the others, sadness filling her expression. "I feel terrible for both of them."

"Same," nodded Julia. "Love is hard, but young love is awful and rips you apart. Joseph and I were ten years apart, and it killed me seeing him in so much pain, yet he couldn't bear the thought of me being so young."

"How did you change his mind?" asked Stephanie. Julia grinned.

"I took him for a boat ride." The other women all laughed, nodding their heads.

"Maybe that's what Hayes should do with Victoria," smirked Ajei. "Take her for a boat ride and show her that everything is alright."

“I’m not so sure that will work for her. There’s a paranoia in her about leaving this property and someone taking her or harming her. After what all of us, we kids from the schools, went through, it’s understandable.” Stephanie just looked down at her hands.

“Hey. Are you okay?” asked Julia.

“I keep thinking about this woman. Ines. I can’t imagine the pain, the agony that she has suffered because of what that doctor did to her to create me and the others. It’s unconscionable. I’ll never understand that kind of evil,” she said, shaking her head.

“He thought he could bring his wife and daughter back,” said Marilisa. “Even though he had one daughter, a healthy daughter, he wanted his wife and baby back.”

“Wait. Why wouldn’t he have chosen his daughter to take DNA from? She would have been a match and probably ideal,” said Kelsey. The women all stared at one another, and then the light went on for Lucinda.

“Ideal unless she wasn’t her father’s biological child.”

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“Mrs. Carter, thank you for taking our call so late,” said Riley. “You spoke to a few men who were part of our team a few weeks ago.”

“Yes. How could I forget three handsome men talking to me,” she smiled. Riley nodded, giving her a smile.

“Mrs. Carter, I know this will feel awkward, but I’m hoping that you’ll trust me with this information.”

“Now you really have me curious,” she said, staring at the screen.

“Mrs. Carter...”

“Ashley. Just call me Ashley.”

“Alright. Ashley, are you certain that you were the biological child of Felix Rubenstein?”

The woman stared at her for a moment, then took a deep breath, staring at the screen filled with curious faces.

“I am not. I was nine months old when my parents married. She was never married to my biological father. I don’t even know his name. Mom became pregnant with her second child almost immediately after marrying Dad, Dr. Rubenstein. Then, as you know, she died during childbirth, and the child died shortly thereafter. How did you know?”

“This woman that we’re searching for, the one that we believe is out to harm our friend, he used her to attempt to clone your mother and sister. We found it odd that he wouldn’t have used your DNA and other material.”

“Yes, I can see where that would be confusing. My grandmother and aunt made sure that I was taken away from him almost immediately. They knew that he wasn’t in his right mind and promised that he could come to Houston and see me whenever he wanted to. They also didn’t want me to be raised in a laboratory. I know he meant well, but there is no doubt in my mind that we would have lived in that lab. Of course, he never came to Houston. I mean, once or twice, but I think it was out of guilt.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” said Riley.

“If it helps you at all, I do remember him having an argument with my aunt. She was my mother’s sister, and he was trying to get her to return to Maine with him. He said he only needed a few samples from her, and he could bring mother back. They thought he was mad.”

“I think he was,” said Riley. “I hate to say that. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. From what I know, he was indeed a mad scientist. And yet, there’s a part of me that wonders what it would feel like to have someone love you so much that they would want to bring you back to life.” The women just looked at the screen. “Oh, don’t worry. I’m not suicidal or anything, and my husband loves me very much. I’m quite happy. But I seriously doubt if he would ever go to such lengths for me.”

“I’m happy he wouldn’t,” said Gabi. “No offense.”

“None taken,” smiled Ashley. “I’m happy to answer any other questions, but if I could do it tomorrow, I’m afraid it’s quite late or early here in Italy.”

“Of course. We’re terribly sorry,” said Riley. “If we need something, we’ll send an e-mail.”

“Please do,” she nodded. “It sounds as if this young woman desperately needs help.”

The screen went dark, and they all stared at one another, shaking their heads.

“She had her mother’s DNA, but there was something he didn’t like in her. He didn’t want to use her for the recreation,” said Stephanie.

“I know why,” said Suzette, looking at the notes that had been translated thus far. “Ashley’s biological father was Ashkenazi Jew. Rubenstein is a German name, often Jewish. He identified as being from German immigrants, not Jewish. He didn’t want the clone of the infant to have Jewish DNA.”

“Man, this guy was seriously screwed up,” said Gabi.

“Yes, and he’s screwed up at least twenty people that we’re aware of,” said Stephanie. “We have to find Ines before it’s too late. She deserves a chance.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Riley. “Alright, ladies. We work together with the tech boys on this. We’re all brilliant in our own right. We understand how women think, especially women in pain. We’re going to find this poor woman.”

“And what about Victoria?” asked Marilisa.

“We’ll do whatever we can for her, honey,” said Gabi. “But right now, it’s going to be in her hands. She has to make some decisions, and so does Hayes. Let’s just hope it doesn’t tear them apart.”

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Stephanie and Brax were curled on the sofa, listening to the pounding rain. They'd been soaked while walking back to their own cottage, like the rest of the property. Happy to make it a night in just for the two of them, they changed out of their wet things and picked a movie.

"Maybe choosing Frankenstein wasn't a smart choice," smirked Brax.

"It does appear that dear Dr. Rubenstein was a bit of a Dr. Frankenstein, but there's nothing we can do about him now. What I want to do is help Ines. I think it's sad that she changed her last name to Ruben."

"She changed it?" frowned Brax.

"Mmhmm," yawned Stephanie. "Her real last name was Gage. I'm guessing she felt a weird sense of connection to Dr. Rubenstein."

"Or she didn't want anyone to know her real name," said Brax.

"I guess so," she said with a sad expression. "Brax? I want you to make love to me. Help me forget all of this tonight."

"Are you sure? We don't go back from this. We go forward."

"I know," she smiled. "That's all I want to do is move forward with you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, here, being the best aunt and uncle we can be to all of our friends' children."

“I can’t think of anything that would make me happier,” he smiled. “Did you know that my father was adopted? Him and all his siblings. My grandmother couldn’t have children either, and my grandfather promised her they could adopt as many children as she wanted. They rescued my father, aunts, and uncles and adopted all of them.”

“That’s wonderful,” she smiled. “Maybe that’s an option for us. Right now. Strip, big guy.”

“Wow, pushy, pushy,” he smiled.

She shoved him back against the sofa, pushing down his suddenly snug sweatpants. Stephanie lifted the big t-shirt over her head, her breasts swinging freely in front of him. She could hear the low growl emanating from his chest.

“See something you like?” she smiled.

“Honey, I saw those when I cut your clothing off of you in the chopper coming back from Maine. That’s when I knew you weren’t a child. You were a woman. A beautiful, sexy as fuck woman.”

“Took you a while to admit that,” she said, flattening her palm against the hot flesh of his penis.

“I guess it did. I was worried what you would think.” She gripped his stiff cock and smiled.

“You mean what I would think about having a man with a beautiful, thick, long cock but no balls? If you haven’t figured it out yet, Brax, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“Yeah, yeah, I can see, I mean, feel, shit! Keep doing that,” he growled.

“I have a better idea.”

Stephanie stood and let her panties fall to the floor, then straddled his wide, muscular hips. Her small frame stretched to accommodate him, lowering herself on top of him.

For Brax, it was the perfect view of the perfect body. She belonged to him, and he was never letting this woman go again. Each time her body rocked toward his own, he drove hard up into her, gripping her hips with passion and ferocity.

“B-Brax,” she gasped.

“Fucking go!”

As their bodies shook simultaneously, he jolted upright with her in his arms and walked to the bedroom.

“The next five rounds will be on the bed,” he smiled.

“Five rounds? You think a lot of yourself, Mr. Pechkin.”

“Yes, ma’am, I do. Mostly because I’ve been waiting a long fucking time to make love to you. So, it’s five in the bed, and then we’ll work our way toward the shower.”

“See, you can read my mind,” she giggled.

It was still raining when Stephanie rolled over to find the space beside her in the bed empty. At first, she thought it was nighttime. But as she looked at the bedside clock, she realized that it was already after seven.

Pulling on the robe, she stepped down the hall toward the kitchen to find Brax with Pax, Mav, Saint, CJ, and Jonas.

“Good morning,” smiled Pax. “Is my brother treating you well? If he’s not, we can kick his ass.”

“No. No ass-kicking this early in the morning,” smiled Stephanie. “What’s going on? Why the meeting in the kitchen this early?”

“We’re trying to figure out what kind of equipment to put in the warehouse to make it look real enough that we might attract Ines,” said Saint.

“I can help you with that. What are you looking at?”

“Honestly? We don’t have a fucking clue,” said CJ. “Hiro gave us a few websites and said to order what we need, and it will be shipped directly to the warehouse.” She smiled at them, shaking her head.

“Well, since this is more my expertise, what do you say I lend you a hand?”

“Babe, we would be forever grateful,” said Brax, kissing her.

“In the meantime, get Suzette and Riley here. They’ll have an even better idea of what’s needed.”

“Why didn’t we think of that?” frowned Saint. Stephanie raised her brows, smiling at the men. “Right. You genius. Us cavemen.”

“I didn’t say that!” she laughed.

“Hey, I’m starving. Can we order all this at the cafeteria?”

“Great idea,” she nodded.

Donning their raincoats and umbrellas, they trekked across the paths to find that the cafeteria was already bustling with activity. As with any other day, the smell of food tantalizing their senses was overwhelming.

Grits, pork sausage, chicken sausage, bacon, eggs, pancakes, waffles, muffins, granola, yogurt, fruit, and just about anything else you could possibly want was being served to them.

Two tables over, Trevon was seated with Juan, Kelly, David, and Hawke. One of the kitchen staff set a large platter of food in front of the ex-footballer and he actually blushed.

“What’s happening there?” smiled Saint. Stephanie turned to see what they were looking at.

“Oh, that’s Millie. Although her real name is Millicent which I think is beautiful. I’m not sure why she shortened it.” They all stared at her, waiting for the rest of the story.

“And?” prompted Saint.

“And, she likes Trevon. She cooks his favorite things every morning, brings them out to him, and he blushes. End of story. I think he’s so gun-shy he can’t speak, and she’s just plain shy. I don’t know her story, but I know that she lives in one of the newer cottages.”

“Something must have happened if she’s on the property and working. She’s a pretty lady,” said Mav. When all eyes turned toward the television, blasting the morning news story, they knew something was wrong.

“Hey, turn that up!”

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“Oh, my God,” whispered Gabi. “That’s horrible.”

The images on the screen were more than they could bear to watch. Ines Ruben was trying to make her way from her vehicle into a grocery store when several young people approached her, throwing eggs and trash at her.

“Look at the freak! Elephant woman on the loose. Hide your kids!”

“Stop it! I’m not a freak. Leave me alone!”

“Witnesses and employees from inside the store came out to help the unidentified woman, but she’d already locked herself in her vehicle and driven away. The police arrived and, after seeing the footage, did charge the teens with vandalism and bullying. It’s a terrible thing to see, Sandra, and that poor woman. I have no words.”

“Dear lord,” muttered Mama Irene. “We have to find that child.”

“Grandma, that child, as you call her, tried to kill Stephanie.”

“She didn’t try to kill me,” said Stephanie. “I firmly believe she just hoped to be able to take samples of what was given to me and input them back inside her own body.”

“Nevertheless, I can’t allow us to risk your life for hers. We’ll find her. We’ll try to help her, but that’s where my generosity ends,” said Luke.

“Where was that footage from?” asked Pax. “What city?”

“Vinton, Louisiana,” said Hiro. “She’s traveling back this way. After losing her job there, probably wasn’t much in Houston for her to stay. Hold on a minute.”

Hiro, AJ, and Tanner were huddled together over the tablet, muttering things about plates and tires, and directions.

“Any time now would be nice,” frowned Hex.

“We’re getting there. We think we’ve narrowed in on her license plate and the make and model of the car. I’m going to get a few drones in the air and thanks to the brilliance of Victoria, it will only look for that car,” said Hiro.

“Alright, let’s get the drone up and find her. She can’t have much time left,” said Cam. “Gabi? Doc? All of you. What are the chances that we can help this woman?”

“Less than one percent,” said Suzette. “There’s never been anyone brought back from something like this, and as much as I’d like to say we’re different, we’re the best, we have the pond, I don’t think any of that will make a difference for her.”

“Maybe not,” said Mama Irene, “but we could give her some peace.” They all turned to stare at her, and Luke shook his head, opening his mouth to speak.

“I’ll take it from here,” said Matthew. “Listen to me. All of you. What has been done here to all of you is unconscionable. No man or woman should have had to put up with pink dust and injections and mind games. It’s awful, and anyone who touched you will answer to God eventually.

“But what’s happening to that poor woman is an anomaly straight from hell. Her body, as I understand it, is literally turning to concrete from the inside out, creating those horrific images we just saw. Lumps, tumors, disfigurement. Look around you. We are blessed with some of the finest physical specimens in the world. Some of the

most beautiful people in the world.

“We have one another. We have all of these people in our tribe. That woman has no one. She has never had anyone. I will not allow her to suffer if we can put a stop to it.”

“Grandpa, I know you mean well, and I know you want to help her, but she’s burned down a business. She shot at Stephanie. I can’t just allow her on the property.”

“Pops, I’d have to agree with him,” said Gaspar. Matthew nodded at his son and grandson.

“Alright. Then we’ll figure out something else for her.”

It wasn’t like Ines to cry. Crying didn’t help anything, and it certainly didn’t do anything for her current crisis. Yet, here she was, on the side of a dirt road, sobbing into her sleeve.

The things those young people said to her were cruel, but she’d heard cruel things before. It was the adults. She almost understood the cruelty from children, but the adults that joined in on it were the ones she couldn’t understand.

Darkness and rain were making the drive treacherous, and the pain was causing her to double her pain medications. Although she could afford a nice hotel, it was unlikely they would allow her to check-in.

Instead, she found a small roadside motel that probably hadn’t changed the linens in a decade. It’s why she always traveled with disposal bedding.

A few miles ahead, she spotted the neon sign and pulled into the small parking lot. There was an A-frame building that housed the offices and an older woman working

the desk.

With great effort and even greater pain, she got out of the car and shuffled inside. She heard the slight gasp of the woman and lowered her head.

“I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to do that,” said the old woman.

“It’s alright. You’re not the first,” she said, still staring at the floor. “I need a room for tonight. I can pay cash.”

“No need to pay cash,” said the woman. “I’ve got vacancies. Why don’t we put you in the room behind the offices? That way, if there’s any trouble, I’ll hear it.”

“Thank you for being so kind,” she said. “Is there anywhere that I can order food and have it delivered?”

“I can order you a pizza,” said the kindly woman.

“Pizza is great. Thank you.”

“Here you go, hun. This is your key, room two. I’ll have them bring the pizza to me, and I’ll bring it to you. What do you want on it?”

“Everything, please. And thank you again.”

True to her word, the woman ordered the pizza and delivered it to her room with a bottle of soda. Once she’d eaten half the pizza, she put the other half in the small refrigerator to eat for breakfast.

She took a quick shower and then opened her toiletries to brush her teeth. They were horribly misshapen, some pushing out, others pushing in. There were several new

nodules on her forehead that she hadn't noticed the last few days.

Anywhere she went, she worked to avoid mirrors. Unfortunately, this one was large and right in front of her. The only purpose it served was to allow Ines to cry herself to sleep.

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“We have her vehicle,” said AJ to the crew at breakfast. “She stopped outside of Lake Charles at a motel and left early this morning, headed this way. It’s obvious she’s coming back here.”

“Okay,” nodded Luke. “Let’s set up a roadblock on River Road. Clear the area and let them know we’re experiencing some issues with the animals. I don’t want anyone to see that poor woman.”

“Change of heart?” asked his father.

“Maybe. Grandpa’s words really hit me last night, and Stephanie firmly believes that she wasn’t trying to kill her, which, in hindsight, seems logical. She’s of no use to her dead.”

“We trust you,” said Nine. “Let us know if you need help.”

While the comms team followed Ines’s car, the rest of the team worked on creating the perfect roadblock. Stephanie was determined to help draw the woman out of her vehicle and get her to trust them. She just had no clue how she was going to do that.

“Compassion,” said Nathan, the ghost.

“Oh, Nathan, you startled me.”

“I’m sorry, little one,” he smirked. She nodded at him, taking a seat beneath the gazebo. The rain was still coming down but now just a dull, constant sprinkle. “What did you mean by that? Compassion.”

“You will convince her to allow you to help her by using compassion. I would suspect that she has never had anyone show her compassion in her entire life.”

“That’s probably true,” said Stephanie, nodding at the handsome ghost. “She was lovely when she went to work at the school for Dr. Rubenstein. She had a pretty face, nice figure. She was a brilliant scientist in her own right. How could he have been so cruel and single-minded of his own intentions?”

“Lack of compassion,” said Nathan. “Do you know the story of my grandson? Trak?”

“No. Not really. He’s kind of scary,” she said, staring at him. Nathan chuckled, nodding his head.

“His job was a job that required that he be scary. But he was scary even before then. His mother and my daughter were sick. Here. In the head,” he said, tapping his temple. Stephanie frowned, swallowing hard. “She was beyond cruel. Angry that her husband left her and her brother left as well. She would beat Joseph with wire hangers or anything she could get her hands on. She was an addict, and if she could sell something for her alcohol or drugs, she would.

“When Joseph was old enough, he decided he would join the Army and return for his little sister so that he could take care of her. By the time he returned, it was too late. She’d taken her own life. As it turned out, her mother truly had no limits as to what she would sell for her addiction.”

“Oh, dear heavens,” sniffed Stephanie.

“Yes. The heavens. I prayed to the heavens and to the Creator and anyone who would listen. I prayed that someone could make her mind right, change her, make her good. I pitied her, had empathy for her because I knew she was sick.

“In the end, there was no amount of prayers that would change her. Joseph was – angry. He was angry for a long time. I believe that anger made him good at what he did. But he lost a piece of himself in that anger, and it wasn’t until we found one another, and he discovered that Erin was his uncle’s daughter, that he softened.”

“Softened? I’m not sure anyone could say that he is soft,” said Stephanie.

“No, I suppose not,” smirked Nathan. “But he has. He has learned to show compassion when it’s needed. He has discovered that for some, it’s all they pray for. Including himself. Lauren showed him that. Not pity. Not sorrow. Compassion.”

“And love,” said the baritone voice behind them.

“I knew you were there,” said Nathan, smiling at his grandson.

“You knew because you’re a ghost. And you’re the best hunter on the planet. You taught me everything I know.” He turned to face Stephanie. “I’m sorry if you believe me to be scary. I don’t mean to scare you or anyone here. Ever.”

“I know. I apologize for saying that,” she said, shaking her head.

“No. It was the truth, and you should never be sorry for telling the truth. Grandfather is right. This woman deserves our compassion. I only hope she is in the proper frame of mind to accept it.”

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Ines was exhausted and in pain. It was too early for the pharmacy to be open, but she needed a refill on her medications. Unable to do anything else, she pulled into a twenty-four-hour clinic, making sure there were no other patients inside.

The moment she walked in, she knew it was a mistake.

“Oh my goodness,” said the receptionist. “Doctor!”

“What in the world are you yelling about?” he said, scowling at her. She pointed to the woman standing in their waiting room, and the doctor looked shocked as well. He swallowed and nodded.

“I just need some pain medication,” she said. “I’m not an addict. You can clearly see why I need it.”

“Yes. Yes, I can see why you would need it,” he whispered. “I can’t help you. I don’t have anything here.”

“Can you give me an injection? Or give me a syringe and a vial of morphine. I can give myself the shots. I do it all the time.”

He stared at her for what seemed like an eternity and then nodded.

“I’ll be right back,” he said quietly.

“Y-you can have a seat,” said the receptionist.

“No. It’s much harder for me to get up and down. I’ll just wait for him.”

“I’m sorry about how I reacted earlier. I-I’ve just never seen anyone with your condition.”

“Yes. My condition,” she muttered. “It’s rare.”

“Here you are,” said the doctor, handing her a brown paper bag. “I put two vials of morphine in there and about twenty syringes. Are you familiar with the dosage?”

“Intimately,” she said. “Thank you.”

“I wish – I wish I were a better doctor and could help you,” he said sincerely.

“I’m sure you’re a fine doctor,” she said to him. “At this point, I’m not sure anyone can help me.”

“Good luck to you.”

She nodded at him, moving painfully slowly out the door to her car again. The sun was rising, the rain drifting away, and she still had miles to go.

“What is wrong with her?” asked the receptionist.

“So much I don’t even know where to begin.”

The moment she got in the car, she gave herself a healthy dose of the morphine. She’d become so immune to its effects she wasn’t worried about driving. Once medicated, she pulled a large sunhat down over her face and went through the drive-thru of the local fast-food restaurant, ordering a drink and something for breakfast.

It was another thing that caused her pain. Just the simple act of chewing caused excruciating pain in her jaw and head. Ensuring that she could at least get some food on her stomach, she ordered something soft and easily managed.

When the morphine started to kick in, she began to feel that she had enough energy to head in the direction she'd last seen the girl. If she could just convince her to allow her to retract some sample tissue from her, blood and bone marrow, she might be able to at least slow the progression of her disease.

"I just have to get there," she said to herself. "I can feel it. I just have to get there."

"Do we have her?" asked Cam.

"We have her. She stopped at a clinic and came out about twenty minutes later with a bag. I was able to focus in and could see that she injected herself with something. Cruz said it was most likely morphine."

"Geez, this is horrible," said Cam. "We want to protect Stephanie, but we also want to help this woman."

"We just have to convince her of that," said Hiro.

"What's wrong? Something else is wrong," said Cam. Hiro shook his head.

"Nothing like what you think," said Hiro. Cam sat beside the younger man, gripping his arm. "I've seen, we've all seen, horrible things in our lives, Cam. We've witnessed limbs being blown off, hell, entire bodies being blown to bits. We've seen men come home not themselves, their heads not in the right place."

"All of that's true," whispered Cam.

“But that,” said Hiro, pointing to the woman on the screen, “that is the cruelest, most awful, horrible thing I’ve ever seen done to a human. And what makes it worse is that it was done intentionally.”

“I know, brother,” he nodded, “I know. We all saw Winter when she arrived. Hell, we could point to anyone here and remember their scars and wounds. I’ve never in my life seen anything like that woman.”

“I wish Rubenstein were alive so we could kill him,” said Hiro, wiping his eyes.

“I agree with that,” nodded Cam as he stood to leave. “Are you going to be okay? Do you want me to have AJ take over?”

“No. He’s helping with the roadblock. We’ve found a way that will interfere with her car’s electronic system. Once we flip the switch, the car will stall. She’ll be stuck.”

“If you need a break, you call someone.”

“I won’t need a break,” said Hiro, looking at his friend. “I’m like all of you. I want to help that woman, but I’m not sure what I can do.”

“I hear compassion is tops on the list of things we need to provide,” he said with a sad smile. “That’s where I’ll be starting.”

“Hiro? You read?”

“I read, AJ.”

“Get ready. She’s three miles out.”

Hiro looked up at Cam, and he nodded.

“Let’s go. I think we should all be there.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:20 am

“It was somewhere along here,” muttered Ines to herself. “I know it was along here. She was driving straight for me. There’s nothing here. This can’t be right.”

Realizing that she was only driving further from the point at which she’d seen Stephanie before, she decided to attempt to turn around. Unfortunately, the road was incredibly narrow, with only two lanes to maneuver in the rain.

To top it off, her mobility was seriously limited, and attempting to turn her arms with the wheel of the car was nearly impossible. Stopped in the middle of the road, the rain pouring down around her. She laid her head against the steering wheel and began to cry.

Ines wasn’t sure how long she’d been there when someone tapped on her driver’s side window.

“I’m moving. I’m moving,” she said.

“Ma’am, please roll your window down,” said the voice. She shook her head, crying harder.

“Please, just let me turn around. Please.”

“Ma’am, we don’t want to hurt you,” said the man.

With tremendous effort, she raised her head and saw more than thirty men surrounding her car. She was going to die.

“Ines?” The soft female voice caught her ear, and she turned her body slightly to look in the direction of the voice. It was coming from the passenger side of her vehicle. “Ines. It’s me. Stephanie.”

“I’m imagining this.”

“No. No, you’re not,” said Brax. “We truly want to help you. I won’t let you harm Stephanie, but we have a medical team that would like to try and help you.”

“No one can help me. It’s incurable at this point. I only hoped to be more comfortable.”

“Let us try,” said Stephanie.

“Why? Why would you help me? I shot at your car. I didn’t mean for the car to flip. I only wanted you to stop so I could explain what I needed.”

“No offense, ma’am,” smiled Brax, “but there were easier ways of doing that.”

“I-I know,” she said, rubbing her head. “I’m sorry. I have a terrible headache. I think I need to lie down.”

“Cruz!”

Ines could hear the footsteps of men coming toward her and knew this was the end for her. She was going to die. In truth, she was ready for death. Life had not been kind to her. The world had not been kind to her. Death would hopefully show kindness by taking her swiftly.

She could hear voices of men and women. They were using medical terms. Terms that were so technical only scientists or medical professionals would know them. Was

she in a hospital?

She honestly didn't care.

They weren't laughing.

The team did something that they hadn't done in more than a decade. They closed the clinic, not accepting any patients at all for the foreseeable future.

"How is she?" asked Stephanie. She'd willingly donated blood, bone marrow, stem cells, anything that was asked of her.

"Nothing has changed, honey," said Riley. "We can't expect that it will. We've taken her to the pond twice while she was unconscious, and it's done absolutely nothing. She's too far gone."

"What can we do?" asked Victoria.

"We can make her comfortable, and we will. Mama Irene and Claudette are making one of the cottages ready for her now. We have a wheelchair for her to make it more accessible, and the medical team will be taking turns to help her with day-to-day things," said Gabi.

"I've never seen anyone that looks like that," said Stephanie.

"It's pretty horrible. Whatever he did to her is creating this irreversible damage to her internal organs. We've all seen calcification of the heart, arteries, liver, and other parts of the body. But this is happening on a grand scale," said Suzette.

"We found a photo of her from ten years ago. Nothing that you see now was visible then. She may have known it was happening, but it moved fast," said Gabi.

“I feel horrible,” said Stephanie. “I was hoping that I could help her.”

“You can,” said Doc. “You can help her by being a friend. A true friend. I doubt very seriously if that poor woman has ever had a friend stand beside her.”

“I’ll see if I can help get the cottage ready.” She kissed Brax, turned with Victoria, Marilisa, Katelyn, and Chelsea, and walked away. He waited until they were out of earshot.

“Level with us,” he said, standing with the other men.

“She’s got maybe a few days. That’s all,” said Doc.

“Damn,” muttered Mav.

“Listen, no one else needs to know this, but the x-rays and scans showed just how brutal he was with her body. When he put her under to take what he wanted, he must have put her under for days or weeks until she healed. She has at least a dozen scars from surgery.”

“He performed surgery on her?”

“He opened her up and took pieces of her,” said Wilson, standing beside his friend. “Pieces of her femur, hip, ribs. That doesn’t even include the pieces of her internal organs that he stole. Part of the reason she can’t heal is because she’s not whole. He stole that from her.”

“Fuck,” muttered Brax.

“Boys? Come with me,” said Matthew.

“Where are we going?” asked Saint.

“We’re going to give a woman her final wish.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:20 am

“I-I don’t understand,” said Ines.

The skin from her forehead was pushing down on her eyelids, making it difficult for her to see. She tilted her head back, looking at the pretty little cottage with the wheelchair ramp.

“It’s your home,” said Stephanie.

“My h-home? Why? I tried to hurt you,” she said.

“You tried to help yourself,” said Stephanie. “I have to believe that you wouldn’t have harmed me.”

“I didn’t want to. I truly didn’t want to,” she whispered.

“Well, we’re going to make you as comfortable as possible,” said Lena. “We’ve got the bed nice and low for you. The chairs are lower. You’ve got access to thousands of movies, and someone will be here with you every day and every night.”

“Why? I’m not going to get better. You all know that. I’m dying. I know that,” she said. Wilson kneeled beside her, holding her disfigured hand.

“Because no one should die alone, Ines. No one.”

“I-I’m so confused.”

“And?” asked Bree. Ines looked up at her and didn’t say anything at first. “What else,

Ines? You're confused, and what else?"

"Angry," she whispered.

"I didn't hear you," said Bree.

"Angry!" she yelled. "I'm so angry at him! Why me? Why did he do this to me? I was loyal to him. I was willing to do whatever needed to be done in the lab. Why choose me?"

"You were the closest genetic match to his wife and daughter," said Thomas. "You didn't know it, but your great-grandmother and his wife's great-grandfather were first cousins. That's the closest he could get."

"I was related to him? Are you kidding me? I was related to that maniac, and he still wanted to kill me."

"Technically, you were related to his wife," said Thomas. "Tell us what we can do for you."

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head gently. "You've done more than I could have ever asked of anyone. This location, being right here on the water, is so peaceful and beautiful. Why is it cool out here on the porch? I know it's hot."

"We have misters and outdoor air conditioning so that you'd be comfortable out here," said Cam. "Anything you need, you let us know."

She turned to face Cruz, Wilson, Doc, Lena, and the rest of the medical team. They were all so beautiful. So handsome. So perfect in every way, and yet they looked at her just as they looked at their friends.

“H-how much time do I have?”

“A few days. Maybe a week or two,” said Riley. “I’m sorry, Ines.”

“Don’t be. I’m relieved.”

Zeus and Atlas came up on the porch, laying their noses at her hands. She smiled down at them, surprised that they weren’t afraid of her appearance either.

For days, people came and went from her little cottage ensuring her every comfort. They watched movies together, sang songs, read books, and ate together. When she could no longer lift the fork, they did it for her.

Four days later as Wilson checked on her vitals, he looked up at Stephanie and shook his head.

“Maybe a few hours, honey. She’s going fast now.”

“Not yet,” said Brax. “We have somewhere to take you.”

“Brax, I’m not sure she can be moved,” said Stephanie.

“I think she’ll want to be moved for this.” Ines opened her eyes but didn’t say anything as Brax lifted her from the sofa, carrying her down the steps and across the property to the waiting boat.

Saint wheeled the chair onto the boat. She was strapped in, and everyone followed in other boats. It was a beautiful, clear, sunny day. Stephanie knew immediately where they were headed.

“To the animals?” she whispered.

“She always wanted to go on a safari,” smiled Brax. “Matthew is making that happen for her.”

As everyone stepped off at the animal sanctuary, Ines was lifted and carried toward one of the elephants. A padded seat with a back provided support for her as she was strapped in. She laughed for the first time in days as the elephant stood.

Irene and Matthew walked slowly around the sanctuary, stopping now and then for the giraffes to touch their noses to her face or the monkeys to hug her. When they made the circle and came back around, they lifted her from the elephant once more.

“Th-that was b-beautiful,” she gasped. “It was ev-everything I dreamed.”

Matthew bent down, whispering to the young woman, kissing her forehead as Irene did the same.

“You’re free to go home now, child,” he said with adoration and kindness. “You deserve to be free of your pain.”

Stephanie reached for the woman’s hand, kneeling beside her.

“I will never forget you,” she said softly.

“It’s me that won’t forget you,” said Ines. “All of you.”

They were the last words she uttered. She closed her eyes, smiled, and fell asleep for the final time.

No one moved. No one left the island. They waited as the sun began to set, and Ines Ruben, nee Gage, found her way home.

She would be buried on the island of the animal sanctuary in the final place where she found peace and joy. The animals would be there to guard her, but there would be no ghost of Ines. She'd finished her time on earth and should have earned medals for it.

When the clinic re-opened, there was a new wing designated for research of rare diseases. It was named the Ines Gage Center for the Eradication of Rare Diseases. They weren't going to stop until they were gone.

Riley, Suzette, Gabi, and Thomas wrote a paper about Ines and what was done to her, submitting it to several prestigious medical journals. They were invited to speak about it and discuss their findings.

"What happened to Ines Gage should have never been allowed to happen," said Gabi. "She was the experiment that we all read about in horror stories. But she is not defined by her disfigurement or her disabilities. She was brilliant, beautiful, kind, and a victim. Relax. Sit back and get ready to hear the story of a young woman that needs to be told."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:20 am

“Are you ready to be Mrs. Stephanie Pechkin?” smiled Brax.

“Mmm-maybe,” she teased.

“Woman, you’re going to marry me today,” said Brax. He nodded toward the grove where Victoria and Hayes were talking. Neither looked like they were upset by anything, and then Victoria hugged him, turning and waving at him.

Hayes spotted the two lovebirds and walked toward them.

“Hi. Everything okay?” asked Brax.

“Not really. I’ve been called back. I thought I could be here for your big day, but it’s just not possible.”

“Brother, I understand that better than anyone,” smiled Brax. “It’s all good. You’ll be home soon.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I hope so,” he nodded. “Listen, watch out for her for me. Okay?”

“Hayes, you’ll be back soon to watch over her yourself,” said Stephanie.

“No. We agreed that we should, uh, see other people,” he said, swallowing. He looked away, trying to hide his tears, but just couldn’t. “I love her so much. I just don’t understand why she can’t do this one thing for me.”

“Oh, honey,” said Stephanie, hugging him. “Give her time.”

“I’ve given her years, Steph. I can’t keep waiting. I want to, but I’m afraid of what I’ll do behind her back. I guess I’m a weak, pathetic male.”

“No. You’re a man with male urges, desires, and wants. I’m not going to judge you for that,” said Brax. “If it’s meant to be, it will happen.”

Hayes nodded, wiping his face with the back of his hands. He stood tall, looking at Brax, and gave another quick nod. As he moved toward the waiting vehicle, Hoot in the driver’s seat, he turned back one last time.

“Don’t let her be alone for the rest of her life.”

“God, that’s awful,” frowned Stephanie.

“We knew it had to come to a head,” said Brax. “I’m sure her folks are taking care of her.”

“Speaking of,” nodded Stephanie. Mo and Ophelia were walking swiftly toward her cottage. They’d obviously heard the news.

“You know, I hate the way things happened for poor Ines, but I’ll forever be grateful that she gave me you.”

“I guess she did, didn’t she?” smiled Stephanie. “I hope she’s happy wherever she is.”

“Same, honey. Same.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:20 am

Leo was grateful every day that he'd been tapped to work with the Voodoo Guardians. His full-time job was working on the custom bikes and cars at Steel Patriot Cycles. But like the others, he was often asked to help with other duties.

Tonight, he was on a break along with several of the other men and their wives. The Well was their go-to place to relax, dance, and enjoy good food. He spotted Victoria seated with her parents, looking as if she were being tortured. He knew the girl was having a hard time. He just didn't know how bad it really was.

"Hi, Leo," said the soft voice. He turned and swallowed, standing so quickly the chair fell over.

"Oh, hi, Tillie," he said, smiling at the beauty.

Mattie Sung, better known as Tillie, was the only daughter of Tanner and Micaela. She was a beautiful mix of her parents' cultures with gorgeous, flowing, silky black hair and almond-shaped eyes.

"Would you like to dance?" she asked.

"Oh. Um. I-I'm not sure." She laughed a beautiful lilting laugh, looking back at her father. Tanner walked toward them and reached out, shaking Leo's hand.

"It's alright if you'd like to dance with my daughter, Leo. She's a grown woman now, as much as I hate to admit it. Twenty-three."

"Twenty-four, Dad," smiled Tillie. "What do you say, Leo?"

“Yeah. Yeah, I’d love to dance with you.”