



# Desert Wind (Gray Wolf Security #20)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** As part of those with strange gifts, Nash has intentionally never taken a wife or life-partner. He couldn't deceive someone when he was in love with another. Seeing Jenna walk into the offices of Gray Wolf Security, was almost more than his heart could take. Finding out what happened to her, was far worse. Now, he has to rebuild their relationship, prove that he is trustworthy and help her to find herself again. That proves to be a greater task than he anticipated.

Jenna Brooks isn't who she thought she was. How is she supposed to heal and find herself again when the someone she once was, doesn't exist? With the help of Nash and the rest of Gray Wolf, she'll discover things she never knew and never wanted to know. But can she find her happy ending with Nash?

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

“Nash! Nash!” yelled his mother from the front door of their base housing. It was nothing special. Just a cinderblock building like all the rest, but it was their home. At least until his father was deployed somewhere else.

“Yeah, Mom?”

“Nash, you and the other boys get out of all that pink dust. I hate that stuff. It gets everywhere, and you track it all through the house. I’m sure their mothers feel the same way. Go find some dirt or something to play in. Climb a tree or maybe run through the hose and wash off.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he nodded.

Nash’s father, like the other boys’ fathers, was in the military stationed at a place called The Depot. This was the third base that Nash remembered living on, but his mom said they’d been on seven altogether. That seemed like a lot to him, but then again, everything seemed like a lot to him.

He liked this one because there were boys that were close to his age, and they liked doing the same things he did.

They ran together, played ball together, and went to school together.

They were great! Every once in a while, there would be a girl that lived on base with them, but it seemed like there were more boys for whatever weird reason.

Then, one day, he started feeling funny. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but he knew

something was changing in his body. He thought it might be that he was growing up, as his mother liked to say. She'd tell him it was growing pains or just his body stretching.

But in fact, it had nothing to do with growing up. People growing up weren't able to do what he could do.

"Hey, do you guys wanna see something cool," said Griffin. He and his brothers, Garrett and Gable, all smiled at him.

"Sure," said Nash.

"We have to go into the woods," said Gable. "Trust us."

Nash did trust the brothers. They were all good boys and good friends, something he treasured as a military child.

Getting into trouble as a kid was never a good idea but getting into trouble as a military child was a horrible idea.

The punishment was much worse, the consequences far more severe.

You knew when kids were good and when they weren't. You could tell right away, and Nash had a lot of experience with the not-good kids.

The boys laughed as they walked toward the woods.

They knew they were supposed to get permission from the base command, just in case the men were training in the woods.

But there hadn't been any new training groups in weeks, and all the boys would have

known because their fathers would have told them.

Still, they knew they should have waited, but this seemed too exciting to wait for all of that.

“What do you want to show me?” asked Nash. “If this is a trick and you’re gonna leave me out here or something, I’m gonna punch you in the nose.”

“It’s not a trick,” said Griffin, laughing at him. “Watch.”

Griffin stood beside Nash, placing one hand on the ground and bending his knee.

His brother counted down from three, and Griffin took off.

Nash could barely see him as he maneuvered through the trees and then returned to them in a matter of seconds.

A whoosh of wind blew their clothing, leaves scattering behind him, and Griffin smiled at them.

“Cool, right?” he laughed.

“H-how did you do that?” asked Nash.

“We’re not sure,” said Griffin. “Gable can get animals to do what he wants. He told that big German Shepherd to sniff out Dad’s chocolate bars in his desk.” Griffin smiled, pulling the chocolate from his backpack.

“It worked, too. I also told that squirrel to stop scratching at the window at night. He said he did it because he was scared like me,” said Gable.

“Any animal?” asked Nash. Gable nodded at him.

“I got that big hawk to poop on the commander’s car, too,” laughed Gable.

“What about you?” asked Nash, looking at Garrett.

Garrett smiled at their friend, lifting his hands in the air and waving his arms. The massive trees swayed back and forth, blowing in the ever-increasing winds. He moved faster and faster, and the winds continued to pick up.

“That’s enough,” said Griffin. Garrett stopped and Nash smiled.

“Well, what do you think?” asked Gable.

“I’m so glad you showed me,” whispered Nash. The boys were all between the ages of eight and eleven, Nash being the oldest. “I didn’t want to tell anyone because they might think I’m weird or a witch or warlock or something. Watch.”

With the winds still dying down, Nash focused on the sky, watching as the dark clouds rolled in quickly, dumping a torrential rain on the forest. Without even thinking, he wished it away, and it was gone.

“So cool!” said Garrett. “Water, wind, animals, and speed. We’re superheroes!”

“But,” hesitated Nash, “superheroes aren’t real. Something is wrong with us. Should we tell our folks?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Gage. “It’s probably nothing, and it will go away soon. Besides, our mom hasn’t been feeling so good lately, and I don’t want to make her worse. She gets real upset easy.”

“Yeah. Yeah, maybe, but if it doesn’t go away soon, we have to make sure we have a pact.

No one tells anyone what’s happening with us.

No one. If they find out, we could all be in trouble,” said Nash.

The other boys all nodded, linking pinky fingers and swearing their secrecy to one another.

“We’d better get back before someone realizes we’re gone. ”

Only someone did realize they were gone because the boys were being watched at all times and didn’t know it. Cameras hidden in the forest and anywhere that the boys might travel had been placed all over the base. They had no idea that every move was being observed.

It was only three weeks later that Garrett, Griffin, and Gable left. Worse, they hadn’t even said goodbye.

“Why are they gone?” asked Nash, trying to hold back tears.

“Son, their father was needed somewhere else. The base packed them up and moved them to another location with very little notice. It must have been very, very important for them to do it so quickly,” said his father.

“It’s not fair!”

“I know,” said his dad. “Being a military child is hard. I promise we’re going to be here for a while. I’ve been told that I’m needed here a while longer.”

They did stay at The Depot a while longer. Almost four years before his father was transferred to Arizona. By then, Nash knew that something was terribly wrong. His mother was sick and not getting better. His father was losing weight. And Nash was more powerful than ever.

Something deep inside was telling him that he couldn't trust anyone. Not even his parents.

About once a month, two soldiers would come to the house to have dinner. He watched as his parents appeared to be uncomfortable with their presence. They rarely spoke to them, and the soldiers didn't bother to speak either.

Usually, he was given a pass on dinner if there were adults in the house. But these men wanted him at the table, and his father agreed. Nash didn't like it. They seemed to watch everything he did.

By the time he was a senior in high school, he knew he was being observed both near and far. His mother had died of an unknown cancer, and his father was planning to retire as soon as Nash graduated.

Nash was ready to strike out on his own and join the Marines. Much to his father's disappointment, he didn't want anything to do with the Army.

For their final senior outing, their entire class went on a camping trip to Fossil Creek Waterfall. The girls were on one side of the camp, the boys on the other. But that didn't stop Nash from speaking to the only girl he'd ever had a crush on.

Jenna Brooks was tall, pretty, sweet, and considered one of the 'good girls.' She didn't cuss.

She didn't drink. And she didn't seem to date at all.

One of the things that appealed to Nash was that Jenna rarely wore makeup.

She dressed conservatively and just seemed to be an all-around good person.

They spent two days laughing, joking, and hiking. When one of their fellow hikers came up missing, the group spread out to try and find her.

Josie Stevens couldn't swim, and for some reason, Nash just knew that's where she would be. He could feel it in his bones that water was the place he would find Josie.

He ran toward the reservoir and could see her arms flailing beneath the surface. Checking his surroundings, he felt that he had to do this. The risks were huge, but he couldn't let the girl drown.

With a sweep of his arm, he parted the water, pushing it to the side like the parting of the Red Sea.

Poor Josie coughed and sputtered, gasping for air.

"Josie! Here, hurry!" he said, waving at her.

She crawled through the muddy floor of the reservoir and made her way up the bank to dry land. Releasing the water, Josie didn't even seem to notice that it had been dry for a moment, then filled once again.

"Oh my gosh! What happened?" she said, still coughing.

"I don't know. You must have fallen into the reservoir. It wasn't very deep where you were. You struggled a bit, but you were able to walk out by yourself. You were very brave."



“I-I walked out?” she frowned. “No. No, I don’t think...”

“It’s okay. Everyone is looking for you. Let’s go.” As they made their way around the bend, Jenna Brooks was standing there smiling at the two of them.

“You found her!”

“Yes. I slipped and fell into the reservoir, but it wasn’t deep where I was. I guess,” said Josie with a confused expression.

No one could seem to explain what happened that day. But then again, no one seemed to care. Josie was alive. As the year began to come to a close, Jenna and Nash talked for hours on end after school about their future plans.

“I bet you’re going to college, aren’t you?” he asked.

“That’s the plan,” she said, smiling. She knew it was a lie. She wasn’t going to be able to afford to go to college. Her parents had already told her that it wasn’t a possibility. “What will you do?”

“I’ve joined the Marines,” he said. “I leave for boot camp the week after graduation.”

“I always knew you were someone special, Nash. The Marines seem like a good place for you,” smiled Jenna.

They’d made promises to stay in touch, and for the most part, they’d tried for a while.

He wrote twice while in boot camp, and she wrote back.

When he returned after boot camp, her parents told him that she’d already left Arizona.

As hard as he tried, he couldn't seem to get a response from Jenna.

He'd made all these plans in his head about what their lives might look like. But things never quite worked out the way they were supposed to.

The Marines turned out to be a great place for him. For the most part, he could hide his gifts and use them only when necessary. None of his teammates knew about it, and he planned to keep it that way.

As a natural warrior, Nash's gifts became harder to hide.

When he helped to save an Afghan village filled with women and children from a fire, the entire unit was suspicious of him.

The insurgents had set fire to the entire village, with the women and children locked inside their huts.

He couldn't just stand there and not do something.

But the questions began to swirl almost immediately. How could a rainstorm suddenly appear in a desert? A desert that saw less than two inches of rain a year.

"What happened out there, Nash?" asked one of the men staring at him. He'd watched him open his palms and raise them to the sky.

"What do you mean? It rained. You saw it." He just shrugged, trying to blow it off, but he knew it wasn't going to satisfy the men.

"I saw it, but I don't believe it was just rain. The sky was perfectly clear, Nash. There wasn't a cloud to be found for a thousand miles. Then you raised a hand to the sky, and it rained."

“I was praying. That’s all,” he lied. “All those women and kids were going to die. All I did was pray that something would save them. Maybe there was a plane that dropped water.”

But his unit didn’t believe him, and the bonds that typically were forged between Marines were now strained. Nash was watched closely by the men, rarely able to have a moment alone. It felt like old times with his parents.

It would be five years before he reconnected with his childhood friends and realized that the superheroes all still possessed their superhero powers. Only now, they were adults who understood that something had happened to them.

By the time they figured out what happened, they were being chased by the very people that made them this way. Along the way, they lost Gable and then Griffin. It was devastating, especially for Garrett.

Faced with no choice but to find a new home, their wayward band of misfits traveled hundreds of miles on foot to find a place where they might be accepted by others.

Just when they’d found their new life, a new family, Nash was slammed in the face with the memory of the only woman he’d ever loved. Only now, she was untouchable.

## Page 2

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“Jenna? We need to talk, honey,” said her father.

He had a pained expression, and Jenna knew exactly why. As the oldest of the four girls, she’d taken on a lot of responsibility over the years, often acting as a second mother to the younger girls.

“It’s alright, Dad. I already know. You’ve lost your job, Mom lost her part-time work, and there’s no money left for college.”

Her sisters made sure that she knew what was coming. They’d been scared, crying, and unsure of their futures. With Jenna being the oldest, they prayed she would have an answer for them.

“Jenna, I’m so damn sorry,” said her father, shaking his head with embarrassment.

“I should have planned better. We thought we would be able to make a life here and provide for you. Provide for your sisters, but it just hasn’t worked out that way.

Honestly. Honestly, I thought there might be something coming this way that would help us. ”

“Dad, I’ll figure something out,” she smiled. “There’s more than one way to get a college degree, and I’ll find a way to make it happen.”

She’d prayed on it. Slept on it. Researched it. And then prayed again. When that didn’t work, she went to the church to speak with Father George.

“I’m sorry your family is suffering, Jenna. I’ve spoken to your mother, and I know it’s hard on all of you, but especially on you being the oldest.”

“I’m not sure what to do. I can get a job at the grocery store or the mall, but it won’t allow me to live on my own and feed myself, plus help Mom and Dad. Without a college degree, I’ve got nothing.”

“There could be another option,” he said with a sad expression. He pushed the brochure for the Sisters of the Carmelite Convent.

“A nun?” she frowned.

“Yes. You are still a virgin, aren’t you? I mean, it honestly doesn’t matter as much any longer, but it helps,” he asked nervously.

“Of course,” she blushed.

“Well, you could become a nun, earn your degree, and work for the convent. It’s not a lot of money, but they would support you while you were there.

All of your pay could go to your parents.

It’s not uncommon, Jenna. I was the oldest son, and it was normal in my family for the first son or daughter to go into the church. ”

“I-I know,” she stammered, “but a nun? I love my religion, I love my faith, but I never intended to devote my life to it.”

“Well, you have some time to think on it. A few weeks anyway. Maybe you could visit one of the convents and get a sense of what it’s like.”

“Maybe,” she said quietly. “Thank you for your time, Father George.”

Every time Jenna saw her high-school crush, Nash, her heart would stop, and she wanted to run to him, beg him to marry her, and allow her to go away with him while he was serving in the Marines.

But it was a ridiculous, school-girl thing to dream of.

They’d never even kissed or held hands. They were just buddies.

No, this wasn’t something you shared with the kids you went to school with. Not even someone that you knew was a special boy. Young man. That’s what he was. A young man.

Nash was someone special, and that had never been more clear than the day she saw what he did at the reservoir. She couldn’t prove it, but she knew that somehow Nash had parted that water and allowed Josie to survive a near drowning.

It made sense. Superheroes were humble, always in the background, and that explained Nash to a tee. Kind, generous, an athlete, and great student. He was the guy everyone wanted to be friends with. In her case, she hoped for more than friends but couldn’t bring herself to do anything about it.

“Honey, are you sure?” asked her mother.

“I don’t think there’s any other way, Mom. This is a good vocation for me.”

“Jenna, women become nuns because it’s a passion, a calling, not because they need the money. You could continue to live here, find work, and we’ll all be okay. Your father and I will think of something else. We’re going to be okay.”

“I’ve made up my mind,” she said with a forced smile. “I’m ready for a new chapter in my life.”

On the last day of school, Nash and Jenna promised to write to one another. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that she was going to become a nun. He thought she was going off to college.

He promised to write, and he did.

What Jenna didn’t know was that the convent wouldn’t allow letters from men who were not family members. She never received one letter sent in the care package by her parents. She never saw Nash again.

That is until the worst event of her life had him sitting directly across from her, attempting to hold her hand. The one thing she’d wished for her entire high school career was happening, and she couldn’t stand the thought of this man touching her.

“Nash,” she mouthed without a sound.

“Jenna. Jenna Brooks,” he grinned, slowly walking toward her. Irene quickly moved toward him, whispering to him.

“She’s scared and skittish, baby. Take it slow. Let her lead.” He nodded, then continued toward her.

“We can stay if you like, Jenna,” said Angel.

She turned, smiling at the two very sweet protectors sent for her. Although she believed the older woman might be the one to truly fear, she knew that she was safe.

“No. No, he’s an old friend from Arizona. A very old, very dear friend,” she smiled

with pain, embarrassment, and trepidation.

When Nash stopped in front of her, she looked him in the eyes, memories flooding her soul, filling her with joy, fear, terror, and regret, then crumbled to the floor, sobbing. Nash knelt beside her, gently placing an arm around her shoulders.

“It’s alright, Jenna. You’re safe now,” he said softly.

Bree knelt beside them, along with Doc, both of them introducing themselves to the woman.

“Let’s get her to the private clinic space in the office,” said Bree.

“No. No, I’m okay now,” she sniffed. “I’m sorry.

It was just such a shock seeing Nash. It’s been almost forty years.

You joined the Marines. You went off to protect our country.

I should have stayed in touch with you, but the convent wouldn’t allow letters to males unless they were relatives. ”

“I did join the Marines,” he nodded. “I became a Special Forces Marine, and I’ve thought of you so many times over the years.”

“Oh,” she smiled. “Well, that makes sense, about the Marines, I mean. You were always special, Nash, and handsome. He was the most handsome boy in school.” Nash could only shake his head at his old friend.

“Why don’t we get you two off the floor,” said Doc.



“A good plate of food will make you feel much better. When you’re done, Nash can show you to your cabin on the private island where we all live.

No one gets on the island or this property without us knowing about it. And no one knows where it is.”

It was a few days before Nash was able to get Jenna alone again. She’d been speaking with the legal and medical teams and trying to determine what her future might look like.

“May I join you?” asked Nash.

He’d been watching Jenna sitting near the fountain in the gardens for nearly an hour. They were all watching her, concerned that she might harm herself.

“Of course, Nash. I actually owe you an apology.”

“Me?” he frowned. “You don’t owe me an apology. You’ve done absolutely nothing wrong.”

“You reached for my hand out of friendship, and I shunned you,” she said, looking down into the fountain. Nash shook his head.

“Jenna, a man attacked you. The touch of a man will set you off for a while. I should have been more considerate. I know it wasn’t about me. It was about your attackers.”

“Thank you for saying that,” she said. “You always were the nicest boy in school. I remember when your family was transferred to Arizona. You were only in eighth grade, I think.”

“That’s right,” he smiled. “We had been at a base called The Depot. In fact, many of

the people here were there.”

“Really? That seems odd,” she frowned.

“Yes,” he laughed. “I suppose it does feel odd. We’re all different, Jenna. We were exposed to something while at this strange base and now have unusual skills.”

“Like what you did at the lake when we were in high school?” she smiled. Nash’s face showed shock and disbelief.

“You remember that? You saw that?” he asked. She nodded. “I never meant for anyone to see me. If I hadn’t done what I did, Josie would have died.”

“I saw it as a miracle from God, Nash. I never thought you were strange. You lifted that water like it was nothing, and there she was, crawling her way along the bottom of the reservoir. You saved her life.”

“I can’t believe you saw me. I wish you had told me,” he said, smiling at her. “I felt alone during that time. I couldn’t tell everyone what was happening to me.”

“I’m sorry. I should have come to you. You were my friend, my dearest friend. I hated that we lost touch after I went to the convent.”

“Why did you go?” he asked. “You were one of the smartest people in school. Surely you had scholarship offers.”

“I wish that were true,” she said. “My parents were so poor at that time they didn’t even have the money to submit my college applications.

I knew that I needed to go to work and help support them.

But if I took a job, I wouldn't be able to support them and myself, and I needed to be out of the house, not another mouth to feed. The convent seemed logical.

"I was a devout Catholic. So were my family members. The convent allowed you to live there rent-free, and when I became a nun, all of my small salary went to my parents. It was enough for a while, then everything just crumbled."

"I'm sorry," he said, reaching for her hand again. He hovered above her, then pulled back, but this time, Jenna reached for him.

"We shouldn't be afraid to touch when we're old friends," she said. He nodded, smiling at her.

"I'm sorry about what happened to you, Jenna, but I'm so glad I've found you again. I've thought of you many times over the years."

"Same," she smiled. "I had a terrible crush on you when I was in high school."

"Why didn't you say something?" he asked.

"We were such friends, buddies almost. I didn't want to ruin that. All the girls wanted to date you, and they were so beautiful and dressed perfectly. I was the poor girl from the wrong side of the tracks."

"No. No, you weren't," he said, shaking his head. "You were my best friend, and I had a crush on you as well." He squeezed her hand, and she smiled, nodding at him.

"Funny how the world works, isn't it? All those missed opportunities for us, and look at us now."

"We're the same people, Jenna."

“No. No, I’m not,” she said. “What that man, those men, did to me left me a shell of myself. I’ll never be alright again. Never.”

Jenna left him sitting there alone. Alone except for a ghost.

“Give her time,” said Nathan.

Nash thought to himself, she can have all the time in the world.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

“What do you want to do now, Jenna?” asked Kari. “Your attackers are gone, and you can now do whatever you like. There’s a place for you here if you want to stay with us.”

“Thank you,” she nodded weakly. “I’m not sure what I want to do, to be honest with you.”

“That’s understandable,” said Bree. “If you had the opportunity after high school, what did you want to do?”

“Well, I wanted to be a teacher, and I did get my teaching degree. I was teaching at the convent’s school when – when the attack happened. Maybe I could do that again one day.”

“I can see where you’d make a wonderful teacher,” smiled Kat. “You’ve been a joy to work with here. You’re a special woman, Jenna.”

“Thank you. All of you have changed my life in so many ways.”

“What about Nash?” asked Kari carefully. She didn’t want to put any pressure on the woman, but they could all see that Nash was desperately in love with the woman he’d desired since ninth grade.

“Nash,” she whispered. “He’s such a good man. I want him to find happiness. He deserves that, but there can’t possibly be a woman good enough for him out there.”

The women all stared at one another and then looked back at Jenna. She had no clue

that he still had feelings for her.

“Jenna, Nash cares for you. Deeply,” said Georgie. “Maybe you could continue to heal here and perhaps rekindle that friendship with Nash.”

“Maybe,” she said quietly. “I’ve been thinking lately that maybe it’s time I went home for a while.”

“Isn’t all your family gone?” frowned Bree.

“Y-yes. I meant, go back to Arizona and find some closure. I left the day after I graduated from high school. I never returned. I went home when my family all died, but it was brief, and I came right back. Maybe going home will allow me to feel again. Feel something good.”

“It could be difficult, Jenna,” said Bree.

“I’m all for you going back to your childhood home but remember that this will bring up painful memories for you as well.

You’ll be seeing your old home if it’s still there.

Your old schools. Maybe even run into old friends. Are you sure you’re ready to do that?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m not sure of anything, to be honest with you. I just know that I can’t sit here and do nothing for much longer, or I’m going to lose my mind.”

“You’re not doing nothing,” said Georgie. “You’re healing. That’s all you should be doing.”

Jenna nodded, then looked at the group of women in front of her.

“Were you all raised here?” she asked.

“I was raised in New Orleans,” said Kari. “I met Pierre when he was sent to guard me before a trial.” She nodded and looked at Georgie.

“My father was part of the original security group, REAPER,” she said. “I was born in Virginia and then moved here.” She looked at Katrina.

“Oh, my father, Miguel, knew the team when they were in Virginia. They rescued me when my uncle kidnapped me. I’ve been around them my entire life, obviously falling in love with Nathan,” she smiled.

“I met the team when Steel Patriots was based in northern Virginia,” said Bree. “I was counseling Grace, and that’s when I met Doc.”

“Have you traveled?” she asked the group.

“We have,” nodded Kari. “We’ve been to several countries and, of course, sometimes travel for work.”

“What are you getting at?” asked Bree.

“I’ve never been anywhere other than my parents’ home and the convent. Now, here. That’s it. I’d bet you all dated, had other boyfriends, partners, that kind of thing. You had girlfriends, sleepovers, and parties. I haven’t had any of that.”

“We could do that here, Jenna,” whispered Bree, reaching for her hand.

“I know,” she nodded. “I’d like to see if there are any of the people that I knew from

high school still in Arizona.

Where have their lives taken them? Did they have children?

Are they even alive? I've been cut off from everything and everyone or lost them.

I just feel as though I need to connect again. ”

“You're sure?” asked Kari.

“I think so,” she nodded.

“You need to let us send someone with you,” said Kat. “We'd all feel much better.”

“No. I don't think...” Her voice trailed off as she looked out the window, seeing Nash standing in the grove.

“Ask him to go with you,” said Bree. “He'd go.”

“I'll think about it,” she said, smiling at them as she stood. “No matter what, I'll never forget what you all did for me. I haven't had a lot of exposure to female friends, but this is what I dreamed it would be like. I'll write to you all.”

Jenna turned and left the conference room, leaving the women to sit quietly for a long moment.

“I'm scared to death for her,” said Katrina.

“Same,” said Kari. “I wish there was a way to keep her here. I'm not sure she's ready to be out there alone.”



“Did you all know that she’s been at that same convent her entire adult life and never even drove to a major city? She only flew home for the funerals of her family members and flew back. That woman is about as green as you can get,” said Bree.

They watched as she walked toward Nash, stopping more than arm’s length away from him. She gave him a shaky smile, unable to actually look him in the face. He tried to smile at her, lowered himself to hopefully get her to look up at him, but no luck. She just stared down, speaking to him.

“I’ve never prayed so hard for a love match to happen since my own,” whispered Georgie. The other women nodded.

“Amen.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

“She’s going to leave,” said Nash, speaking to a few of the men on the team.

“Maybe,” said Ghost, standing with Kane.

“No. She is. She told me this morning that she was considering going back to Arizona for a while. She needed to visit the graves of her family and remember who she was.”

“You could go with her, Nash,” said Kane. “We’d provide whatever you need to go. You’ve got the trackers on you, the comms devices. You’d be safe.”

“I don’t think she wants me to go with her,” he said.

“Have you asked her?” smirked Ghost.

“No.”

“Ask her, stupid,” laughed Kane. “You never know what she might say. You’d at least know how she feels about things right now. But things could change in the future, Nash. She’s still healing.”

“She only sees me as a friend and protector,” he frowned.

“Right now. Right now, she sees you as a friend and protector, Nash. Give her some time to figure out her new normal. That woman has been through a helluva lot in the last few months. Brutally attacked, raped, and beaten.

“She reevaluated her life only to realize that being a nun wasn’t what she wanted at

all. That's a lot for anyone to take in, then realizing that another nun was placing her in danger had to have been the final blow for her."

"I'll see," he said, nodding.

"We support you no matter what, Nash. Figure it out."

He spotted Jenna going into the office buildings to speak with the legal team, and he wanted to run after her. Instead, he took a seat in the grove and waited.

"Good morning," smiled Nash as Jenna walked toward him.

"Good morning," she said tentatively. "It's a lovely day."

"Yes. Yes, it is."

There was an awkward silence between them, then they both spoke at the same time.

"Jenna."

"Nash."

They laughed, and Nash shook his head, waving a hand at her.

"You first, please."

"Nash, I've been speaking to the legal team and Bree. My case is basically closed now. All the men, those responsible, are gone now. Either dead or-or just gone."

"That's great. You're free to live a life now," he smiled. She nodded with a tentative grin.

“Yes. I think-I think I’m going to go home.”

“Home? To the convent?”

“No. To Arizona, as I mentioned to you earlier. I think I’m going to go back and try to close some old wounds and maybe relive some memories that I need. Good memories.”

“I-I see,” he said as pain overwhelmed his body.

“Will you walk with me? I need to pack some things and get ready to leave.”

“Yeah.Yeah, sure,” he nodded.

Every step caused him pain. The utter agony of her leaving him again, never to be seen again, or worse, risking that she would be harmed again. It was all too much for him.

Opening her cabin door, he stepped inside and took a seat at the bar.

“Nash, come on back while I pack my things,” she smiled.

He nodded as he walked toward the bedroom. She left the door wide open and opened the blinds to let the light filter into the room. He took a seat in the large armchair and watched as she pulled out the suitcase and began packing.

She spoke about random things, nothing that made any sense at all to Nash. He could tell she was nervous, rambling about nothing. Finally, he couldn’t hold it any longer.

“I’m worried about you traveling by yourself,” said Nash, looking at Jenna as she packed her bags. “The drive from here to Arizona isn’t safe. You’ll be traveling

through some pretty remote areas.”

“Nash, I know. I’m from there, remember?” she smiled.

“Yeah. I remember,” he said calmly.

“Listen, I’m not happy about this either.

I’m scared to death that I’ll get lost or break down out there.

I’m terrified that any friends I once had are gone, except for you.

” She turned to look at him, leaving the packing for a moment.

“So, yes. I’m terrified, and I don’t know what to do about it because I have to do this.  
”

“I could go with you,” he said in a barely audible voice.

“What?”

“I said,” he said, raising his voice and clearing his throat, “I could go with you. We could share a hotel room, two beds obviously, but I’ll be there to protect you. If you need time alone, I’ll be happy to give that to you, but I won’t be far away. I’d be there to protect you, Jenna.”

“Why? Why would you do that? Why would you leave your friends and family for me? You have a life here, Nash. You have a job and all these people that count on you. Why on earth would you be willing to drive all the way to Arizona with me?” she asked.

Because I love you! Because you're the woman I've always waited for! Because you're amazing!

“Because we're friends, and that's what friends do.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

“She said yes,” said Nash, walking into the offices. Nine, Ghost, Gaspar, Ian, and Kane were sitting around a table laughing. They all turned and stared at him.

“She said yes. She wants me to go with her. I’m going. I have to,” he said, staring at them.

“Brother, we support that,” said Ian. “Maybe the two of you can figure out where you belong. Together. Or...”

“Don’t say it,” said Nash, shaking his head. “Don’t even put that thought into the universe. It has to be together.”

“You really love this woman?” asked Gaspar.

“When you first saw your wives, what went through your minds?” he asked.

“Maybe not a good question for us,” said Ian. “All of us met our wives after they’d been attacked, beaten, or were being stalked. But once the saving and protecting part was done, I remember looking at Faith and thinking I’d never be able to live without her.”

“Same,” nodded Gaspar. “Alexandra was a mess after the attack. She looked nothing like what you see today. I sat by that hospital bed for days, then brought her here. Before I knew it, I realized that I would never be able to leave her side. Never.”

“It was the same for me as well,” said Ghost. “Grace stumbled into our clubhouse property, beaten, starved, and absolutely cracking my heart.”

“I was sent into a remote village to rescue who I thought was a male doctor,” smirked Nine. “Best fucking snafu ever. I knew right away that I wouldn’t be able to walk away from her.”

“You already know my story with Aislinn,” smiled Kane. “Why are you asking this?”

“On that last day of high school, I planned on asking Jenna to marry me. We were kids. Just eighteen years old,” he said, shaking his head.

“I knew I loved her. I knew she was kind, beautiful, sweet, intelligent, everything I wanted in my life. When I left the house that morning, I told my father what I was planning.”

“What did he say?” asked Kane.

“He said that I should reconsider. I wasn’t being fair to Jenna by marrying her and then being deployed somewhere, leaving her all alone to fend for herself. He said there was all the time in the world, which turned out to be a lie.”

“Surely you understand what he meant, right?” asked Nine.

“I do. Now, I do. But I’m trying to tell you that I loved her then, and I love her now. There’s a reason I never married or had a long-term partner, and it had nothing to do with that fucking pink dust. I just knew that Jenna was the only woman meant for me.”

The five men smiled at him, nodding. They knew how he felt and more than happy that he was going to pursue the woman. Except she wasn’t exactly in the frame of mind to be pursued.

“She’s going to be skittish as shit, brother. Victims of sexual assault can’t just jump



into a relationship. Their counseling actually tells them not to do that,” said Ghost. He nodded.

“I know. I know that it might not work out. I know she might wake up one morning and run for the hills. Hell, we might get to Arizona, and she could turn to me and say thank you, adios. But I have to try.”

“Then try,” smiled Kane. “But. All the bells and whistles need to be on. We’ll have eyes on you and her the entire time.”

“Actually,” said Nash, “I came here hoping that maybe you could send two guys to follow us. Just for a while. I don’t want her to know. I’ve got a feeling that something is wrong, but I don’t know what it is.”

“If you got a feeling,” said Nine, “then follow that damn feeling. We understand instincts better than anyone, and they’re rarely wrong.”

“Are you sure you don’t want us to send a few guys with both of you? They can stay in another hotel, but then she’d know they were there,” said Kane.

“No. She seems determined to do this but doesn’t want a lot of people around her. I don’t know. She’s still very quiet about it all.”

“We’re here if you need us,” said Nine. He looked at the others, nodding, and then turned to Gaspar. “Who do we send to follow?”

“Well, my brothers are fucking driving me crazy again,” he smirked. “Let’s send Luc and Antoine. I’m sure their wives will thank me for giving them a break.”

“I appreciate this more than you know,” said Nash.

“Brother, it’s what we do. Just win that woman’s heart and bring her home,” said Ghost. Nash nodded and left the room, promising to send all their details soon.

“If she can’t get past this, she’s going to crush his soul. I always knew that Nash was holding back, and now I know why,” said Kane.

“Well, hopefully, she’ll be able to move on with her life,” said Gaspar. “She won’t ever forget it, but she can make a life for herself with him. We’ve got a whole lot of women who have done exactly that.”

They looked at Kane, a frowning, pained look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” asked Ian.

“I don’t know. He said he felt like something was wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. Nash is never wrong. None of us is ever wrong.”

“Maybe we should ask the tech boys to dig in a bit on the area. They can see if there’s any criminal activity happening in the desert, other than the usual, that we need to warn them about.” Gaspar nodded.

“Do it. We want them both to come home in one piece. Well, two pieces, but happy to live as one. You know what I fucking mean.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

“The duffel has a false bottom to it,” said Sly. “I’ve taken the liberty of loading you up with our latest toys.”

“I love you guys,” smiled Nash.

“Four weapons, ammo, knives, comms devices, all of it. You can even go through security if you need to, and it won’t be found. Your stealth netting vest is in there as well. We’ve tested your comms device, and it’s functioning, along with the GPS attachments. There’s also a GPS tag on the SUV.”

“What about Jenna?” asked Nash.

“She refused, brother. We wanted to give her a tracking tag when she arrived, and she refused. I voted to do it without her knowing it.”

“You were going to inject her tag without her knowing?”

“No,” said Sly, shaking his head. “I was going to give her a bracelet that had tracking software in it. It’s much classier than tagging someone without their permission.”

Nash laughed at the man, shaking his head as he looked at all the things in the bottom of the duffel. From the outside, it just looked like a regular duffel bag. But when you lifted the clothing out of it and pulled the bottom, it was remarkable how much space was in there.

“You good?” asked Sly.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Do you ever just get that feeling that something isn’t right, Sly?”

“All the damn time,” he mumbled. “Part of it is I worry constantly that my cancer will return. It’s been more than thirty years, and I still get scared every time I feel tired or get a cold. It’s ridiculous, really, but I can’t help it.

“Top that with me worrying about my beautiful wife, Suzette. I worry about my teammates and their families, all of it. I’m the guy constantly looking for threats, and it’s exhausting because I usually find one.”

“Sly, I hate to ask this,” started Nash.

“You can stop there,” he smiled. “I’m already looking into things in the area and trying to find any background information on Jenna’s family. It seems strange that they all died within a few years of one another.”

“I never said that, but I damn sure thought it,” he frowned. “It seemed too much of a coincidence. I’m sure I sound paranoid, but I just can’t shake that feeling.”

“Did you meet her family?” asked Sly.

“I knew who her parents were. She introduced me to them once at a school function of some sort. They’d come to pick her up early. Some emergency at home or something.”

“What kind of emergency?”

“I honestly don’t know. I guess I’m going to have about fifteen hundred miles to figure it out and hopefully get her to talk to me.”

“Her full name is Jenna Brooks, right?” Nash nodded at the man. “Was she born and raised in Arizona?”

“As far as I know. Again, it’s not something we ever spoke about.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll figure it all out for you. Just watch your back, Nash. We wouldn’t want to lose either of you.”

“I promise,” he nodded.

“Oh, and Nash? Come home soon.” He smiled at Sly, leaving with the duffel slung over his shoulder.

Standing at the SUV, Jenna was hugging the legal and medical teams, Mama Irene shoving bags of food and coolers into the back of the SUV.

“Mama Irene, we’ll stop for food,” he said, looking at the tiny woman.

“You won’t be stoppin’ for no trashy roadside food,” she said. “George, me, Claudette, and Ruby put together enough food to last you a few days. You gotta stop and eat.”

“We will, Mama Irene,” smiled Jenna.

“Mama, let them go. They need to get on the road,” said Claudette. Irene nodded, walking toward Jenna and opening her arms.

“You do what you need to do to get your spirit right, child. Then you come home where you belong and make a life with us, your family, right here.”

“Oh, Mama Irene,” she sniffed, hugging her. “I wish I’d met you years ago when I

really needed guidance. Heck, I need guidance now, I suppose.”

“Just do what Nash tells you, and you’ll be safe,” she said to the woman. “He’s a good man, Jenna. A great man.”

“I know,” she nodded. “He’s a good friend.”

Nash heard that word again and cringed, wondering if he’d ever be thought of as something more than just a friend. He knew that Jenna was still suffering from her wounds, internally and externally, but that word really sent panic through him.

“Nash, you come home, honey,” she said, hugging him.

“I will, Mama Irene. I promise,” he smiled.

He knew that if he couldn’t convince Jenna to return with him, he’d come back. He was already missing Kane and their team. The connection they all shared wasn’t just mental, it was physical. When they were separated, it felt as though they were missing a piece of themselves.

“Ready?” he asked Jenna.

She nodded, nibbling her bottom lip with a look of doubt.

“Jenna, we can wait. We could hold off for a few days, and you could think about it,” he said, hoping she’d say yes.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, it’s okay. I want to do this. I need to do this. I can feel it in my soul that there’s something I have to get settled.”

“Alright, then. Let’s get your soul settled,” he smiled.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

They weren't on the road more than an hour when Nash looked at the passenger seat to see that Jenna was sound asleep. Her mouth was slightly open, her soft breathing causing him to smile. He reached over and gently pulled her sweater up around her, careful not to touch her skin.

She still had the soft brown hair, now sprinkled with a few gray and white hairs.

But her skin was smooth, wrinkle-free and, not surprisingly, makeup-free.

Her nails were neatly trimmed and filed with the palest pink polish he'd ever seen.

He couldn't help but smile at that, realizing that it was probably the first manicure she'd ever had.

Knowing they would have to split the drive into two days, he targeted a halfway point somewhere near Sweetwater, Texas. By the time they hit Tyler, Texas, she was still sleeping, and Nash was starting to become concerned.

Pulling into a large gas station for fuel and a rest stop, she moved as the vehicle was stopped.

"Wh-where are we?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"Tyler," he smiled. "You've been asleep for about four hours. I wouldn't have stopped, but I need to use the bathroom, and we need gas."

"Four hours! Nash, you should have woken me. I didn't mean to sleep that long."

“You needed it,” he smiled. “Come on. We’ll go in together.”

He realized immediately that she was nervous seeing all the travelers and truckers inside the rest stop. He nodded toward the women’s restroom and then went to the men’s. He rushed his own business just to make sure he was outside the ladies’ room before she came out.

Sure enough, a few moments later, she emerged with her hair pulled back from her face and a more relaxed expression.

“All okay?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you. There was a nice lady in there that had a disposable facecloth I could use. I feel slightly more human now. Is there something here to eat?”

“Well, Mama Irene and Claudette made some things for us, but it’s mostly snacks. It looks like they serve sandwiches, burgers, and breakfast items. We’re sort of halfway through breakfast on our way to lunch,” he chuckled. “Your choice.”

“The bacon smells divine,” she said with a smile. “Maybe an egg and bacon sandwich, hot coffee, and I’ll grab some terrible snacks to go.”

“Perfect. I’ll order while you do that.”

Nash placed the order and then watched as Jenna made her way up and down the rows, filling the small plastic basket. By the time she was done, the sandwiches were ready, the coffee in two styrofoam cups, and the pump to the SUV kicked off because it was finally full.

“Is this all?” asked the young man at the register.



“I think this is enough for a while,” smirked Nash. Leaving with a large brown paper sack, they got back into their car and on the road.

“Will we drive straight through?” she asked.

“No. It’s too dangerous for me. I need to rest before driving more than ten or eleven hours.”

“I could drive.”

“I know you can,” he said, smiling at her, “but my alpha male ways would cause me to still remain awake, worried you might need me. I’m afraid it’s the curse of men like me.”

“Good men,” she whispered.

“I hope so,” nodded Nash. “I’d like to think of myself as a good man. I’ve tried to be. It hasn’t always worked out that way, but I protect those I care for, and I don’t hurt the innocent.”

“When you were a Marine—”

“I’m always a Marine,” he grinned. “I am a Marine.”

“Okay,” she grinned. “When you were serving overseas, you were in active war zones, right?”

“I was.”

“So, you killed people, right?” He stared at her for a brief moment, then looked back toward the road and nodded.

“I did. But it was only those who deserved to die. Those who had killed innocent people. I tried to stick by that rule, but sometimes, well, sometimes in war, innocents get hurt.”

She was quiet for a long moment, and Nash just knew that this had changed their relationship.

“What did it feel like?” she asked.

“War?”

“No, killing someone who deserved it.”

“I see,” he said, his arm resting on the doorframe, his fist leaning against his jaw. He took a deep breath, readying himself for what he would say.

“You think it will make you feel better. That you’ll feel justified for what you’ve done, and I suppose, in some instances, it did.

Like, this time an Afghan warlord had taken all these young girls from a school and was going to give the girls to his men as wives.

They were between the ages of twelve and fifteen. ”

“Oh, my,” she whispered.

“Yeah. I didn’t regret that at all. I didn’t shoot him, but I damn sure created enough rain that it filled the ditch he was hiding in and drowned him. But it didn’t save the girls. His men had already taken them, and they were killed before our unit could arrive.”

“I’m so sorry, Nash. But you tried. You did your best,” she said innocently.

“I guess that I did. I mean, I know the entire unit did what we could, but it still wasn’t enough.

When you’re a Marine or any service member, you take orders from those who often are nowhere near the action.

They’re sitting in some situation room or war room calling the shots, and they see nothing.

“As a man with a conscience, there were times that I questioned their orders and was concerned that they were in contradiction to the situation.”

“What did you do?”

“Sometimes, I followed them anyway. Other times, I walked away. It never mattered because there was always someone willing to follow the order and make the kill.”

Jenna was quiet as a mouse, staring through the windshield at the hot asphalt of Texas.

“Jenna? Why did you ask me that?”

“I wish – I wish that I could have killed those men myself. I know that I wouldn’t know how, and I know that I wouldn’t have been brave enough. But I keep thinking that if I had, it would make me feel better.”

“It wouldn’t,” he said directly. “Trust me in this, Jenna. It wouldn’t have made you feel any better.”

“I keep having these dreams of men coming for me and my sisters. It’s silly, really. They’ve been gone a long time. My mother isn’t in the dream, but my father is, and he just says it can’t be helped. What do you think that means?”

“I’m not sure. It would be something that Irene might know, or maybe Noah or Julia. They’re very tied to our ghosts but also to other spirits.” She yawned, and Nash smiled at her.

“Go back to sleep. I’m not tired at all. You obviously need the rest, and the car is relaxing you enough to sleep. I’ll wake you when we stop again.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, yawning once again.

“Positive.” She gave a soft nod, closing her eyes as she reclined the seat.

“You’re a good man, Nash.” Her eyes closed, and she drifted off to sleep. Nash could only shake his head.

“Yeah. I’m a good man. I just hope you figure out that I’m a good man and much more.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

By six, they were well past Dallas and in Abilene.

“Are we stopping here?” she asked.

“I thought we might since it’s a bigger city, but there’s a huge rodeo and horse show happening, and all the hotels are taken. Sly has found a room for us at a smaller hotel in Sweetwater.”

“It sounds like a nice place,” she smiled.

“It’s not very big, but it has some decent small hotel chains. We’ll grab a room and get something to eat.”

After securing a room with two double beds, the last one available at the hotel, they showered off, changed their clothes, and headed out to find something to eat. It was Texas, so the options were steak, barbecue, ribs, or more steak.

It turned out that steak was what you should eat in Abilene, Texas. The cuts of meat were so large even Nash wasn’t sure he could eat the whole thing.

Finally full beyond what was surely healthy for them, they walked back down the road to their hotel.

“Hey, look at that,” said Jenna. “The WASP WWII Museum. They were women in the military, right?”

“They were,” he smiled. “Women’s Airforce Service Pilots.

They were incredibly brave women doing the jobs of men because there were none here to do it.

They were all serving overseas. They would test planes, flying them from one location to another and interacting in maneuvers to prove the planes were flight-worthy.

Or they would fly a group of planes across the country to be sent to the men serving in WWII. ”

“That’s amazing. How unbelievably brave they were,” she smiled.

“It looks like it’s closed, but maybe we could visit if we come back through this way,” he said hopefully.

“Yeah. Yeah, maybe,” she nodded sadly. “I mean, I’m not sure I’ll come back this way.”

“I didn’t mean to imply anything, Jenna. Just know that I’m always willing to be your tour guide.”

Jenna said nothing as they continued toward the hotel. Once inside the room, he allowed her to change into her nightclothes first and crawl into her bed. He locked the door, then lay a pistol beside her.

“If anyone knocks, you pick that up and come and get me.”

“But you’ll be in the shower,” she frowned.

“I don’t care, Jenna. If you need me, you open that door and barge in. I’ll be there before you know it. I don’t want you scared.”

“It’s funny,” she mused as he gathered his change of clothing, “I don’t think I’ve been scared much at all since you’ve been with me.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Nash showered as quickly as he could, happy to be clean of the road dust and in clean clothing. When he opened the door, it wasn’t a surprise to find Jenna sound asleep, the television flickering in the room.

He turned the television off, cut off the lights, and crawled between his own sheets. Quickly, he sent a text to the team in Louisiana to let them know everything was fine. He knew they were tracking him, but sending a text was always preferred.

“Antoine and Luc are down the road in another hotel but can be there in minutes if you need them. Don’t worry, Nash. We’ve got you both.”

He texted back a thank you, then lay on his side, facing the sleeping Jenna. He watched her for what felt like hours, not recalling when or how he closed his eyes.

Shocked to jerk awake the next morning, light filtering into the room, he wasn’t shocked to see Jenna still sound asleep. It was as if she were catching up on twenty years of sleep.

As quietly as possible, he gathered his things and changed his clothing in the bathroom. When he emerged, she was waiting patiently for her turn.

“You’re awake,” he smiled.

“Yes. I seem to be sleeping more than usual,” she frowned.

“I think that’s a good sign,” he laughed. “You’re relaxed, you’re healing, and you’re

safe.”

“Maybe. Or maybe there’s something wrong with me,” she frowned.

“Hey,” he said, slowly moving toward her. He raised his hands, placing them gently on her shoulders. She didn’t flinch, didn’t move, and he took that as a great sign.

“You’re not sick. There’s nothing wrong with you. Trauma takes its toll on the body, Jenna. Give yourself some grace, and you’ll be just fine.”

“Thank you, Nash.”

With their things packed in the car once again, breakfast done, and the car filled with gas, they were on their way to Arizona. It was going to be another scorcher of a day.

The stretch of highway between Sweetwater and Arizona was long, straight, empty, and way too open for Nash’s liking. With Jenna asleep once again, he was able to tap into comms and communicate with Antoine and Luc.

“There’s nothing out here, brother. We’re about four miles behind you, but there is nothing between us and you. You’re all good. Just get to Arizona, and we can all rest for a few days.”

“Nash, this is Code. I’ve been trying to get some background information on Jenna and her family to be sure we’re not missing any living relatives.”

“Okay. And what did you find?”

“Brother, was her father’s last name the same as hers?”

“As far as I know,” he said with a puzzled expression.



“She never mentioned anything different. I understood his name to be John Brooks. I think her mother’s name was Mary.

The sisters’ names were Jeannie, Jillian, and Jari.

She didn’t say what happened to Jeannie, but Jillian was killed by a drunk driver, and Jari died of a stroke. ”

“I’m not finding that at all, Nash. Jeannie Brooks was found dead in the desert, stripped, and two bullets placed in her forehead.

Jillian was killed in a head-on collision with a tow truck.

The driver was never found. Jari didn’t die of a stroke.

She had a massive heart attack due to a chemical ingestion. It doesn’t say of what.”

“None of that makes any sense. She never told me how her parents died, just that they were long gone.”

“ That’s the other thing. I can’t find any trace of them, living or dead. I don’t find a marriage record or a death record.”

“Shit,” muttered Nash.

“Are you cool with me continuing, Nash?”

“Yeah. I’m cool with that.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

As the sun set over the desert horizon of Arizona, Nash directed the car toward their home for what he hoped would be only a few days. The resort was lovely, with a two-bedroom suite all to themselves, swimming pool, and much more.

“This is so nice!” she exclaimed.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “The boys back home made sure we were taken care of. Let’s drop our bags and have dinner here. Sound good?”

“Perfect,” she smiled.

Nash hadn’t heard anything else from the team back home, but he was damn sure itching to learn what they’d found.

The restaurant downstairs was relatively quiet, with a few people enjoying their evening meal. Most tourists don’t visit Arizona in the summer. They waited until a slightly less hellish heat was upon them to visit the desert, Native American sites, monuments, and beautiful scenery.

“It all looks so wonderful!” said Jenna. “What are you having? Nash?”

“Oh, sorry. I’m a bit distracted, that’s all. I think I’ll have the seafood pasta.”

“In Arizona?” she chuckled. “Maybe go with the side of the menu featuring Mexican dishes. If I remember right, it was always delicious here.”

After ordering, Nash took it upon himself to prod a little bit further into Jenna’s

background.

“You know, I don’t think I ever asked if you and your family were from here originally,” he said. “You know that I wasn’t. My family was transferred here.”

“Oh, no. I think my parents were from the Northeast, New Jersey. I mean, that’s where they moved to Arizona from.

That’s strange, isn’t it? I never really asked them much about it.

Actually, that’s not true. I had to do a family tree one year in school, and my parents couldn’t give me a lot of information about their families. ”

“Why not?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said, shrugging. “They just said it wasn’t something they felt was important.

They’d met, fell in love, and left New Jersey.

I came along almost right away. Then, there was quite a gap between me and my sisters.

I was almost five years older than Jeannie and eight years older than the twins. ”

“I’m glad you had them,” he smiled.

“I suppose. I always felt like a second mother to them,” she said, frowning.

“I didn’t really think much of that before.

Not until I came to Belle Fleur. I've watched how all the siblings behave with one another there, and it was really different than what I was used to.

My sisters looked at me more as a surrogate mother.

"We looked nothing alike. I mean, all of the Robicheauxs look as if they were cut from the same cloth. I had this light brown hair, blue eyes, and medium build. They were all dark hair, dark eyes, and a little more full-figured."

"Why do you suppose that was? I mean, looks could be a lot of different factors, but why do you think you felt more like a surrogate mom?"

"I'm really not sure. My mom and dad were gone a lot, working several jobs at a time. Sometimes, they were gone for several days at a time, and I had to get the girls ready for school, make sure they had lunches, that sort of thing."

"How old were you?" he frowned.

"I guess between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. I felt guilty about leaving for the convent because I knew they would have no one to take care of the girls. But they weren't upset about it. Not really that I saw, anyway."

"That's a lot of responsibility for a young girl," he said, smiling at her. "I always knew you were special."

She nodded at him, tilting her head, staring at him. Pushing her food around on the plate, she set the fork down and looked up once again.

"What's wrong?" she whispered. "Why are you suddenly asking me all of these questions?"

“There’s no big reason, Jenna.”

“There must be a reason, Nash. I’m not a stupid woman. We’ve known one another a long time, and you’ve never been interested in my family history before. Why now?”

“Jenna, the boys back home were trying to see if they could find any living family for you. Perhaps an aunt or maybe the spouses of your sisters, maybe even children they had.”

“That was nice of them,” she smiled, “but I could have saved them the trouble. There’s no one. I’m not really sure what happened to their husbands, and they never had any children.”

“Maybe there’s no one,” he said. “Honey, they can’t find any death record, marriage record, nothing for John or Mary Brooks.”

“Well, that’s just silly. I know they were married.”

“I’m sure they were,” he said calmly. “It’s just that there’s nothing on their deaths.”

“Nash, I went to their funerals. They died after my sisters. I was there!” she said with a raised voice. He nodded, holding up his hands and waving for her to lower her voice as people stared at them. “Sorry. I was there for the funeral.”

“Listen to me. I don’t want to hurt you.

I don’t want you to get upset. Your sisters?

They died suspiciously, honey. Jeannie Brooks, no married names for any of your sisters, by the way, was found dead in the desert, stripped with two bullets placed in her forehead.

Jillian was killed in a head-on collision with a tow truck, and the driver was never found or tried.

Jari didn't die of a stroke, honey. She had a massive heart attack due to a chemical ingestion. ”

Jenna's face turned an ashy gray color, and she shook her head, pushing her plate aside. She stared down at her hands in her lap.

“Jenna? Jenna, look at me,” prompted Nash. “Jenna?”

“I hear you,” she whispered. “Secrets. There were always secrets in our house. Ridiculous, stupid secrets. Daddy has a job to go to, Jenna, watch the children. Daddy has another job, Jenna. We'll be gone a few days.

Jenna, Jeannie died. We'll have the funeral in three days.

Always secrets about the what, why, when, and how.

And I was the obedient little daughter, the nun, who never pushed. ”

“Honey, we don't know anything yet. We're just trying to help you find some closure. We can stop if you want. We can stop right now and return to Belle Fleur.”

“No. No, we're going to continue. We're going to continue, and we're going to find out the truth about my family even if I have to dig up every damn corpse.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

“What’s happening, Code?” asked Ghost.

“I’m not sure. We’re not sure,” he said, nodding at Sly and Ace. “This is the weirdest shit ever. We thought we’d be helping Nash and Jenna by trying to find some family that might still be living, aunts or uncles, something. As it turns out, we’ve turned over fucking family secrets.”

“No family?” frowned Ian.

“Not only no family, but the Brooks family seems to be non-existent. John and Mary Brooks do not exist. I can’t find a death notice, death certificate, hospitalizations, nothing.”

“If you’re finding nothing, that makes me worried,” said Ghost.

“It’s not just that,” said Ace. “It’s the sisters all dying under mysterious circumstances. Jeannie stripped and two bullets in the forehead. What does that sound like?”

“A gang or mob hit,” frowned Ian. Ace nodded.

“Jillian hit head-on by a tow truck. No witnesses on a busy road at 1900 on a Tuesday evening.”

“How is that possible? There must have been dozens of cars around the area.”

“No one saw a thing,” frowned Code. “Then we have Jari. Chemically induced heart

attack.”

“What does that mean?” asked Ghost.

“That means she was given enough amphetamines to kill four bull elephants. It was estimated at the time of her death that her heart rate was almost three hundred beats a minute.”

“Jesus,” muttered Ian. “These women were murdered, and if they were murdered, chances are the parents were as well.”

“And if that’s true,” said Ace, “Jenna is in danger. Think about it. What if the attack by the Flaming Skulls wasn’t random at all.”

“But I thought they were pissed because she was helping those young women escaping from their club,” said Ghost. “How could that be random?”

“I don’t know,” said Ace, shaking his head, looking at Code and Sly. “We don’t know. What we do know is that this all feels very, very wrong. I think we need to make sure that Antoine and Luc are really close. Maybe not even in hiding any longer.”

“What are they doing today?” asked Ian.

“They’re going to her childhood home if it’s still there. It was a small modular home, not quite a mobile home but similar.”

“Have them stay close just in case. Nash has skills that none of us have,” said Ghost.

“Yeah, but he’s in the desert. Not exactly a hotbed of water resources to help him,” said Code. Ian stared at the group as Sly whispered to his co-workers. Code looked at



Ian and Ghost. “We have a problem.”

“Fuck.”

“There. There it is,” said Jenna, pointing to the nearly crumbling home.

Nash was so shocked by what he saw he almost gasped aloud. The rusted metal building barely stood. Weeds, trees, debris, and other materials were scattered around the yard, clearly no one taking care of the place. The question was, why was it still standing?

The neighborhood had grown up around it, now filled with lovely ranch-style homes, playgrounds, and a school just down the block.

“Wow, it’s changed so much,” she frowned. “I guess this is the first time you’ve ever seen my home.”

“It is,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I knew I was one of the poor kids, but I didn’t think much about it back then. I had a few girlfriends that would come over now and then, but honestly, I didn’t do a lot of things with other girls. You were the only person that I knew who I didn’t want to see all of this.”

“Jenna, I wouldn’t have cared,” he said, reaching across the console, his fingers touching hers. She didn’t jerk away, which, in his eyes, was an improvement.

“Why wouldn’t they have torn this down?” she asked. “Look how lovely this neighborhood is. Surely, someone would have taken this down and bought the land. If nothing else, it’s worth something.”

“It’s a great question,” he said, opening the door. “Stay behind me, okay?” She nodded, more than willing to let him discover the snakes or scorpions first.

Testing the door, Nash was surprised to find it unlocked. That only made his protective senses rise again, worried that there could be vagrants, drug users, anyone on the inside. Pushing the door open, the stifling Arizona heat blasted them in the face.

Adjusting their eyes to the darkness, he pulled on the cord of the blinds at the front window and was greeted by forty-year-old furniture covered in dust. There was at least one roof leak, giving off the smell of dampness and mildew, possibly mold.

“We need to open the back door so there’s air coming through here,” he said. “I don’t want you to get sick from anything in here.”

“You would get sick as well, Nash.” She looked around and shook her head. “It’s so sad to see this.”

“Memories can be tough,” he said.

“It’s not that. Minus the smell and the dirt, it looks exactly the same. Nothing has been moved or changed since the day that I left. I didn’t realize how poor we were.”

“Nash? I think you need to get out of there. I’m picking up on security cameras in that house. Why would there be fucking security cameras in that piece of shit?”

“We have to go,” said Nash, reaching for her hand. He didn’t care if she tried to pull away. He wasn’t going to let her go.

“Why? Wait! Nash, I want to check out the other rooms,” she said, pulling on him.

“No! Jenna, there are cameras in this place. Someone had security cameras in a fifty-year-old manufactured home that’s falling apart. Why? Why the fuck would that be?”

“I-I don’t know,” she said, looking around.

“Let’s go.”

She willingly followed him out of the home, only to see another SUV parked at the end of the driveway. He was more than happy to see that it was Antoine and Luc.

“Go,” said Luc. “There are two cars coming into the neighborhood. Go!”

Nash took off toward the back side of the neighborhood, leaving Antoine and Luc behind him. When they were safely back on the main roads, he kept checking his rear-view mirror, then got the all-clear from Luc.

“What just happened?” asked Jenna. “Why were Antoine and Luc here?”

“I’ll explain everything,” said Nash. “Let’s go somewhere that we can sit and have lunch. I’m sure the two of them will join us.”

“Fine. But I think I deserve an explanation as to why you wouldn’t allow me to at least see the rest of my childhood home.” He nodded, frowning at her.

“There might be explanations needed all around.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

Nash found a small Mexican restaurant off the main roads and out of view. When Luc and Antoine walked in behind them, neither was surprised to see the other.

After taking their seats and ordering food, Jenna stared at the three men.

“What is going on?”

“Jenna, Nash told you earlier that we’ve been concerned about the ways in which your family died. We had trouble finding your parents’ death certificates or any sign that they had indeed died.”

“I told Nash that I was at their funerals. They died literally within days of one another.”

“Did you see their bodies?” asked Antoine. She looked at him and shook her head. “You didn’t because it was a closed casket. It was closed intentionally because of the brutality of their deaths.”

“Wh-what?” she whispered.

“Jenna, have you ever heard the name Genevieve St. Martine?”

“No. Was she someone in history? Someone famous?” she asked innocently.

“Yes, sort of,” said Luc. “Genevieve St. Martine was the infant daughter of Claudia and Jacques St. Martine. Jacques was a very well-known French businessman, often dealing in things that weren’t exactly legitimate.”

“I see,” she frowned.

“When Genevieve was just nine months old, she was kidnapped while in the park with her nanny outside of Paris. The nanny was murdered, and the child was taken, never to be seen or heard from again.”

“That’s terrible,” she frowned.

“It is terrible. The police in France and here in the U.S. all believed it was an act of vengeance from another family. The Ciprianis.”

“That name sounds familiar,” she said, looking at the men. Nash nodded at her.

“The Cipriani family is one of the most brutal mob families in Italy and have businesses on the East Coast. They’re known for their illegal activity of all kinds.

They had a vendetta against St. Martine because he turned over evidence to Interpol that cost them billions of dollars and the incarceration of two very important people in their operations. ”

“It all sounds very sordid,” she said. “But what does this have to do with me?”

“Jenna, when you were in our clinic, we did a number of tests on you. They were all routine bloodwork, x-rays, that sort of thing.”

“I remember,” she said softly.

“Our team realized today that you are Genevieve St. Martine. Your DNA and blood match identically. There’s no other option,” said Luc. She stared at them, then started laughing.

“You’re joking,” she smiled. When they didn’t smile back, she sobered. “Y-you’re joking. That’s not possible.”

“Jenna, we believe that the people you thought were your parents were, in fact, working for Cipriani. You were always going to be used as leverage between the families.”

“B-but why let me go to the convent?”

“It’s possible that the people acting as your parents didn’t want any harm to come to you and thought the convent would be safe for you. Your sisters were, in fact, blood-related, but there is no way that you were born of the same parents.”

“I don’t understand any of this. I’m not related to them. I didn’t have three sisters?”

“They were your sisters, in a manner of speaking. You were raised with them, but they weren’t your biological sisters.”

“What about my parents, the people who raised me? Did they really die?”

“The boys back home did some research once they figured out who you really are. A couple fitting the description of your parents were found on the edge of the mountains outside of Tucson. It looked like they were hiking toward Mexico.

“Their death was brutal, Jenna. Not something anyone would want to see, which is why the casket was closed. Their fingerprints matched those of two people who were believed to be employed by the Cipriani family. Victor and Angela Portello. Who else was at their funeral if your sisters had already died?”

“Me. A few people who said they were neighbors. I didn’t really remember them. There were two men who said they worked with my dad. That was about it.” She

stared at their faces and realized what they were telling her. They were waiting to see if she showed up at the funeral.

“Did anyone speak to you?” asked Nash.

“The priest. He said he was sorry for my loss. The others just stood there. I walked around and asked who they were. I mean, I’d been gone for so long I had no idea who those people were.

But if I’m this lost baby, this kidnapped baby, why not take me, hurt me, bring me home, or whatever they were trying to do? ”

“We’re not sure, Jenna,” said Antoine. “They obviously didn’t want to harm you, or they would have. Let the team back home continue to dig into this, and we’ll find out what happened here.”

“What happened?” she said, staring at them.

“Are you kidding me right now? You just told me that I’m the long-lost kidnapped child of some French businessman who apparently was doing all kinds of illegal things.

Raised by two people hired by my kidnappers, guilted into a life of service at the convent, and now I’m potentially a target as well. I didn’t miss that innuendo, right?”

“No. You didn’t miss that innuendo,” said Nash.

“I want to go back to the house,” she said.

“Jenna, there were cameras at that house, and no doubt someone is there now waiting for us,” said Antoine.

“Why on earth would someone wait forty years for me to return to that house? You are not making any sense at all,” she said with frustration.

“That’s what we need to find out.”



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

“Are you fucking with me right now?” said Gaspar. “Jacques St. Martine.”

“DNA doesn’t lie,” said Ace. “She’s an exact match for the missing child.

We think, but don’t have the proof yet, that the Ciprianis paid the couple to watch the baby.

Somewhere along the way, they fell in love and had three children of their own or could have been married before, making it a believable family.

Maybe they thought she would be safe in the convent, or maybe that was part of the plan all along. ”

“Did they tell her?” asked Nine.

“They did. She’s confused, angry, somewhat disbelieving, but they’re headed back to the house. She refused to go back to the hotel. She said if there was someone there waiting for them, she wanted to speak to them.”

“Damn,” muttered Ghost. “Well, she’s got Nash, Luc, and Antoine with her. Hopefully, that will be enough manpower if someone is waiting for them. Can you fuck with the cameras?”

“Already done,” said Ace. “They were just cheap cameras bought off the internet. There is something else we need to be concerned about. It was always rumored that one of the reasons the St. Martine baby was kidnapped was because she held the secret to something.”

“An infant? What kind of shit would she have the secret to? It makes no sense at all.”

“I don’t know,” said Ace. “We know that St. Martine and Cipriani had been in a trade and turf war for a while. They were both shipping drugs in and out of Africa and South Africa when one of Cipriani’s planes went down, killing his only brother on board and losing almost twelve million in drugs.”

“I remember that,” said Ghost. “We were actually in Nigeria at the time, and everyone was worried that it would create an all-out drug war in the area.”

“It almost did. Interpol, French police, everyone was panicked about how it would all play out. Then, St. Martine’s infant daughter was kidnapped, and everything stopped. St. Martine’s businesses were suddenly legitimate only, and Cipriani was handling the drug business in the region.”

“He knew that she was alive,” said Nine. “St. Martine. He knew that Cipriani had his daughter, and she was alive. If he thought she was dead, he would have ripped Cipriani’s business apart and taken his head.”

“You’re right,” nodded Gaspar. “But why not pay whatever he wanted and take the girl back? Why not find her on your own?”

“I think that’s what he was trying to do,” said Ace.

“Remember that Cipriani was in trouble about thirty years ago. The feds were after him for tax evasion. The Rubio family out of Cuba was disrupting his shipments and causing trouble in Europe. Then, his wife’s brother was arrested for sex with a minor and eventually, convicted of child trafficking and pornography.

“Cipriani was an old man by then. Maybe he ordered that she be killed, and St. Martine went after her. When he found her gone, he killed the entire family.”

“We need to find out what they want with her,” said Gaspar. “Who runs their families now?”

“You’re not gonna like this,” said Code.

“I never like anything, so this will keep with the norm,” frowned Gaspar.

“Their wives. Claudia St. Martine is eighty-seven years old and, apparently, mean as a snake. Lydia Cipriani is eighty-five and equally as vile. They both blame the other for the deaths of their husbands. It’s all-out war.” Ghost nodded, looking at the others.

“Great. Lucky for us, war is what we do.”

“We go in first,” said Luc, pushing Jenna behind him. Antoine opened the door while Nash stayed at the rear, watching for anyone suspicious.

The blinds were still open and the room still ventilating with the back door opened. They hadn’t gone into the house at all, only watched and waited for someone to return.

“We’re losing daylight,” said Luc. “Go ahead and do your tour, but if we say move, you’re going to move.”

Jenna nodded, knowing that they would do anything to protect her whether she liked it or not.

Walking from room to room, she remembered every detail of what was left behind. It was like a time capsule. The twin’s room was still the same. Two small beds with one dresser and a desk. Jeannie had her own room, as did Jenna.

She smiled at the posters on the wall of the movie stars and her favorite band frontman. Memories of a normal teenage girl. Pinned to a corkboard was a school photo of Nash. She touched it as if to bring back a memory that was long gone.

Nash stood at the doorway watching her, realizing that the photo she touched was of him.

“I remember giving that to you when we graduated,” he whispered. Jenna nodded.

“I knew I couldn’t take it to the convent with me, so I asked my parents – those people – I asked them to keep it safe for me.”

Nash pulled out his thin wallet and smiled. It contained his driver’s license, two credit cards, and a high school photo of one Jenna Brooks. She laughed, nodding at him, then started to cry.

“Hey, hey, it’s all going to be okay,” he said, moving slowly toward her.

“So much time wasted, Nash. For what? I’m a kidnapped French child raised by people not my own, and I have no idea why.

Did it have something to do with what happened to me?

Did the last eight months stem from this?

” She waved her hands around the room, Antoine and Luc now watching her as well.

“I can’t answer that, honey. We want to, and we will. For now, let’s head back to the resort. It’s going to be dark soon.”

She nodded, staring at the three men.

“Jenna? You okay?” asked Antoine.

“C-can I have a hug? Like brotherly hugs?” They all laughed, the three men wrapping their arms around her.

“Better?” asked Nash.

“Much. Surprising how much better that makes you feel.” They closed the drapes again, closed the doors, and walked out of the old house.

“Did you find anything?” whispered Nash to Luc and Antoine.

“Nothing. A few books, nothing inside them, a few old school papers, that’s about it. They lived somewhere else after here, according to Ace, but this was her childhood.”

“Let’s find the other house,” said Nash. Just as they were about to get into the SUV, the neighbor across the street was walking toward them.

“Hi there! Are you folks thinking of buying that old place?” he asked. Nash squeezed Jenna’s hand, silently indicating her silence.

“Well, we’re thinking about it but having trouble locating the owner. We really just want the lot,” smiled Nash.

“Good luck with that. The neighborhood association has been trying to get that place torn down for years. It was abandoned years ago, and apparently, when the developer built the neighborhood, he was told that house had to stay. Someone paid him a lot of money to leave it alone.”

“Is that right?” smirked Antoine. “Filled with gold?” They all chuckled. All except Jenna.

“We all thought so,” laughed the man. “We tried to keep up with the lawn for a while, but it got to be too much for everyone. Once in a while, someone comes in and cleans it up, but they do nothing with the house.”

“Did you know the family?” asked Jenna quietly.

“No. No, ma’am,” he said, shaking his head. “As I mentioned, this land was cleared of homes that looked just like that, and then all of these were built. That one is definitely a mystery, but I guess we’re stuck with it a while longer.”

“Maybe,” nodded Nash. “Maybe not.”

The man spoke to them for a few more minutes and then waved as they left the neighborhood behind them. Jenna didn’t say a word the entire drive back to the resort. Too late to go out to dinner, they used the hotel restaurant once again, eating in relative quiet.

“Jenna, are you okay?” asked Nash, reaching for her hand. This time, she linked her fingers with his and nodded. Nash couldn’t believe it.

“I’m getting there. Are my real parents still alive?” she asked.

“Your mother is. Her name is Claudia St. Martine,” said Antoine.

“Can I meet her? Can I see her?” she asked.

“Let us make sure that she’s not the one placing you in danger, okay?” said Nash. “If she checks out and everything is good, we’ll make sure that you two are able to meet up.”

“Good. Because I have a few things I’d like to get off my chest.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

With Jenna now fully aware of Luc and Antoine's presence, the brothers took the spare bedroom while Nash slept on the sofa bed. Jenna went to bed early, exhausted from her day of discovery.

"This is just crazy," said Nash, leaning his head against the back of the sofa, staring at the ceiling.

"I knew her for four years and never once suspected anything was wrong. I never drove by that house, that shack. I never asked about her folks, her family. And yet I can recall every damn time she'd ask me how my parents were doing."

"We're all made different, Nash. You can't beat yourself up over something you did or didn't do as a kid. Did you meet her folks?" asked Antoine.

"No. Not really, anyway. I'd see them at school functions, but looking back, it always seemed as if they were in a hurry to leave.

She was such a happy girl. Always smiling, as if she had no worries in the world.

It's what made me love her almost immediately.

Yet when I see that house, that does not strike me as a home that was a happy place.

"I have no idea if the girls were treated well, fed well, or anything else. Jenna just always seemed normal to me."

"Maybe they were decent people," said Luc. "We can't judge them for the situation. I

suspect that the Ciprianis were the ones paying them to take very good care of her.”

“I know. I just wonder what other shit I missed in high school,” he frowned. Luc laughed, shaking his head.

“Brother, you were a kid yourself. You can’t beat yourself up over that. Hell, I missed shit with my own siblings in high school! Even afterwards, when we were all serving, I didn’t realize how bad Baptiste and Rafe had become. They burned out fast and were struggling.”

“I hate to hear that,” frowned Nash. “I knew of your family. Everyone did. The Robicheaux Rangers, famous brothers who couldn’t be stopped. Then, of course, I’d hear about what Nine, Ghost, and Ian had done, all of the men with you. As a Marine, Rory Baine was the god we all spoke of.”

The men chuckled, nodding at him.

“Listen, we might have been Robicheaux Rangers, but don’t think we didn’t hear about all the others as well. Nine, Wilson, hell...”

“Trak!” they all said in unison, laughing.

“I thought that dude was just smoke and mirrors until the first time I met him,” said Antoine. “He scared the living hell out of me.”

“I think that’s his mission in life. Scare everyone so they stay away from him,” said Nash.

“We heard about all of you, too,” said Luc softly. Nash looked up at him and swallowed. “You take fireside stories with a grain of salt, but we listened because we’d seen a few things. I personally was a witness to something Flip did once upon a



time.”

“I guess we’ve all got our stories, don’t we?” said Nash.

“How did you all end up together?” asked Luc.

“I think once we figured out there were more of us out there, we just sort of gravitated to one another. It was probably our ability to connect with one another. You could feel when someone who was like you was around you. With me, Flip’s wife, Nat, was a fire starter.

I could feel that she was out there. Not romantically, just that gut feeling that someone is there for you.

“When I met Hawke and David, I knew immediately that they were like me in some way. In the end, we were being chased, hunted, and tracked, and figured it was better if we stayed together.

“Mary, she was the first of us. She became our unofficial leader just by her sheer ability to evoke compassion and maternal instinct. She knew that there was a place for us to be safe, and she started tracking Kane and the others. That woman had balls the size of softballs,” he chuckled, shaking his head.

“We walked up to the cabin in Wyoming like we were welcomed guests. She knew enough to know that Kane wouldn’t shoot without asking a few questions. We lost some good people in all of that bullshit as we were running away.”

“I heard,” nodded Luc. “Uri Bellum and his wife. I met Uri a lifetime ago. He was a good man.”

“Yeah. And Mary. As I said, she was like a mother to me. And to the others, as well.

Kindest, sweetest woman who ever lived. Your mother reminds me of her.”

“Yeah, Mama has a way of making everyone feel loved and cared for,” said Luc. Luc looked at Nash and then at his brother, then back again. “Do you think you can convince her to go back to Belle Fleur until we figure all this out?”

“I don’t want to force her,” said Nash. “I feel as though decisions were forced on her since she was a kid. Hell, some were forced on her before she had the ability to say yes or no. I don’t want to be that guy.”

“Brother, there’s no way that you’re ‘that guy.’ You’re just being a good man, Nash. You care for her, and I think you’ve been incredibly patient and kind. Far more so than I was with Montana,” said Luc. “I nearly pushed her away.”

“She wasn’t going anywhere, brother. I knew she loved you from the moment you danced together at Bull and Lily’s wedding.” Luc nodded, laughing at his brother.

“Just like we all knew that you loved Ella the second you saved her and Ryan,” grinned Luc.

“You guys definitely seem to have cornered the market on picking the right partners,” said Nash. “None of you are divorced, are you?”

“There are a couple of us,” nodded Antoine. “Pierre was married once before, but she died. He almost made a mistake the second time. Moose was married once before. A few of the other guys as well. But to your point, once they set foot on Belle Fleur land, it all seemed to right itself.”

“Can we agree all of that is attributable to your mother?” smirked Nash. Luc and Antoine laughed.

“I think if we don’t, we might be struck by lightning.” Antoine stood, nodding at Nash. “I’m gonna get some shut-eye. Hopefully, we’ll have a plan in the morning that will make all of us happy.”

“From your lips to your mother’s ears,” smirked Nash. Antoine and Luc stared at Nash a moment, sobering.

“Brother, don’t joke about Mama hearing us. That shit scares me.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

“I smell coffee,” smiled Jenna, walking out of the bedroom dressed in a pair of long tan shorts, tennis shoes, and a soft cotton shirt. She looked rested, relieved, and somehow different to the men this morning.

“Coffee is a requirement in the military,” said Luc, pouring her a cup. “Partly to stay awake, partly to tolerate your superiors. Either way, it’s a mandatory part of wearing the uniform.” Jenna laughed, taking the coffee from his hands.

“And after you’re no longer wearing the uniform?”

“Oh, we’re all wearing it beneath our civilian clothes,” said Nash. “It never goes away.”

“I was thinking while I was in the shower this morning. There’s nothing here for me. I appreciate the care that they gave me, even though they were pretending to be my parents. But there’s nothing left here except more questions.”

“What do you want to do, Jenna?” asked Nash.

“I think we should go back to Belle Fleur and figure things out from there.”

“We’re sure glad to hear you say that, honey,” said Antoine. “We think that’s the right thing to do as well. Jenna, we do have a question for you.”

“Sure. Anything.”

“Did your parents, the people who were the family that you knew, did they leave you

anything?”

“Leave me anything? No. They had nothing as far as I knew. I had a few letters from them at the convent telling me that they were okay. Like I told Nash, the twins married right out of high school. I wasn’t happy about that because I thought they were too young, but my folks said that they were both in love.

“Dad, John, or Victor, or whatever his name was, apparently had a good job by then, and they moved to an apartment closer to Tucson.”

“Tucson? That’s where they were found dead in the desert,” said Luc. “Maybe they knew someone was coming for them, and they decided to run.”

“I wish I knew,” said Jenna.

“Let’s pack things up and head out,” said Antoine. “We’ll stay close, making sure that no one can get between us.”

“Why is it so cloudy out? There’s usually not rain here this time of year,” said Jenna.

“That’s not rain,” said Nash. “That’s dust. We’ve got winds at up to sixty miles per hour. It’s going to be rough on the open highways. We may have to take it slow getting out of Arizona.”

“I’ve got nowhere else to be,” smiled Jenna. “Besides, just ask Nash. All I seem to do on road trips is sleep.”

“Makes for a quiet ride,” smirked Nash.

After grabbing a quick breakfast and packing their things, they were on the road. The comms team, using satellites and drones, confirmed that they were not being

followed, tracked, or stalked in any way.

By the time they hit the other side of Tucson and were driving along the I-10, they realized just how desolate and difficult this journey would be in a dust storm.

“Maybe we should pull over,” said Luc.

“I think that’s what I would hope for if I were chasing someone,” said Antoine. “Let’s try to get into Texas. At least we know there we’re not far from Fort Bliss. We could always use the guest quarters on base if we had to.”

“Alright, but if this shit gets worse, we’re going to be in trouble.”

It was painfully slow going as the winds whipped across the desert. Like an old John Wayne movie, tumbleweeds littered the highway, pieces of cactus hitting their vehicles.

When Nash’s SUV stopped on the side of the road, they were both confused at first, then saw what he was seeing. The flickering flames of a fire about to be completely out of control.

“Stay in the car!” yelled Nash as he opened the door, running toward the flames. Antoine took his place, ensuring that Jenna didn’t move.

“Nash! Nash! Where are you?” yelled Luc, trying to protect his eyes from the wind and sand.

“Here!” came the voice. Luc followed the sound and saw Nash staring at the wall of flames moving toward them.

“Oh, fuck. What are we going to do?” asked Luc.

“I need water, and I don’t sense any,” he said, staring at the dark clouds of sand. He knelt to the ground, touching the earth with his hands.

“Nash, you read?”

“Loud and clear.”

“According to satellite footage, there’s a water tower about two hundred meters to your southwest. Does that help?”

“That is exactly what I need,” smiled Nash. He turned in a circle, his hands wide open, his palms itching as he felt the water in the tower. “Hold onto something. We’re about to get drenched.”

Luc wrapped an arm around his waist and shrugged.

“I have zero pride when it comes to self-preservation. Do your thing, brother. We’ll either live or drown together.”

A few seconds later, Luc heard the creaking of steel bending and the sound of the falling tower above the sound of wind. Water rushed toward them, the roadway, and the fire beyond. The SUVs rocked back and forth as the water doused the flames of the desert inferno.

When it was done, Luc laughed at the sight of the two of them soaked to the skin.

“Holy shit! That was the most fun I’ve had in a while,” he said, standing and helping Nash to stand. The men laughed, shaking their heads.

“You did it,” said Jenna, stepping out of the SUV with Antoine.

“Brother, that was fucking amazing!”

“I think we got it all,” said Nash. “At least now the fire department will have a chance.”

“How will that be explained?” asked Jenna.

“Simple. The winds were more powerful than they thought, and it toppled the water tower. There’s always an explanation, Jenna. Even if it’s not the one they want to hear.”



“How is she doing?” asked Ian.

“She’s sleeping right now. In fact, it seems that’s all she does,” smirked Nash.

“Well, that’s normal. She’s had a lot of shocks, a lot of drama in her life this last year. I’d want to sleep until it all went away as well,” said Ghost. “How did she handle everything in Arizona?”

“Surprisingly well. I mean, she was shocked at first, but then I think her memories started to fit into place, and she realized that there were signs things were different for her. She wants to meet her biological mother, but if we do that, the Ciprianis will know she’s alive.”

“That’s true,” said Ghost, “but the question is why are they after her, and what was the secret she carried with her as an infant? Does she have any jewelry that she’s always carried with her? Anything like that?”

“I didn’t get to ask her that question,” said Nash.

“What about the guys that followed you into the neighborhood? Did we find out anything about them?” asked Gaspar.

“We just wanted to make sure that Nash and Jenna were covered,” said Luc. “I think the boys were trying to get a read on the plates.”

“Nothing,” said Ace. “They had no plates. What the hell does she have that would make them track her for more than fifty years?”

“I hate to say this, but I think we’re going to need to visit Claudia St. Martine,” said Nine. “I understand she’s a bitch to get to, but we have to somehow notify her of why we want to see her without telling her all of it.”

“Why not tell her Jenna, Genevieve, is alive?” asked Nash.

“What if she was the one that wanted her dead?” Nash frowned at them, realizing there could be a million possible scenarios as to why she was taken and kept alive.

“I can’t imagine wanting your own child dead, but I guess we all know it’s happened before and will probably happen again,” said Nash. “Did she have other children?”

“None,” said Ace. “Apparently, Genevieve was their only child, and Cipriani had no children. Maybe it has something to do with not leaving an heir to their empire. Without Genevieve, the St. Martine empire dies with Claudia. It could leave the door open for the Cipriani family.”

“That’s true, but when Lydia dies, there’s no one to take over their empire,” said Ian. “It’s all very strange.”

“Ace? See if you can get contact information on St. Martine,” said Ghost.

“I’ve tried, and I’ll keep trying. For someone who runs a supposed legitimate empire at this point, she’s damn hard to get in touch with. No direct phone, e-mail, not even a damn mailing address. I’ll keep looking.”

Ace left them, Code and Sly on his heels.

They’d been fortunate over the years to have the best communications, data, and tech teams in the world.

With the addition of G.R.I.P., they were producing some of the most advanced technologies in the world that the world knew nothing about.

And they planned to keep it that way for as long as possible.

“Nash? How are you doing?” asked Kane.

He stared at the five men he admired most in the world. All genuine heroes in a world that needed more heroes. He respected them, emulated their behavior, and praised their compassion balanced with justice.

“I’m doing okay. I know it’s going to take time to get her to open up to me more. She’s a little better, or at least she was while we were in Arizona. She allowed me to touch her hand or shoulder a few times.”

“Brother, this isn’t just about her attack,” said Ghost. “You forget that she was in a convent for the last thirty-five years of her life. She was rarely around men at all. It’s probably one of the reasons she didn’t run when she saw those bikers.

She was too innocent to understand that they could be trouble. ”

“That’s true,” he frowned. “I guess I didn’t think about that.”

“I have an idea,” said Ghost. “What if we took her up to the shop and let her see what the boys are doing with the bikes up there? She’d understand that not all motorcyclists or motorcycle clubs are bad.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” he smiled.

“Hi,” said Jenna. “Sorry for the interruption. What’s a good idea?” They all turned to stare at her, standing like the gentlemen they were.

“Did you have a good rest?” asked Nash.

“I did. What’s a good idea? I feel as though it’s probably about me,” she grinned.

“Would you be willing to allow us to take you somewhere on the property to show you something?” asked Ghost.

“Of course. I trust all of you.”

Ghost nodded, leading her out to the ATVs. Nash looked at the others and frowned.

“Let’s hope she still feels that way after this.”

Jenna had no idea what building they were entering. When you entered the businesses from the property side, the doors were numbered, not labeled. Ghost turned to her and smiled with his hand on the door.

“Trust us, okay? We know every person in this building.” She frowned at him but nodded.

The moment they entered the mechanic and build area, Jenna froze. She spotted the shining chrome, the beautifully painted tanks, and the bikes lifted on the racks.

“Th-they’re motorcycles,” she whispered.

“That’s right. We make custom motorcycles right here on our property. Remember? That’s how we knew what happened to you. The Flaming Skulls were trying to buy our motorcycles, and we refused them.”

“You refused? Why?” she asked innocently.

“Because we don’t do business with men like that.

We own this business, so we choose who we do business with.

Our motorcycles are highly desirable because they’re all custom-made.

We ask the height, arm and leg length, and weight of the biker to ensure that their ride is as comfortable as possible. ”

“I see. And-and do you all ride those things?” she asked.

“We do,” nodded Kane. “It’s a wonderful feeling of freedom. The wind in your hair kind of thing. For veterans, we often don’t like closed spaces. I don’t think I’ve ever known a veteran who drives a small car.” The others smiled, nodding.

“I can understand that. If it’s bigger, it doesn’t feel as claustrophobic. It makes sense to me. Were you part of a gang?” she asked tentatively.

“No,” said Ghost. “We had a club, which is something very different. When we left the military, we decided that we wanted to continue to serve. We funded our business by building these bikes. We never thought it would take off the way it did. Skull and some of the other guys are the absolute best at what they do.”

Jenna walked slowly around the bikes, giving a wide berth to the very large men working on them. She spotted Trevon, whom she’d met several weeks before, and smiled at him. The gentle giant stood slowly, his hands folded in front of him.

“Hi, Miss Jenna. How are you feeling?” he asked. The older men grinned at the sweet man.

“Trevon, you don’t have to call me Miss Jenna. Jenna is fine. But thank you for

asking. I'm getting there. A little better every day."

"That's good. That's real good. I know you'll be your old self in no time." She gave a wry smile and nodded.

"My old self. I'm not sure I want to be my old self.

"Trevon looked panicked for a moment, staring from her to Nash and then Ghost. "It's not a bad thing, Trevon.

You just reminded me that I can't decide to leave the convent behind and not leave most of who I was behind. I have to re-invent myself."

"If you don't mind me sayin' so, ma'am. There's nothin' about you that needs reinventing. You're pretty awesome, just like you are." Jenna laughed, shaking her head.

"You know, if you were thirty years older, I'd say you were flirting."

"No, ma'am. I respect Mr. Nash too much to do that," he grinned. He turned and started to work on the bike again, Nash blushing from the comment.

"Come on, Jenna," said Ghost, holding out his arm. "There are bikes up front completed that you should see."

The entire visit was liberating for Jenna. She asked a million questions about motorcycles and how they're made, why they paint the tanks, why does it make such a loud noise, anything and everything. She was like a curious child, and the wonder and excitement grew the more they spoke.

When they left the building, she chatted non-stop with the men and then waved

goodbye, running toward the small group of women headed into the cafeteria for dinner.

“Thank you for doing that, Ghost. It was like a light switch went on for her,” said Nash.

“It was my pleasure. Maybe now it will be one less monster under the bed for her.”

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“Where is she?” asked Lydia, staring at the four men in front of her. They were her most trusted men and the only ones who understood the importance of finding the woman.

“We’re not sure, ma’am. After the attack at the convent, she disappeared. The men thought they saw her briefly on the cameras at the house, but when they went back to check the footage, there was nothing there.”

“Burn the house to the ground. There’s nothing we need there any longer.

Burn it and sell the land to the damn developer.

” She started to turn away from the men, then turned back.

“Wait. There will be a box somewhere in that house. I’m sure of it.

It will have papers inside it. Don’t open it but get me that damn box. ”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Have you checked her attorneys of record?” she asked thoughtfully. The men all shook their heads. “Do it. Her court case was taken over by a different legal team. Find out who they are and where they are located.”

“Of course.”

She gave a curt nod, and the men left the room. If she didn’t find that woman and end



her, it could ruin everything she'd worked so hard to build.

Anthony might have been a brilliant businessman, but he was weak in every other way. She'd never been happier than the day he died. It was as if the weight was nearly gone from around her neck.

Now, she was the ruler of this empire, and in time, she would control everything throughout Europe.

Time. It was the one thing she didn't have an abundance of or an ability to control. At eighty-five, she was on the downhill side of her life. Very downhill. She was healthy, she was active, she was still in her right mind, and her thoughts were clear.

She just wished she could have another twenty or twenty-five years, but she'd be lucky if she got another ten.

Standing from the massive mahogany desk, she walked around it to stare out the back windows of her villa.

Below the veranda stretched along the Tyrrhenian Sea.

To the left and right were rows and rows of olive trees and grapevines.

Her land was fertile, fruitful, producing some of the world's best wines and olive oils.

It had been her personal mission to make sure that the land would always give back to her. The businesses that Anthony built were ever-changing.

Drugs. More drugs. Less drugs. Weapons. No weapons. More weapons. Bigger weapons. Tanks. And now, they were asking for military aircraft. The world was going to destroy itself, and she was more than happy to provide the tools for it to do

so.

Opening the French doors, she stepped out onto the veranda and was immediately met by a member of the kitchen staff.

“Are you ready for lunch, ma’am?” asked the older man.

“I think so, Roberto. Do you have some of the tapenade you made last night leftover?”

“Of course, ma’am. I made a larger batch to ensure you could enjoy it today.”

“Lovely. I’ll start with that and some fresh bread. Then, well, surprise me with whatever you have.”

“I’ll be right back,” he nodded.

She demanded loyalty from her staff, and Roberto had been with her for nearly thirty years now. His father had been with her before him.

She waited until he was out of earshot and then muttered to herself.

“Surprises. I don’t tolerate them unless they’re about food.”

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“Why is it so damn hard to find information about all of this?” muttered Ace.

“The Cipriani and St. Martine families are famous for all the wrong reasons. When Genevieve was kidnapped, the whole world knew about it. International police, military, even mercenaries searched for her and then suddenly stopped.”

“Stopped? Why would they stop?” asked Code.

“I don’t know. It just said that the search was suspended, and they believed the child to be dead. They searched for less than two weeks. Doesn’t that feel odd to all of you?” asked Ace.

“Damn sure does,” frowned Sly. “Most kidnapping cases don’t just end unless they find the victim. And it usually doesn’t end unless the parents tell them to stop. But why would Claudia and Jacques tell them to stop?”

“If I had to guess, it didn’t matter much to Jacques,” said Ace. “There are photos from old newspapers of him with two or three women at a time on his arms. He’s in casinos, restaurants, the opera, the theater, with all these different women, and not one of them is Claudia.”

“But they were married when he died, right?” asked Code.

“Yep. Showed her as the grieving widow.” He shoved the photo from the cemetery toward the two men. “There was even a big stink about Anthony and Lydia Cipriani being at the funeral. It felt strange to everyone.”

“I’d say,” frowned Code. “I think we need to start looking into any possible connections of relatives, business associates, that sort of thing. What were they working on or fighting over at the time?”

“That’s a problem,” said Ace. “I looked into it, and it doesn’t seem as though they had any common interests at all.

The Ciprianis were determined to control the drug trade in and out of Africa.

The St. Martines were managing organized crime in Europe.

They were tiptoeing around one another but not stepping on one another’s toes from what I can see. ”

“We’re definitely missing something,” said Sly. He rubbed his eyes, shaking his head as he looked at the clock. “I think we need a break from this. Let’s grab some dinner and come back to this tomorrow.”

“I agree,” said Code. Ace nodded at his friends, leaving the information spread out on the table.

There had been a light rain earlier in the afternoon, leaving everything smelling of summer.

You could almost taste the smell of the cypress and moss, the flowers, and shrubs.

It was always prominent, but after a rain, it was even more so.

As they neared the cafeteria, Trevon was approaching as well.

Usually dressed in work attire, he’d obviously showered, changed his clothes, and

now had an abundance of cologne sprayed on his body.

“Brother, what’s that pretty smell,” smirked Code.

“Damn. Too much?”

“No, man. I’m just kidding with you. You look good. Can I assume this is for Millicent?” said Code.

“Yeah. I’m nervous as shit. She’s so damn shy, and I suppose I am too. But I really want to ask her out on a date. Like a real date.”

“She’d be foolish to say no,” said Sly. “You’re a good man, Trevon. Surely, she’ll see that.”

“Anyone know why she’s staying on the property? I can’t find out anything, and I don’t want to ask her,” he grimaced.

“You know, I’m not sure. She was brought onto the property by Claudette and Jake. We were never asked to do a background check on her, which is usually the norm here. Nine and the others gave their approval, but it’s pretty unusual.”

“Well, wish me luck,” he said, opening the door.

“Go get her, big man.” Sly grinned at him, shaking his head.

They had a lot of big men on the property. Tailor and Alec were the old guard, but add in Max, Titus, Noah, Noa, Bodhi, Cade, and the younger men, and they had their Team Big times ten.

Trevon was almost a Team Big all by himself.

He was tall, wide, strong, and graceful.

A lethal combination for any man in security.

But he also had a tender, sweet side that was almost comical to watch.

When Hayes left a few weeks before, they found him sitting near the fountains with Victoria as she cried.

Except it wasn't just her crying. Trevon was crying with her as if he could feel her pain and her heartbreak.

"I sure hope that woman doesn't break his heart," said Ace, watching as Millicent brought out the massive tray of food for him. Trevon stood like a gentleman and spoke softly to her, twisting his hands together, and he spoke.

Millicent looked up at him with a shocked expression and then looked down again. When she walked away, he turned to the three men and shrugged. They couldn't resist finding out.

"Did she say no?" asked Code.

"She didn't say no, but she didn't say yes. She asked if she could think about it." Code chuckled, shaking his head.

"Well, you're right. That's not a no."

"Maybe she doesn't like mixed-race men," he frowned. "I never asked her that. I never thought about it since all of y'all are so accepting."

"I don't think it's that at all," said Sly. "I don't get that vibe from her. She's friendly

with everyone here.”

“Everyone except men,” said Ace. They all stared at the observant one in the group and nodded.

“She freely speaks with, walks with, and works with the women on this property, even going to the pond with them. But when it comes to men, even George and Jake, she backs up, looks at her feet and doesn’t speak.

Those are all signs and symptoms we’ve seen one too many times. ”

“He’s right. She’s afraid of men,” said Trevon. “Damn. I need to know why she’s here. I know she doesn’t want to talk about it but how can I help if I don’t know?”

“Well, if you’re asking us, we usually go to the source, and in this case, it’s either Claudette or Millicent herself. Take your pick, but I can assure you neither will be easy nuts to crack,” said Code. Trevon frowned.

“Great.”

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“Did you enjoy your dinner?” asked Nash.

“It was wonderful,” smiled Jenna. “It’s always wonderful here. We had such bland food at the convent. Nothing too spicy, nothing that could be considered too boastful or elaborate.”

“Boastful?” he grinned. “How is food boastful?”

“Well, look around you at the volume of food here. There’s so much of it. This would have never been allowed at the convent. You ate small portions and didn’t gorge yourself with food or drink. This is so much. How much goes to waste?”

“None,” said Nash. “Everything is either turned into something else, frozen, kept for leftovers, or given to the shelter that the team runs.”

“Oh,” she whispered. “I had no idea. There’s a shelter here?”

“Yes. Along with a school for orphan children or those who are rescued through their missions. The adults are kept a bit further down the road, but someone takes the leftovers to them every night. There’s a full kitchen there, so they have their own meals every day, but sometimes we get stuck, unable to hit the stores if the weather is bad.

“Plus, we have a shelter downtown New Orleans. It’s run by Asia and Molly. They used to live here, but when their son got married and moved away, they wanted to do something different.



“So, Matthew turned an old warehouse into a shelter for kids who had nowhere to go at night. Maybe their parents work late night shifts or just don’t care where their children are.

Molly and Asia provide meals, games, and a safe space for kids.

On the third floor, there are bunks for kids who need a secure place to sleep. ”

“That’s so remarkable,” she said, staring at all the people.

“I remember them saying something about a school when I first got here, but I was so distracted by everything I guess I forgot about it. I knew you all were special, but to provide for orphans or children in danger is truly something remarkable. I loved my time teaching, and I do miss it.”

“It could be something for you to do if you wanted to go back to teaching,” said Nash. “You said that’s what you were doing at the convent, right?”

“Yes. I helped with kitchen duties when I was very young. I found it quite cathartic, but the nun in charge of the kitchens told me I didn’t have the skill to boil water,” she laughed. Nash laughed along with her.

“That’s a beautiful sound. You laughing,” he said, grinning at her. She tilted her head and reached for his hand.

“Oh, Nash. I owe my laughter, my comfort, my safety to you. You and all these people here. I would be hiding in a hole somewhere if it weren’t for all of you. I can’t thank you enough.” Nash nodded at her, a pit forming in his stomach.

“Look at me, Nash.” He looked up at her.

“Nash, I like you. I like you a lot, but I have to figure out what all this is about. I’m just starting to feel like a human being again, like a woman.

I’m just starting to find myself and feel like myself – the self I think I was supposed to be all along.

No. No, that’s not right. I feel better than I’ve ever felt, and I’m just now realizing that. I owe it all to you and the team.

“I can’t promise what will happen in a few days, a few weeks, or a few months.

What I know is that I want to spend as much time with you as possible.

When you’re around, I feel safe. I feel as though the world is right.

In truth, I feel like that high school girl back in Arizona a lifetime ago. ”

“Jenna, you can have all the time in the world. Just knowing that you have some feelings for me will keep me going,” he said, reaching for her other hand.

“Some feelings?” she frowned. “Nash. I love you. I guess I haven’t said that to you, but I do.

I love you. I think I’ve always loved you, which didn’t make me a very good nun.

I think I’m scared to think about what will happen if you and I, well, if we become intimate.

I’ve only known violent intimacy. I have no idea what to expect.

I’m trying to work that out with Bree and the others. ”

“I won’t rush you, Jenna. You’re too precious to me to rush this. We can do baby steps.”

“Thank you,” she said, kissing his cheek. Nash thought his heart had stopped, his face burning with the heat of her lips. “I like that you’re in the cabin near mine. It helps to see you through the window.”

“Any time. I can sleep on your porch if you need me there. Whatever you need,” he smiled.

“Maybe, in time, you could sleep in the spare room. I mean, if you want to.”

“I would be honored to be under the same roof as you. I’m sure you’ve already guessed that I’ll be a gentleman.”

“Nash,” she laughed, “you are the textbook definition of a gentleman. In fact, after visiting the motorcycle shop, I realized that every man here is a true gentleman. Maybe one day, when I’m feeling incredibly brave, I’ll take a ride on one of those motorcycles.”

“You let me know when you’re ready, and I’ll take you wherever you want to go. For now, what do you say I walk you back to the cabin on our island.”

“Can we have cake first? I see the lemon cake, and it’s my favorite.” Nash laughed, nodding.

“Yes. We can definitely have cake first.” He stood to get them two slices of cake, and Jenna stood with him. She reached for his shoulders, pulled him in close, and hugged him. He could hardly breathe, afraid to move.

“Thank you, Nash,” she said, pulling back. He smiled at her, nodding.

“My absolute pleasure, Jenna.”

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:13 pm*

“Hey, we made contact with Claudia St. Martine,” said Code, walking into the conference room the next morning.

“And?” came the echoed response. He just grinned at them.

“She was disbelieving, of course. She said she’d given up on her daughter ages ago and thought it was a hoax. Unfortunately, she doesn’t want to see Jenna right now, but she’s willing to speak to our team and see photos of her.”

“Alright,” nodded Nine. “Send four of our French speakers.”

“I’ll go,” said Gaspar. “In fact, I’ll take Marie and Camille. They speak better French than I do, and maybe having a woman there will be comforting to her. Tell Baptiste and Gabe to pack their shit. They’re coming too.”

“Will do,” said Code. “Should we say anything to Jenna?”

“No. Not right now,” said Ghost. “If Claudia rejects her, I don’t want Jenna to know that. I assume we’re traveling to France.”

“She has a home in the south of France, near Cannes. She said she’d arrange for us to be picked up from the airport there and brought to a restaurant in the city. She didn’t feel comfortable having us at her home.”

“Paranoid. That’s interesting,” frowned Nine. “Are you sure you don’t want more men coming with you?”

“Naw. Between Gabe, Baptiste, and me, we should be fine. Besides, Camille and Marie count as ten of us.”

“I won’t tell them you said that,” smiled Nine.

An hour later, they were on the jet and headed toward France. The women had been surprisingly prepared and didn’t argue about how much luggage they needed. When Gaspar said it would only be two to three days, they knew it would most likely be less than that.

“This woman must have a lot of mixed emotions about potentially seeing her daughter again,” said Marie. “I can’t imagine that feeling.”

“It’s funny, but Code said she was skeptical and seemed distrustful,” said Gaspar.

“Do you blame her?” asked Camille. “Your daughter has been missing for more than fifty years, and suddenly, strangers say that they’ve found her.

Can you imagine how many people claimed they had her daughter, or knew where she was located, even tried to pawn off another child on her? It must have been horrible for her.

“That woman had a funeral, a burial, all of it. She’s in her eighties now. It’s not enough time to even have a discussion of what her life has been like.”

“This is why we brought the two of you,” smirked Gaspar. “Having a little feminine wisdom helps in this situation.”

After a long nap and a hot meal, they arrived in Cannes and, as promised, were greeted by a driver.

“Madames, et Messieurs Robicheaux,” he said with a perfect French accent.

“Yes. I mean, oui,” said Gaspar. He only spoke French on rare occasions to his parents or siblings. Being away from the language had made him forgetful and probably unable for anyone to understand him.

“It’s alright, monsieur. I speak English, as does Madame St. Martine.”

“I guess I didn’t need you guys after all,” said Gaspar. “If you want to go shopping or something, you could do that.”

“Are you kidding? I came to meet this woman, and I’m going to meet her,” said Camille. “I want to see her reaction when she sees the photos of Jenna.”

“Are you expecting a strange reaction?” asked Baptiste.

“I don’t know. It’s just something that I think will tell me a lot about that woman. It kind of bothers me that she didn’t move heaven and earth to find her or at least find a body. I would have. Mama damn sure would have,” said Camille.

“I agree with Camille,” said Marie. “It’s something a mother would have done.”

“Do you think she’s involved somehow?” asked Gabe.

“I think everyone is involved,” said Marie. “We just have to find out why and how.”

“Maybe they need to be part of the security team,” smirked Gaspar. Marie raised her eyebrows at her older brother, giving him a sly smirk.

“We’ve been telling you that for years.”

The streets of Cannes were far more beautiful than photos portrayed them. Expensive shops, small over-priced bistros and coffee shops, and the marina lined with mega-yachts and sailing vessels. It was purely magical.

And far too much for the humble Robicheaux clan.

“Let’s get this done and get home,” said Baptiste.

The driver expertly wound his way through the streets of Cannes, finally stopping at a beautiful three-story restaurant on the water. He opened the doors and waved them inside the restaurant.

“Madam St. Martine is waiting for you.”

“How will we know her?” asked Camille.

“She’s the only person in the restaurant. She owns this establishment, and it’s closed to guests until your business is concluded.” The siblings raised their brows at one another and nodded their thanks to the driver.

The restaurant had a beautiful interior with a mix of French countryside and seaside nostalgia. In the corner, at a large table, sat an older woman. She was very small with snow-white hair and thick glasses.

“Madame St. Martine?” asked Gaspar.

“Yes. Obviously.”

“I’m Gaspar Robicheaux. These are my siblings, Marie, Camille, Baptiste, and Gabriel.” This time, her brows raised as she nodded.



“Your parents are good French Catholics,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Yes, ma’am. They are. Our parents had fifteen children. Nine boys and six girls.”

“They were very lucky,” she said with a sad expression. “Genevieve was my only child. I could have no others.”

“I’m so sorry. But the good news is that she’s alive. We’ve matched her blood type and DNA with the tests that were used during the kidnapping investigation.”

She pursed her lips, nodding her head up and down.

“And what is it you want? Do you want some sort of reward for this? Because the reward offer was retracted many years ago. I am in no mood for scams.”

Speechless, they looked at one another and couldn’t think of anything to say. Then, Camille and Marie sat down beside the woman.

“May I call you Claudia?” asked Camille. “I have a twin, Claudette.”

“How lovely,” she said quietly.

“You’ll forgive me, Claudia, but you don’t seem like a woman who is happy to find out that her daughter is alive. I can assure you that if it were my child, I’d be dancing in the streets. I would have jumped on the first plane to America and be reunited with her.”

“But she’s not your daughter. Allegedly, she’s mine. Leave the blood work and DNA tests that you have. I’ll have my own team compare them, and I’ll get back with you.”

“Wait. That’s it?” frowned Baptiste. Gabriel stared at the woman, trying to figure out

her game.

“Are you joking with me right now? We don’t want shit from you.

Let’s make that very clear. We don’t need your money or any of your ill-gotten gains from the criminal empire your husband left you. ”

“I do not have a criminal empire. My late husband did. I do not. My businesses are legitimate and quite successful.”

“Fine. We don’t want your damn legitimate businesses. But we have a woman, safe, happy, healthy but very confused, back home who wants to meet her real mother.” The woman’s head popped up, and she stared at the handsome man.

“Was she ill-treated?” asked Claudia.

“No. Not to our knowledge. She said they had a hard life. It wasn’t a wealthy one, but she seemed somewhat happy. She joined a convent after high school.”

Again, the woman gave no indication that she was pleased, angry, curious, or any other emotion. She just sat still.

“Thank you for bringing this information to me. I’ll have my team review all the data, and I will contact you.”

Effectively dismissed, Gaspar and his brothers stood from the table. Marie pushed back and then looked at the woman, shaking her head.

“If you had any idea of what you’re missing out on, you’d be on that plane with us.

” She pushed a photo of Jenna toward the woman.

She was laughing, a piece of cake in front of her.

Her hair was tucked behind her ear, but her smile was bright and cheerful.

“In case you’re interested, that’s your daughter, and she’s a remarkable, resilient, beautiful woman. ”

The siblings turned, leaving the restaurant and the old woman at her table.

She picked up the photo and stared at the face smiling back at her. With shaking hands, she touched the corner of the photo to the candle on the table and then set the photo on the plate, watching as it burned to ashes.

Outside, they waited for the car to return to take them to the airport. There was no reason to stay if Claudia was not going to at least ask questions of them.

“What now, Gaspar? I don’t want to go back and tell Jenna that she doesn’t want anything to do with her,” said Marie.

“Gabe? What do you think?” asked Gaspar.

“I’m not sure. I sensed a lot in her. Curiosity, caution, and fear. Not of us but of something else.”

“Fear of what?” whispered Camille.

“I’m not sure, but I think we need to find a way to speak with Lydia Cipriani.

She’s the other half of this coin, and I fear we need her side of the story to finish this out.

Both widows, both survivors and running their husband's businesses.

It all seems very planned to me. Maybe not planned but too convenient. ”

“So we're off to Italy?” asked Marie.

“No. We go home first, and then we'll decide how to proceed. Besides, none of us speak Italian.”

“We didn't need our French with her,” said Baptiste. “I'd venture to say we won't need our Italian with Cipriani.”

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The team agreed that they wouldn't tell Jenna of their meeting with Claudia. It might very well be too painful for her at this point. Instead, they found ways to occupy her, including visiting the shelters and the schools.

It was evident that this was where Jenna belonged. Teaching. With children surrounding her. Her time may have passed for her to have children of her own, but she could give the love overflowing inside of her to those who needed it most.

"Hey, we've got a couple of problems you guys need to know about," said Code.

"Of course we do," said Ian. "What now?"

"Someone was digging into the court records to find out the attorney of record for Jenna. They got the names of Kari, Kat, and Georgie."

"Okay. We can manage that," said Ghost.

"Maybe. The other is the house in Arizona. Neighbors called the police because they saw someone attempting to start a fire. He stopped them because the winds are picking up again, and it would have burned the entire neighborhood."

"There's something in that house," said Nine. "Get two men back to search that damn house."

"Already done," said Code. "I sent Max and Titus. They were meeting with a company in Southern California about security work the last two days, so it was on their way home. They should be getting to the house soon."

“Good. Make sure they take anything they think might be of value to us.”

“What do you want to do about the legal team?” asked Ace. “Should I give them a heads up?”

“Definitely. Let Kari know that Cipriani may reach out for information about the case or about Jenna. We need to speak with Cipriani face-to-face. I just need to figure out what we’re going to say to her and what we’re going to do about this bullshit,” said Nine. Ace smirked at him, shaking his head.

“Always bullshit somewhere. That’s why you have us. Bullshit scoopers. The best in the business.”

“Geez, they weren’t wrong about this place. It’s depressing as shit and quite the dump,” said Max.

“It’s hard to picture Jenna in this house. I mean, she seems so, I don’t know. Neat. Clean. Proper. I’m trying to find the right words,” said Titus.

“I think those are all good words for her,” said Max.

He started opening the kitchen cabinets, and it didn’t surprise him to see bugs crawling around the cabinets. He found the same friendly welcome wagon in the drawers.

“There’s no food,” said Titus, opening the other cabinets. “When they left, they took all the food or threw it away but left the dishes behind.”

“Maybe they thought they’d rent the place to someone,” said Max.

“Who? I don’t know anyone that would rent this place.”

“Brother, I think we’ve been living the good life too long. You and I both know a helluva lot of people who would love to rent a place like this.”

“You’re right,” nodded Titus. “I forget sometimes how fortunate we’ve all been.”

“Take the back bedrooms. I’ll look in the master,” said Max.

Max rifled through the dresser drawers and keepsake boxes lining the shelves of the dusty bedroom.

The heat was stifling, so he opened the windows to allow air in, only to be met by more stifling heat coming at him at thirty miles per hour.

Dust flew through the windows and off the furniture, but it was actually better than the intense heat of the closed home.

He opened the keepsake boxes, each one labeled with a girl’s name on it. Three boxes. Not four. There wasn’t one for Jenna. The other three girls all had their own box filled with school papers, artwork, letters, photos, and precious memories of childhood.

Why wouldn’t they have a box for Jenna?

Clothing still hung in the closet. Others were neatly folded in the dressers. Again, why leave these things behind?

“They were running,” muttered Max to himself. “They didn’t have time to take these things.”

Kneeling beside the bed, he carefully shone his flashlight beneath the bed and surprisingly found nothing. He pushed the mattress aside to check between the

mattress and box springs but once again found nothing.

Max walked to the back of the home, finding Titus on his knees doing exactly what he'd done. Looking beneath the bed.

"Find the boogie man?"

"I was expecting to, but no. Anything in the master?"

"Yeah. Keepsake boxes for the other three girls but not Jenna. Artwork, report cards, photos, all of it. But not one damn thing for her."

"Same here. High school yearbooks, class photos, keepsakes from dances, hell, even their dresses are still hanging in the closet."

"Yeah. Same as the master," frowned Max.

He stepped back into the hallway and winced as the floor creaked beneath his weight. It wasn't unusual. Max was a very big man. So was Titus. Floors always creaked beneath their weight.

When he moved to go down the hallway, he found it odd that the floor stopped creaking then started again. Turning, Titus was staring at him with a raised brow. He knelt down and pulled the carpet from the wall. Dust and who the hell knew what else flew in his face.

"Great. I'll pay for that," frowned Titus. He continued to pull on the carpet and then leaned back on his heels. "We've got ourselves a safe."

"Then we need to get that damn thing out of there," said Max. The winds outside were picking up with ferocity, the poorly constructed modular home rocking on its



foundation.

Leaving Max to guard their find, Titus sped to the hardware store for the tools he would need. He wasn't worried about breaking into the safe. Someone back home would do that. What he needed was to get that safe out of the floor.

Forty-five minutes later, the two men had it out of the floor but not without considerable effort.

"That was a fucking bitch," gasped Titus.

"I think we're just getting old," grinned Max. "Let's load it up and get the hell out of here."

After securing the safe, Max and Titus stopped at their hotel for a quick shower, grabbed their luggage, and got on the road to head for home.

The dust, wind, and funnel clouds of dirt made driving nearly impossible.

If they could just get another fifty miles under their belts, they'd be out of the path of the winds.

"Max! Titus! Are you there?" asked Code.

"Yeah, we're here. What's wrong? We're driving home," said Titus.

"Shit. The winds are causing some issues with comms. We lost your tracking for a few minutes, and it coincided with an unexplained explosion at the house. Someone blew it to shit."

"Is there fire?" asked Max.

“ No fire. Apparently, someone called the fire department seven minutes before the explosion. At least they didn’t burn down an entire neighborhood.”

“Yeah. Lucky. But I bet they were pissed to realize we got what they were after.”

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“Mrs. Cipriani, how may we help you?” asked Kari with syrupy sweetness.

“I believe you were the attorney of record for a woman by the name of Jenna Brooks. Terrible case. A nun, from what I’m hearing, who was beaten and raped.”

“You seem to know a great deal about this case, ma’am. Did you have something you needed to tell us?” she asked calmly.

“No. Nothing. It’s just that I believe she could be someone I know, perhaps someone who’s been lost for some time now.”

“Lost? Ma’am, I assure you that Ms. Brooks is not lost. She’s found herself and is quite healthy and happy now.” Lydia Cipriani stared at the screen, chewing on the inside of her cheek to prevent her from lashing out at the impudent woman.

“I’m glad to hear that, but I’d very much like to see this woman and speak to her myself. I knew her family, and, well, I’m sure they’d want me to help her. I’ll send a first-class ticket for her to come to Italy.”

“Help her? How very kind of you. Ms. Brooks is not a fan of traveling, so it might be better if you came here to the United States to meet her. We could pick a convenient location for both of you.”

“I’m an old woman, Ms. Robicheaux. Certainly, Ms. Brooks could travel much easier than I can. I’m used to getting what I need without an argument. I will send someone to pick her up. Where is she?”

“Let me make myself perfectly clear, Mrs. Cipriani,” said Kari, steeling herself.

“You will not send anyone for Ms. Brooks. If you attempt to kidnap her, again, as I suspect you did when she was a child, I will have you arrested, and I don’t give a damn about your age.

I will throw your ass in a maximum-security prison and send you to trial.

“I know your game, and I know your business all too well. I enjoy putting those who sell drugs, buy and sell humans, and traffic children in jail. I will not hesitate to do the same to you.”

“Young lady, you have no idea who you’re speaking with,” she seethed through her pearly white dentures.

“Oh, I have every knowledge of who I’m dealing with. You are Lydia Cipriani, wife of Anthony Cipriani, one of Europe’s most notorious criminals. I think you wanted revenge on the St. Martine family and kidnapped their infant daughter, leaving her in that horrible house in Arizona.”

“I never kidnapped anyone,” she said, staring at the screen. “And if you think for one moment you know me or my family, you’re delusional.”

“Delusional or not, you will not get near Ms. Brooks.”

“Where. Is. She?” she said slowly and deliberately.

“None.Of.Your.Business.”

“You are messing with matters that you do not understand. I want to know where that woman is!”

“And I don’t want to tell you,” smiled Kari. “You remarked that you’re an old woman, Mrs. Cipriani. Let me give you some advice. Get your affairs in order before you die. It would be a terrible thing if Claudia St. Martine took over the Cipriani empire.”

Lydia stared at the screen with devilishly dark eyes. This was a woman who understood hate. She understood how to make grown men crumble with one gaze. She understood death, and she very much understood how to deliver death to others.

“You think you understand what’s happening here, don’t you?”

“I understand all too well,” said Kari. “You’re not my first criminal.”

“Call me what you like, but you are foolish. You understand nothing, and neither does that young woman. It may not happen today, it may not happen tomorrow, but that woman will die. The two of us cannot survive on this planet together.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” said Kari. “I hate having to kill old women.”

So shocked by Kari’s response, Lydia Cipriani ended the video call and left Kari and her team pleased with themselves.

“I think it’s obvious she kidnapped that little girl.

The question is, why did she keep her alive?

If you wanted her gone, if you wanted to punish her parents, you certainly achieved that by just taking her.

But if you really wanted to dig the knife in, why not kill her and send her body back?

That's more the speed of criminals in their category. No mercy, no grace," said Georgie.

"That's bothering me as well," said Kat. Katrina nodded.

"Listen, I come from the underbelly of drugs, kidnapping, trafficking, all of that heinous world. Kidnappings are for a purpose, and the children or wives, which is usually who gets kidnapped, are never returned alive. Never."

"Then we're missing something," said Kari. "We're missing something big, and we've got to find it if Jenna has any hope of living a normal life."

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Claudia St. Martine walked the narrow stone path toward the family cemetery at the back of her property. She hated this place. Hated it. But she was tied to the land and tied to the businesses belonging to the St. Martine family.

Passing the markers for her former in-laws, she touched the headstones and nodded. There was a small angel marking the grave of her daughter. If anyone had asked her, she would have told them she was dead.

Now, someone was telling her that she was alive.

She already knew that.

Touching the headstone of her late husband, she frowned.

Jacques Felix Christopher St. Martine

Son, Husband, Father

“Husband,” she spat. “You were no husband to me. I despised you. I still do. You took my daughter from me. You took away any chance I had at happiness, at having more children. I was never happier than the day you died.”

The warm summer wind kissed her skin, and she closed her eyes. At least once a week, she walked out here to confess her hatred for her late husband. Wherever he was, heaven or hell, he should know by now that he was not loved by his wife.

An arranged marriage by their families, Claudia never wanted anything to do with

him. She was in love with someone else, but that didn't matter. This was business. The families needed to be one.

All the photos of him with questionable women didn't seem to matter. It didn't matter the stories of his drunkenness and violence. It didn't matter that he was caught in a hotel room with four women and two men.

"It's a phase of his youth," said her father. "He'll grow out of it."

Except he didn't grow out of it. He got worse, and she had to pay the ultimate price for that. A price that came at the cost of everything she held dear and loved.

She spit on his grave, not for the first time. Feeling satisfied with that, she sat down and cried like she did every week. It was the only time she allowed herself such a luxury. When her phone rang, she wanted to toss it into the grass, but instead, saw a number she didn't want to see.

"What do you want?" she asked harshly.

"We had a deal."

"I'm aware that we had a deal. It's not my fault that it wasn't kept."

"You know what this means, Claudia. It means war between the families."

"You know what, fine. Let there be war. I'm almost ninety years old. I don't give a damn any longer. Start a war. I'll finish it. You still won't have what you want. You'll never have what you want."

"I will have what I want and more. I despise you."



“The feeling is mutual. I assure you.”

The call ended, and her hands were shaking so badly she wondered if she would be able to make the walk back up to the chateau. She decided that she didn't care. She would sit here and remember why this was all happening.

“I love you, *cherie*. We will find a way to be together one day soon.”

“I love you, too. But we both know that can't happen. It won't happen. It's not possible. Jacques will go on a rampage and create more death than either of us has ever seen.”

“I can fight him. I will for you.”

“No. No, we can't fight him. He's too powerful.”

She opened her eyes and wiped the tears streaming down her cheeks. With one final look at the plot, she moved back toward the house and to her private quarters. Inside, she pulled a box from the closet and slowly opened it.

Gently, she removed the small layette once belonging to her daughter. Holding it to her nose, she inhaled, the scent of baby powder and lotion still prevalent. A small silver rattle was pushed aside, a hospital bracelet with her name on it.

Beneath the false bottom, she opened another space revealing a matchbook, a playbill from the theater, and a room key for a hotel in Paris.

“Memories,” she whispered. “How are they so powerful after all this time?”

Carefully, she placed the items back in the box and secured them in her closet once again. After straightening her dress and dabbing the tears from her face, she made her

way back downstairs to the dining room.

“Are you ready for dinner, madam?” asked the butler.

“Yes. I suppose I am.” He started to walk away, and then she called to him again. “Samuelle? I know it’s an unusual thing for me to ask, but do you think tonight you and the staff could join me for dinner?”

“Join you? I-I’m not sure. It’s not usually done, Madam. Are you sure?”

“Yes. I believe I’d like some company this evening. I suppose getting older has made me feel nostalgic. We used to throw grand dinner parties here. Hundreds of people would attend. I miss those days.”

“Of course, Madam. I’ll notify the others. I’m sure they’ll love having their meal with you.”

Claudia knew that was a lie, but at least she could beat back the loneliness, even if just for one night. As much as she’d hated her husband, she loved being wealthy and having everything a woman could possibly want.

Except love. Love was always out of her reach.

Maybe she could give all of this up. Maybe she’d sell it all and buy a small place in the north of France or England. She didn’t need this huge chateau. She didn’t need the boats, cars, or airplanes. She could leave it all tomorrow, sell it, and find happiness in a smaller way.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I hate myself for it, but no. I cannot give up this life.”

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Nash had his arm around Jenna's shoulders, gently pushing his foot against the porch as the swing moved easily in the breeze. It was raining. Again. As much as Arizona needed rain, Louisiana needed a bit of a dry spell.

Yet nothing stopped because of the rain. In fact, it seemed to move at the same crazy pace that it always moved.

In the last few days, Jenna seemed to open up more emotionally and physically. She was now the first one to kiss his cheek or even his lips. She was now the first to reach for his hand or arm. This was the Jenna he'd prayed for.

"Nash? Was anyone able to contact my biological mother?" she asked quietly. He knew the question was coming. He'd dodged it for days, hoping that they would convince Claudia to see her daughter.

"We did," he said honestly. "She is doubtful that you really are her child. She's asking her own team to look at the evidence. We all thought it was best to give her some space and time. She's a very old woman now."

"I see. You would think if she's a very old woman, she would want to meet the daughter she never knew."

"I feel the same way, honey, but I'm trying to be respectful of her feelings. It must be terrible to think of your child as gone and then suddenly find out she's alive. Especially after all this time. I can't imagine what that must be like."

"I suppose," she nodded. "I guess I had this childish dream of her hugging me and

welcoming me into her life.”

“Did you have a good life? Before,” he asked.

“I did. The parents I knew, John and Mary Brooks, or Victor and Angela Portello, whoever they were, were good. I knew that things were different but never guessed as to why.

“Max and Titus said they found memory boxes belonging to my sisters and thought it was strange that they didn’t find one for me. I did have one. It was small, but it was mine. I added things to it over the years.

“They were kind to me when I would do well on a paper or contribute my babysitting money to the family fund. I think they loved me in their own way. But I’ve been thinking a lot about this, a lot. I don’t think they were kidnappers.”

“Honey, you were taken, and they had you. That, by definition, makes them at least accessories to kidnapping,” said Nash.

“Maybe, but they never hurt me, never spanked me, never yelled at me. And we didn’t live in luxury. I don’t understand that at all. If they were paid to take me, wouldn’t someone have paid them well?”

“I suppose so,” frowned Nash.

“Dad was always working two or three jobs, and Mom always worked as well. It was a hard life, but they made it a good life, and I never really noticed that they treated me differently. I was asked to take care of the girls, but that’s because I was the oldest.”

“Then you had a good life?” he asked.

“I did. It wasn’t fancy. It wasn’t filled with debutante balls or glamorous shopping. But I never went without a meal. I was never hit. I always had a roof over my head. I was luckier than many children.”

“This is reason four hundred and twenty-three of why I love you, Jenna. You always see the good in others. You see the good in the world.”

“Don’t you?” she asked with a sad expression.

“No. No, I don’t because I’ve seen much more of the world than you have. I’ve seen war, I’ve seen hatred, I’ve seen violence.” Nash regretted it the moment the word slipped from his lips.

“I’ve seen violence,” she whispered.

“Oh, Jenna. I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know,” she nodded with a pained smile. “I know you didn’t. But if that hadn’t happened to me, I would have never seen violence. If I had never seen violence, I wouldn’t be able to know what true happiness and goodness look like. I don’t wish it on anyone, but I’m glad it happened.”

“Jenna.”

“Not all of it,” she said quickly. “Obviously, not all of it. But I understand better now. Thanks to you, thanks to everyone here, I know what goodness, kindness, love, and compassion look like. I can filter my memories and emotions accordingly.”

Nash kissed her temple and held her tighter. The sun was setting over the bayou, and in spite of the zappers hanging from their porch, the mosquitoes were out in force tonight and ready to carry them away.

“Should we go inside?” she asked quietly.

“If you like,” he nodded.

“Nash. I meant, should you and I go inside for the night? Together.” Nash swallowed and nodded at her. Following her inside, he silently prayed that he wouldn’t do or say anything stupid.

“I’m nervous,” he blurted out. She smiled at him.

“Me too. I’ve heard from my very reliable sources that turning down the lights or just using candlelight can help. You won’t feel so exposed, or I should say I won’t.”

“Whatever you want, Jenna, is what we’ll do.”

Walking around the small space, she lit each candle that was available and turned off the electric lights. The room looked magical, and she had to agree with her sources. It made her feel better.

“What now?” he asked with a smile. Jenna laughed, shaking her head.

“I don’t know. My sources didn’t go much further than this. I guess we could just hold one another. In bed?”

“I think that sounds perfect,” he smiled.

Holding one another in bed turned into talking for hours on end about ridiculous subjects. What’s better, lemon cake or coconut cake? Could Batman defeat Superman? What about Iron Man and Superman? Fish or chicken?

On and on, endless bantering and laughter until she rolled to her side, facing him, and

let her hands wander beneath his shirt. The rippled muscles of his abdomen and soft tufts of hair at the center of his chest made her blush.

Nash didn't move, afraid that he'd send her running.

"Love me," she whispered.

"I already love you, Jenna. Nothing will ever change that."

"Show me."

Controlling his desires was the most difficult thing Nash had ever done. After carefully removing their clothing, he explained everything that he was doing to Jenna's body, ensuring that she didn't panic or become afraid.

He grimaced at the scars on her body, but in fairness, she did the same with the scars on his body. Jenna might have only experienced violent sex, but her instinctual ability to know what to do and how to touch a man impressed Nash.

When the knock on her front door came, Nash thought it was the middle of the night. He looked at her sleeping face and gently rolled from the bed, slipping on his jeans.

Seeing through the glass of the front door, he could tell it was already daylight, and Ghost and Nine stood on the porch.

"Hey," he said in a whisper. "Everything okay?"

"Sorry to wake you, but we had a message early this morning from Claudia St. Martine. She's throwing a ball and wants Jenna and guest to attend."

"That's great, right?"

The two men frowned at him, shaking their heads.

“What’s wrong?”

“We’ll be sending a large team with you. Get dressed and come to the offices. We need to show you what the boys have found.”



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“A ball, madam?”

“Yes. A ball. Like the ones we had ages ago. It’s a celebration. My daughter has been found,” she said, staring at the staff.

“She’s been found?” asked one of the maids.

“Yes, Patricia. Found. As in, we know she’s alive and well. I’ll be throwing a ball. Invite everyone.”

“Yes, madam.”

Claudia turned and walked toward her office, holding her head up and her shoulders back. She knew it would be a shock for everyone. She hadn’t entertained in years, and balls were very much out of fashion.

She didn’t care.

Seated at her desk, she dialed the number she’d been given by the people who’d visited her initially about her daughter.

“I’d like to speak with Gaspar Robicheaux, please,” she said crisply.

“May I say who’s calling?” asked Code.

“Claudia St. Martine.”

She waited patiently as she was placed on hold. With pen and paper, she began to scribble out all the details of what she believed would make a successful ball.

Entertainment. There should be a wonderful band or perhaps a quartet. No. No, young people didn't like quartets any longer. Should they wear gowns or just cocktail dresses? Tuxedos? No, that seemed too formal.

Food. She'd focus on the food. It was the one thing she knew something about. Meats, fish, and cheeses of all varieties, and more pastries than you could possibly find in the world.

Everyone who was anyone would know about this amazing event and be present. Everyone.

"Hello, this is Gaspar Robicheaux," said the voice.

"Ah, yes. The young man with fourteen siblings."

"Yes, ma'am. That's me."

"I'd like to meet my daughter. I'd like for her to come to France, with a guest, if she prefers.

She can stay at my chateau, where I'll be throwing a large ball in her honor.

We must announce to everyone that she's been found, and I'm delighted to introduce her to the world. A few years late, but nevertheless."

"Why the sudden change of heart?" he asked suspiciously.

"A woman reserves the right to change her mind," she said calmly. "I've thought a

great deal about this situation. About the past. I'd like to die knowing that I've met my daughter and everything has righted itself."

"I see. And when would this soiree be scheduled?"

"I'm in the process now. It will take a week or so, even with all the resources that I have."

"I need to ask Jenna," said Gaspar.

"Genevieve. Please don't call her that common name."

"Ma'am, she is Jenna. She has been for over fifty years. If she wants all of us to call her Genevieve, we'll do so. But you don't dictate what that woman is called in public. You lost that right."

"Young man, I sincerely hope that she doesn't decide to bring you as her guest," she said harshly.

"I sincerely hope that she does. Either way, I will be there."

"I said one guest of her choosing. Surely, you won't be the one guest."

"You said one guest. I didn't agree to that, nor will I. We believe someone is still trying to kill Jenna, and we will be protecting her."

"Who is we?"

"Her friends. She has a lot of them, and we're very protective of our sweet Jenna.

So, I will ask her if she wants to come to this party of yours, and if she does, I will

notify you.

But let me be perfectly clear. If there is anything that you're planning that would harm her, I will kill you without a second thought. I have no problem at all doing that."

"I'm sure you don't. I've known men like you my entire life. I'm quite aware of what you're capable of."

"Good. Then we understand one another."

"Perfectly. But if you're worried about her, you might want to give the same warning to Lydia Cipriani."

She hung up and looked up to see one of her bodyguards standing in the doorway.

"Ma'am, he'll notify Ms. Cipriani. She'll know that your daughter is alive."

"Yes. I'm aware."

Gaspar stared at the phone as if wishing he could jump through it. Cipriani was definitely a part of this plot, but he couldn't shake the feeling that St. Martine wasn't innocent in all of it.

He dressed and headed to the office, only to find Ghost, Ian, and Nine already having their coffee.

"What's up?" asked Ian.

"You're not going to believe this."

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“None of that makes any sense,” frowned Nash. “She didn’t want anything to do with her, didn’t even want to see her photo, and now she wants to throw her a grand ball?”

“We agree, brother. There’s something suspicious happening here, and we’re going to need to dig a little more. I can’t remember a time that we’ve struggled finding the information that we needed on someone,” said Ghost.

“It does feel odd,” said Nine. “Who do we know on that side of the pond that might be able to tell us about the families?”

“Not sure,” frowned Gaspar. “Torro’s uncle passed a few years ago. He might know someone.”

“Wait. We know someone. Our friends in Italy at the house we stayed at. They were terrific and seemed to know everyone,” said Ian.

“Let’s give them a call.”

Gathered around the screen, the men dialed the number and waited for a response.

“My friends!” yelled the young man on the screen.

“Enzo, how are you?” smiled Gaspar.

“I am very well, sir. Business is good, and I’m enjoying my life very much.”

“I’m very happy, Enzo. Listen, I hate to get down to business, but I need a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Can you tell me anything about the Cipriani and St. Martine families?” he asked.

“I think I should get my uncle for this.” He stepped away and, a few moments later, returned with his uncle. Gaspar asked him the question again, and Uncle Aldo nodded.

“You certainly pick strange friends,” frowned Aldo.

“They’re not really friends. The St. Martine baby that was kidnapped is a friend of ours.”

“Is? But she’s dead,” he frowned.

“I assure you, she is not.”

“It was all over the news when it happened. Rumors swirled that the Ciprianis had kidnapped the child and murdered her or sold her into a trafficking ring. It was terrible. At the news conferences, Mrs. St. Martine was inconsolable. Her husband seemed cold. Distant. He kept telling her to be quiet, to gather herself together or leave.”

“What a dick,” frowned Nine.

“Yes,” laughed Aldo, “I think you could consider him that. He had quite a reputation for philandering. Many women at a time, sprinkled with a few men. He was known to test his own drug products. Then, when all this happened, he suddenly had legitimate businesses.”

“Maybe the Ciprianis agreed to keep Jenna alive if he backed out of the business. Do

something else but allow them to control the markets.”

“Perhaps,” nodded Aldo. “But Jacques St. Martine is not the kind of man to take orders from a man like Cipriani.”

“What about his wife?” asked Ghost.

“Ah, Lydia. A vicious viper of a woman who would rather kill a man than pay him what he was worth. She was the person feared in their relationship. Not him.”

“Wait, so she was the one doing business with the drug dealers?”

“Yes. She traveled all the time to Africa, South Africa, even Asia to find buyers, dealers, anything to make their business bigger. She wants to rule the world.”

“I see. But not Claudia St. Martine?” asked Ghost.

“She doesn’t want to rule that world,” said Aldo. “She wants to rule the world of fashion, chateaus, parties, and jewels. There was never enough for her. Never. Perhaps it was her way of getting back at Jacques.”

“The Ciprianis never had children, and the St. Martines only had the one daughter, correct?” asked Nine.

“That’s right. Rumors had it that Jacques had, what do you call them, SMZs.”

“SMZs?” frowned Ian. “Do you mean STDs? Sexually transmitted diseases?”

“Yes. Yes, that’s it. Rumor said he’d caught many things from his partners, possibly even HIV or AIDs. That was why they only had one child.”

“Damn,” muttered Ghost.

“What about the Ciprianis? Why no children?” asked Ian.

“Again, only rumors, but everyone assumed it was because she was too mean. She was selfish, gone all the time. I think she could not have children. Nothing to base that on, just a thought.”

“And Cipriani’s brother? What about him? They said he died in a plane crash carrying drugs. Accident or intentional?”

“I think in their world, nothing is accidental. Anthony Cipriani was very, very close to his brother. South Africa and Africa were dangerous places for drug dealers at that time.”

“Why would he send him then?” asked Ghost.

“He didn’t. Lydia did. They were caught on film arguing at the graveside of his brother. You couldn’t hear what was being said, but photos were taken and sold to the papers. Suddenly, the newspaper shut down, the photos were lost, and no one knew where they went.”

“Holy shit, what have we found ourselves in the middle of?” asked Gaspar.

“A mess, my friends. I would not trust either woman, but you know that. They have no one left in their families. Single women with no one. Widows.”

“That’s not true,” said Nine. “Genevieve is alive, and she’d like to meet her mother.”

Aldo nodded but pursed his lips.



“What do you want to say, Aldo?” asked Ian.

“Do you remember the stories of terrible mothers in fairytales?” The men nodded at him. “Keep those in mind as you meet these women.”

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Jenna was making coffee and cleaning up the kitchen, humming to herself as she did so.

Her first night of lovemaking with Nash was more than she could have possibly hoped for.

Fearful that the nightmare of what happened to her would ruin the moment, she was able to use the tools that Ashley and Bree had given her and pushed the nightmares and fears aside.

This was Nash. Not some random biker who only wanted to hurt her. This was a man that was loving and kind. She could see that very clearly, and it kept her steady all night.

When she woke to find him gone, she didn't panic. She knew that he usually woke early and went for a run or met with the team at the office. It gave her time to shower and change, getting ready for their day.

Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she stepped out onto the porch and enjoyed the steamy morning air. In the afternoon, it would become stifling, but right now, it was tolerable. In fact, Jenna appreciated the warmth compared to the chill of the air-conditioned house.

A few moments later, she saw Nash walking toward her with Ian, Ghost, Nine, and Gaspar. At first, she smiled. Then she saw the serious expressions and stood.

“What's wrong? What happened?” she asked.

“It’s alright,” smiled Nash. “Jenna, we contacted your biological mother, and at first, she didn’t want to see you.”

“I see. So, it was more than just looking at the data you gave her. Well, I guess it was quite a shock for a woman her age. I can understand that,” she said with a sad expression.

“That was at first,” said Ian. “She contacted us this morning and said she wants to throw a ball in your honor. In France.”

“What? No. No, I don’t want to go to a ball or be the center of attention. I just want to meet her.”

“We felt certain you would feel that way, but she insisted. The thing is,” said Nine, “we think there’s something else at play here. Lydia Cipriani says she had nothing to do with your kidnapping and now all this strange behavior from your mother. We don’t like it.”

“What should I do? I mean, I’d like to meet her. Just once.”

“We can’t tell you what’s right or wrong,” said Gaspar. “What I can tell you is that you won’t do anything alone. If you go. We go.”

“I damn sure go,” said Nash.

“Why didn’t she want to see me?” she whispered.

“She wasn’t sure it was real,” said Gaspar. “She asked to have all the evidence we had and that she was going to have her team review it. I guess she did that.”

“Is there a possibility I’m not this child? Genevieve St. Martine?”

“No, honey. It’s for sure,” said Ian. “There’s no doubt. You can fool a lot of things but not DNA.”

“Okay. Okay, then I think we should go. I just want to ask this woman why she gave up on me after only a few weeks. I want the opportunity to see her face, to see if I look like her.”

“A little,” smiled Gaspar. “I didn’t see a lot of you in her, but there was some. If you want my honest opinion, you’re much prettier than she is.”

“You’re being very nice,” she smiled. “Don’t worry about me, Gaspar. I honestly don’t expect much. She’s old, and she doesn’t want the memories of what she once had. I don’t understand that because I was never a mother.

“I can say that I don’t believe I could ever hold my child, have it stolen from me, and not move heaven and earth to find that child again. I’m just not built that way.”

“Neither are we,” said Nine. “I’m not an expert in these things, but you’re going to need a new wardrobe for this little trip. We want our Jenna to let the world know that she’s something special. Because you are.”

“We called Gwen to come to the cabin for some measurements and fittings. She said she has several dresses and gowns that will be perfect for this. You worry about what to wear for the trip, and we’ll worry about everything else. Okay?” smiled Gaspar.

“Okay. So Nash will go with me. Who else?” she asked tentatively.

“The four of us. Kane, Max, Titus, Antoine, Gabe, Alec, Taylor, Trak, and our wives.”

“That’s a lot of people,” she frowned.

“Yep. Because you’re important. We’re not going to risk anything happening to you.”

“Thank you all for this. I don’t know what will happen, but I feel as though this will allow me to close this chapter of my life.

No matter, this is my home, and I will be coming back here.

” She kissed Nash’s cheek and picked up her coffee mug.

“Anyone else want more coffee.” They all laughed, nodding. But it was Ghost that spoke up first.

“Silly question, woman. We always want coffee.”

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With a wardrobe that a supermodel would have been proud of, Jenna felt ready to head to Paris. She had no idea what to expect from her biological mother and not a clue as to what to expect from the ball.

“Where are we going?” she asked as they headed toward the runway in the large caravan of ATVs.

“We have a private airport for our planes,” smiled Nash.

“Planes? As in plural?”

“Yes,” he laughed. “Again, our technology here is superior to just about anyone on the planet. We have helicopters, airplanes, and hybrids of helicopters and planes that no one has seen. They’re equipped with safety and communications equipment that will protect anyone on board.”

“This is amazing,” she said, gasping as the plane came into view. “It looks like a commercial jet but sleeker, if that makes sense.” Nash nodded, agreeing with her summation.

“I know what you mean. I was shocked when I saw all of this initially, as well. Come on. Let’s get boarded.”

“What about our luggage?” she asked.

“The luggage will be put on board, don’t worry.” He took her hand and boarded with the other couples, happy that Jenna was comfortable enough that she happily sat with

the other women, laughing and talking.

“This is my first time anywhere other than here and Arizona,” she grinned. “I can’t believe I’m going to France. I’m excited but nervous, too.”

“It’s okay to be nervous,” said Erin. “Maybe this can help you to finally get some answers that you really need and want.”

“I hope so,” she nodded. “I’m not even sure what answers I want. I guess I’ll start with why she gave up so quickly in finding me. I’m not a mom, but I can definitely say that if any child I knew were kidnapped, I wouldn’t give up.

“I remember one of the girls that had run from the Flaming Skulls was very young, only fifteen. She just wanted to go home, but I couldn’t find her family. I called all the numbers she had, asked police to visit their home, everything I could think of.”

“What happened?” asked Alexandra.

“They’d moved. They packed up everything and left their town, moving to another state without leaving any forwarding information. Police actually thought they had something to do with the disappearance of their daughter.

“When we finally found them, I thought it would be this tearful, loving reunion, but it wasn’t. They looked at her and called her ‘soiled.’ Can you believe that? Who would look at their child and call them soiled?”

“You’d be surprised,” said Lauren. “We’ve had to deal with a lot of young women and young men who were trafficked, abused, kidnapped, all of it. Sometimes parents just can’t get past what happened to them.”

“That’s true,” said Faith. “And unfortunately, sometimes, some people weren’t meant

to be parents. They don't care what happens to their children, and when something does happen, it's almost a relief for them. It's horribly sad.

“When Kelsey disappeared, I was so distraught I could barely think for myself. Ian knew right away that something was wrong and sent Noa to find her. It was the best decision of our lives. Noa, that huge, massive, big-hearted Hawaiian cared for her in a way I might not have been able to at the time.”

“Why not?”

“Honey, I was so distressed I don't think I could have focused on what was important. Noa, all of these men have this ability to care for the human but also protect from evil. It's a wonderful thing to possess.”

“I've seen that with all of these men. Especially with Nash, obviously. He's been so protective of me. It's funny that we spent all those years together as kids, and nothing transpired. Both of us were so shy, so careful to not ruin our friendship, we nearly missed the chance to have more.”

“But you didn't,” smiled Grace. “You didn't miss your chance. We're all very proud of you for taking the steps you have, for claiming him as yours.”

“Claiming? Is that the right thing to say?” she frowned.

“I think it's the perfect thing to say,” laughed Alexandra. “I'm going to share some old-guard, old-girl advice with you. Advice that Erin gave to all of us and that helped me personally.

“These men, these men protect so fiercely, so devoutly it's all-consuming.

And they love the same way. All-consuming.



It's remarkable to watch and a blessing to be a part of it.

If you want my advice, don't question anything.

Just let yourself feel. These are special men, and if you don't mind me saying so, it will sound a bit conceited on my, on our part, but it takes special women to be with them. ”

“Special,” she whispered. “No one has ever called me special. Never. I was an exceptional student, great grades all through school, and yet not one teacher called me exceptional or special. In fact, my seventh-grade English teacher once said I was a good student, but I would never go far if I didn't learn better hygiene. ”

“That's terrible!” cried the women in unison. Jenna nodded.

“Yes. But I understand now why she said it. I didn't understand back then that my clothes weren't very clean.

They were washed but still smelled because my parents couldn't afford laundry soap.

They just washed them in water. Also, I was becoming a young lady, and it wasn't explained to me that I had to be extra clean because of that. ”

“Oh, honey, that's terrible,” said Grace. “Listen, if you have any questions at all, we know it's probably too late, but please don't hesitate to speak to any of us. We're all very open about our lives and about being women.”

“I've waited so long for something like this,” said Jenna, shaking her head in awe.

“When I was at the convent, speaking about things like this was forbidden. I mean, obviously, we didn't speak about men or sex, but even talking about periods or

menopause was frowned upon.

We were supposed to ignore and suffer in silence. ”

“Forget that!” laughed Lena. “We celebrate being women and all the aches, pains, horrible, terrible shit that we have to go through. We talk about everything, and I do mean everything. Don’t be afraid to talk to us, Jenna. About anything.”

“Thank you all. It was really helpful to have Charlies’ books,” she blushed. “That woman definitely knows how to write about sex. It helped me more than can I ever express to her.”

“I’m sure she’d be thrilled to know that.” Lissa stood and walked toward the galley, walking back with a tray of glasses filled with champagne.

“Well, we’re going to France, we’re celebrating Jenna. I think we should toast to women.”

“Here, here,” smiled Erin. “To Jenna. The newest member of our crazy girl troupe.”

“And we’re thrilled to have you,” smiled Aislinn. “Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

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The benefits of traveling with the Gray Wolf team were that the planes not only traveled faster but also had amenities that other planes did not. Everyone had changed into different clothes, ready to meet the grand dame, Claudia St. Martine herself.

Opting to drive themselves, unsure of St. Martine's motives, they rented a large passenger bus and drove to their hotel first, then prepared to change into their evening attire. At the check-in desk, the concierge handed Gaspar an envelope.

"What is it?" asked Ian.

"It's from Claudia. She's demanding to see Jenna alone one hour before the event is to begin."

"We can't let her do that. That woman isn't trustworthy. I just know it," said Ian.

"I know that as well, but shouldn't we give Jenna the opportunity to say yes or no?" He stared at Nash, who shook his head.

"Nope. I'll take the heat for this, but nope. I don't like any of this. The minute we landed, I could feel something is going to go terribly wrong."

"I feel it too," said Kane.

"Shit. Maybe we should pack up and leave," said Nine.

"No," said Gabe.

“No? Gabe, you have to give more than that. I love you, but you’re sounding more like Pops every day. Those one-word responses won’t fly.”

“No. We can’t leave. Jenna needs to play this entire scene out, or she’ll always wonder. She can’t be left alone with St. Martine. Make sure everyone knows that. Also, I’m fairly certain that Cipriani is here.”

“Fuck me,” muttered Ghost. “Everyone, gear up beneath your suit. Don’t leave anything behind. That includes the wives.”

“What shall I tell Madame St. Martine?” asked the concierge.

“Tell her that we reject her early arrival. We will be there at the appropriate time.”

“Sir, I’m not sure—”

“I don’t give a damn if you’re sure. We are sure. We will arrive at her chateau at the appointed time,” said Nine.

“Yes, sir.”

Two hours later, the group stood in the lobby, ready to depart. The women looked positively stunning with their evening attire and jewels and were gorgeously styled for the event.

The men didn’t look so bad either. All were wearing custom-made suits that only served to highlight their amazing shapes.

“Mine is tight,” frowned Tailor.

“Me too,” said Alec.

“That’s because neither of you listens to me about diet,” said Lena. “You’ve put weight on.”

“Babe, it’s all muscle,” smiled Tailor.

“You will never learn. Stay away from the sweets table tonight,” she frowned.

“But, honey,” he called, following her to the cars. Although they had the large van, they were going to arrive in style, renting multiple limousines to carry the group to the chateau.

“I’m so nervous,” said Jenna, wringing her hands in her lap. Aislinn reached for her, holding her hands as she smiled.

“It’s alright,” she started. A momentary look passed over her face, and she pulled back.

“Babe? Aislinn, are you okay?” asked Kane.

“S-someone. Someone is going to try and hurt her tonight,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry. Did you say something?” asked Jenna.

“She’s just getting a little headache,” said Kane. “Did everyone hear that?”

He got the confirmation that all those on comms heard Aislinn’s prediction. A prediction that was never wrong.

Jenna excitedly looked out the windows as the chateau came into view. Even the team was impressed at the size and scope of the massive home.

“Holy shit,” muttered Alec. “That’s more of a castle than a chateau. The St. Martines definitely like their luxuries.”

The women were carefully helped from the vehicles, lining up to enter the chateau. When the enormous double doors opened, Claudia St. Martine stood waiting, frowning at them.

She wore a gold sequined dress, a massive yellow diamond hanging from her neck. On her ears were matching pendant earrings and, gracing her head full of white hair, a crown.

“A fucking crown,” mumbled Gaspar. “Who the hell does she think she is?”

“As I recall,” she said through tight lips, “I asked to meet my alleged daughter privately an hour ago.” Jenna said nothing, staring at the woman.

“And as I recall,” said Gaspar, “I told you she would not be alone at this event. We just flew in, and everyone needed rest and time to dress for your grand ball.”

“Still defiant,” she growled, staring at Gaspar.

“If you’ll excuse me,” said Jenna, walking closer. “All I wanted was to meet my biological mother. I don’t want anything from you.”

“Good.” Jenna felt as though she’d been slapped. She took a step backward, and Nash started to move forward. Jenna gripped his arm.

“It’s alright, Nash. I expected that we would look alike,” Jenna said calmly, following the woman who had already turned to walk into another room. It was obviously a private room meant for just them. On a large grand piano were several photos, and Jenna stared at them.

“This is you as a young woman,” smiled Jenna. “Beautiful.”

“Yes. I was quite beautiful.”

“I don’t see our resemblance other than our nose,” she said quietly. The others just watched as she stared at the photos. Finally, she stopped at one, picking it up.

“Put that down.”

“Who is this?” she asked. “He isn’t the man in your wedding photo. Who is he?”

“Put that down!”

“Answer me,” said Jenna firmly.

“I can tell you, my dear,” said another older woman walking into the room. “That’s my husband.”

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“Your husband. Who are you?”

“Lydia Cipriani. Perhaps it’s time she knew it all,” said the woman, staring at Claudia.

“Shut up, Lydia. You weren’t invited to this ball.”

“I was invited in your very covert way, darling. As you always did things.”

“Will someone just tell us what the hell is happening here?” asked Nash.

“It’s quite simple. This whore was sleeping with my husband because her own was infested with disease,” sneered Lydia. “Anthony was so smitten with you he would have given you the world. And he did. He gave you a daughter.”

“If you loved him, why did you not try to find me?” asked Jenna.

“Find you?” laughed Lydia. “She had you kidnapped. She hired those pathetic people to care for you and keep you away.”

“Wh-why? I don’t understand. Why would you do that? You let your only child live away from you, grow up in another home? Why? No money, not a decent home, no education?” Jenna stared at the woman, who only stared back in silence. “I deserve to know!”

Her scream echoed in the cavernous room, and even Claudia jumped.



“He couldn’t leave Lydia as we planned, and Jacques refused to divorce me. We were trapped in loveless, horrible marriages. I looked at you and only saw him. It was a reminder every day of what I couldn’t have.”

“But you had me!” yelled Jenna.

“Oh, that’s not all,” said Lydia. “Tell her the rest.”

“I despise you,” said Claudia, staring at the old woman.

“Same.”

“Anthony put you in his will. If Lydia dies, everything, all of his businesses as they are today, go to you.”

“What?Why?”

“Because you’re his only heir.”

“But why would that anger you? Isn’t that what you want, for your daughter to have it all? All of it?” asked Kane.

“She’s not quite that generous,” said Lydia. “If I die, everything goes to Genevieve. But if Genevieve and I are both dead...”

“It goes to Claudia,” said Erin.

“Yes. It goes to me, as it should. I would sell every business, every building, all of it. I would have endless amounts of money and riches. With everyone in the world believing that Genevieve was dead, I had all of it free and clear.”

“Lady, you’re eighty-seven years old. You won’t live long enough to spend it.”

“It won’t matter. I’ll have it. There is never enough. Never.”

“I want to make sure I understand this,” said Jenna quietly, standing in front of the two old women.

“You had an affair with her husband, resulting in me.

The only child between the two of you. Instead of recognizing that I could carry on your family legacies, both of them, you made the horrible decision to have me kidnapped and taken away, declaring me dead.

“I live more than fifty years in the states without knowing anything. My protectors, kidnappers, whatever you call them have no money, no education, and cannot provide for me in the way they should have been able to. Then, I’m attacked, and somehow you found out.”

“You left the convent. That’s how I found out.”

“So, you knew I was in a convent?”

“Who do you think suggested that to the stupid priest and to Victor? It was me. You’d be safely tucked away, no spouse, no children, no knowledge of who you really were. Then you decided to become savior to those whorish girls.”

Jenna took one step forward and slapped Claudia so hard she fell backwards onto the sofa.

“Those young girls were kidnapped, raped, beaten, and tortured. They were not whorish. From the sound of this story, you were the whore. Both of you. Because I

highly doubt that you were innocent in any of this, Lydia.”

“I wasn’t,” she said, lifting her chin. “I admit that. I was more concerned for our businesses than Anthony. He was only concerned for her. And you.”

“He knew about me?”

“He knew. He was devastated when you were kidnapped. She thought it would bring them closer. Instead, it drove them apart. She wanted to leave and go somewhere, just the two of them. He wanted to find you. So, she devised a plan that would make it look as though you were dead.”

“After just a few weeks? You must have paid a pretty penny for that,” said Ghost. He saw the shame in Claudia’s face and knew. “You didn’t pay them what you said you would, did you?”

“I paid them. For a few years and then stopped. It no longer mattered after a few years. They’d fallen in love with the child by that time.”

“Where is the will?” asked Jenna.

Lydia and Claudia both stared at the woman, frowning. Lydia was the first to reach for it, handing her a copy.

“You just happened to have that with you?” growled Gaspar.

“Call it women’s intuition,” smirked Lydia.

Jenna walked toward the others, each of them looking at it. In the corner of the room, Trak stared at the two old women, making them squirm in their seats.

Handing Jenna a pen, she wrote several sentences on the will and signed it, then handed it to the others to sign. When she turned, she tossed it to Lydia.

“There. I’ve declined my inheritance. When you’re both dead, which at this moment I hope is very, very soon, the entire estate will be divided and sent to multiple charities.

My friends have witnessed my request, and it’s been signed.

If the lawyers need anything else, have them contact us. ” Jenna turned, headed to the door.

“Where are you going? I’ve planned this ball for you. You cannot leave!” said Claudia.

“Oh, I’m leaving, and I will never set foot in this horrible place again. Not that you were going to leave me anything, but when you die, again, I hope soon, burn it to the ground, or I will.”

Nash smirked at his beautiful girl as they left the chateau, passing dozens of partygoers coming in. Gaspar and Nine stood in front of the old women.

“Advice? Hell, I’ll give it anyway,” said Gaspar. “Just poison one another and be done with your miserable feud. You’ve wasted your lives and could have been enjoying that beautiful woman related to both of you.”

Gaspar and Nine walked away as Lydia and Claudia just stood staring at the empty room. They nearly had heart attacks when they heard the deep baritone voice.

“If you do not poison one another, I will be happy to come back and do it for you. In fact, I may do it anyway,” said Trak. He pushed through the two women, knocking them both back down to the sofas, shaking in fear.

When he stepped outside, the others were waiting.

“All good?” asked Ian.

“It will be.”

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Deciding not to waste a trip to France, they talked about travel plans as they sat in the café outside their hotel, still dressed in their finery. The team was laughing and enjoying themselves. Even Jenna.

“Are you sure you’re okay, honey?” asked Nash.

“You know, I think I’m better than I’ve ever been. I had a feeling she wasn’t going to like me. I never dreamed she was behind my kidnapping, but I don’t even care anymore. I’ve found my life, Nash. Here with you and all of our friends.”

“I’m very glad to hear that.”

For eight days, they traveled around France, visiting historic sites and eating themselves into oblivion. When they finally returned home, it was the new start that Nash had hoped for.

Their announcement to the Belle Fleur team upon their return was not surprising. While in France, they’d eloped with their small group of friends watching. Nash and Jenna were truly starting their new life together.

“Thank you for making me the happiest man on earth,” he said, kissing his new bride.

“Nash, you never gave up on me. On us. I’m so happy to be starting our lives together, and it gives me time to think about my new class I’ll be teaching in the fall. I can’t wait to get back to teaching.”

Nash and the others were enjoying their return meal in the cafeteria when they saw

Trevon speaking to Millicent. She still couldn't look him in the face when they were speaking, but the gentle giant didn't balk.

“I hope they're okay,” said Jenna.

“Honey, if I know anything at all, at Belle Fleur, they'll be okay.”

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“How long have you been working in restaurants?” asked Sara.

“All my life,” whispered the woman.

“I’m sorry, Millicent, I can’t hear you,” she smiled.

“All my life. I’ve worked in kitchens since I was seven.”

“Seven? Did you cook with your mother? Grandmother?” she asked the woman.

“N-no.”

“Millicent, I just need to be sure that you can cook. If you’re in trouble, if you need help, our team can help you with whatever it is.”

“I-I can cook something for you.”

“Alright,” said Sara. “This is the kitchen you would be in every day. Use whatever you like, and I’ll wait outside in the dining room.”

Sara, George, and Mama Irene walked out of the room and left the woman to prepare something for them.

“That girl is in trouble,” said George.

“I know she is, but I can’t make her tell me. What do we do about backgrounds? I’m concerned that if I tell her we need to do a background check on her, she’ll



disappear,” said Sara.

“You let me handle that,” said Irene. “I’ll make sure it’s all good.”

An hour later, Millicent appeared with a plate of shrimp and cheddar grits with a side of cornbread. The three interviewers took a bite, moaning as it slid down their throats.

“That is delicious,” grinned George.

“I couldn’t agree more,” smiled Sara.

“You’re hired,” said Irene. “And it comes with a cottage right here on property.” George and Sara looked at Irene but didn’t defy her.

“A cottage? I can live here?” asked Millicent.

“You will live here, child. You will.”