

SIREN
Publishing

Ménage Everlasting

WHEN YOU HAVE EVIL TO OVERTHROW,
YOU NEED TO CALL IN THE DRUNK MONKEYS.

DRUNK MONKEYS 3
**MONKEY
WRENCH**
TYMBER DALTON

Monkey Wrench

When you have evil to overthrow, you need to call in...the Drunk Monkeys.

Stacia Rooney is worried her older brother is being brainwashed for a suicide mission by the Church of the Rising Sunset. When she has a run-in with the Drunk Monkeys, they unfortunately agree with her assessment.

Quack and Lima think it might already be too late to help Stacia’s brother escape whatever evil project Reverend Silo has cooked up, but they need her help to get more information. They suspect it’s part of a larger plan to spread the deadly Kite virus across the United States and speed up the apocalypse.

Whatever’s going on, Quack and Lima know two things for certain. One, Stacia belongs with them. And two, they are going to throw an explosive monkey wrench into Reverend Silo’s plans. The question is, will the world come crumbling down around them when two of them are exposed to Kite?

NOTE: This book contains an instance of dubious consent involving a secondary character. It is not described in detail or intended for titillation.

Genre: Futuristic, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Science Fiction

Length: 62,663 words

MONKEY WRENCH

Drunk Monkeys 3

Tymber Dalton

MENAGE EVERLASTING



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Everlasting

MONKEY WRENCH

Copyright © 2014 by Tymber Dalton

E-book ISBN: 978-1-63258-142-6

First E-book Publication: August 2014

Cover design by Les Byerley

All art and logo copyright © 2014 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

Letter to Readers

Dear Readers,

If you have purchased this copy of *Monkey Wrench* by Tymber Dalton from BookStrand.com or its official distributors, thank you. Also, thank you for not sharing your copy of this book.

Regarding E-book Piracy

This book is copyrighted intellectual property. No other individual or group has resale rights, auction rights, membership rights, sharing rights, or any kind of rights to sell or to give away a copy of this book.

The author and the publisher work very hard to bring our paying readers high-quality reading entertainment.

This is Tymber Dalton's livelihood. It's fair and simple. Please respect Ms. Dalton's right to earn a living from her work.

Amanda Hilton, Publisher

www.SirenPublishing.com

www.BookStrand.com

DEDICATION

I couldn't do what I do without the love and support of my husband. He holds down the fort and takes care of the furbabies and keeps me in food and clean clothes while I'm writing what "the voices" tell me to.

I also couldn't do this without my wonderful readers who buy my books. Thank you, all of you, for your love and support. I appreciate you so much!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is book three in the Drunk Monkeys series and focuses on Quack and Lima. The books in the series are best read in order. All titles are available from Siren-BookStrand.

Table of Contents

Title Page	
Copyright Page	
Dedication	
Author's Note	
Chapter One	
Chapter Two	
Chapter Three	
Chapter Four	
Chapter Five	
Chapter Six	
Chapter Seven	
Chapter Eight	
Chapter Nine	
Chapter Ten	
Chapter Eleven	
Chapter Twelve	
Chapter Thirteen	
Chapter Fourteen	
Chapter Fifteen	
Chapter Sixteen	
Chapter Seventeen	
Chapter Eighteen	
Chapter Nineteen	
Chapter Twenty	
Chapter Twenty-One	
Chapter Twenty-Two	
Chapter Twenty-Three	
Chapter Twenty-Four	
Chapter Twenty-Five	
Chapter Twenty-Six	
Chapter Twenty-Seven	
Chapter Twenty-Eight	
Chapter Twenty-Nine	
Chapter Thirty	
Chapter Thirty-One	
Chapter Thirty-Two	

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)
[About the Author](#)

MONKEY WRENCH

Drunk Monkeys 3

TYMBER DALTON

Copyright © 2014

Chapter One

“That damn, batshit crazy asshole fucker in charge there in Pyongyang is the one who stirred the shitpot. Then Beijing made him lick the goddamned spoon and nuked his fucking ass. Problem is, when they did that—not saying they weren’t justified, mind you—our first and best chance to reverse-engineer this clusterfuck went up in a mushroom cloud. All the rest of us could do was fucking bend over and pray for lube and a reacharound.”

—Gen. Robert K. McCammon (*Our Last History?* by Willard M. Sterling. Interview date May, 2143)

“In the time since we first became aware of the virus, and the subsequent events that have followed, we’ve come to understand that we have no idea why, much less how, they [North Korea] created it. Unfortunately, when Beijing wiped Pyongyang off the map, they also wiped out any hope we had of creating an effective vaccine in a timely manner to prevent transmission to a majority of the world’s population. It’s estimated that within another five years, over ninety percent of the world’s population will either be dead or infected unless we get lucky and figure it out.”

—Dr. Arnold P. Almer, CDC (*Our Last History?* by Willard M. Sterling. Interview date April, 2143)

“In terms of [Kite, the drug’s] addictive nature, it makes meth look like baby aspirin.”

—Kimberly Coates, PhD, University of Florida (February, 2143)

“Well, fuck.”

—President Charlotte Kennedy’s reported reaction upon learning that China authorized the use of nuclear weapons against North Korea on July 29, 2142, in response to Pyongyang allowing thousands of people they supposedly infected with the Kite virus to flood across the border into China several days earlier.

“The Drunk Monkeys? Those crazy motherfuckers don’t exist. And boy, are they good at what they do. Thank god.”

—Gen. Joseph Arliss (June, 2143)

* * * *

Long story short...

From Australia, to Hawaii, to Mexico, and now Los Angeles. It’s May, 2143, ten months since TMFU—The Massive Fuckup—and only a week since we last left the Drunk Monkeys special ops team on their quest to save the world.

For the past several weeks, the men—and now women—of the Drunk Monkeys have been busy little...

Well, monkeys.

And, good news, one mole was brought down and taken out of commission in Mexico City. Unfortunately, doing so uncovered the fact that there is actually a second mole in the food chain between the Drunk Monkeys and four-star General Joseph Arliss, their direct commander.

And it’s a two-star general of a mole.

To say that little factoid complicates things on their end is a major understatement.

General Arliss still has the Drunk Monkeys operating off-the-grid and remaining in hiding. Oh yeah, along the way they’ve located two people from The List, scientists who were part of the team which developed the Kite virus for North Korea in the first place.

That would be before China made North Korea go *boom* in a spectacularly radioactive mushroom cloud of dust.

AKA TMFU.

Those two scientists are now in the process of working to develop a vaccine for the Kite virus.

The men of the Drunk Monkeys have also added two women to their group along the way. They’ve become valuable additions to their team. Pandora, who is an item with partners Doc and Tango, and Clara, a nurse practitioner who hitched her wagon to twin brothers Yankee and Oscar.

Now, they’re all trying to locate a third person from The List and bring them safely into hiding with them. Meanwhile, there’s a certain troubling development that’s caught their attention regarding what appears to be a church-run research project that might or might not be designed to spread Kite in the United States.

Oh. Almost forgot. There’s also Reverend Hannibal Silo to deal with, head of the Church of the Rising Sunset. He is still on his megalomaniacal quest to secure the Kite vaccine for himself, so he can control its distribution, become President of

the United States, and destroy the rest of the world's population so he can personally help repopulate it.

Yeah, he's nuts.

And away we go...

* * * *

The monkeys have been on the move again...

Lima didn't like sitting around and not making any progress in their mission. Despite nearing the end of their first week at their safe house in the Los Angeles compound, the Drunk Monkeys weren't any closer to locating the next person on The List, or finding out exactly what nefarious plots, if any, Reverend Silo's church was cooking up.

Bubba, their backdoor intelligence contact in Chicago, was furiously trying to dig up something, *anything*, that would give them a better idea of Silo's plans. So far, he'd been unable to hack into the church's computer system in general, or the church's Los Angeles facility in particular.

And considering Bubba's advanced skills and wide network of intelligence contacts, he found that highly suspicious, to say the least.

On the other hand, Bubba thought he had finally secured a solid lead that might reveal the location of Dr. Riley Perkins, a chemist, from The List. It looked like Perkins had definitely traveled to the Los Angeles area. Her exact whereabouts however, still remained a mystery.

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

The building they were now using as their safe house had, until just a few months earlier, been a small private school of only twenty classrooms. It had closed down when the rich parents withdrew their children en masse in response to the risk of Kite infections.

Even better, the building came equipped with a fully functioning chemistry lab that Q and Sin had taken over to continue their work trying to develop a Kite vaccine.

The two women who'd joined the team, Pandora and Clara, were just glad to have air-conditioning and indoor plumbing after their time on the road.

One of the other men had snagged them a TV. Lima, their unit's communications and computer expert, hacked a sat-link cable TV connection. Lima ran the cable connection into the former cafeteria, which they were using as their dining area, planning area, weapons cleaning area, and general socializing area.

Pandora and Clara sat in chairs in front of the dark TV while Lima worked his magic. Some of the men from the group who weren't napping or standing watch, came in to observe. Normally, Clara would be in the lab helping Q and Sin with their research, but the two doctors were currently pouring through new information they'd received that morning from one of their fellow teammates from The List who was in hiding at an undisclosed location elsewhere in the world.

Lima hit the power button on the TV remote and the screen flashed to life.

The women let out a cheer. "Let's see what's on," Clara said.

The first channel he landed on showed Reverend Hannibal Silo giving a sermon.

Both women booed. "Yeah, if that's all you got," Clara said, "shut the damn thing off."

"Hold on," Lima said. "Give me a second." Three channels later and he'd found the local news.

The sound of it even drew Papa and Alpha, their unit's commander and second-in-command, and Uncle, the eldest member of their team.

The reporter was detailing another deadly riot that had broken out in the western part of the area, near the old LAX international airport complex. Buildings that had miraculously survived previous riots were now ablaze, while deputies, police, and firefighters attempted to fend off rioters and tried to do their job to stop the fires from spreading.

Clara chewed on her thumbnail. "How far away from us is that?"

One of her men, Yankee, stood behind her. He rested a hand on her shoulder. "Close enough to keep tabs on, but far enough we don't need to worry about it. Not right now, anyway. That's at least fifteen miles from us."

"Is that the smoke I saw this morning?" Pandora asked. She'd discovered the building's roof had been used for gardening projects by the school. She now spent a few hours every day up there tending to the neglected plants that had survived.

"Probably," Quack said.

Quack was Lima's partner. The twenty men of the Drunk Monkeys SOTIF unit were paired in two-man buddy teams. Each man had a code name. When the two women, and the two scientists, were added to their group, they were also issued code names by the group. Lima was Devin Mercado, who'd been in the military for ten years, ever since he was eighteen. The

last four of those years he'd spent serving with the Drunk Monkeys. Quack was Cody Velez, just a few months older than Lima at twenty-nine.

Lima handed Clara the remote. "Here you go. Enjoy."

"You're not going to watch with us?"

"Nope. I've got to go check in with Bubba and see if he has anything new for us."

Bubba was Pandora's friend and boss in the research department at Chicago Metro Media. He was also a computer hacker and former military intelligence, and now their only guaranteed secure line of communication to General Arliss. Bubba had served with Arliss during his time in the military years earlier.

Lima swung through the kitchen to grab himself a banana before heading down the hallway to the classroom on the first floor that he and Quack were using as their quarters. He'd set up all his equipment on the teacher's desk, and they'd shoved the students' desks against the far wall to give them plenty of room for their bedrolls. It was nice to finally be able to spread out after weeks of cramped quarters.

Quack followed him to their room. "Please tell me we're going to be doing something soon. *Anything*. I'm going stir crazy."

They were men of action, not men of sitting around. Lima sympathized. With the riots in such close proximity, he wanted to find the next scientist from The List and get the hell out of the area. The safe house might be an ideal work location for Q and Sin, but the area in general was unstable.

"I hope so." Lima powered up his main laptop. "But it's a big damn city," he said. "Even after the earthquakes dropped some of it into the Pacific Ocean a few decades ago. It's like a small country when you look at the population density. It takes time to find someone who's determined they don't want to be found."

Dr. Riley Perkins was single. Originally from Canada, she had no living family there. When the group from The List made their escape from North Korea into South Korea just days before China nuked their rambunctious neighbor, that was the last any of the others from The List had seen of her. They knew she'd survived, but no one knew where she'd gone. They didn't even know for sure what name her false passport had been under.

She'd logged in to the team's private server a couple of times over the past several months, but she'd been careful enough to conceal her true location by using hacked sat-link ID codes. Q and Sin had left messages on the server when they settled in LA, asking Riley to contact them because they were now together, but so far they'd received no response from her. They didn't know if it was because she hadn't checked the messages, or just wasn't responding because she worried it was a trap.

In fact, none of the other team members from The List had revealed their whereabouts, although a few were still sharing any data they were able to obtain.

Thankfully, Bubba was smarter than Dr. Riley Perkins in terms of hacker sophistication. He was finally able to trace ping trails on the hacked sat-link IDs. They'd all originated from Los Angeles, at free public access points like libraries and coffee shops, all within a five-mile radius.

Hence why they were now here.

Lima also wanted to know why the hell Hannibal Silo had such stringent security on his church's network. Nothing they'd tried so far had allowed them access. It didn't make sense that a non-banking organization as large as that of the Church of the Rising Sunset didn't have at least one backdoor security flaw they could exploit.

Lima found he had a new message waiting for him from Bubba.

Is the new church facility there easily accessible?

Lima didn't know. They hadn't ventured out to it as of yet. They were trying to maintain as low a profile as possible.

He replied.

Unknown. Why?

Bubba replied almost immediately.

Find out. Specifically, access to personnel workstations.

Lima sat back, considering that request. He already suspected he knew where Bubba wanted to go with this.

Roger. Will run past PTB.

The "powers that be" in this case meaning Papa, their unit's leader.

He closed the lid on the laptop and went in search of their leader. Unfortunately, the man was in the men's bathroom, locked in a stall.

Lima knocked on the stall door.

"Fucking *seriously*?" he replied. "There are four other damn toilets in this room, and five in the women's. Use one of them."

"Sorry, no. I need to talk to you."

He let out a sigh. “This better be important.”

“It is.” Lima repeated Bubba’s message.

Now Papa’s tone sounded serious. “Hold on.”

Lima heard the other man hurry up and finish his business. The toilet flushed and Papa emerged from the stall, with his tablet tucked under one arm. He headed for the sinks to wash up. “Let’s go.”

Lima led him back to his room and reestablished the connection with Bubba for him.

After a few minutes of back and forth, with Quack looking on from across the room where he was lying on his bedroll, Papa focused on Lima.

“It needs to be you and Quack who go do this. You’re the one with the necessary computer skills. No one else is really qualified in this department but you. Grab a couple of others, maybe Omega and Echo. Omega’s from this area, and Echo is an expert at disguise. Use them for your logistics and backup.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Lima asked. “Just walk in there and say, ‘Hey, we wanna drink your Jesus juice, so why don’t ya just show us around?’”

“Well, considering we don’t know what their security setup is, it needs to be during the daytime when there are people there. I would suggest walking in and flirting your asses off.”

Quack snorted. “Oh, *sure*. Because that’s just what people go to churches to do, flirt their asses off.” He lifted his head and looked over at their commander. “You sure you ain’t getting soft, sir?”

“The building,” Papa said, using his “instructive” tone with them, “is in a crappy neighborhood. Lots of liquor stores around there. Use your imaginations. Gargle with some cheap booze and follow after a couple of women who go in there and pretend you’re drunker than skunks.” He pointed at Quack. “Takes you ten minutes to grow five o’clock shadow anyway. You’re halfway to looking like a hobo as it is.”

Lima couldn’t help but snort at his partner’s aggravated expression in reply.

But despite their OTG status, neither of them would dare outright challenge their commander. It just didn’t work like that.

Which was another reason they enjoyed the hell out of watching the two women who’d joined their group verbally spar with the man. Vicarious pleasure.

Papa tapped a final reply into the computer before standing. “I want it done by tomorrow or the next day. Don’t put yourselves at any unnecessary risk, but get it done.” He headed toward the door.

Lima thought Quack didn’t know when to shut up sometimes. “Oh, *suuure*,” Quack snarked. “Let’s just walk into a building that might be housing some nefarious Armageddon plan. No risk at all.”

Lima shot him a “shut up” look.

Papa didn’t turn. He lifted his left hand and flipped them a bird. “By tomorrow or the next day at the latest, gents. Coordinate with Omega on anything you need and logistics. Don’t make me make it an order.”

“Yes, sir,” the two of them said.

Quack sat up and looked at Lima. “I suspect this isn’t going to go according to plan.”

“Since when does it ever?”

Chapter Two

Stacia Rooney was sick and tired of Marco's bullshit. She yanked her hardhat off and let it fall to the floor as she stalked down the grated walkway. Despite the asshole having a good six inches and at least eighty pounds on her, she got in Marco's face when he turned at the sound of her shouting his name.

"I asked you, what the *fark's* your problem, Marco?"

He didn't immediately reply. It seemed her direct approach had caught him off-guard so she kept it up, forcing him to take a step backward as she screamed like a crazy person and shook the large, heavy monkey wrench she carried in his face. A month of toting the twenty-five-pound pipe wrench nearly every night had not only toned her arms, but had also given her lean muscles she'd never had before. Now, carrying the wrench felt like carrying a popsicle stick had before she started working the swing shift at the brewery.

"I am sick and tired of your innuendos," she screamed, adrenaline, anger, and a tiny bit of fear all amping her volume. "Of you slapping or pinching my ass when you walk past me. Of you 'accidentally' walking in on me when I've got the bathroom door closed, you fucking monkey. You knock it the fark off or you *will* be going to see a doctor about getting this goddamned wrench surgically removed from your asshole!"

She'd started to swing the wrench at him, but Billy, the lead shift supervisor, had stepped up behind her and grabbed her, pulling her back.

"Come on, Stace," he muttered in her ear. "He's not worth it."

Marco leered at her and grabbed his crotch through his work coveralls. "Geez, you want a piece of me, honey, all you gotta do is ask."

She felt Billy freeze. Then, his restraining grip disappeared. "On second thought," Billy said, "go ahead and clock the fucker. He deserves it."

Despite his height and weight advantage, Marco was also thirty years older than her, and a pack-a-day smoker. When she rushed at him, he wasn't expecting it and tripped on the grate flooring as he tried to scramble back and away from her.

She swung the three-foot-long pipe wrench like a golf club up between his legs, nailing him squarely in the nuts. Around her, she heard a loud chorus of sympathetic "oohs" from her male coworkers, and cheers from the few female ones, even over the sound of the production line running up on the bottling floor just above them.

Marco let out a coughing roar of pain and doubled-up on the walkway, clutching his hands to his crotch. She planted the business end of the wrench on the metal grating with a loud *clang*, right next to his head. Using the wrench as a crutch, she leaned in.

"You're *done*, asshole," she shouted. "Hear me? Next time, I'll catch you alone and cut 'em off. You fuck with me, you are fucking with a special kind of crazy that they don't even write about in textbooks. You understand me?"

He groaned.

She slammed the wrench down again, the sound ringing through the area and making Marco flinch. "You hear me?" she screamed in his face, spittle flying and hitting him in the forehead.

He finally nodded.

She stood and, snatching up her wrench, had turned to head back toward Billy. But when passing Marco, she took one more swing at the fucker's tailbone for good measure, drawing another howl of pain out of him, and more cheers from the onlookers. Reaching down for her hardhat, she settled it on her head before turning to Billy.

"Am I good, boss?"

He nodded. "Yep." He pointed to two of his guys. "Get his farking locker cleaned out and drop his ass out the front gate with all his shit. Confiscate his badge and bring it to me personally. I'll tell HR to send someone out there to meet you with his final paycheck. He doesn't get another chance. He's done."

The men grabbed the still-howling man under his arms and dragged him away.

Then Billy turned to her and dropped his voice. "You get a pass because I saw what he did to you," he muttered, too low for anyone else to hear, "and because I needed an example made out of him once and for all. Don't make me regret I looked the other way this time for you. I know your family needs the money."

She nodded, her heart racing. He turned and spoke to the rest of the crew. "And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how I expect any jerk to be handled who lays a finger on *any* of their coworkers. The days of tolerating that kind of bullshit are over, you understand me? I can go out there and find fifteen people before I walk a damn block who'll be glad to put their asses in this brewery at a fraction of the pay you all are earning right now. Tenure doesn't mean shit to me if you waste company time harassing your fellow employees. Got it?"

Everyone nodded.

“Good. Get back to work. Show’s over.”

Stacia headed back to her station, adrenaline still surging through her veins. She hadn’t meant to do it, to go after Marco. But after weeks of subtle harassment that turned into not-so-subtle harassment, and threats by him to get her fired because he had tenure and she didn’t, she’d snapped.

Yes, her family needed the farking money. Desperately. Which was why she hadn’t reported him before now. She knew it wouldn’t do any good. She’d hoped that by ignoring him he’d move on to more interesting pastures if he couldn’t get a rise out of her.

But Marco had gotten on her last nerve tonight by pinching her ass when he walked past her.

Fortunately for her, Marco hadn’t seen Billy standing right there in the alcove with her, doing his shift rounds earlier than usual and talking with her.

In fact, it was the luckiest damn thing to happen to her in a long, long time. Because if Billy hadn’t been standing right there, it was likely no one else would have stood up to report what Marco had done. She would have lost her job for attacking Marco, and the fucker was just vindictive enough he might have pressed charges against her for it, too.

Then who would have taken care of Aunt Darla?

Her brother Marvin damn sure wouldn’t.

She had to be more careful, rein in her temper. Usually she wasn’t quick to pop off like that, but with all the other stresses piling onto her shoulders, between never-ending money issues and her ditzy brother’s absences lately, Marco had snapped her last nerve.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly let it out again before getting back to work.

I will be a lot more careful.

Chapter Three

By the time Stacia's shift ended at six the next morning, she was worn out, as she always was after a long workday.

Which, right now, was pretty much seven days a week, when she could pull the extra shifts. She took every additional shift she could get them to give her, filling in for people who took a sick day or PTO leave.

The bottling plant was hot down where she worked in the bowels, helping keep the place running as one of their maintenance monkeys.

Even when an apocalypse was brewing, people still wanted their beer.

Thank goodness for that.

The irony that she couldn't afford to drink it was not lost on her.

She couldn't be wasting a couple of dollars on a bottle of beer when those same dollars would buy a pound of beans.

Or some of Aunt Darla's pain meds.

With her surgical mask in place, Stacia trudged down the sidewalk with others just off their shift and heading toward the bus stop that served the south end of Carlkilney Brewing Company's Los Angeles plant. She needed a new mask, because this one, even though cloth, was about worn out. She always wore it when not at home or inside the plant. Everyone got stick tests before they were allowed to enter the plant, proving they were clear of Kite.

As far as she knew, no one at the plant had yet tested blue.

But if the rumors she'd heard were correct, it was only a matter of time before that happened. She wasn't about to take any unnecessary chances with her health. She couldn't afford to get sick and miss work.

She couldn't afford to miss work for *any* reason.

Luckily for her, the company was extremely interested in their profits, which meant making sure they kept a clear workforce running the plant. Billy had already hired a replacement to put in the slot below Stacia that had opened up as a result of Marco's firing and everyone else in line advancing a step.

Turned out tenure couldn't protect the man after all. Not when there was a management witness to what Marco had done to Stacia. The company had zero-tolerance for sexual harassment.

Lawsuits were expensive, after all.

Billy had also ensured not a single damn person would report Stacia's response to Marco's assbattery, so Stacia's job was secure.

And she was now one rung ahead on the ladder at work. The new grunt below her would work their way up, the way Stacia was in the process of working her way up.

Maybe I can finally move out of piping.

When the bus finally showed up, Stacia and her fellow passengers queued and climbed aboard, scanning their bus passes as they did. The driver wore one of their optional full-body protective suits. She'd been seeing more of those lately. There were growing rumors that the busses and trains would soon start stick-testing passengers, but Stacia hadn't seen any signs of that happening yet.

She knew the airlines were doing it, but since there was no way in blue heaven she could ever afford an airline ticket in her damn lifetime on her pay, it didn't really matter to her. That was a rich person's problem.

And while she had a metric shit-ton of problems in her life, being rich was *not* one of them.

Her problems lay in things like bringing home a paycheck so Aunt Darla could keep the rent paid, the lights on, and food in the fridge.

And buy the meds that helped keep Aunt Darla's severe arthritis at bay as much as they could.

If Marvin would get off his farking ass and find a damn job and keep it for more than a week or two, it'd make things a lot easier.

Even though her aunt didn't have the heart to toss Stacia's older brother out on his ear, Stacia was damn close to it herself. If it wasn't for Marvin, they could take in a roommate. A *paying* roommate. Hell, maybe even two, if there were two beds in the room. The small apartment only had two bedrooms. Stacia and her aunt shared one, and Marvin had the other.

I can't believe he couldn't even cut it in the military. Who the fark flunks out of the military?

He'd passed his physicals when he turned eighteen, and then he shipped out to basic training. Stacia had only been sixteen then, and relieved as hell that he was finally gone. She'd seen the problems in him even as a kid, that he was someone devoid of focus and ambition.

She'd hoped, if nothing else, that the military would provide him with training, self-discipline, and a steady paycheck he could send home. At least with her still being underage, they'd been able to get food stamps and she'd still drawn a tiny death benefit from losing their mom.

Then Marvin had returned home two weeks later, unannounced, and said the military had let him go. He had discharge papers, which Stacia had backed him into a corner and forced him to show her to prove he hadn't just given up and gone AWOL.

For good measure, she'd taken them down to the local enlistment office the next day, just to confirm they were legit and he hadn't lied to them about what happened.

They were legit, and he was out. But they wouldn't confirm why he was out, only that he'd been honorably discharged.

Worse, he wasn't even in long enough to earn bennies. If he'd been discharged for an injury, he would have received full bennies. Had he at least been in a year before the discharge, he could have gotten housing discounts, work-school opportunities, hell, even health insurance and a PX card.

But nope. He couldn't even fark up the right way. When he farked something up, he farked it *alllll* the way up, in *the* worst possible way.

At least they'd had his extra food stamp credits and death benefits until he turned eighteen. He'd flunked out of high school at fifteen and had bounced around from part-time job to part-time job, never holding one for more than a few weeks at a time.

I guess I shouldn't have expected any better from him in the military.

Aunt Darla wanted Stacia to be more patient with him. To be more understanding. Their aunt was convinced the deaths of their parents had made Marvin the way he was.

Stacia didn't buy that theory, because it hadn't turned her into a worthless waste of space. She was convinced Marvin just didn't give a flying fark and wanted people to take care of him. Stacia had not only graduated from high school, she'd held part-time jobs from the day she was old enough to get a work permit at fifteen, and had even tried to take a few classes at the local community college.

The problem with that being that she couldn't afford to go to college, *and* work enough hours to pay the bills, *and* afford tuition, *and* have time to study. Her grades in high school, while good, weren't good enough to compete for scholarship money. And unless she stopped working altogether, she couldn't apply for most charity scholarships.

And then their aunt likely would lose the apartment because they wouldn't be able to pay their bills.

Stacia had switched tacks and taken a few vo-tech classes at night for free from the local high school system, enough to give her basic mechanic skills that put her a notch above the average person looking for a job. Until it had closed five months earlier, she'd been working on the line at the local Taimu auto plant as a maintenance tech. But only the rich were buying cars now, and the company wasn't selling enough of them to keep the plant open.

Hell, she'd learned more on that job in the three years she'd spent there than she ever would have learned with a full vo-tech degree.

And it was that on-the-job experience which had landed her the job at the brewery.

Farking Marco.

She'd heard from other women that reporting him did no good. He denied everything, he was buddies with someone in HR, and he always retaliated.

That was why Stacia had tolerated his bullshit as long as she could. She'd almost expected Billy to look the other way, which was part of the reason she'd finally snapped.

Had she known he was going to nail Marco for finally doing something in front of a witness with more pull than Marco had, she would have rethought her approach.

But at that moment, she'd been pissed.

The fark.

Off.

She almost wished they hadn't fired him. It would have been fun making him flinch any time she walked past him, deliberately baiting him into backing down.

Making golf jokes.

As she settled into her bus seat for the nearly hour-long ride back to their apartment, she stared out the window at the cars lining both sides of the streets, parked there. Some still drivable, some not. Some with owners who could afford to drive them on rare occasions, most sitting there with owners who hoped to one day be able to afford to drive them again.

Not many cars sharing the road with the bus in this neighborhood. Stacia never complained about their apartment when she realized she could be living in a neighborhood like this, run-down, crime-ridden, and looking like it had imploded and just not collapsed yet.

It could always be worse.

She just wanted—*needed*—a little respite. No telling what Marvin's excuse de jour would be as to why he couldn't even earn a farking nickel as a panhandler. Hell, sell his blood if he had to.

Anything.

She'd even look the other way without judgment if he wanted to go hustle on the street turning tricks. She wouldn't deny it wasn't the best option, but it was one she'd kept in the back of her own pragmatic mind as a possibility, if worse came to the very, rock-bottom worse.

Their bills had to get paid. Her aunt needed her medication. If Stacia was ever forced to that point of financial desperation, she would do whatever it took, short of breaking the law, to keep money coming in. Prostitution, while not very savory, was at least legal in their state. She certainly wouldn't be the first woman who needed to spread her legs to pay the bills.

And with the way their country's economy had bottomed out, she likely wouldn't be the last.

Starving, or not working, was *not* an option. Not for her. The only shame was in not trying.

Acting weird even by his normal standards, Marvin had spent most of his days over the past two months going to that damn church that had sprung up in their neighborhood four months earlier in a previously vacant grocery store building. Apparently a place run by that televangelist dude.

Barn? No, Silo. That was it.

Silo gave her the creeps any time she saw him on the TV. Even Aunt Darla had once commented that she didn't like him before turning the channel.

Stacia had first wondered if Marvin was going there and trying to sign up for whatever charity programs they might be offering. She knew some churches periodically offered classes like free employment counseling.

Hell, even a food pantry would be great. It'd be less money they'd have to spend at the store on increasingly expensive staples like rice and dried beans. They hadn't had beef in a couple of months. Chicken was the cheapest meat they could get their hands on, and it was something they could stretch over a week or longer, everything from eating the meat, to making stock from the carcass and using that for soup.

But Stacia didn't understand why Marvin kept going there with what seemed to be nothing to show for it. And she hadn't been able to pin him down long enough when he was at the apartment to question him about it.

Some of them had *real* jobs to get to, unlike her brother.

It was after seven in the morning when Stacia punched in her code to unlock the door to apartment 216 and dragged herself inside, locking it behind her. The small front room held their tiny kitchen area, the rickety table and three chairs, a ratty sofa, an old recliner, a dinged-up coffee table, and their TV.

She was glad to see Marvin at least wasn't asleep on the couch with the TV going. She would have kicked his ass for wasting electricity and running up their bill like that.

Hell, maybe I should make him sleep on the couch. Then I could rent out his room anyway.

She peeked in and found him asleep in his room. After a moment of fighting the urge to go in and scream him awake, she pulled his door closed and headed to the bathroom to grab a shower.

Fighting with him likely wouldn't help. It damn sure hadn't helped any in the past.

Maybe I should just rent it out and not tell Aunt Darla. Just do it and force Marvin out. Would serve him right.

At least then she could be sure that Aunt Darla would still get her meds.

After undressing and stepping under the hot water, she decided to let it go for now. She needed food and sleep. Marvin would have to wait until she could deal with that without wanting to kick his ass the way she'd almost kicked Marco's.

Chapter Four

Reverend Hannibal Silo, founder and leader of the Church of the Rising Sunset, impatiently drummed his fingers on the glass top of his desk in his penthouse office in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

He was *not* amused.

There had been no new information received on the whereabouts of the SOTIF1 team, AKA the Drunk Monkeys.

The men who had, thus far, foiled his attempts to get his hands on two members of The List.

All they knew was that Dr. Phe Quong and Dr. Peter McInnis had likely been located by the team and taken into protective custody.

They had not, however, been brought to the United States and turned over as per their last known standing orders from their commander, General Joseph Arliss.

General Arliss was also someone who'd been vexing Silo for a while.

Silo had taken great pains over the years to acquire well-placed contacts and operatives throughout the corporate world, government, and military, sometimes by taking them on as true-believer allies, sometimes by bribery, but usually by extortion, through getting information on them that they didn't wish to become public.

Arliss, however...

Silo stewed.

It was suspected, as best their other contacts could independently discover without drawing suspicion to themselves, that Arliss had somehow given his pet SOTIF team a command to go off-the-grid. No further information on their whereabouts was forthcoming, even though the general had made no official indication that the men's mission, goals, or status had changed.

To get anything else out of Arliss would require a direct order from the President herself. Even the generals running the other SOTIF teams couldn't pry that info out of Arliss if he didn't want to reveal it.

And if that was what it would take, well then, that was what Silo would do.

Meanwhile, he was awaiting word from his right-hand man, Jerald Arbeid, about Jerald's conversation with one Senator Tom Davis from Illinois. The senator had connections inside the CIA. Jerald had traveled to DC to talk to the senator in person.

They'd been dealing with the senator for a while and it was time to start shaking his tree with a little more vigor. They were offering him a chance to skip a couple of his regular monthly extortion payments to Silo in exchange for him snagging Silo a new contact inside Homeland Security.

The NSA had become practically worthless in terms of usable information. Yes, they seemingly had intelligence data on every person in the country, the ability to spy and sneak through computers and phones and bank records at will, but any attempt to sift through that nearly infinite resource was akin to trying to find a particular drop of water in the Pacific Ocean.

It just wasn't worth the aggravation.

Besides, the people who worked there really didn't give a shit about blackmail. They could cover their own tracks quite effectively, thank you very much. Silo knew it wasn't worth the risk of one of them uncovering evidence that would bring unwarranted attention upon himself.

And he knew for a fact that had happened at least one other time, when one of Silo's contacts had tried to flip an NSA operative into coming to work for Silo. It had cost Silo a twenty-thousand-dollar-a-month extortion payment when the idiot hung himself rather than being exposed by the NSA operative as someone who viewed child pornography.

Silo had also viewed it as a chilling warning shot across his bow that future attempts to meddle in the affairs of anyone at the NSA wouldn't be tolerated.

No, what he really needed was one of the pissant guys at Homeland Security, who were always on the lookout for ways to improve their own standing and who weren't afraid to look the other way in the pursuit of their own self-interests.

Silo had neared the end of his patience by the time Jerald called Silo on the burner cell phone they'd bought for just this purpose.

Jerald didn't keep him waiting. "We have a deal, sir."

Silo took a deep, relieved breath and let it out again, his normal placid smile returning to his face. "Excellent."

"Three months in exchange for three names. And I will have a personal meeting this afternoon with the first prospect here in DC."

"You don't think we should bring them out to Albuquerque?"

"Since we are on an accelerated timeline, I thought it best I handle this one personally, considering the limitations of travel now. One of the other prospects is in Los Angeles, and the third I've already contacted about coming to our headquarters in New Mexico in a few days."

That was Jerald, always on the top of his game. “Good, good.”

“Besides, I already had information on file to leverage against the prospect here in DC. I will need a couple of days to gather background information on the other two to decide how best to proceed.”

“I trust your judgment, son. Keep me posted.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll fly back tonight and be in the office in the morning.”

“Good work. God bless you.” He ended the call and allowed the smile to spread into a wide grin. This was the best news he’d heard in weeks.

They were *finally* making progress.

About damned time.

Silo had four special promo spots to film that afternoon. By the time his driver took him home that evening at his usual time, Silo was in high spirits, an excellent mood. After bidding the day nurse good-bye, he walked to his wife’s room. They were nearing forty years of marriage.

Mary sat on the end of her bed, waiting for him as she did every night.

At his appearance she stood, turned, lifted her housecoat to expose her bare ass, and bent over the bed.

He smiled and began removing his belt as he started his walk across the room. Then he realized she wasn’t crying like she usually did.

He stopped, head cocked. “Look at me.”

Slowly, she turned her face toward him. Then he realized her eyes looked red and puffy, as if she’d already been crying.

“*Tsk.* My, my, my. You’ve started and finished crying without me. For shame. You know what that means, don’t you?”

She closed her eyes.

He used the sharp-edged, harsh tone on her that he knew would get her ass moving. “Go get them. *Right now.*”

With her face already turning nearly purple from her shame, she stood and hurried to her closet. Inside was a locked cabinet that only he and Mary had access codes to open. They told the staff it was for personal records.

It also kept a record of who accessed it and when. If she ever went into it without him ordering her to, it would mean a blistering beating for her.

So far, she had not.

She returned with the vibrator, bottle of lube, and a condom. Dropping to her knees, she silently held them up to him.

“Noooo. How do we ask?”

Oooh, he knew how much she hated this part. *Despised* it.

It made it that much sweeter for him.

He normally didn’t use a condom when he fucked her. But when he really wanted to shame her, to remind her that she wasn’t anything more than a worthless whore and he damn well knew it, he made her debase herself.

She’d been the one in college captured on video and begging to be gang-banged by the frat boys. Hell, at one point she’d had three huge cocks at the same time, one in each hole. Over twenty different men had used her that night, and she’d screamed out in pleasure countless times, pleading with them not to stop, until she’d literally worn them all out.

Usually he didn’t allow her pleasure. She was forbidden to masturbate. He’d broken her of that habit when he’d walked into her room one night soon after they were married, with the intention of using her, and caught her frigging herself with her hand.

She’d gotten fucked in the ass that night as punishment, and twice a day for two weeks after that, having to say the entire time he was fucking her, “I will not make myself orgasm,” out loud over and over again, while she rubbed her clit with her hand and wasn’t allowed to climax.

He was a strong believer in operant conditioning. She’d forever associate masturbation with anal sex.

Anyway, the conditioning had worked. The human brain was an amazingly malleable thing, especially when training was paired with a mixture of sex, pain, and shame.

The video cameras he’d had installed in her bedroom and bathroom also made sure she didn’t get away with anything. Only he could see the videos, and he reviewed them on a regular basis, making sure to mention things to her to let her know he had reviewed them. Even this many years later, she would still sometimes look up at one of the cameras, as if she’d just had an unapproved thought and was worried he’d seen it.

He’d ensured the daily cocktail of meds she took were also designed to reduce her sex drive as well as make orgasming difficult.

Which was why he reserved this special treat for her when he felt she deserved it.

Most days, he had her suck him off after her discipline, and that was it. Sometimes, he fucked her pussy. There were a few times here and there that he fucked her ass, usually after she’d lubed him with her own spit.

When he really wanted her to feel shame, when he saw her getting too used to her daily discipline sessions, he used this

little slice of hell to further debase her.

Aaand now there were her tears, of shame, loathing, maybe even hatred, rolling down her cheeks.

He didn't care. They were tears. And he owned them the way he owned the rest of her. When he wanted to see her tears, by God, he would see them.

"Place them on the bed," he said, "and assume the position."

Slowly, she got to her feet and laid the items out exactly as she knew he would want them. The bottle of lube. The condom. And the vibrator.

Oh, she was in for a treat tonight. His cock was painfully hard already.

She hoisted her housecoat again and bent over the bed, bare ass exposed.

He stepped up behind her and started the discipline with the belt, harder than usual, but not hard enough to break the skin. He also went longer than normal, careful to keep an eye on the time so he'd be finished well before the night nurse arrived.

Once her ass was flaming red, he stepped back, breathing heavy, cock ready to burst from his pants.

"Now you know what you have to do."

Sniffling and crying, she stood and turned, removing her housecoat so she was naked. Then she dropped to her knees in front of him.

She mumbled.

He grinned. "Oh, nooo. You know how to ask. Do I need to break out the video tonight and make you watch it from beginning to end to remind you what a filthy whore you are?"

She took a deep breath. "Please, husband, I want you to fuck my ass and make me come tonight."

"Take my cock out."

She did, her hands trembling.

"Kiss it."

She did, pressing her lips to the tip.

"Better than that.

She took a deep breath and slowly deep-throated him, holding it all the way to the base for a moment before slowly sitting back. He watched her with his hands on his hips, the belt still hanging from his left hand.

"Very good. Now put a condom on it, and the lube."

She got up and retrieved them from the bed. Then she returned to kneel in front of him. She opened the condom package, rolled it onto his shaft, and then started coating it with lube.

"It's your ass it's going inside. Remember that. The lube is for your benefit, not mine."

When she finished, she returned to the bed. This time, she lay on her back, ass at the very edge, her knees drawn up to her chest and legs spread wide.

"Remind me what it was you wanted again?" He nearly giggled.

"Please, husband, I want you to fuck my ass and make me come tonight."

"Get your vibrator."

She did.

What he especially loved about this punishment was that she was incapable of lying to him after so many years of his training her. She was also incapable of faking an orgasm. And he'd purchased the vibrator because it was an especially strong one.

Her sex lay open in front of him as he stepped up to her and grabbed the base of his cock. "Look at me," he said.

She forced herself to look up at him. Tears streamed from her eyes.

She was never allowed to wipe them away, or any snot that might run out her nose, before he was finished with her.

After laying the belt on the bed, he pressed the head of his cock against her asshole. Sometimes, when he didn't feel like making the walk to her room in the middle of a night, or if there was a nurse on duty and he didn't want a witness, he'd play the frat house video on his TV with the sound down and stroke himself to several orgasms while watching her get spit-roasted and reamed by the frat boys.

He'd given serious thought at one point to tracking down all the men in the video and inviting them to repeat the evening with her, but by then his reputation as a minister had grown and he didn't want to risk word of it getting out.

Although he had threatened her with that a few times.

He slowly speared her, enjoying her look of revulsion and hatred. He reached down and shoved two fingers into her cunt. She was already growing wet.

She hated this, and him, but her body knew what it wanted even when her brain said otherwise. He'd made sure of that.

After all, she was his wife, and he owned her.

The Bible said so.

“Now make yourself come. Until you’ve come three times, my cock stays in your ass. He took a slow stroke out, until just the head of his cock was still inside her, before slamming deep and hard into her again.

She let out a soft cry, but her cunt clenched around his fingers, flooding his hand with moisture. She turned the vibrator on and pressed the head of it against her clit.

“Almost like having two of those filthy frat cocks in you at the same time, isn’t it?” He worked a third finger into her cunt and twisted, finding her G-spot.

He slowly fucked her ass, smiling down at her as she worked her body up toward the first orgasm. As he felt her body tensing, climbing, he picked up the pace so that when the first orgasm hit her, making her cry out, he was pounding his cock so hard into her ass that he nearly lost control as her tight muscles spasmed around his cock.

No, she couldn’t lie to him. Her body couldn’t, that was for sure.

He stopped with his cock buried inside her. “There’s one. You get to come two more times, just like the filthy whore you are. Keep looking at me while you do. I want you to remember who owns every last bit of you.”

Even through her tears her hatred burned in her eyes. It only made him smile that much more.

It was all her fault. If she had just been polite when she’d snubbed him the time he’d asked her out on a date in college, he would have walked away. Had she simply been decent and not acted like a fucking cunt.

But no. She’d laughed at him, her fucking rich bitch friends standing there with her, snorting like that was the funniest damn thing any of them had ever heard.

“I’d *never* go out with you. What, are you crazy? You don’t have any money. Friends, sure. And yeah, studying. But I’ve got news for you, you’re not good enough for me for *that*. You’re here on a charity scholarship.”

Then she and her friends had walked away, laughing.

He’d thought she was a real friend to him, a nice girl, a good friend. Not a stuck-up bitch only using him for better grades.

He’d shown her who had the last laugh.

If her friends could see her now, the real her.

She continued using the vibrator on herself. It would take her at least another couple of minutes to get to the second one.

The third he always loved, because it usually took her at least ten minutes to get there.

And he savored every second of it.

“Why aren’t you allowed to make yourself come unless I tell you to?” he asked her.

“Because I can’t control my body. You are my husband and you control my body.”

“Exactly.” He started pumping the three fingers buried in her cunt, making sure every stroke caught her G-spot. “And why are you only allowed to come when my cock is in your ass?”

“Because I’m a dirty whore who doesn’t deserve to be treated like a lady.”

“Very good.” He scissored his fingers inside her, loosening her up even more so he could really slam his hand into her hard and fast. “And what do dirty whores get?”

“Fucked in the ass.”

“Yes, they do.”

If she’d only been nice. Had she treated him with respect, hell, if she’d accepted his offer to go out with him, even if just that one time, he could have shown her gentle, kind, loving. He would have gladly cuddled with her, treated her like a queen. Let her sleep in bed with him every night.

Allowed her to bear his children.

But no. She had to be a bitch.

So he made her *his* bitch.

Oh, tonight’s video would go in the keeper file. He loved playing nights like this back, too. Loved watching her debase herself for his amusement.

He reached up with his free hand and twisted her right nipple, hard enough to make her cry out, but then her cunt and ass started spasming again as her second orgasm hit her.

He laughed. “You’re right. You are a dirty whore. You’ve got my hand up your cunt and my cock in your ass and loving it.”

He’d recovered enough control he could start moving his cock again, this time slowly fucking her.

Then he had an idea. “You know, I think the fact that you had already cried before I got here tonight means I’ve been too lenient with you. I think that for the next couple of days, I’m going to have to remind you what a dirty whore you are every night. Maybe then you’ll remember who’s in charge here.”

She sobbed.

Not because of the vibrator or out of pleasure, either.

Inside, he danced with glee. She would shed plenty of tears for him over the next few nights.

He'd been meaning to add an extra element to their discipline for a while now, but he'd been too busy to follow up on it. He would have to get a butt plug for her to wear. A big, thick one. Condition her to get wet when she put it in, and by default to get wet when he fucked her ass. He planned on fucking her ass more frequently. He wanted the extra mental barb of being able to reach around and feel her pussy get wet when he fucked her ass so he could tease her about it.

He also wanted to be able to use her own cunt juices to lubricate his cock for fucking her ass. Make her use her own hand to spread them on his cock.

He wanted her next few months to be spectacularly horrid for her, so that when she tragically caught Kite and died from it while he was out of town at one of the church strongholds, one of her last feelings would be of shame over how she'd treated him so long ago.

Of how she'd basically brought this all on herself.

She was sobbing by the time she had the third orgasm. He finished, then pulled his hand from her cunt. "Open your mouth, whore."

She licked her own juices from his hand, the way she'd licked them from the cocks of the frat boys that night.

She was lucky he was grossed out by going from ass to mouth, or he would do that to her, too. He wouldn't debase himself.

Only her.

He finally pulled his spent cock out of her ass. He took the vibrator from her and shut it off. "Go get the wet washcloths."

She got up and fetched them from the bathroom, removing the condom from him and wiping him down with one, then wiping the vibrator down with the second one.

He returned it and the bottle of lube to the locker.

Then he stood by the bed and she dropped to her knees in front of him, kissing his cock.

"Now what do you say?"

He loved the hitching sound of her voice. "Thank you for fucking this filthy whore's ass and allowing me to come, husband. You are the best husband ever."

"You're welcome. And you'll be thanking me the next several nights, too." He reached for his belt. "Get cleaned up before the night nurse gets here."

He barely held back his chuckle when he heard her crying as he closed her door behind him.

I can't wait to begin training my new wives.

Chapter Five

The next morning, when Stacia returned home after her shift, Aunt Darla had already gone to work but Marvin hadn't yet left the apartment. Stacia decided to give up on going to sleep right away. Instead, she followed him when he left when he thought she had already gone to bed.

Sure enough, once outside their apartment building, he made a direct beeline in the direction of the Church of the Rising Sunset's facility.

Sonofabitch.

She adjusted her surgical mask and waited a couple of minutes after he went inside the building to follow him. Of course, the dumbass hadn't been wearing his mask. He'd probably left it sitting on his dresser.

Again.

Idiot.

Several other people had also gone inside, apparently close to her age or Marvin's, even though it was hard to tell with the surgical masks most of them wore.

Inside the front door, to her right, was an open doorway that looked like an office, based on the people sitting inside at desks. When she peeped inside the room to her left that apparently functioned as the main sanctuary, she found it sat completely empty except for rows and rows of folding chairs facing a podium in front of a large cross painted on the wall behind it.

Listening and hearing a group of people chatting somewhere, she made her way down the main hallway that wound around until she discovered an open door. At least fifty folding chairs sat in this room, many of them occupied by people who weren't wearing face masks. It looked like a classroom, with a large video screen and whiteboard at the front.

When she spotted Marvin sitting in the front row, talking to a young, attractive woman seated next to him, Stacia resisted the urge to walk in and drag him out by his ear.

Of course. A farking woman.

Where else could a guy without a job, without any money, and without any prospects for a decent future meet women who might express an interest in him but at a church?

She startled when a woman spoke from behind her. "Hi! Are you one of our volunteers?"

Stacia turned and found herself looking up at a woman not wearing a mask, but instead who wore a completely creepy and too-wide smile. She carried a clipboard and wore a lab coat and stripper heels. Stacia couldn't understand why that particular combination, but whatever.

"My brother's in there. What's going on?"

"Oh, is he one of our volunteers?"

"Volunteers for what?"

"Our research project. Haven't you heard? We're working toward finding a vaccine for Kite. We're calling it the Preachsearch Project. Isn't that cute?"

Stacia blinked. "What?"

"You know, that horrible virus. Our doctors are working on a vaccine."

Alarm bells went off in her head. "Wait a minute. You mean to tell me the CDC has its greatest minds totally devoted to doing that, and you all think *you* can solve it?"

Creepy Smile Stripper Heels Lady cocked her head, but the smile didn't leave her face. "Well, yes. It's God's will. I didn't realize you'd be joining your brother in the program." She started to consult with her clipboard. "What's his name?"

"Uh, nooo, that's because I'm *not* joining your program. And neither is he." Stacia marched into the room, right up to Marvin, and stood there until he looked up at her.

"Stace? What are you—"

She grabbed his arm. "Let's go. Move it. Now."

Marvin didn't budge. "No. You don't understand, they're going to pay me for volunteering. I'm already in training."

"Then it's *not* volunteering. You can get a freaking job where you don't have to be a guinea pig."

He didn't get up. "You don't understand. This is God's will." He tipped his head slightly toward the young woman, who smiled that same creepy kind of smile at her as Stripper Heels Lady had.

"This isn't god's will, Marvin. This is you trying to scam women and get laid. Come on. Let's go."

He pulled his arm away. "No. I've had a spiritual conversion."

"Since *when*?"

"Since meeting Korey here. She's in the program, too."

Korey waved, the smile remaining on her face. "I'm from Kentucky."

She sounded like it. “Yeah, I can tell you’re not from around here,” Stacia quipped.

Stacia’s sarcasm soared over Korey’s head. “No, it’s my first time out of the state. I got to fly on an airplane for the first time, too! Boy was *that* excitin’, I’ll tell you what. The church even paid for it.”

Stacia focused on Marvin, glaring at him. “Let’s go. *Now*.” Usually that tone of voice got his ass moving if nothing else did.

He scowled at her and dropped his voice. “They’re going to pay me one hundred *thousand* dollars for doing this,” he hissed. “So don’t mess this up for me. I made it through the first round of training, and I’m nearly done with the second. I’m going to be staying in the dorms here, too. The food’s great! And they have all the farking cable TV channels. It’s unbelievable!”

She knew she couldn’t have heard him right. She was still hung up on the money. “One *hundred* grand? *What?* What the fark are you talking about?”

He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to her. It was a copy of a signed contract.

She skimmed through it. Yep. They would pay him one hundred thousand dollars if he kept his end of the bargain and successfully made it through the program. She didn’t fail to notice how the contract did not specify what, exactly, the program entailed.

Even more alarm bells went off in her brain, really loud, scary ones that sent gooseflesh rippling across her arms.

He pulled the paper out of her hands and neatly folded it to return to his pocket. “So, you’re welcome. It will be deposited in Aunt Darla’s account as long as I complete the training process and get sent out to an assignment. Now go away before you mess this up for me. You’ve been bugging me to do something, to step up. Well, I did, and I am. Maybe *this* is what I’ve always been waiting for. I can *do* this and we’ll be able to live on it for several years. Maybe you’ll even be able to go back to school now.”

So *this* was why he hadn’t told her anything about what he was doing. Because he knew she’d make him stop. “What the hell do you think they’re going to do to you that they’re paying you that much money!”

Could he *really* be *that* stupid? There had to be a catch. There *always* was a catch, and *especially* in a situation like this, which sent warning bells screaming through her brain.

Now Stripper Heels Lady was talking to another woman in the back of the room, but the smile had fallen from her face. The other woman wore a surgical mask, lab coat, geek glasses, and sensible shoes.

Fark.

“Last chance, Marvin. Let’s go.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “No.”

Aunt Darla wouldn’t be happy about this, but there wasn’t a damn thing Stacia could do. Her brother was an adult, older than her, even if he’d chosen to act like a helpless kid for most of his life.

She threw her hands up in front of her. “*Fine*. Do this. I don’t care anymore. I’m done trying to get you to step up and simply act like a farking adult. Best of luck.”

There was also a door to the hallway at the front of the room, at the end of the row where Marvin and Korey sat. Stacia headed for that one instead of walking all the way back to the one she’d entered through, meaning she’d have to pass the two lab-coated women.

From behind her, Marvin spoke up. “Love you, sis.”

Stacia didn’t turn or even slow down, only raised an arm at him as she ducked out the door, hurrying, practically at a run as a nasty tingling sensation developed at the base of her spine. She wanted out of that building.

Immediately.

Ever since their mom died in one of the flu pandemics, she’d resented that Marvin hadn’t stepped up more, at least as an older brother.

Whenever he fucked up, that was his stand-by response. “Love you, sis.”

It’d worked when she was little.

Now? Not so much.

Words didn’t pay bills. Words didn’t buy food. Words didn’t help keep Aunt Darla’s pain at bay by buying the medication she needed to function.

Words didn’t make up for all the disappointment, the broken promises to get a job, to try harder, to step up and be a man. If he’d at least set a good example, made an honest, decent attempt to inspire her, encourage her.

He hadn’t even done that.

At least he hadn’t ended up an alcoholic, a drug addict, or in jail.

Scratch that. Had he ended up in jail, at least he would have had three squares and a cot, and Stacia and her aunt could have rented out his room for extra income.

Her aunt did the best she could, but her arthritis made it difficult for her to do much more than work a low-paying job at a local call center for a national bank. She'd been widowed when her husband was killed in the line of duty in the military before Stacia and Marvin were born. That gave their aunt a small stipend every month, and guaranteed discounted housing.

As long as she paid the rent every month.

They couldn't raise the rent on her, either. They could, however, evict her if she didn't pay. At least with Stacia working, they were able to pay the bills every month as long as they were careful with their money.

Stacia always shopped at thrift stores for clothes whenever she got to the point she couldn't avoid buying any. She used the library for books, and she frequently took things she found in garbage bins or on a curb, fixed them up, and sold them for a little money, or traded them for store credit with a couple of thrift shops who'd do that for her.

The only luxury she allowed herself was the basic cable service for the TV, because her aunt enjoyed watching TV, especially when she was in a lot of pain and couldn't afford extra pain medication after her monthly allotment ran out. It wasn't an easy existence, but at least they were better off than many people.

It meant staying where they were, though. If they moved, they could get a discounted rate on a participating place, but it would be discounted from the current price. Aunt Darla had lived in that apartment for twenty-two years. No way she could ever afford a newer place at skyrocketing rents.

Their neighborhood wasn't the best, but it wasn't the worst, either. Once an upper-middle-class neighborhood, over the decades it had decayed into a predominantly lower income neighborhood, at least with no obvious gang activity.

Yet.

And the owner of their building actually did what he could to make repairs in a timely manner since he had several military widows in residence and received stipends from the government for each one.

Stacia plodded home, depressed and angry at Marvin and his stupidity. There, she undressed, pulled on one of the oversized T-shirts she slept in, and tried to get some sleep. She needed to be out the door by eight that night to make sure she caught her bus.

The last bus of the day from her neighborhood to the plant.

If she didn't make it, she'd be farked.

I'm going to let Marvin do whatever the fark he wants. I'm done trying to look out for him when he obviously doesn't give a crap about looking out for himself. Or us.

Chapter Six

Rev. Hannibal Silo sat in his study. He'd just released a lot of tension by completing his daily discipline ritual with his wife. Belting her ass, until it was glowing red and hot, and then fucking her ass while she used the vibrator on herself.

Two nights in a row of that had reduced her to pathetic, shame-ridden sobs that were music to his soul.

Who needs antidepressants?

He smiled. Well, Mary did, because he'd had her taking them for so long. Not so much antidepressants as depressants, medication meant to keep her docile and compliant.

He'd taught her the facts of life when she'd dared defy him once before, years ago, early on in their marriage. A nurse had tried experimenting with taking Mary off the drugs while he was out of town.

Fortunately, he'd arrived home early and unannounced, fired the nurse on the spot, and crammed the medicine down Mary's throat before she was questioned by authorities and denied there were any problems.

By that time, the medicine had once again taken effect.

And Mary had sported a blistered ass from the belting he'd given her for defying him and asking the nurse to "rescue" her.

Not to mention she'd had a very sore asshole from the fucking he gave her.

Before that night, he usually didn't resort to physical discipline with her. Only when he felt she was growing too complacent, or he'd especially been in the mood to spank her before she sucked him off or he fucked her. More a way to keep her mentally off-balance, to never know what to expect from him.

To obey him.

Even more importantly to Silo, to fear him.

From that night on, he'd given her the daily discipline ritual. Obviously, she'd needed it.

Now it was second nature to her but she still cried every night.

And that always gave him a hard-on.

Tonight, his main task before bed was to go over the text for one of the special sermons he would film in a few days. Little half-hour shows that would air in paid time slots on other networks, as well as would be posted on the church's website.

Jerald had written this one with emphasis on creating additional anxiety over the growing Kite epidemic. Yet it was vital they not alienate any potential new followers at this point, and they wanted to ensure the continued support of their current sheeple.

It doesn't matter what label you give God. He doesn't care. He doesn't care if you've worshipped in a temple or a mosque or in the middle of the woods. I do not believe in judging people, and never have. That is not my job. I cannot condemn someone for who they love, as long as they are adults. I cannot condemn someone for a divorce. I cannot condemn someone who has turned their life around and focused themselves on being a better person and improving the world around them.

If you have grown tired of judgment, of divisive dogma that does little more than serve a human agenda, perhaps it is time for you to allow me a chance to show you what love is supposed to be, what God means to me. Allow me to introduce you to my God, to my church. And if you still feel you wish to look elsewhere in seeking spiritual comfort, then I would be the first to offer you a smile, wish you well, shake your hand, and thank you for keeping an open mind. Jesus would not tolerate me doing anything less than that.

He spoke the lines aloud, testing the cadence, the timing, adjusting very little.

As usual, Jerald had done an impeccable job of imitating him. On paper at least.

In the years Jerald had been with him and helping him write his sermons, donations had soared. Jerald had studied thousands of hours of his past sermons, watched him in real life, and had combined the best of neurolinguistic programming with gentle religious rhetoric to complement Silo's style.

The man was a friggin' genius.

Had Silo known about NLP back in his early days, he might have soared to superstardom years ago.

They had several large satellite churches all over the United States, as well as in other countries. In the largest ones, they held live sermons with a video screen, the local congregations following along as he gave his sermon. In some of the smaller ones, or ones where time zone issues conflicted, they replayed the sermon at a more reasonable hour.

But they'd discovered if they broadcasted the live sermons, even if they fell in the middle of the night local time, people would still attend. Oh, smaller numbers to be certain, but every dollar taken in during a sermon was another dollar in the pot.

Silo also had the churches simulcast his special speaking engagements. That way, people who couldn't afford to travel to see him in person could still see him, for free.

And the offering plates were always passed around, meaning more income. The parishioners felt included, felt like he was allowing the poor a chance to see him speak, like he was accessible to them. He conducted periodic live sessions with various churches when tithes lagged, accepting direct questions and comments from attendees.

Those always raised the tithing. People liked it when they felt they could connect to him.

And, periodically, Jerald would handpick local parishioners after careful research and pay all expenses to fly them to Albuquerque to meet with Silo privately for several hours.

Those meetings Silo always found tedious, but it never failed that when the people returned home, they talked him up so much that it was worth the ROI when the next tithing reports came out for that church.

It was far more cost-effective to bring people to him than to waste his time going out and visiting elsewhere. Especially now, with Kite burning up the globe. They'd lost five churches already, the latest losing communication with them a week ago.

All attempts to contact them remained futile.

Jerald had recommended keeping those facilities on the satellite feed, though. Just in case there were still parishioners who knew how to turn on the equipment. It wouldn't do to have them feel abandoned.

In other words, it didn't hurt anything to keep the feed going, rather than dumping them off the server access.

Their web team had reported drastically decreased page hits in India, China, and other countries in the region. That, more than anything, had been a startling benchmark.

But their page hits were steadily increasing in the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia, Russia, areas in South America, and Western Europe. Online donations from those areas were also on the rise.

Jerald had suggested an extended schedule of video feed events to those regions where donations were on the uptick.

Again, it couldn't hurt.

Jerald had also conducted several vigorous rounds of interviews and hired Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese voice actors to dub some of his sermons and Internet-only content for Central and South America as an experiment. They already had translators who live-captioned every sermon in local languages, their jobs made easier by having early access to the scripts.

Jerald wanted to see if it made any difference having different audio feeds available.

Silo took a break and leaned back in his chair. The first batch of volunteers was being prepared at that moment in the LA facility. They were undergoing some pretty rigorous mental, emotional, and spiritual programming. As long as they successfully completed that portion of the program, they would then be trained for their mission.

Spreading the word of God. Spreading the feeling of God's love.

Of course, they'd be spreading Kite the whole time.

They expected a portion of the candidates to wash out. They were hoping for at least a twenty-five-percent success rate. Because the ones who made it to the second part of the program would not all likely be successful in their missions. Anything could happen. Their illness could progress faster than anticipated. They could have problems actually carrying forth their objective. Hell, some junkie could mug them and kill them.

Then again, as long as junkies got the drugs, that would be okay. The objective would still be achieved, getting Kite the drug into people's veins so it could spread Kite the virus throughout the lower rungs of society and begin culling the herd.

Ah, the beauty of Kite the drug. One of Silo's operatives had picked up the recipe for that from a very scared North Korean national who had apparently missed the radioactive barbecue of his homeland by a few hours when he escaped on a boat that dropped him off in Busan, South Korea.

Wanting nothing more than the funds to get the hell off the Korean peninsula, he'd eagerly sold the recipe to an information broker from Russia whom Silo had used in the past. That broker had given Silo first dibs on it, because he knew how much Silo was willing to pay for the other half of the equation, scientists on The List.

Jerald had immediately set to work putting together a small team of chemists with backgrounds in illegal pharmaceuticals to create a test batch, which they'd just finished unleashing in New York City.

It was a resounding success.

And they had synthesized a much larger batch of it and were using it on their new volunteer "apostles." The drug created a functional euphoria, an addictive high without taking away a person's ability to think and reason. And the effects of one dose lasted nearly twenty-four hours.

But with that first dose, the brain's pleasure centers were irreparably altered. The first dose, literally, would hook you.

It was that effect they were capitalizing on with their volunteers. Mix the drug with the mindfuck and hardwire the Glory of God right into their cerebral cortexes.

Or, whatever part of the brain it was that the drug impacted. That wasn't Silo's concern. All he cared about were the results.

The results being that their test subjects would feel great, better than they'd ever felt in their lives. They were being told it was an experimental vitamin and vaccine mixture. Then they would be charged with finding the most unfortunate people they

could and improving their lives by literally injecting them with the essence of the Holy Spirit so they could feel that good, too.

Amen, hallelujah, pass the potatoes.

They would not, of course, be told what would happen to them if they didn't get their daily dose. Not even the volunteers would know about that. They would be told to keep giving themselves the injections every day, and would be given enough for seven days.

The chemists had even come up with the idea of making it a different color than the rest of the doses, so the volunteers would think it was different.

In seven days, the volunteers would either be dead or dying from Kite the virus. Hopefully taking out a shitload of worthless people with them.

They were also being programmed with some very paranoid suggestions that they had to be careful not to expose themselves to any authorities. That the government was fighting to stamp out the Word of God, and that they would try to stop the volunteers from fulfilling their God-given mission.

Amen, brothers.

Yes, suicidal, paranoid, brainwashed volunteers armed with a highly addictive drug, carrying a deadly virus payload. Of course, they didn't know they were on a suicide mission. Two of the criteria for selecting the volunteers had been dumb and poor. Meaning people who were easy to manipulate, and who had families who likely wouldn't push too hard for answers regarding their loved one's disappearance when a gigantic cash payment showed up in their bank account.

If this worked, and if they got away with it, they would conduct another operation elsewhere on a much larger scale.

Meanwhile, they would be putting more batches of Kite the drug out on the street for sale to prime the pump, as it were, in urban areas where drug activity was already high and where they wanted new batches of infections.

If the plan failed, or if any of their people were captured before they died, they already had a backup plan in place. For starters, the clinic wasn't an official Church of the Rising Sunset facility. It appeared as such on the outside to the casual onlooker.

But the corporate charter, bank accounts—everything—was set up as an independent entity that could be traced back to someone from Saudi Arabia who only existed on paper there. Even the computer system was self-contained and in no way connected to their larger network. The logos used on the facility's brochures and paperwork were just different enough that the church's lawyers could claim it was a case of fraud and trademark infringement.

Nowhere in the official church rosters did the LA facility even exist. And nowhere in the LA facility was Reverend Silo's likeness.

Yes, recruitment messages had been sent out via their normal channels. But the origins of all of those messages could be traced back not to an official employee of the church or a message board moderator, but to a user of the message boards, a non-existent PR person at the LA facility who simply used publicly accessible church channels to spread their misinformation. If anyone from their church was cornered as having promoted the facility, Jerald already had an easy explanation ready—they were all simply misled. Honest mistake. They were guilty of nothing but being trusting, because they thought the clinic was legitimate and part of the church's large and ever-expanding charitable network.

Nowhere had Silo ever mentioned it, anywhere. He would absolve his people of any guilt and make public mea culpas on their behalf, placing the blame squarely back on the "people" who ran the clinic and tried to capitalize on his church's good name.

Jerald was a friggin' genius, as far as Silo was concerned.

In case of an accidental media exposure that they weren't prepared to deal with, Jerald had made sure the facility had gas lines running throughout the building that could be remotely opened and ignited.

Whoops! Gas leak. Sorry, our bad.

If that was the option they had to resort to, and people came to the church and questioned it, they could always claim they believed it was a legitimate research facility, and that any malfeasance resulting from its operations was not known to Silo or the church at large. That its illegal activities were most certainly not known to, nor sanctioned by, the church.

Every option had been covered. Very few people knew about the Kite virus aspect of the operation. The volunteers wouldn't be infected until the day before they were sent out on their missions. The people involved in the training aspect were church loyalists who were not only being paid well via accounts traceable to the facility and not the church, but their families were already safely nestled in completed church strongholds throughout the country. The chemists participating in the Kite the drug aspect of the training were also being paid well, and now had secured places in strongholds for their families, too. They also did not know the full extent of the operation or its ultimate goals.

Then there were the researchers who knew all about Kite the virus. They were attempting to synthesize a vaccine and were able to obtain fresh Kite virus samples nearly every day, either from dying or dead victims, via health department contacts working at the new LAX international airport.

They just had no idea those samples would also be used to infect the volunteers.

Only three on-site staff actually knew the full story, and nowhere were they listed in any of the facility's computer records. One was Dr. Able Isley, a psychiatrist firmly under Silo's thumb. He'd personally recruited the two other doctors. They were suffering extreme financial and legal duress and willing to suspend their Hippocratic Oaths long enough to help with the project. They also accepted huge sums of money for their participation and silence, as well as had guaranteed places for themselves and their families in the church strongholds.

Win-win.

Well, except the volunteers. They would be the ultimate losers. Them, and the people they infected. At least the volunteers' families would be financially well-off.

But Silo didn't really care about any of them. They were merely tools by which he could do God's work.

Jerald had arranged that any of the volunteers who didn't successfully complete the program would be reported as having sadly died in tragic accidents as they were returning home. The facility, of course, gave the families an immediate insurance payout of twenty-five grand cash, seeing that the volunteers had been there on business. Oh, and they covered all funeral cremation expenses and had the cremains shipped to them.

It was the least they could do.

The payments were coming from an account in Switzerland that wasn't tied to the church in any way, so no one on Silo's Albuquerque staff would see the payouts. Only Jerald.

And he wasn't talking.

They'd already had to eliminate a few volunteers who'd washed out.

Jerald had made sure the volunteers they'd selected came from locations scattered across the nation, and did background checks to make sure none of them knew each other. And they would be sent out in teams to cities they weren't familiar with. There wouldn't be a "pattern" to put together. The volunteers who made it through the program and completed their missions wouldn't be talking about them.

They'd be dead.

Likely, with everyone focused on all the other troubles going on in the United States, as well as the world at large, the last thing anyone would be worrying about were a few tragic deaths out of the hopefully tens of thousands that would soon keep public health officials hopping to get ahead of the new Kite infections to control the spread of the disease.

Silo couldn't wait to watch the plan come to fruition. The sooner the cleansing started, the better. Then he would be able to get himself elected president, pick up the broken pieces of their country, and put together a new, better United States.

One united under the God of Hannibal Silo this time.

Amen, brother.

Chapter Seven

Omega and Echo assisted Lima and Quack on their recon run the next morning. Under Papa's orders, Lima led the operation and they headed out to scout the church's facility. At first, Lima thought maybe their suspicions about the church's activities were unfounded and the result of a massively fragile leap in logic.

But the more information Bubba pulled together about the facility, and their failure to hack into that particular facility's computer system, the more Lima thought they might really be onto something.

Something potentially horrendous, if their suspicions proved correct. It was suspiciously unconnected to the church in any way, yet it bore its name and a logo very close to the church's logo. As if it was meant to be mistaken as an official affiliate of the church.

Yet somebody had gone to great lengths to make sure it could not be traced back as an official church facility.

Omega stood in the deep shade of the abandoned building's doorway with Lima and Quack. They all wore civvie clothes. The large black man studied the church's building kitty-corner across the intersection from where they were huddled.

"I'm not real familiar with this neighborhood," Omega said. "We need him to finish circling the building before we waste time talking about any plans. I don't see any obvious video cameras out front, which is strange. But if they're small cameras, we might not be able to see them from here."

Lima pulled a feed detector from his pocket and scanned with it, looking for the most common camera feed bandwidths. "If there are any on the outside in front, they must be hard-wired. No nearby wireless signals showing up in that direction."

"Or scrambled," Quack said.

"Why would a church scramble video from security camera feeds?" Lima asked.

"Why would they have a computer network system that apparently has zero exploitable flaws?" Omega replied. "Why would they go to such lengths to make themselves look like they're part of the church when, in fact, they apparently aren't? The answer being because they are up to something they don't want anyone knowing about. You don't pay to have that kind of network security unless you have something worth hiding."

Omega's partner, Echo, slowly appeared from around the back side of the church building across the way. Dressed like a homeless person, he wore oversized dark sunglasses and a bandana across his lower face instead of a surgical mask as he slowly shuffled along. He carried a plastic bag of aluminum cans in one hand and his gaze darted all over, as if paranoid someone might be watching him. Occasionally he looked up, threw his free hand protectively over his head as he ducked, and barked some gibberish into the air.

"He's too good at that," Lima said. "Sometimes, I wonder about him."

Omega chuckled. "Tease him all you want about the foreign movies and shit he watches, but the man is a freaking chameleon. 'Bout the only thing he can't do is turn his pale, blue-eyed ass into a brother. You tell him you want him to do or be someone or something, damned if he doesn't pull it right off. I'd bet he would have made a great actor if he hadn't gone into the military." The two men had gone through basic together, served together for several years, and were fast friends even before they joined the Drunk Monkeys.

It took him another five minutes, but Echo slowly made his way across the street and to their doorway. He dropped his voice and pantomimed begging for money from them.

"Three cameras in the back," he whispered, "and two in front. That I saw. I'm guessing high-end industrial grade. Looks like maybe 08-Fegoes."

"Sonofabitch," Lima muttered. "Scrambled feeds."

"Undetectable feeds," Omega said. "And likely equipped with facial recognition software on the inside."

"That complicates things," Quack said.

"Only a little," Lima said. "The surgical masks work to our benefit. And I still have some magno-lotion in my kit. We smear a little of that on our cheekbones and foreheads, it farks the reader software."

"Can't it detect if you're wearing that?" Omega asked.

"No. It goes on clear. All it does is fool the software, distorts the sensed facial structure, and makes it read the faces differently when the software runs its search algorithms."

"Okay," Omega said, "so answer me this. How you gonna get inside there long enough to get to a computer terminal? Without someone seeing you do it?"

"That's where you two are going to come in handy," he said. "You're going to keep an eye on this place today and give me a bead on when people are coming and going. I'd bet at lunchtime we see some people head out to eat. Echo goes in and does his polite and crazy panhandler act and leaves. That gives me an idea of the layout when I pull the recorded video feed from the glasses he's wearing. If there's an office close to the entrance, or a receptionist's desk or something, we come back

tomorrow and have him fake a seizure in the parking lot. One of us runs in for help. People will run out to see what's going on and, in the confusion, I'll do whatever it is I'm going to do."

Omega chuckled. "You have *no* clue what you're going to do yet, do you?"

"Not a single damn one. I'm waiting on Bubba for that part."

"Anything else I can do to help besides surveillance?" Omega asked.

Lima nodded. "Yeah, actually, there is. I need you to get me a suit. And shoes."

"A suit?"

He slowly nodded. "Yep. I need to look like money."

* * * *

That night just before dinnertime, Lima had his clue. "I've got the answer," he said when he walked into the common room where everyone was preparing to eat. He held up a small thumb drive.

"What are you supposed to do with that?" Papa asked.

He smiled. "Bubba send me a present. All we have to do is get me into that church building, get me to someone's computer station, and boom, he can get in."

"It's a virus?"

"Trojan. It'll allow Bubba an undetectable back door into their system, and we'll finally be able to take a tiptoe through Silo's tulips."

"Can he dump my parents' retirement fund back into their account, then?" Clara snarked. She still held a lot of resentment at Reverend Silo and how her parents had chosen to ignore her warnings not to waste all their money by giving it to his church.

Papa looked like he was mulling over their options. "Our first priority is still to figure out where Dr. Riley Perkins is, if she's even in the area. I'm not yet totally convinced whatever Silo might be up to is relevant to our cause. But yeah, just in case he is trying to spread Kite around, we should do whatever we can to shut that shit down."

"Yeah," Clara drawled, "because that *might* just *possibly* be a *bad* thing, if they're doing *that*."

Papa shot her an irritated look, but she flashed him a sweet, innocent smile in return.

Chapter Eight

That evening, as Stacia sat at her bus stop near their apartment building and waited, the surgical mask over her nose and mouth made her sweat even more in the oppressive heat. As she sat there, she tried not to think about her brother.

Marvin apparently hadn't come home during the day, and her aunt hadn't seen him, either.

He didn't have a cell phone. He'd dropped the last one and it wasn't in the budget to buy him a new one, not even a burner.

Stacia *damn* sure wasn't giving him hers. She needed it in case Aunt Darla had problems and needed to contact her.

Mainly because Stacia was the only one Aunt Darla *could* count on. Stacia also only had about five minutes of time left on the cell's account before she had to restock, so she never used it. She couldn't really afford to load more minutes on it right now.

Stacia hadn't told her aunt exactly what she'd found out about Marvin's sudden volunteerism spirit. Stacia knew it would likely upset her aunt, especially when she didn't know all the details and wouldn't be able to answer any of the older woman's questions.

And Stacia wasn't even sure what the hell the deal *was*. There had to be a catch. It couldn't be a legitimate offer. That was an obscene amount of money. It just didn't make any sense.

Then again, nothing her brother had ever done made any sense.

At war within Stacia, her anger at her brother over his irresponsibility versus the indelible memory of her mother's words before she died.

How she'd made the two of them promise to always look after each other. How she'd made Stacia promise to take *care* of her brother.

Come to think if it, she hadn't made Marvin promise the same thing in return, to take care of Stacia.

Maybe she knew he couldn't.

If Stacia looked back with a brutally honest eye, her brother's problems were always there. Their mom having to ride him to do his homework or study. Riding him to clean up his stuff. Riding him to do *anything*.

It wasn't that he actively rebelled and fought her, it was like he just couldn't remember it or stick with anything long enough to *do* it. His grade school counselor had ruled out ADHD.

He just...didn't *care*.

Stacia had gone so far last year as to stop doing his laundry for him. She'd thought maybe if he had to wear stinky clothes, *maybe* he'd *finally* get off his ass and do *something* on his own. Take a little initiative.

Nope. She thought she'd won the battle the next week only to find out her aunt had started doing his laundry because she felt sorry for him. He hadn't even asked her to do them, he'd just re-worn dirty clothes for several days and their aunt had noticed.

It was like some internal circuit never connected in his brain, leaving him adrift and unable to latch onto something.

Stacia took over doing them again because she didn't want her aunt dealing with the extra strain.

The driver tonight must have been a new one to the route, because he wasn't wearing a protective suit. Stacia scanned her pass and boarded, taking her usual seat toward the back of the bus and holding her tote bag carrying her lunch, work clothes, and hardhat in her lap.

There usually weren't many other people riding this time of night who were heading in the same direction, unless they were her coworkers at the plant. The bus would head to the garage after the last stop at the bottling plant, and usually the bus home that she caught first thing in the morning had just left the garage.

In a way it was good, because it meant less people to run into, to risk Kite exposure from.

So far, the news said that the only local cases they'd had were isolated at the airport and contained before they could expose anyone in the city at large.

Stacia's deeply rooted cynicism, combined with her innate wariness, doubted the story was that simple. She wondered what the public hadn't been told. Weren't being told.

Or were outright being lied to about.

Wondered if the continuing riots they'd been having on the other side of town really were people expressing dissatisfaction over the government and the economy, as had been reported, or if they were actually Kites running rampant.

She'd seen extremely graphic videos from overseas when she'd gone to the library and used the computers there. Those videos weren't being shown on the local nightly news. She'd looked up international news websites and saw the user videos that had been posted. Mobs of raging people attacking and sometimes even killing people. If you were bitten, or injured or exposed to the blood of one of the Kites, you probably would get the virus. Or if a victim didn't get the rages and attack you

toward the end of their disease, if you were their caregiver and exposed to their bodily fluids, you would likely contract the disease from them anyway.

In places like India there were reportedly no remaining doctors, nurses, or other medical professionals in the country. They'd all either contracted the disease, or had been killed by Kitters, if they hadn't fled.

What was scarier, Stacia couldn't decide. The high mortality rate? The infection potential? Or how packs of them sometimes banded together in their rages. It reminded her of the old zombie movies she'd watched on TV as a kid, when she still had the luxury of free time after doing her schoolwork.

At least Kitters could easily be killed. They didn't reanimate and get back up again after they died, like Hollywood zombies.

In real life, the dead *stayed* dead, no matter how many of the living they took with them in the process of dying, or after.

And people seemed to die pretty dang easily.

Health officials overseas were recommending bodies be burned as close to where they died as possible if there weren't body bags available to safely transport them. The fear being that long transports of unenclosed bodies could risk spreading the disease in the process.

Burial was an option only if cremation wasn't possible. And that if buried, to try to do it away from a public water source, or private wells, and not in an area prone to flooding for fear of bodies popping to the surface later on.

It scared her. Even in these crazy times, those were things you heard about in movies and books, not in real life. The flu pandemics had been bad, but there were still tidy processions of memorial services for the dead.

Yes, the United States had worked itself right into a rich and poor class system, with very few people surviving in the middle class. Yes, people were rioting in protest.

But unlike the flu pandemics, which were so deadly mostly due to vaccine shortages, at least if you got the flu, you had a pretty decent chance of surviving it.

If you tested positive for Kite, you were better off saying good-bye to your loved ones and letting someone kill you before you suffered an agonizing death and infected anyone else.

What a horrible way to die.

She didn't want to engage in the what-if game.

What if Kite started spreading in Los Angeles?

Or what if it already had?

She didn't want to devote the energy or brain cells to that. Her focus right now was on work, on doing her job the best she could so she could keep getting paid to do it. That was the issue directly in front of her at that moment. Hypothesizing about possible Kite infections in their city wasn't part of her job description, nor was it part of her daily life. It would not only waste time and energy but possibly get her mind going in directions she didn't need it to be going.

Like how would I keep Aunt Darla safe?

* * * *

People who hadn't witnessed but had heard about the can of whoop-ass being opened on Marco's balls gave Stacia fist bumps, thumbs-ups, or simply smiled and nodded their heads in respect as they all waited in line to get stuck at the front gate.

Especially the women.

Marco had long been a bane at the company. But he'd always been careful to skirt the line just on the side of crossing it, unless he was absolutely sure he had no witnesses.

Then all bets were off.

And he didn't hesitate to threaten to put in a bad word for anyone who didn't tolerate his antics.

Billy had been the lead shift supervisor for six weeks, only two weeks longer than Stacia had been there. He'd moved to there from a different part of the plant, as well as from a different shift. He'd only heard vague rumors of Marco's bullshit.

And apparently he'd decided to catch the man in the act.

When Stacia finally got her stick test, received the clear notice, and headed inside toward the locker room, Billy called out to her from his office when she passed.

She walked in and shifted the tote bag on her shoulder. "Yeah, boss?"

He smiled. "You ready to kick ass tonight?"

She laughed. "Why? Is Marco back?"

"I just meant in general."

She shoved her previous thoughts about Marvin and her issues with him out of her head. "Yeah, I'm ready for my shift."

"I think what happened with him did more to boost morale around here than anything I ever could have tried."

She shrugged, not comfortable with the attention being focused on her. “I lost my temper. I shouldn’t have, but I could only take so much for so long.”

“I know, and I’m sorry it went on for as long as it did. I’ve been begging corporate to fix the closed-circuit video system in this section ever since I started here. It hasn’t been their priority...until I reported firing Marco and why. Now, they’ve suddenly found the funds and personnel to take care of it. I’m not convinced Marco didn’t sabotage the cameras himself a long time ago.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” she said without thinking.

“Well, anyway, thanks for what you did. I promise, I won’t forget it. HR is still processing the paperwork, but it looks like you might get a slight pay bump for stepping up one position with him gone. Might only be ten or fifteen dollars a week, but I hope that helps.”

“Thanks. It does.”

Her heart raced. That was the best news she’d received in a long time. An extra ten dollars per paycheck could be stretched into a few extra meals per month. Or, she might actually be able to pick up a new pair of work boots in her size, instead of the used ones she’d purchased from the brewery’s employee exchange that were men’s and about a size too big. She wore two pairs of socks to keep them from hurting her feet.

Or it would buy more medication for Aunt Darla to get her through the last days of the month, when she always ran out.

After changing and stowing her stuff in her locker, Stacia went to her station and inventoried her tools, as she did at the beginning of every shift. If there were any shortages, she had to report them immediately, or it could be docked from her pay.

And she couldn’t afford that.

She smiled when she laid eyes on the pipe wrench. Picking it up, she hefted it, then swung it the same way she had when going for Marco’s balls.

Fore!

From across the way, Chuck Daring, another tech on her shift, let out a laugh. “Just keep that thing away from me, will ya?” he teased.

She grinned. “Don’t worry, Chuck. Your balls are safe. I like *you*.”

“Good. Because I’ve seen what you do to assholes.”

With a chuckle, she hung the pipe wrench back on its hook and finished her inventory.

Chapter Nine

The next morning when Stacia walked into the apartment, she found a note on the table from her aunt.

Have you seen Marvin? I don't think he's been home in a couple of days. I hope he's okay.

In the usual course of a week, Stacia and her aunt rarely saw each other on weekdays except sometimes in the evenings. Her aunt would be careful not to wake Stacia up when she came home from work. And with her pain, her aunt had usually gone to bed by the time Stacia got up and started getting ready for work. In the mornings, her aunt had usually already left for work before Stacia got home. They shared the bedroom, in separate beds, the way her aunt and Stacia's mom had before their mom died.

Stacia stared at the note, the uneven, spidery script. It wasn't difficult for her to envision her aunt's cramped and twisted hand as she held the pen. Fortunately, in her job at the call center, all she had to do was a bare minimum of typing. No writing by hand at all.

She would consider how to respond after she'd taken a shower and had eaten something. Leaving her tote bag on the table, she opened the fridge and realized they were low on food again.

Okay, groceries first, then sleep.

She didn't like her aunt doing any shopping. It was stressful on the woman and only added to her already high daily pain levels.

She took a chicken out of the freezer and stuck it in the fridge to thaw. When she returned from her shopping trip, she'd put it in a large stock pot to simmer all day so her aunt would have a warm meal to come home to. Her aunt would refrigerate the remnants so Stacia could do the actual carcass-picking the next morning, and put the bones on again to simmer all day for stock.

Her aunt worked Mondays through Fridays, usually. Sometimes, she would work part of the day on a Saturday or Sunday to fill in if someone was sick or needed time off. Stacia's days off varied, especially if she took extra shifts for the overtime. She'd once gone twelve days straight before human resources told Billy to make her take a day off.

Marvin...

Well, Marvin was Marvin. He would sometimes help cook, sometimes help shop, but Stacia had found she couldn't afford to send him out by himself unless it was for one specific item and she gave him exact change. He would always come back missing stuff from the list, would buy stuff not on the list, and would sometimes splurge on things they couldn't afford. He also wouldn't remember to get the cheapest option if more than one was available, and he wouldn't take the time to do the math to see if a lower price didn't actually cost more when compared to another item.

He occasionally made halfhearted attempts to help clean, would sometimes dust, especially the stuff on top of the bookshelf where her aunt couldn't reach. About the only chore Stacia could count on him to do was the dishes. He never left dirty ones in the sink, and always washed up the rare times they ate a meal together.

Despite repeated attempts to teach him, even the basics, he couldn't cook to save his life. It was like he didn't retain the info.

He was...just Marvin.

Standing under the shower, Stacia felt a little guilty about how she hadn't returned his "I love you."

Wait, why should I feel guilty? He's the one who decided to sign up for this cockamamie thing without bothering to ask us or share the details with us first.

The truth was, she suspected he didn't *know* the details, other than he saw the dollar signs being flashed in front of him. And that scared her. He was as trusting and oblivious as she was wary and cautious.

Which fit into the same theme of him being as incapable, clueless, and aimless as she was skilled, determined, and ruthless when it came to flat-out getting. Shit. Done.

Maybe I should stop by the church again and see if I can find him. Talk to him. Talk him out of this plan.

Because the more she thought about it, the less everything added up. It didn't make any sense, not in a good way. People earned a hundred grand for being lawyers or bankers or athletes.

Well, they *used* to earn that for being athletes, until the threat of Kite shut down public sports venues and teams had to put their players on hiatus. Now a lot of those same players were as broke as the people who watched their games on TV.

After her shower, she dressed and grabbed one of the homemade protein bars she kept in the fridge. She'd learned the recipe from one of her teachers in high school several years earlier, mixing beans and raisins and other things to create an inexpensive and relatively nutritious food bar.

At one point, she'd even earned extra money during high school making them and selling them to fellow students who couldn't afford school lunches. She'd carefully calculated her expenses and usually made a fifty percent profit on every batch,

which she'd then turn around and invest in more supplies. It wasn't a lot of money, but it had paid for a new pair of comfortable sneakers for her, the first brand-new pair of shoes she'd ever remembered owning.

And the first truly comfortable pair of shoes she'd ever owned up until that point in her life.

She remembered going to the shoe store and watching people who didn't have money worries, people who could afford cars, browsing and trying on pair after pair of frivolous dress shoes.

There she'd been with her store coupon, taking her time and carefully trying on different sneakers until she settled on a good-quality pair that was both comfortable and within her budget, the best she could afford to buy with her coupon.

They had lasted her over a year of daily walking, including repairing them until she could no longer keep them together and she had to go buy a pair of used sneakers from a thrift shop.

It'd taken her another year to have the heart to finally throw them away, every time she looked at them a clear reminder why she had to be careful with her money, why she couldn't ever jump at what she thought was a "deal."

Not Marvin.

Marvin had charm, wit, and a fun personality. What he lacked in skills and brains, he made up for in charisma.

She'd always been the quiet, watchful one, slow to smile, quick to anger.

As she passed the table again, she stopped at her aunt's note. Finally, as she chewed her bar, she picked up the pen.

He's been spending a lot of time at the new church. They have some sort of volunteer program he said might be hiring. I'm not worried about him.

It wasn't technically a lie, any of it. It wasn't her brother she was worried about so much as it was the church and any ulterior motives they might have.

Chapter Ten

The next morning, Lima found a plastic garment bag hanging from the knob of their room's door. Inside was a suit jacket, matching slacks, a dress shirt and tie, belt, and even shoes and dress socks. Omega had also left a small basic disguise kit by the door.

He grinned.

Perfect.

After sending Quack down to eat, Lima spent a little time with a couple of his own special toys and the disguise kit before heading to the common room. When he walked in, everyone sat up, confused for a moment.

"Well?" He turned around. "What do you think?"

Omega nodded his approval. "Glad it fit right," he said.

Lima now looked like a blond-haired, blue-eyed banker or other professional, rich guy, not military. The blue contacts he'd put in had infrared sensors and sat-link feed sensors built in. They'd both disguise his appearance and help him quickly locate any computer terminal with sat-link access. He also wore wire-rimmed glasses that had plain lenses, but held a video recorder in the frame.

Before leaving the compound to head back to the church building, and after the other three men were disguised, Lima sat down with Quack, Omega, Echo, Papa, and Alpha and detailed his plan. In front of Lima was a tablet displaying recon photos and maps he could swipe through.

Echo would settle in and do his harmless crazy-guy routine, circling the building and parking lot several times throughout the morning. The day before, fifteen people, mostly women, had left the building around noon and headed down the street toward a sandwich shop.

At one point, when Echo stopped at the front door and stood there as if talking to his reflection in the windows, he spotted two women still seated at desks inside a room that opened to the right off the building's main hallway. The other side of the hallway had a door that looked like it opened into the sanctuary. At one point, he'd stepped just inside the doorway and swept his gaze around enough to give Lima a pretty good view of the office area.

So now Lima knew his target computers.

He sketched out a plan for the men based on the video feed he pulled from Echo's glasses the day before.

"We don't know exactly how far out their security camera coverage goes, so I'm going to loop way around to the sandwich shop up the street and make my approach from there. Echo, I want you to walk into the church building today after you get there. Make something up, tell them you're looking for your baby or some crazy bullshit like that. I don't know what, but make them feel sorry for you, not afraid of you. Okay? You don't want them afraid of you. I want you pulling on their heartstrings."

Echo grinned, looking completely out of character in his mismatched rags. "Got it."

"I mean, get them to the point of tears, okay? I want them talking about you when they see you doing your crazy act in the parking lot later when the large batch of them leaves for lunch."

Echo gave him a thumbs-up.

He focused on Omega, who wore civvie clothes, jeans and a T-shirt. "Omega, you're going to be backup. Drive the truck and park it down the block from where we were yesterday, in the opposite direction of the sandwich shop after you drop us all off in different places. Once you see me leave the church building again, swoop in and get Echo the hell out of there and meet us at the pickup point."

Quack held up a finger. "What about me?" He was also dressed in civvie clothes.

"I need you hanging out on the same corner where we were yesterday. You see anyone giving us trouble or it looks like there's a problem, or you get a long ping from me, fire a few rounds high into the glass on the front window of the building, here and here, and then take off and meet us at the original drop-off point."

He'd given all the men what he called "pingers." Considering it looked like the church might have sophisticated security devices monitoring the outside of the building, he didn't want to risk the signal from their radios being picked up or even jammed. The low-frequency buttons were of his own design, on a frequency rarely monitored by modern surveillance equipment, and an easy way to signal to someone. All four of them had the earpiece devices. All they had to do was reach up and touch the button on their earpiece, and it would send the signal out one hundred yards in all directions.

Time for Papa to hold up a finger. "Um, far be it for me to second-guess your plan, but why shoot at the place? Won't that bring you guys more attention?"

"Last-resort distraction. It doesn't appear like they have any security personnel. Just women, office workers. They'll probably get scared and duck or run. It doesn't look like they replaced the original glass from when it was a grocery store, so if

he hits high, the whole window should fall out and shatter and scatter people. If I'm inside and need more time, I'll ping, and the gunshots will make logical sense why I'm hiding in their office near the front door should anyone catch me in there. And it might not be necessary if Echo's as good an actor as he thinks he is."

"I'm better," Echo said with a grin.

"Alrighty," Lima said. "Then let's go find out."

Chapter Eleven

When Stacia left the apartment to go to the store, she had started out with the intent of stopping by the church again and demanding to see Marvin before she went shopping.

As she approached the building, her nerve flagged. She remembered the way she felt the last time she'd been there, like maybe she'd barely escaped even though no one had made any attempt to stop her from leaving.

Ignoring instincts like that was rarely a wise move.

Switching the empty cloth shopping bags, several of them stuffed inside one, to her other shoulder, she thought about it some more. By the time she passed the sandwich shop she'd changed her mind again.

She should go have it out with him. Again. As his little sister, it was her right to see her brother.

Right?

Nearing the church building, the small parking lot in front of it was less than a quarter full. That wasn't unusual, considering many people in this part of town couldn't afford anything besides public transportation.

What caught her attention was the homeless guy wandering around the parking lot. He seemed to be talking to himself and not harassing anyone.

Homeless people weren't an unusual sight in this part of the city, either. They'd been run out of the rich enclaves decades ago, and it was usually safer here than in some other neighborhoods that were riddled with gang violence.

But as she glanced around and spotted another guy across the street, who was standing in a doorway and apparently watching the homeless guy, she decided to go straight to the grocery store and kept on her course. She didn't know why, but something felt...off.

Something she suspected she didn't want to have any part of.

An hour later, as Stacia trudged back from the store, sweating in the heat with her four bags full of groceries weighing her down, she stopped when she reached the church's parking lot. It was a few minutes past noon and she needed to get home and get to bed if she was going to get any sleep before her shift.

But now she felt royally pissed off. Marvin should at least be helping her schlep the groceries home.

Fired up, she stormed past the homeless guy holding court with a lamppost in the parking lot and paused in the building's foyer.

A wall of blessedly cool air hit her. It felt so good she almost forgot herself and pulled her surgical mask down to inhale the cool air. But she stopped short of doing that.

Okay, maybe that was the other reason Marvin had started out coming here, just to cool the fark off. They couldn't run their AC when they weren't home, and even when they were they had to keep it turned up as warm as they could stand it to keep the electric bill down.

She turned to the right, walked through the office door, and stepped up to the first desk. Apparently she'd hit them at lunchtime, because there were only two women in there now and the other day she'd seen several. Out in the foyer, she heard the front door open again.

"Hi, I'm looking for my brother. His name's Marvin Rooney. He said he's volunteering for a project here, or something like that. I'm not sure exactly what he's doing. But I need to speak with him. It's important, a family matter."

"What's your name?"

"Stacia."

The women both looked younger than Stacia, maybe eighteen or nineteen. Neither wore surgical masks, Stacia noted. The one she was speaking to had long brown hair down her back. "What's his name again?" the girl asked.

"Marvin. Marvin—"

A gorgeous blond guy in an expensive suit rushed through the door. "Hi, um, there's a man who appears to be having a seizure in your parking lot out there."

The two women jumped up and ran out the door. The man ducked around the first desk, pulled something from his pocket, and stuck it into one of the ports on the computer. Then his fingers flew across the keyboard.

At first, Stacia didn't think the guy had seen her when he rushed in, maybe because of where she was standing next to the doorway.

Then he looked up at her with eyes so blue they didn't look natural. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, too, over the surgical mask covering the lower half of his face. There was something about him, about the look in his eyes, the way he walked, that contradicted the expensive suit he was wearing and screamed *cop*. Or maybe *military*.

"Get down," he ordered.

"What?"

He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her, groceries and all, around the desk with him and down to the floor while he reached up and touched his ear.

Seconds later, gunfire shattered the front window. Stacia yanked her hands free of her grocery bags to cover her ears as she cowered against the guy.

He didn't seem to mind. In fact, it was like he'd been expecting it because he didn't so much as flinch. He stared at the computer screen and tapped on the keyboard a few more times before he yanked whatever the thing was from the computer port and jammed it in his pocket.

Then he looked at her. "You want to get your brother out of this joint, don't you, Stacia?"

She nodded, terrified, wondering what the hell was going on.

"Then I suggest you do it ASAP. And you didn't see anything. I dragged you back here with me when the gunfire started, right?"

She nodded again, not stupid enough to disagree with him. The last thing she wanted or needed was to be hauled in to testify in some court case and lose work days having to sit there.

And if this was some sort of gang activity, she *damn* sure didn't want to be mixed up in it as a witness.

He jumped up and ran out the office door.

Stacia took that as her cue. She grabbed her bags of groceries, made sure she hadn't dropped anything, warily poked her head out of the doorway, and ran for the large opening now surrounding the front doors. All the glass in the large window had shattered and fallen.

By the time she reached the parking lot and broke off at a dead run toward their apartment building, suit guy, homeless guy, and the guy she'd noticed earlier on the other corner were all gone. No one appeared to be shot, but several women, in addition to the two who'd been in the office, had hunkered down behind parked cars and were screaming.

That kicked Stacia's legs into overdrive. Despite the way her lungs burned, she didn't stop running until she reached the park next door to their building, and even then she kept up a fast trot until she entered the building's lobby.

She didn't bother waiting for the elevator and ran up the two flights of stairs to the second floor.

Her hand trembled so badly it took her three tries to enter her lock code for the apartment door, but she finally got it opened, rushing through and then slamming the door shut behind her, throwing the deadbolt.

She wouldn't swear to it, but she felt like at least some of the way home she'd been followed.

Shake it off. You're just freaked out.

Hoping that was all it was, she headed toward the kitchen to put the groceries away and get the chicken cooking.

As she did, she thought about the strange man, the one who definitely didn't belong in a suit. As she'd huddled next to him through the gunfire, she'd felt the lean, strong muscles hidden under his suit.

And the warning he gave her before he left chilled her. He must have heard her give the girl at the desk her and Marvin's names.

Dammit!

She wasn't about to go back there today. Hopefully she could catch up with Marvin and talk him out of whatever he was doing. But it'd have to happen once the excitement at the church had died down a little.

Hopefully, that wouldn't be too late for her to talk to Marvin again.

Chapter Twelve

“What the fuck happened?” Omega asked when he picked them up.

“Drive,” Lima ordered, hoping he hadn’t screwed up by letting the woman go.

“You going to explain now, or explain later?” Quack asked from the truck’s backseat, where he now sat with Echo.

“There was a complication. I needed a distraction.”

“What complication?” Omega asked.

“That woman, right?” Quack said as a statement more than a question.

“Yeah.”

“Who?” Omega asked.

“The woman with the groceries,” Quack said.

“Her brother’s in the program,” Lima explained. “Her name’s Stacia. Her brother’s name is Marvin Rooney. I heard he talking to the receptionist in the office when I went in, but I couldn’t wait any longer. The other women were coming back from the sandwich shop.” They’d left earlier than they had the day before, meaning they’d returned sooner, which had messed with their logistics.

“I take it she’s not happy about her brother being in the program?” Omega asked. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t have risked a civvie seeing you.”

“She did not seem happy about it, no.”

In fact, the woman had looked and sounded really pissed off about it.

She was also cute, but that was irrelevant.

Lima pulled out his tablet from its hiding place under the seat and grabbed a sat-link connection. Before they returned to the safe house, he’d already sent Bubba a message asking for a background check on the siblings.

When they returned to the safe house, Papa was waiting for them upstairs, standing there with his arms crossed over his chest. “Well?”

Since it was his operation, Lima got to do the honors of telling him the story. While their commander wasn’t happy about resorting to shooting or involving a civvie, he had news of his own.

A grin crossed his face. “Bubba just sent word that you struck gold, buddy. The good news is, he got into the system and pulled a full data dump. They haven’t shut him out as of when he messaged me a little while ago, so he might be able to set up a stealth monitor in their system.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“That facility, whatever it is, isn’t attached to any other network run by the church. It’s a very basic, self-contained network. He hasn’t yet found any way to access the larger church system through it.”

“Shit.”

“No, don’t be like that. You guys did good. Now we just have to wait and see if it bears fruit.”

* * * *

Later that afternoon, Bubba got back to Lima.

I’m still sorting through the server data because a lot of it is encrypted. I haven’t been locked out of it yet, but meanwhile, I got that other info for you.

What followed was background data on Stacia and Marvin Rooney. Stacia was twenty-three and currently employed by a local brewery, according to IRS records. Her older brother, Marvin, was twenty-five and apparently unemployed. However, he was showing up in the facility’s database, his status listed as “in training,” whatever that meant.

They’d both had the same address for approximately twenty years, listed under the name of Darla Englebury, who seemed to be their aunt. They lived in an apartment in a building only a few blocks from the church facility. Both their parents were deceased.

More interesting, the brother had served in the military for only two weeks when he was eighteen, and had received an honorable discharge for undisclosed health reasons.

Mental health reasons. The listed reason was “unsuitable for standard service” but they didn’t expound upon that and provide an official diagnosis, which Lima found odd. The military was usually extremely specific on DX forms...except wher they deliberately chose not to be.

Bubba had also included copies of the siblings’ California state IDs. It didn’t look like either of them had a driver’s license or owned a car.

Lima sent him a reply.

Any chance of finding out exactly what that DX cause means?

Bubba replied moments later.

Already have the request in. Will let you know what I find out. You think that angle might be your in?

Lima considered it, thinking about the woman he'd seen in the church office. The official state ID pic didn't do her justice at all. Around five five, she had shoulder-length brown hair, and brown eyes that appeared both watchful and wary while studying him in the church office. She had a body built like she was in shape. Not like some rich people were, because they had time to exercise, but like someone used to doing manual labor for a living. Real curves over svelte, lean muscles. Her jeans and plain blue T-shirt hadn't been new, but they'd been clean. Her fingernails had been blunt and unpainted.

She was definitely the kind of woman who, under other circumstances, he would have pursued. He hated vapid, showy women. He wanted a woman who wasn't fragile, who could stand on her own.

In fact, thinking about her now, without an operation at stake, had made his cock hard.

Lima replied to Bubba.

I don't know. Maybe. It depends on what you tell us about that place.

Bubba replied a few minutes later.

Roger. Tell the PTB that I hope to have at least some info forthcoming today. Decryption is a bitch and a half on these files. And FYI it doesn't look like they're running outside feeds or file saves on those cameras yet. I found where the cameras are dumping the feeds, but apparently they rushed the whole job and didn't verify it past looking at the video feed on a monitor. The error codes for the feeds not saving are dumping into their own log file that it looks like no one's accessed since the facility was set up four months ago. Shoddy work. I disabled the error messages, so they're still blind. Doesn't mean someone, somewhere, isn't looking at video screens where those cameras are pointed, but for now they aren't recording or being shipped off-site. Just keep that in mind.

Lima breathed a sigh of relief.

Thanks, I appreciate the heads-up.

Lima shut down the sat-link connection and closed the lid of his laptop. That had been a sheer stroke of luck about the surveillance cameras.

He got up to go find Papa and give him the latest update. Maybe the brother was exactly the internal access point they needed. Perhaps they could use his sister to get to him and find out what was going on in that facility.

He'd keep all his options open.

Chapter Thirteen

Major General George Macaletto stood at attention in front of four-star General Joseph Arliss' desk and prayed he didn't nervous-sweat right through his undershirt.

Arliss had turned his hard grey gaze on Macaletto and was studying him like a lion preparing to take down a baby zebra. At least, that was the way Macaletto felt.

"So how long as this man been missing?" Arliss asked.

"He didn't report for work after his requested time off, sir. It's been over a week."

"And I'm just hearing about this now...why?"

"Sir, I didn't realize this was something you'd personally—"

"Since when have I *not* personally been interested in the whereabouts and welfare of the people who serve directly under me in my command?"

Macaletto resisted the urge to nervously swallow. He was already off-balance from the general ordering him into his office first thing that morning and then ordering him to stand at attention like a damned private.

"Sir, I thought since he reported directly to me that—"

"You thought wrong, soldier. I should *not* have found out about this through a weekly personnel report. I should have been notified the day he turned up missing. Has anyone been sent to his residence to check on him?"

"Yes, sir. I went myself and—"

"Did you enter the residence?"

Considering he'd lied about going in the first place, he knew he'd need to remember his story later. He didn't know exactly where Colonel Afton Gregor was at that particular moment in time, but he strongly suspected Gregor was somewhere in the vicinity of Mexico City, and that the colonel's health status was now, unofficially at least, *deceased*.

"Uh, no, sir—"

"*Do* it. Call MPs, call local authorities. I want someone to enter his residence and make sure he's not lying dead on his bathroom floor. And I want an *immediate* report from you when you do it."

"Uh, yes, sir."

"Then if he's not there, I want you to file a missing persons report on him, copies on my desk no later than four o'clock this afternoon. And I want investigators looking at his bank and credit card records, travel records, e-mail, everything. Understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dismissed."

Macaletto turned to head for the door when the general called after him. "And when I said do it, I mean it is your *next* action, and nothing else will get done, including you taking a piss, until that man's residence is searched. Understand me?"

He turned to look at the general. The older man was still watching him with that predatory look.

I hope Silo eats him alive in the new world order. "Yes, sir. Understood."

He hurried back to his office, mentally swearing the entire way.

Fucking asshole.

Figured that this would be the *one* damn time the general would actually pay attention to the stupid weekly personnel reports. At least Gregor had the decency to get himself killed on Mexican soil, not in the US. It would slow down the investigation, perhaps even stall it.

He hoped.

* * * *

Four-star general Joseph Arliss leaned back in his chair as George Macaletto practically ran from his office. *Shit.*

At one time, George had been one of his most trusted subordinates. He never would have suspected him of treason.

But Bubba had e-mailed him the pics and video forwarded to him by SOTIF1 and their interrogation of Gregor in Mexico City.

Colonel Afton Gregor had been sent by Macaletto to try to locate the Drunk Monkeys.

Arliss strongly suspected a mole in his food chain after the incident in Australia. He'd heard from one of his intelligence contacts in the Ukraine that a mercenary team had been contracted to go to Australia only hours after Arliss had diverted the Drunk Monkeys there.

And there had been only four people in his food chain who'd known about those orders. One being himself, and one being Papa, head of the team.

Macaletto had been one of the other two.

The last had been his driver, who'd heard him discussing it on the phone. And while Arliss didn't suspect his driver was a mole, he already had Bubba looking into the man's finances and personal activity just to make sure.

Then, when Papa had smartly chummed some bogus info into the echo chamber, somehow, the info beelined right into a different hive, and another SOTIF team had been deployed after their commander consulted with Arliss.

Of course he'd approved it. He knew they wouldn't locate his Drunk Monkeys. And to not approve it would have tipped his own hand that he'd given them an OTG order.

Now what Arliss didn't know was the identity Macaletto's handler. Bubba had his theories, and Arliss trusted the man, but he needed proof before he took out a two-star, even one under his own command. He needed to find out how deeply his own hive was compromised before taking action. Whether or not it involved other hives, as they called the SOTIF team command structures, or just the man in his own food chain.

Arliss also commanded SOTIF9 and SOTIF10, but he'd been careful not to reveal that to anyone except the officer he'd hand-picked to publicly lead those two units. As the program's creator and official overseer, Arliss had made sure to carefully lay out a failsafe system in case he'd ever needed it.

It looked like he might need it.

His greatest fear over the years was a president and congress bought and paid for by special interests, and a low-income population too busy trying to survive to care about the political process. He'd wanted the ability to work silently if needed, in the background, to take out any private interests that grew too powerful.

It wasn't much of a stretch to see how many of the foreign terror organizations had gotten their start. He didn't want a small but powerful group of private interests, commercial or religious, gaining too much power and usurping the Constitution.

He still gave a damn about that piece of paper, even if politicians and the big banking consortiums wanted to do nothing more than wipe their asses with it.

He'd already had three bankers, two in Europe and one in Saudi, taken out when intelligence had shown they were funneling money directly to several large-scale jihadi organizations.

He wouldn't hesitate to do it to Americans, either.

Now, if Bubba's hunch proved correct, Arliss might have to do just that. If evidence proved beyond a doubt that Hannibal Silo was behind some scheme to spread Kite or to take control of a Kite vaccine and hold it hostage, Arliss would send a team in without hesitation to take the man out.

Right now, he was more interested in shutting down this info leak in his organization and rooting out how many more there might be besides Macaletto. He had to do it on the back end, because to start an official inquiry would mean outing the Drunk Monkeys and the classified fact that they were protecting two of the scientists.

Arliss knew it wouldn't be easy, considering Macaletto had an intelligence background, but what Macaletto wasn't counting on was how far Arliss' own secret web stretched across the world.

Arliss wiped all evidence of the photos and videos from his personal tablet and the e-mail account, dumping and deleting the disposable e-mail account before doing a factory reset on his tablet.

Let the game of cat and monkey begin.

Chapter Fourteen

Hannibal Silo smiled across the table at his wife the next morning. “And there’s my lovely bride. How are you feeling today, dear?”

The housekeeper was preparing Mary’s breakfast. He stifled his internal giggles at the way Mary wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Oh, Mrs. Silo,” the housekeeper said. “Today is your hair appointment.”

Hannibal wondered how Mary would enjoy sitting for a couple of hours on that well-fucked ass. He reached into his pocket and withdrew his wallet. “Here, sweetheart,” he said, handing her a couple of hundred dollars. “Why don’t you have Elise take you shopping after your appointment? If you feel up to it, of course.”

She took the money, eyeing him warily.

Oh, he didn’t care about giving her money or what she spent it on. She never asked for money. She refused to. It was, he supposed, one small way she thought she exerted a little control over her own life.

He chose to allow her that illusion.

The hairdresser had their information on file and billed him for Mary’s appointments. It was the same salon he used, so he always settled up with a credit card when he went.

Giving Mary cash was his silent way of telling her he didn’t consider her anything more than his property, a commodity.

A whore to be paid off.

And she damn well knew it.

“Thank you,” she said.

“But of course. And if you want more, let me know.” He stood and walked around the table, kissing her on the top of her head, more for the housekeeper’s benefit than Mary’s. “Have a good day, dear.”

He left the kitchen, heading for the front door. His driver was already waiting outside.

He didn’t worry about the housekeepers like he did the nurses. The housekeeper was only there for two hours every morning. She cooked breakfast and tidied up, and reminded the day nurse of any appointments for Mary that showed up in the daily calendar. She didn’t actually take care of Mary like the nurses did. That was why he only rotated them out every year, instead of every few months, like the nurses.

His driver, Henry, gave him a smile when Silo walked out onto the front porch.

“Good morning, Reverend. You’re looking chipper this morning.”

Silo smiled. “I feel great. I had a wonderful night’s sleep last night.”

He sure had, after putting Mary through her paces and leaving her with a gaping asshole.

* * * *

Mary Silo clutched the money in her left hand, keeping it tucked in her lap while she ate. Normally, she despised it when Hannibal gave her money. She didn’t want anything from him if she could avoid taking it. If she had to buy clothes or other items, she could console herself with the fact that they inherited her parents’ money when they’d died, and what she was buying came from that portion of it.

Well, that was what she told herself.

She hated it when Hannibal gave her cash. And she knew damn well why he did it, too. To reinforce his opinion of her.

Today, however, she’d take the boon and run with it.

She’d had a plan she’d mulled over for years, ever since that smarmy little weasel, Jerald, started working for Hannibal. She’d never had the balls to do anything about it before now. Her husband had the world convinced he was a great and kind man, and she was a fragile little shit who could barely wipe her own ass.

She’d made a mistake a few weeks earlier, forgetting to slow her step, slur her speech, and Hannibal had Dr. Isley out to adjust her meds.

That had been a reminder to carefully watch how she acted around everyone. Especially when in her bedroom or bathroom.

Hannibal was smart enough not to have cameras in other parts of the house, where they might accidentally be discovered. But in her bedroom and bathroom, she was guaranteed she’d never have a moment to herself, ever. She’d either have a nurse with her, or Hannibal watching over her.

Bastard.

Oh, how she wished she could go back in time and take back what happened, her caving to Hannibal's blackmail. Back then, young and stupid, she hadn't realized that what he'd done was pay to have her raped when his friend spiked her drink. She didn't realize she could have pressed charges against him for what he'd done to her.

All she'd been able to envision at the time was the potential shock and dismay on her parents' faces if Hannibal showed them that video. How her reputation would be forever ruined. How people would have looked at her for the rest of her life when the sex tape got out.

And she'd had no doubts that Hannibal would have shown it to everyone. He would have spread it all over the Internet. There wouldn't have been a university she could have transferred to where eventually it wouldn't have come back to haunt her.

He would have made sure of it.

But now...

She didn't know exactly what he and Jerald were up to. She hadn't heard all the details. But she knew enough from their talks on Sundays, when Hannibal was cocky enough not to care she could hear them, that something horrible was in the works.

This wasn't about her any longer. Her life was over, wasted.

She couldn't allow Hannibal to kill or harm innocent people.

She'd been pretending to take her meds. A few months ago she thought she could stop them at once and it nearly made her sick, so she'd been forced to take them. That had taught her. She slowly weaned herself off them, waiting longer and longer to take them, so that eventually she could stop some of them, and greatly reduce others.

She palmed the pills, carefully putting them in her pocket and then removing them later and flushing them down one of the other toilets in the house, where Hannibal didn't have a camera to watch.

Today, after breakfast, she prepared for her hair appointment. Elise would take her.

Elise always left her there and went to get them lunch and coffees from a cafe a few doors away. Mary had always told her to take her time, not to rush. The nurse was usually gone at least thirty minutes. About the same amount of time it took for her hair color to set. A color that Hannibal insisted they use on her.

Next door to the hair salon was a store that, among other things, sold cell phones. She'd have to risk hiding it in her makeup bag in her purse. It was one of the few places in her life where Hannibal never went.

She didn't know what she'd do once she got it, but she had an idea.

All she'd need was the courage and strength—and probably more than a little luck—to go through with whatever she decided to do.

Chapter Fifteen

The next morning, Lima checked for messages from Bubba after eating breakfast. He had the room to himself because Quack had gone downstairs to the laundry room to take his turn washing clothes.

“Huh.” He stared at the screen, still not sure what he was looking at.

Finally, he picked up his laptop and walked down the hall, where he knocked on the chemistry lab door.

Clara, dressed in a protective suit, walked over to the small window. “What?” she called through it.

He held up the laptop so she could read the screen through the glass. He pointed at one line in particular. “What the hell does *that* mean?”

She was a nurse practitioner who’d been working at a charity clinic in Mexico when she joined them a few weeks earlier. Because of her medical training, she’d been enlisted as a lab assistant for Q and Sin. Yankee and Oscar had fallen for her, hard, and she’d fallen for the twin brothers, too.

A frown creased her face as she read the computer screen. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard of it before. Hey, Q, Sin, come here.”

The two scientists, also wearing protective suits, joined her and read the laptop screen through the window.

Both men shook their heads. “No idea, mate,” Sin said. “Sorry.”

“If you find out what it is,” Q said, “please inform me of that.”

“Thanks anyway.”

“Oh,” Clara said before he could leave. “Maybe Doc knows. Ask him. He was trained in military med school, wasn’t he? If not, I can send a message to Paul at the clinic and ask him.”

“Sheesh, duh. You’re right. Thank you. Sorry I interrupted you guys.”

“No worries,” Sin assured him.

Lima went in search of Doc. He found him, Doc’s partner, Tango, and Pandora up on the roof tending to the garden.

Lima showed him the laptop.

Doc frowned, taking the laptop from him to read it. “Who has *that*?”

“Do you know what it is?”

“Yeah, I know what it is, but first you tell me who has it. I know for a fact it’s no one on this team, because it disqualifies you by default from service. They’ll kick a person out before basic’s over.”

“That woman’s brother, the one who is apparently one of the church volunteers. It’s why the military gave him a medical discharge.”

On his screen, the message Bubba had sent him.

Classified DX cause on subject due to polymorphed adrenal genetic sensory disruption, AKA PAGSD. Can’t tell you what that means yet, because there is literally nothing I have found in standard medical databases talking about it. Now you have me curious.

If Bubba couldn’t find something out, Lima knew it had to be a cause for concern.

“So what the hell is it?” Lima asked.

Doc returned the laptop to him. “The military has a top-secret lid on it. It’s a genetic condition they think is caused by a combo of experimental vaccines they were giving servicemen at one point. They used them for about four years before military doctors at bases who treated families and children started noticing some male babies fathered by men who’d received that exact combo of vaccines were having...issues.”

“Issues how?”

“Symptoms that were sort of a mix of ADHD and dyslexia and autism, problems with sensory recognition and processing, cognitive issues, things like that. They immediately discontinued using the vaccination regimen and started trying to track the children, but it was difficult once the men were discharged. But when the boys came of age and started applying to join the military, they were able to pick them out via genetic sequencing tests and then boot them from service. They only teach military doctors about it. The government didn’t want a class-action lawsuit over it. The only reason military doctors were told about it was so they could look for the symptoms in children, and then later in adults.”

“Why does it automatically disqualify someone from service?”

“Because they are incapable of focusing or staying on task. Not exactly a quality you want in a person trained to operate high-powered weaponry. Most of them never successfully complete high school. It’s usually misdiagnosed and treated by civvie doctors as ADD, ADHD, or mild autism, and then sometimes those kids can do okay. But only if they’re caught very early and treated aggressively. Most aren’t, obviously, unless their parents have the money to afford private doctors and treatments. Anyone in the public system, if they get treatment, usually receive meds and a pat on the head and are sent on their

way, but it doesn't fix their problem."

"Why hasn't anyone ever picked up on this?"

"Because of the extremely limited number of men affected. And the genetic sequencing test to find it is one the military came up with. It's not a test private labs ever do, because it looks for specific sets of markers in places and in ways that no other test looks for. It was easy for them to keep it classified. When I was in med school, there were currently less than five thousand known adult cases, several hundred more in people who were deceased, and numbers of new cases being identified every year were rapidly dropping as the far end of the original vaccine usage window was approaching."

Lima stared at him. "Say what?"

"They stopped using the vaccines. Apparently the effect wore off after a while. Any kids the men fathered later when they weren't getting those vaccine combos weren't affected."

"So what about Stacia?"

"It didn't affect girls for some reason, and they haven't passed it on to any of their children, as far as we can tell. And boys who have it, they don't pass it along, either. Not exactly a line of research the military is eager to pursue, frankly."

"All that to avoid a lawsuit, huh?"

"Well, a lawsuit, and to prevent another public backlash against vaccinations like they had way back in the early 2000s. There were already enough flu deaths without people refusing to get vaccinated for fear of government fuckery."

Lima closed the laptop. "Okay, thanks."

He returned to his room and then realized he might as well save Bubba the hassle of researching. He typed out a quick reply summarizing what he'd just learned from Doc and sent it.

Obviously, if it was a military secret, Stacia didn't know anything about it.

And based on the history Bubba dug up on the siblings, they likely had never been able to afford quality medical care to get her brother treatment that would have allowed him to live a more higher-functioning life.

Crap.

Now he felt sorry for the woman, and he didn't even know her.

* * * *

That afternoon, Lima heard back from Bubba.

Still working on decrypting files. Still have internal access.

That wasn't much.

In fact, it was nothing.

Lima had a hunch he wanted to follow up on, so he gathered Quack and went in search of Papa.

"I want to go do a little recon."

"Why, where, and how?"

"I want to return to that neighborhood and scout around."

"You want to find that woman." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. I really think she might be a way for us to get some answers."

"We can wait until Bubba decrypts the data."

"Sure, we can do that. And then if he finds something that's germane to our mission, it might mean we still have to go scout around. Look, just me and Quack. I promise we won't go shoot up anything."

Papa looked at Alpha, who'd been listening in. "Your opinion?"

He shrugged. "We're all going stir crazy. I say let them take a burner cell and go. They might find out something we can use."

Papa scrubbed his face with his hands. Their commander hadn't shaved yet and bore stubble on his cheeks and chin. "Why do I have a feeling I might regret this?"

"Maybe we'll pleasantly surprise you," Lima said.

Quack grinned. "Maybe we'll find a girl of our own."

"Maybe you two better get out of here before I change my mind," Papa told them.

Chapter Sixteen

“So what do you want to do?” Quack asked Lima.

Lima was driving. “I just want to check out the neighborhood right now.”

“Uh-huh.”

He looked at Quack. “I do.”

Quack shook his head. “I know you better than that, dude. Fess up.” Quack suspected Lima wanted another close-up look at that cutie.

He hadn’t gotten a good look at her in the scuffle at the clinic because he’d been too busy trying not to shoot any innocent bystanders. But from the ID picture they had of her, he had to agree with his partner.

She was a cutie.

They had shared several women in their past. It was easier to share one woman, make her a promise to rock her world, and then be able to keep that promise, than it was to try to find a woman for each of them.

Not like they could have a relationship anyway.

Then again, he knew Doc and Tango, and Yankee and Oscar, had thought that, too.

Before now, it was just one or two nights here and there, easy to slip into a woman’s bed and ruin her for future men. They took great pride in ruining a woman in the good kind of way. It was fun to blow a woman’s mind with the best sex of her life.

And he’d seen that look before on Lima’s face.

“Hey, her brother is in that group,” Lima said. “Maybe she can talk to him for us, get us information. Maybe she has information.”

“Maybe she’s single and lonely?”

Lima didn’t bother replying to that, meaning Quack knew he’d squarely hit the nail on the head.

“She’s not married,” Lima noted.

“Doesn’t mean she doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

“Would it be so bad if she’s single?” Lima asked him.

“Didn’t say that. But if your plan involves getting her in bed as well as getting information, let’s get our stories straight from the start.”

* * * *

Lima and Quack cruised around the neighborhood first before parking on the street in front of the apartment building. Run-down and depressing, it wasn’t the worst neighborhood, but it spoke volumes regarding the woman’s financial situation.

They both donned surgical masks. Lima led the way upstairs to the apartment listed in the information they had.

“I can’t believe we’re going to go knock on her door,” Quack quietly griped as they walked down the hall. “What happened to just doing recon?”

“This *is* recon.”

“Bullshit. Some people would call this stalking.”

“Everyone would call this stalking.”

“Then why are we *doing* it?”

Lima didn’t bother responding. He wouldn’t be deterred.

The building was old, but clean. No graffiti on the walls, no broken lights in the hall, the paint a blah beige color, but relatively fresh.

They’d seen far worse in their travels, but it definitely confirmed the residents did not occupy the upper echelons of society.

They knocked on the door.

Lima noticed a flash of movement through the viewfinder.

“Stacia,” he called, raising his voice, “please. We want to talk to you about Marvin. We’d like to help you get him out of there.”

* * * *

Stacia froze on her way to the kitchen to grab a knife. She didn’t know how long it might take cops to get there if she

called them, which was why she ran for a weapon first. But now through the sound of her pulse throbbing in her ears, her mind latched on to the mystery man's offer.

Turning, she walked back to the door. They were big guys. Cute guys, but definitely cops or military. They could probably kick the door in and kill her before she reached the phone.

But if they were going to do that, they likely would have done so already instead of politely knocking and talking to her.

The one looked familiar, with black hair, but she couldn't place him. His handsome features, what she could see over the top of his surgical mask, looked like he belonged in a museum, like one of those old marble statues from ancient Rome. The blond guy she'd never seen before, but he was equally cute.

"Who are you?" she called through the door.

"Can we talk to you?" the dark-haired guy said. "Please? Just talk. If you want to come outside and talk in the park next door, we'll meet you there."

And his voice sounded familiar but she still couldn't place him.

She watched them through the viewfinder as she tried to make up her mind. Their postures looked relaxed. They weren't holding any weapons, but that didn't mean they didn't have any.

In fact, they looked like men who were probably always armed.

"What do you think you can do to help me?" she asked, stalling for time until she could make her instincts and brain come to an agreement. Instinctively, the men didn't raise her hackles.

Her brain was trying to logic her gut out of that conclusion.

"We don't know," the guy said. "That's the point. We have a mutual vested interest in finding out what's going on in there, but we know it's not anything good."

It looked like the black-haired guy was doing all the talking.

"What if I say no?"

The black-haired guy looked like he let out a frustrated sigh that wasn't loud enough to make it through the door, but his body language bore no hint of anger. "Then I guess we'll go away, and neither you nor we gain any information that might help any of us."

"Why me?" she asked. "And how did you find me?"

"Because you and I met briefly at the church building. I heard you give your name and your brother's name to the receptionist."

With a will of its own, her hand unsnapped the deadbolt and she yanked the door open.

They were even cuter close up, and they made absolutely no move to come in.

She stared at him. "Who the hell are you two?"

The black-haired guy tugged his mask down. "Last time you saw me, I had blond hair, blue eyes, and wore glasses."

Now she placed him. He was suit guy.

She stepped out of the way and motioned them inside, shutting the door behind them. "That doesn't answer any of my questions."

"We need to ask you some questions first," he said.

"Why?"

He smiled, and somewhere deep inside her, something pleasant sent up a flurry of sensations she wasn't used to feeling. "Because believe it or not, we have a lot more to lose than you do."

* * * *

Quack was wrong. She wasn't cute, she was fucking adorable. If he'd gotten this good a look at her the other day, he'd be panting after her, too.

Hell, he *was* panting after her. He hoped she didn't notice how his cock had thickened in his trousers. She had brown hair that fell around her shoulders, and sweet brown eyes. She was around five five, about nine inches shorter than him.

The perfect height to pull her against him so she could press her face against his chest and...

He cut off that line of thinking before he ended up with a tent in his pants.

She wasn't acting afraid of them, but he could tell she was someone used to keeping herself safe. Someone used to taking care of herself. She wore jeans and sneakers and a faded T-shirt that was clean. The apartment was sparse, but tidy. These were people who didn't have much, but made do as best they could. Low income didn't mean low class.

"I don't get it," she said. "What do you mean by that?"

Lima cast a quick glance at him, and he knew they were about to land themselves ass-deep in something he had no clue if they'd ever get out of or not.

He let Lima do the talking because his brain's blood supply had currently been diverted to his balls.

Hell, he wasn't being shot at. It wasn't like he needed to be on high alert at that moment. Intense focus had kept him alive this long.

It had also taught him when he could drop that focus and just be in the moment.

Despite the purpose of their visit, this was one of those times.

"We are investigating the clinic," Lima told her. "We think there's something illegal going on there."

"Illegal like what?"

"That's what we don't know yet. We're still...analyzing evidence."

She studied him. "You hacked in, didn't you? That's what that thing was you stuck into the computer?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Did you tell anyone?"

She snorted. "*Hell* no, what's wrong with you? I'm smarter than that, thank you very much."

"What is your impression of what they're doing?"

"I don't know, but it can't be good." She told them about her brother's contract, what she'd read of it, and the revelation that they would pay him one hundred grand at the completion of his training, before he was sent on assignment.

Quack let out a low whistle. "Holy crap, that's a huge red flag."

"Tell me about it. Rather, tell my stupid brother that."

"But no idea what the training entails or what the assignment will be?" Lima asked.

"No. We didn't talk that long. He's not religious, either. At least he wasn't up until a couple of months ago when he started spending a shitload of time at that place. I thought when I saw that woman he was cozied up to, Korey? I thought okay, he's trying to get laid. But that contract looked legit. I mean, I'm not a lawyer, but I graduated high school and took a couple of college classes. You tell me why they'd pay a group of people one hundred thousand each to go do some sort of work for a church, huh? Does that add up to you?"

"No," Quack said, his mind now firmly focused on the conversation at hand. "It sounds fishy as hell."

She threw up her hands in relief. "*Thank* you! I'm glad someone agrees with me. I haven't even told my aunt yet because I don't know what the hell *to* tell her. I don't want her upset, but I don't know what to do to get Marvin's stupid ass out of there."

She looked like maybe she was close to crying but forced it back. "My brother's an idiot, okay? And a pain in the ass. Can't hold a fucking job. Flunked out of high school. Hell, flunked out of the *military*, for crying out loud. That takes a special kind of idiot. You'd think I'd be happy he hit a windfall like this, right? But I'm not. You know why?"

"Because you're afraid he's going to die," Quack quietly said.

She froze, slowly nodding as she locked eyes with him. She looked worried as hell.

"Yeah," she softly said. "Exactly. So if you want me to keep my mouth shut, I'll take it to my grave. But if you really think you can help me get him out of there? Then guys, I'm your new best friend."

Chapter Seventeen

Standing this close to Stacia, Lima saw his first impressions of her hadn't been wrong.

He wanted her even more now, but business had to come first. "Your brother, he has trouble focusing on stuff, right? Can't seem to get his shit together? Maybe been like that for a while?"

She nodded. "Yeah. All his life. Why?"

"I need to tell you some stuff, but I can't tell you exactly how I know it yet. It's not an exaggeration when I say there are lives at stake. Can that be good enough for now?"

She nodded.

He told her what he'd found out about PAGSD, and the fact that her brother had been bounced from the military because of it.

Sadness filled her face. "Sonofabitch," she softly said. "I *knew* it. All my life, I knew there was something different about him. He really couldn't help it, could he?"

"No," Lima said, "he couldn't. It's genetic."

"So what am I supposed to do with that information?"

"I wanted to lay a foundation here," Lima said. "To show you we aren't just blowing smoke up your ass. We have a mission."

"You're military?"

"Let's not talk about that yet." Lima gave her an extremely condensed and sanitized version of how TMFU came to happen, and that there were people trying to fix this shit. And that they were part of that fixing, but he left out detailing their exact roles.

Understandably, she looked stunned when he finished. "Why do you guys want to waste your time trying to help me with my brother when you've got a world that needs you?"

"What do you mean?" Lima asked.

"I mean, what's in it for you?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. We just want to help. Uh, saving the world is kind of our gig, you know."

"Figuring out what's going on with my brother isn't part of that."

Quack wore a grim look he suspected mirrored his own. "Actually," Quack said, "we think it might be."

* * * *

Stacia felt like she could barely breathe after absorbing what they told her about Marvin and his genetic condition.

Then they told her about how Kite came to be and it felt like a gut punch.

But as the two men detailed what little they'd found out about the church's operation thus far, the enormity of the situation hit her.

And at least they'd finally told her their names.

"Unfortunately," Lima continued, "most of what we know hinges on circumstantial evidence and a few leaps of logic. Small, reasonable leaps, but far from the cold, hard proof that we need to take it to any official government entities and get their asses shut down. And from what our inside guy is beginning to untangle in his intelligence research, the simple fact is we don't yet know which government entities are immune to Silo's reach."

It even looked like Silo was buddies with the president.

How the *hell* were they supposed to overcome someone with *that* kind of pull?

All the men could do was continue their mission as ordered.

Now Stacia worried about her doofus brother even more. And she felt a little bad that he really couldn't help being the way he was. He wasn't a great brother, but he was the only one she had.

The only family she had, other than Aunt Darla.

It took her a few moments to digest what they'd told her. When she finally spoke again, her voice trembled. "My dumbass brother might have signed himself up for some sort of kamikaze mission, is that what you're saying?"

They nodded.

Her knees buckled. She'd thought it, but part of her had hoped she was overreacting. To hear these men confirm her worst fears finished her off. Quack grabbed her arm and eased her down onto a chair at the table. "Fuck," she whispered.

"We have to find out what their actual plan is and stop it," Lima said. "Can you talk to your brother again? At least pretend to accept what he's doing? Any information you can get out of him could be invaluable. We might be able to shut the

place down without having to blow it up.”

She laughed. It trailed off as she stared up at them. “Oh. You’re not kidding about that part, are you?”

Quack smiled. “A couple of our guys are demolition and munitions experts. When you absolutely, positively have to blow shit up, they’re your men.”

Lima took over again. “If they are playing with Kite the virus in that clinic, maybe they already have the vaccine and are testing it. Maybe they already have one or more of the scientists from The List under their control. Finding the people from The List and keeping them safe *is* our mission. It all boils down to we don’t know what they’re doing, and that’s the problem. If Kite is a factor, that probably makes it part of our mission by default. If your brother will talk to you, you might be able to get us the info we need to finally figure out what the fucker’s up to.”

She looked up at them. “You mean Silo?”

“Yeah. He’s a slippery fuck. He isn’t doing anything that we can directly tie to him yet. Your brother might be the break we need.”

“I know a lot of preachers are con artists, especially now, but do you really think he’d have the balls to pull off something like this? Isn’t this, like, the antithesis of what’s in the Bible? I mean, I’m no scholar unless it’s got nuts and bolts and moving parts. But I’ve had Christian friends before and they never wanted to engineer an apocalypse.”

“Just because a guy says he believes in Christ and God,” Quack said, “doesn’t mean he’s a Christian.”

“What does the umbrella salesman wish he could do?” Lima asked her.

Puzzled, she shook her head.

He looked positively grim. “He wishes he had the power to make it rain at will. Maybe that’s something Reverend Silo’s figured out. A preacher needs an apocalypse to sell his goods to the most dubious of souls. Maybe he’s not content with the shitstorm we’re already stuck with, he feels he needs to drive the message home here in the US.”

“But he’d have to be totally batcrap crazy.”

Lima shrugged. “Mighty Leader was that level of batcrap crazy. And that’s why we’re in this mess to start with.”

* * * *

Stacia didn’t have to work that night, but she didn’t want the men there when Aunt Darla came home, either. She left her aunt a note and went for a walk with them to talk some more.

“What is going to be my best approach?” she asked them. “How do I explain my about-face on what he’s doing?”

“Simple,” Quack said. “You tell him the truth.”

She stopped and stared at him. “Really? I just go up to him and say, ‘Hey, I think these people at the clinic are dangerous and I need you to spy on them for me?’”

“No,” Lima said. “You tell him you’re trying to understand why he’s doing this and you’d like to learn more.”

“Oh.”

“It’s sort of the truth,” Lima said. “Just not exactly the truth.”

“Don’t try to pull him out of there yet,” Quack said. “Let him try to bring you in.”

“I’m not going to do whatever it is he’s doing. Besides, he won’t believe that.”

“No,” Lima said. “Let him sell you on it. Be willing to listen.”

“You think it might be that easy?”

“Maybe. You know your brother. We don’t. But maybe something he tells you will prove to be a clue we can use.”

“Or maybe I’ll be stumbling around like a damn drunk monkey in the dark,” she grumbled.

Both men burst out laughing.

She turned. “What’s so funny?”

“Believe it or not,” Lima said, “that’s our unit’s...nickname.”

She arched an eyebrow at him.

“Hey, we didn’t pick it. But it stuck. Even a drunk monkey can manage to fling his poo in the right place every so often.”

Now Quack stared at his partner. “Dude, you are sooo not helping here.” Inside the apartment with her, he’d removed his mask, too. She wondered how often Quack shaved. He had a five o’clock shadow on his chin, but if anything it made him look more handsome. Now all three of them had their masks back on as they walked outside, and all she wanted to do was stare at the two men.

They were cute, they were funny, and she didn’t get even a hint of bullshit vibe from them.

She didn’t have a problem hanging her hat with them...for now.

Especially if it meant maybe getting Marvin out of that damn place.

“I’ll try to go talk to him tomorrow morning,” she said. “I take it you guys have vehicles?”

They nodded.

“Meet me in front of my building tomorrow night at seven,” she said. “You can drive me to work and I’ll tell you what I found out.”

Hell, a chance to spend a little time with the men, and a chance to save a couple of bucks on bus fare?

Absofarkinglutely she’d do that.

“Deal,” the men said.

Chapter Eighteen

Early the next morning, Stacia's first errand after her aunt left for work was to go to the library, even though it meant a bus trip to get there. She wanted to use a public library computer terminal to look something up.

Typing *Drunk Monkeys* into the search bar didn't bring her much, at first.

Until she clicked on the news results tab.

That was when she spotted the third entry down.

She clicked on it.

The short blog entry titled *Drunk Monkeys: Myth or Madness?* had been posted two days earlier by a guy who, from the look of his blog, covered a lot of covert military ops information.

I have it under good authority that the SOTIF (Special Operations and Tactical Infiltration Force) program I've written about before not only exist, but one of the teams, with the code name Drunk Monkeys, has been sent out in search of people from The List, and may have even found at least one of the people.

And that research and resources have been desperately diverted to keeping the scientist safe and working on trying to develop a vaccine for Kite.

If this is true, and I sincerely hope it is, then godspeed and good luck, Drunk Monkeys. We're counting on you.

She quickly closed out the browser screen and left the library, practically sprinting back to the bus stop. She didn't want to spend too much time there in case her search brought her uncomfortable attention.

Her next stop was the church. It was a little before ten in the morning when the bus dropped her off at the corner. The building's shattered front windows had been replaced by sheets of plywood.

Swallowing back her nerves and reminding herself this was about Marvin, she steeled herself and returned to the belly of the beast.

A different young woman from her previous visit sat at the desk and seemed to be the only one in the office. "Hi, can I help you?"

"Um, yeah. My brother is one of your volunteers, and I wondered if I could speak with him for a couple of minutes, please? I have some family stuff I need to talk about with him."

"Sure. What's his name?"

"Marvin. Marvin Rooney."

"I'll see if he's available. You can wait for him across the hall in the sanctuary, if you'd like."

"Thanks."

To Stacia's immense shock, Marvin actually appeared a couple of minutes later. Stacia had remained standing, halfway expecting some security force would show up to run her off, haul her away...

Or maybe worse.

But she knew she had to risk it.

Marvin smiled when he saw her.

There was something...different about him. She couldn't put her finger on just what, but she knew it wasn't due to her new knowledge about him and his genetic condition.

"Hey, sis." When he stepped in for a hug, she embraced him. "Let's sit down and talk for a few," he said. "I'll have to get back to my classes soon, but we were on a break. What's up?"

Now that he was sitting in front of her, she didn't know how to proceed.

She opted for direct. "Look, I'm sorry I blew up the other day. I'm just...confused."

The smile remained on his face and he nodded, but he didn't interrupt her.

"I want you to explain this to me," she said, trying to control her building fear. "Help me understand what's going on here. I think it's great that you want to earn money for us, but I'm scared."

That was the truth.

"There's nothing to be scared of, sis," he said. "They want to try to find a vaccine for Kite. And they want us to spread the word about their work and the Word of God when we finish the testing rounds."

"But why isn't the news reporting this?" Maybe gentle logic might break through his thick skull.

He can't help it.

She tried to keep reminding herself of that, but it was damned difficult.

"They are afraid that it might start a riot," he said. "They don't want people lining up outside when they don't even know

for sure yet if they have one. They also didn't want to give people false hope in case the medicines they're working on don't work."

That was just logical enough to make a scary sort of sense. But it also didn't give her a better idea of what was going on, or if it was legit. "So they're...infecting you all with Kite? Is that why all the money?"

"Oh, no. They draw our blood, then then give us test medicines. Then they draw our blood again and see what changes happened, and test the blood samples against the virus. They needed a wide variety of people from all over the country. They said just like with the flu viruses that maybe different strains would affect people with different antibodies in different ways."

Again, that sounded just logical enough to keep the facility's status as ambiguous in her mind.

"But why all the money?"

"Because they wanted our families not to be burdened by our absence."

Well, in Marvin's case, it was actually *unburdening* them to not have him around.

But she didn't say that out loud.

He continued. "Once we get through this phase, if we make it to the point we're sent out, then when we come back, they'll be drawing more blood samples from us to do more testing."

"Okay, see, that's the part that's confusing me. Why are they sending you out? What are you supposed to be doing?"

"To spread the Word of God," he simply said, as if it was obvious.

"That's it? For all that money?"

He glanced around and leaned in. "We were told that there might be...government agencies who wouldn't take kindly to a church being the one to come up with the vaccine, and they might even try to sabotage things. They told us not to talk about it to other people. That they will have us start out with the least fortunate people, like the homeless and addicts, to try to teach them about God and to give them the medicines they're giving us if they look like they're working. To protect them."

He leaned in closer. "People like *us*, sis. People who don't have money. People the rich and the government have done their best to keep under their heels. They want to empower people like them, like you and me. The church sees the value in everyone based on them being people, not as being a bank balance."

He looked down at his hands, which fidgeted in his lap as if independent of him. "I feel guilty I haven't been able to do more," he said. "I've always been different. But now I have a chance to help you and Aunt Darla. If I make it through this, then maybe she can finally retire."

He eventually met her gaze again. "And I know me not being there right now helps," he softly said. "One less person to feed. If I don't make it all the way through to get paid..." He shrugged. "Then it's just one more thing in my life I screwed up."

At war inside her, the fear over this whole situation, and her breaking heart that her brother had finally achieved a moment of self-realization.

She didn't have the heart to tell him yet about the condition he'd been born with. Why add that to his burden?

"So what about that girl, Korey?"

He smiled. "I really like her, sis. And she likes me. She's from a poor family, too. I thought we had it bad, but they have it a lot worse than we do."

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"I don't know what we are. We hang out all the time. But I like her. I'm thinking maybe after this is done, maybe I can talk her into staying in LA with us. If it's okay with you and Aunt Darla."

She was about to ask him something else when a tone sounded.

He smiled and stood. "I need to go. Class is starting again."

She stood and hugged him. "Just...stay safe, okay?"

"I will."

"Love you, bro."

He smiled again, wrenching her heart. "Love you, too, sis."

She watched him walk out of the sanctuary, her thoughts an angry, jumbled swirl. Since humans had enough grey cells to want to be in charge of everything, people had tried to coerce others into doing their will, either by charm, force, or brainwashing.

Nothing he'd told her gave her much in the way of new information.

If anything, it'd left her feeling more unsettled than ever.

And feeling more than a little sad—and scared—for her brother.

Chapter Nineteen

On her walk back to their apartment building, Stacia got the uncomfortable feeling she was being followed. But when she stopped and turned to look, she didn't see anyone.

The feeling grew so strong that she turned around and diverted into one of the grocery stores she sometimes shopped at. After grabbing a sales flier from the rack by the door, she worked her way toward the back, where the discounted meat bin was. Sometimes she could snag a piece that had reached its expiration date and get it for a fraction of the regular price, if she could beat others to it.

Nothing.

After a few minutes of looking through the flier, she picked up two bags of dried beans that were on sale and discounted further with a coupon from the flier. She took her time walking up to the check-out, carefully scanning outside through the mesh-grate covering the plate-glass windows.

Nothing suspicious.

Part of her hoped it might have been Lima and Quack. But that didn't make sense since they were scheduled to meet later.

Or maybe they were trailing her to see what she did?

Maybe she was just farking paranoid over what she hadn't learned from Marvin, but what her mind was guessing at.

Quack and Lima had seemed nice. At least they'd been nice to talk to. And it was a relief to find out they weren't part of a gang, that Aunt Darla wouldn't be in any danger from them.

If anything happened to her aunt because of something Stacia had seen or done, she never would forgive herself.

Pausing in the store's doorway, she didn't see anyone hanging around. Instead of walking straight down the block toward the apartment building, she ducked around the corner and sprinted across the side street and down behind the next set of buildings. A slightly longer way, but at least the feeling of being followed didn't return by the time she reached the building's northeast entrance, the one farthest from where she usually entered and exited, and she ran up the stairs to their apartment.

* * * *

Stacia put the beans and some leftover chicken meat on to simmer while she tried to sleep. Unfortunately, she was plagued by troubling thoughts of Marvin and what might be going on with the church.

After only managing a few hours of sleep, she got up early and showered before she put the finishing touches on the soup. By the time Aunt Darla returned home from work, Stacia had a thick chicken bean soup ready for her dinner.

The older woman let out a soft sigh as she settled into a chair at the table. "You take such good care of me, sweetheart. Thank you."

Stacia leaned in and kissed her forehead. "Well, just returning the favor. You've taken good care of me all my life, and I love you."

Her aunt caught Stacia's hand before she could step away. She gently squeezed her hand with her twisted, gnarled fingers. "I love you, too, dear. You have no idea how much."

Stacia hated the pinched, drawn look on her aunt's face. She was such a sweet, kind, loving woman. To suffer the loss of the love of her life, and then to lose her only sister, and then the arthritis.

It wasn't fair.

Then again, life wasn't fair. Whining about it didn't get you through it.

Her aunt released her after a final pat of her hand and picked up her spoon. "Do you think Marvin will be home tonight? I haven't seen him in so long."

Stacia didn't like to lie, especially not to her aunt, but the other option wasn't better. "I saw him this morning and talked with him for a few minutes. He's hoping the church takes him on in a paying position. He's taking some sort of classes they're giving for free. And they're feeding him, and they have a dorm there for their students, so that's not a bad thing. He said to tell you hi."

Aunt Darla smiled. "You've been very patient with me giving him leeway all these years," she said. "And I do appreciate it. I know he can be a drain on our resources, but I promised your mother. You two are like my own kids."

Stacia returned to her aunt and gently hugged her. "I know. It's okay. I just get...frustrated. I love the lunk, but it would really make life easier if he could hold down a steady job and contribute to the household."

Remembering to stay with her normal mantra was hard. She didn't want to tell her aunt anything that would worry her. If Stacia veered from her usual stance, that would likely clue her aunt in to the fact that something wasn't right.

“If this doesn’t work out for him,” her aunt said, “I’ll talk to him and tell him he doesn’t get any more chances. I cannot have you work yourself to death trying to make ends meet for all of us. I talked to a couple of women at work today who have roommates. They told me what they charge, just for room and utilities, not even food. It would mean you wouldn’t have to take all those extra hours anymore. You could actually have a normal life. And there are several women at work who are looking to become roommates and downsize because they can’t afford to live alone, or they need to move somewhere else.”

Out of nowhere, an overwhelming feeling of dread washed over Stacia. Most likely from so much change, nearly too much, coming at her too quickly.

Stacia kissed her aunt’s forehead again. “We’ll see what happens,” Stacia said. “Maybe this time it’ll be different.” She sat at her place at the table.

Her aunt studied her. “You don’t really believe that, do you? Because I know I don’t. Bless his heart, I love you brother, but I think I’m finally ready to see things from your point of view.”

Stacia picked up her spoon. “No, but I want to believe. I *really* wish I *could* believe it.”

Chapter Twenty

Stacia was standing outside with her surgical mask on and her tote bag in hand when the men pulled up in front of her building in an old Clando pickup truck. She didn't even give them time to shut the engine off, hurrying over and jumping into the backseat of the double cab.

Tonight, she was desperately glad they were picking her up. The watched feeling had returned as soon as she'd stepped outside the apartment building.

Making the trek through the park to the bus stop would have been nerve wracking in a way she wasn't used to. She hadn't been mugged or raped, although she'd had a couple of close calls over the years that she avoided by running fast and yelling loudly.

Tonight...

She shuddered as they pulled away from the building. "I work at the Carlkilney Brewing plant over in Torquada."

Lima was driving. "We know," he said, the surgical mask hiding the smile he was likely wearing if his tone of voice was any measure.

"Oh. Yeah, I guess you probably do."

Quack turned to look at her over the back of the seat. He pulled down his mask and frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I..." It would be stupid to admit she felt like she was being watched, right? "Hey, were you guys watching me for a few minutes or something before you drove up?"

"No. Why?"

"It's stupid. It's probably nothing."

"Let us be the judge of that," Lima said.

She told them about feeling like she was being watched, and about earlier that day, her side trip into the store. "I'm sure I'm just paranoid now. Going to that church gives me the creeps."

"Maybe, maybe not," Quack said. "What time does your shift end?"

"Six in the morning. Why?"

"We'll be waiting outside the plant for you," Lima said. "In this truck."

She didn't know if that made her feel better or worse, but she wouldn't refuse their offer.

It meant another bus fare she could slide over into the grocery money column. "Okay. Thanks."

"Did you talk to your brother?" Quack asked.

"Yeah." She told them about their conversation.

From the look on Quack's face she could tell he felt pretty much the same way about it that she did.

"Doesn't clear them at all," he said.

"That's what I thought," she said. "I keep coming back to the fact that one hundred grand is an obscene amount to pay someone for something like this. Especially when so many people are so poor they could get away with giving them a few thousand. Hell, maybe even a few hundred."

"Hush money," Quack said.

"Blood money," Lima added.

His words chilled her.

"And that was one of my thoughts, too," she admitted. "How many families are going to complain, when they're bad off to start with, if they suddenly see more money than they'll probably ever earn in their entire lives show up in their bank account? I know that sounds shallow, but there are a lot of people out there desperate enough to look the other way if they're fed a reasonable enough explanation that helps them sleep at night when they're given that kind of money."

Taking a direct route in a private vehicle meant an hour-long bus trip was reduced to thirty-five minutes. When they pulled up outside the plant early, parked just down the block so as not to raise any suspicions, the men sat there with the quiet solar engine running and the air-conditioner going.

"Look," Lima said, "you strike me as a reasonable, logical woman. Our inside person is still fighting with decrypting the info we have. Based on what we've found out so far, I think we're all in agreement here that whatever's really happening in that building isn't kosher."

Relief filled her, that they were validating her opinion. That she wasn't just being suspicious. "Thank you."

"We'll see what else we can find out," Quack said, "and we will be waiting out here for you at the end of your shift. We'll take you to meet the rest of our group and talk more in-depth. Hopefully we'll have something concrete we can give you to take to your brother and talk him out of there."

"Can we just kidnap him out of there?"

Lima smiled. “That’s always an option of last resort. Let’s try sifting through intel first.”

“Thanks.”

As she walked down the fence surrounding the plant to the main gate, she slung her tote bag over her shoulder and tried not to engage in idle, sexy fantasies about the two guys.

* * * *

The men watched her walk down the sidewalk and toward the main gate of the bottling plant. Lima could see his partner’s grim expression reflected in the passenger side mirror.

The three of them were in absolute agreement about this entire situation.

“I don’t like it,” Quack said. “That’s just enough bullshit to tell me whatever they’re doing is really, really bad. I mean, typical brainwashing 101 garbage, turning the victim against the very people who might help them. Instilling paranoia.”

Lima had reached up and adjusted the rearview mirror to watch her. “You and I are on the same page, dude. Preaching to the choir.”

They waited to leave until she was safely inside the gate. Used to irregular hours themselves, they’d both napped during the afternoon in preparation to meet up with her. They had already planned on arranging to pick her up from work to take her in to meet with Papa, but fortunately, she gave them a ready-made excuse.

After returning to the safe house, they updated Papa and the others.

They all grimly agreed with the current assessment that whatever was going on at the church facility, it was looking more and more suspicious.

Lima checked his laptop for any more updates from Bubba. He could tell from the tone of the man’s messages that he was growing increasingly frustrated by bumping up against the encryption when he usually wasn’t stymied by such things.

I don’t know what they used on these files. Other than the little bit I’ve already given you, everything else is wrapped up tighter than a rich virgin’s cooch. The longer it takes me to get inside those files, the more I want to know what the hell’s inside them. Banks don’t even use this kind of encryption.

Lima knew if Bubba couldn’t figure it out, he damn sure couldn’t. He was a skilled hacker in his own right, but more of the on-the-fly kind of skills that they needed in the course of their duties, not the deep kind of hacking knowledge that Bubba had honed over decades in military intelligence before going to the private sector.

“So the million-dollar question,” Quack said, “is what the hell do we tell her if we’re right and they are doing something nasty in there? We can’t risk her going in and warning everyone and getting herself killed by those asshats. Or just as bad, captured, and she tells people how she found out. Not that I think she’d willingly tell them, but it’s not like she’s been trained on how to endure torture. And I’d prefer she didn’t get tortured in the first place.”

“I know, I know. We’re back to that stupid waiting game again,” Lima said. “Just suck it up and deal with it like the rest of us.”

He knew logic wouldn’t work on Stacia’s brother anyway. Not at this point. Whatever indoctrination methods they were using had already hooked him into their belief structure. He suspected kidnapping and deprogramming him would be the only way she could reclaim him at this point.

Then again, he could be wrong. The church would have had no way of knowing about Marvin’s condition. Maybe that would screw things up the way they’d screwed things up for him all his life.

This time, it could be the man’s lucky break.

Chapter Twenty-One

Working at the plant wasn't exactly what Stacia would call fun by any stretch of the imagination. It had, however, stopped being something she dreaded now that Marco was gone. The lightened mood of the entire shift didn't go unnoticed, either.

Especially when Billy announced they were all getting a fifty-dollar one-time pay bonus that week because production had unexpectedly jumped five percent.

Billy wasn't an idiot. He'd delivered an iron-clad case to HR that Marco and his bullshit had been a drag on their company for years.

As a result, the company would be getting rid of the tenure system and instead replace it with a merit system. Employees could earn points for performance.

They could also lose them for bullshit like what Marco had been engaged in. He certainly hadn't been performing his job up to the highest standards when he'd spent so much time harassing coworkers.

It turned out he hadn't just been sexually harassing the women, but bullying quite a few of the men as well, like making them do his work as well as their own, again impacting production. Without fear of retribution, men were now coming to Billy and reporting the stuff they'd silently dealt with for years.

With everyone doing their own jobs without fear of Marco targeting them, it was a given they had a more productive shift.

They allowed Stacia to clock in early for her shift. Billy called out to her when she passed his office door and handed her a small, wrapped box with her name on it.

"What's this?"

"Karen from the morning shift asked me to give it to you." Curious, and more than a little wary, Stacia opened it.

It was a small package of dark chocolate candies. And it included a little note.

Thank you! Marco picked on my husband all the time. Thank you for standing up to him! Please enjoy these with our love and appreciation.

The note's text blurred as tears welled in Stacia's eyes. She hadn't had chocolate, especially dark chocolate, since she was a kid. It wasn't in their budget, and she refused to waste money on it when for the price of an ounce of it she could buy her family five pounds of dried beans.

Billy studied her. "What is it? You okay?"

She nodded, finally reaching in and taking one of the candies and popping it into her mouth.

Just as good as she remembered it as a kid. She closed her eyes and savored it, enjoying it. Then she held the box out to him, offering him one.

"Thank you," he said as he selected one. "I haven't had these in years." He also seemed to savor it.

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeah. They're expensive."

"But...you're the boss."

"So?"

"I mean, don't you make a lot more than us?"

He nodded his head at the door, indicating for her to close it.

She did.

"How much do you think I make?" he asked.

She hoped this wasn't a trap. It didn't feel like one. She shrugged. "I don't know. I figured management made decent money."

He pulled a slip of paper out of his pocket and slid it across his desk. She recognized it. It was the payment stub those who used direct deposit received on payday, with the details of their earnings, tax deductions, and so forth.

He only made ninety-two dollars more a week than she did.

It shocked her.

He took the paper back. "That's between you and me, obviously," he said.

Numb, she nodded.

"I'm lucky that my wife's parents inherited their apartment from her mom's mom and dad. We live there with them. We can't afford to move out on our own. I have two daughters, who I'd kill and die for, but our younger one was an accident because we couldn't afford for my wife to replace her five-year. A condom broke on us before we could get her a new one put in."

“Wow.”

He shrugged, a sad smile on his face. “For the record? A five-year is a lot cheaper than a child.”

* * * *

Billy’s words haunted her throughout her shift. It even dampened her joy over learning about the extra bonus.

Trying to get her mind off that, she thought about Lima and Quack and that they would be picking her up at the end of her shift.

That was something she looked forward to.

When she finished working and clocked out at the end of her shift, she gathered her things and started walking down to the main gate. She was looking for the men’s truck when she happened to glance in the direction of the bus stop. Who she saw standing there chilled her.

Marco.

He stood back in the shadows behind the bus shelter, and hadn’t spotted her yet.

There was no good reason for him to be waiting there.

None at all.

The only one she could think of was a very, very bad reason.

Stacia ducked behind the guard shack and frantically scanned the street where the men said they’d be parked. Two of the street lamps were out, but then she spotted their truck parked there between two other cars she’d had yet to see move since she’d been working at the plant.

Taking a deep breath, she clutched her tote bag tightly against her and sprinted for the main gate. If she could get through the gate before Marco reached it, she could easily outrun him to the truck.

That was her plan, except she was still about fifteen feet from the main gate when she heard Marco yell her name.

Ignoring him, she bolted through the gate, running as fast as she could toward the truck and hoping the men were paying attention. Quack opened the passenger door and stepped out, but she screamed at him.

“Move over!”

He apparently spotted Marco, who she heard bellowing behind her, and then Lima was also getting out of the truck, both men heading toward her with their gazes on Marco.

“Get in the truck, Stacia,” Quack ordered when she blew past him.

She didn’t argue, jumping into the backseat and turning to watch.

Marco lumbered to a stop on the sidewalk, about twenty yards away from the truck. The men had stopped and were standing shoulder to shoulder and blocking his path.

Both of them held their hands ready at their hips, as if they had holsters hidden under their shirts.

For all she knew, they probably did.

Marco glared at them. “Get outta my way, assholes.”

“Buddy,” Quack said, “trust me when I say you want to turn yourself around and walk away, right now.”

She was torn between lust and terror. The tone in the men’s voices stirred more than comfort inside her.

It stirred need.

“My beef’s with her, not you two fuckers. Move.”

“Now, see,” Lima said, “that’s where you’re wrong. If your beef is with her, then you *are* dealing with us.” He drew a handgun, holding it pointed down at the sidewalk. “Now, you can turn around and go away, or we can make you disappear. Your call. We’re good with either option.”

Now Marco looked like he was rethinking his position. He cast one final glare at the truck before turning and stomping off the way he came.

Relief filled her, so sharp and fast, that she nearly burst into tears.

When the men returned to the truck and Lima got back behind the wheel, he turned to look at her over the back of the seat. “I’m guessing there’s a background story we need for context?”

She nodded. “Drive and I’ll tell you.”

“Tell us now,” he said. “That guy isn’t going to come back and fuck with us.”

Still trembling, she told them about Marco, what he’d done, what she’d finally done to him. When she finished, the men laughed.

“Seriously?” Quack asked. “You nailed him with a goddamned monkey wrench?”

She nodded. “I had it in my hand and thank god it was that and not a tiny screwdriver or something.”

Now having heard the story, Lima put the truck into gear and pulled out. “You are a woman of many talents,” Lima said.

She didn't imagine the respect in his tone. It was the same tone Billy had used.

"Just please don't go after our nuts," Quack joked.

"Don't worry, your nuts are safe. I like your nuts." She realized what she'd said too late, but the men were already chuckling.

"Honey," Lima said, "you want to see our nuts, you say the word."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Stacia's pulse started to slow as Lima drove them away from the plant. Thank goodness they had offered to pick her up and she hadn't stupidly turned them down.

She wondered if Marco had been able to find out exactly where she lived yet. The apartment wasn't in her name, it was in Aunt Darla's, as was the phone.

She knew Marco didn't have a car. He had to take the bus with the rest of them, but he took a different one because he lived in a different neighborhood. But if he still had a contact in HR at the plant, it might have been possible for him to find out. Or if he'd somehow learned what stop she got off at, maybe he'd narrowed it down.

Maybe he'd been the reason she thought she was being followed. Maybe it'd been him following her.

"No offense," Quack said, "but we need to blindfold you for this part of it. It won't be long."

"Why?"

"So you can't see where we go."

"You don't trust me?"

"We trust you, but you need to understand the enormity of the situation we're dealing with."

Lima expounded. "We don't want to have to change safe houses right now. What we have is a pretty good setup. This will save us the time and driving of having to take you home, and then go back and talk to the others, and then bringing Papa to you. Until we get the okay from Papa to let you know where our safe house is, we can't."

She could understand that. They had someone they reported to.

And she didn't want to go back to the apartment right now, anyway. She wasn't worried about her aunt, because Marco didn't know who she was, and she walked to and from the bus stop with three other people who worked where she did. "Okay."

"Thanks."

They had her lie down in the backseat and gave her a bandana to use as a blindfold. She didn't bother trying to cheat. If they were going to trust her enough to take her there in the first place, she wouldn't try to look.

If they'd wanted to kill her, or rape her, or whatever, they would have. They'd had plenty of opportunities already.

If she wanted a snowball's chance in hell of saving Marvin, the men were it.

If for that reason alone, she would trust them.

Because she knew damn well they might be the only chance she had.

* * * *

After driving for about twenty minutes, they stopped for a gate, then she heard a roll-up door open. They pulled into a garage, based on the sound, and then the engine shut off and the garage door rolled down again.

"We're here," Quack said. "You can sit up."

They were inside a garage. There were several men gathered around the truck. "Get Papa," Lima told one of them.

One of them left and returned a moment later with another guy.

Holy hell, they're all hunks.

Lima and Quack quickly detailed who she was and why they'd brought her there to their commander or leader or whatever the heck he was. He walked over to her.

"You understand the enormity of the situation, right? Why secrecy is necessary?"

"Yeah. Lots of bad shit in the world right now, including maybe the people who have their hooks in my brother. You help me with that, I'll be more than happy to do whatever I can to help you with your gig."

He extended his hand. "You can call me Papa."

She shook with him. "Stacia."

"Glad to finally meet you in person. I feel like I already know a lot about you."

"According to these two guys, you *do* already know a lot about me."

He grinned. "I like you. You've got spunk."

* * * *

Before they got down to business, they gave Stacia a stick test and then introduced her to everyone. Lima and Quack recounted a brief run-down of what happened in front of the plant. Stacia had to repeat the story to everyone about how she'd

stood up to Marco.

When she finished, a large black man she thought was named Omega laughed before speaking up. “Well, I have the perfect codename for her,” he said.

Everyone looked at him.

“Considering what she did to that guy at work, we call her Ak.”

Papa asked it first. “Ak?”

“Yeah, A-K. Short for Ass-kicker.”

Everyone laughed, but it was the good kind of laughter, of friendship and agreement and support, not the poke-fun-at-you kind.

And she definitely knew the difference.

Lima cocked his head as he stared at Stacia. “I like it. I think it fits you perfectly.”

“Ditto,” Quack concurred.

She shrugged, secretly pleased about it. It felt good to have someone besides her aunt acknowledging that side of her. Not just acknowledge, but validate it.

Well, okay, Billy at work had praised her for standing up to Marco, but it was nice to have people who technically barely knew her recognizing it and praising her for it.

Another reason she hadn’t bothered pursuing romance since her first, last, and only time, was that she knew she wasn’t some girly-girl. She didn’t have time or money to waste trying to pretty herself up. She worked at a tough job, and sometimes needed to be a tough broad to keep herself safe.

Now that they’d all been introduced to her firsthand, their leader gave her the full story about Kite, what they’d been doing, and what they’d accomplished so far.

If she’d thought the original, condensed version had been terrifying, she’d been sadly mistaken.

“So now what happens?” she asked, feeling overwhelmed and almost afraid to voice the question. “What’s the plan? We wait to hear from your contact to see what he finds out?”

“Basically,” Papa said.

That frustrated her. “So what am I supposed to do about Marvin in the meantime?”

“Keep trying to talk with him,” he said. “Keep lines of communication open with him until we know how best to proceed.”

Once everyone else had filtered out of the common room, including the two other women, Stacia was left alone with Lima and Quack.

“I know I’m going to need sleep,” Quack said. “You probably do, too,” he said to her. “Would you like us to take you back home?”

“Trying to get rid of me, huh?” she only half teased.

She did *not* want to go back to the apartment. Not with the threat of Marco hanging over her head, but more importantly, because she didn’t want to leave these two guys.

For the first time in her life, she felt like maybe she had someone she could lean on, just a little, tiny bit, to help shoulder her burdens.

“Babe,” Quack said, “trust me when I say getting rid of you is the *last* thing we want to do.”

She went for broke. “Then how about I sleep here today?”

The men froze before glancing at each other.

“Or is that a problem?” she said, hoping she hadn’t seriously overstepped some invisible line.

Or maybe they didn’t find her nearly as attractive as she found them.

“Here?” Lima asked.

Don’t be afraid to have fun for once in your life. She stepped closer. “Specifically, with you two. If, you know, you’re good with that.”

The men nodded, smiles filling their faces. “Might not get right to sleep, though,” Lima said suggestively.

She lobbed the suggestion back at him. “I’m good with that.” She met his brown gaze. “I’m real good with that as long as you two are good with that.”

“Then follow us, milady,” Quack said.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They led her to their room. It wasn't much, but considering the circumstances, it was clean and she knew it'd be safe.

No way she'd get any sleep at the apartment today. She was too wound up and every noise would put her on high alert.

Stacia reached up and stroked Quack's chin. "Don't you ever shave?" She loved his dark blond hair. Even cut on the short side she could tell it was curly if he let it grow out.

He shrugged. "Doesn't do any good. I never grow a full beard, and my five o'clock shadow always reappears about two hours later."

"So you *do* shave?"

"When I have a damn good reason."

"Like?"

"Formal inspections. Which, if you haven't guessed, we haven't gotten a lot of those lately."

"What about for me?"

He smiled. "Ah. Is that a request?"

"If you want to."

"Don't like me all scruffy?"

"Maybe sometimes."

"I can be scruffy," Lima protested.

"Oh, please," Quack shot back. "You look like you walked out of a Michelangelo painting. You've probably never had a facial hair below your eyebrows. You look like a damn naked baby without needing to shave."

Lima walked over to stand behind her, the warmth from his body washing through her as he pressed her against Quack.

"What are your real names?" she asked.

The men hesitated.

"Look. You know a hell of a lot about me already. I don't trust easily, if you haven't guessed. Throw me a bone. Metaphorically," she quickly added. "I know you guys are eager to use your bones on me."

Lima finally said it first. "Devin. Devin Mercado."

She glanced up at Quack. "Cody Velez."

"Those are very nice names. Why can't you use those?"

"Because we have code names. We need those to protect not just us, but our families."

"Oh." She hoped she wasn't tensing up, wanted to remain casual. "Families?"

Lima smiled. "Parents. Siblings. One of the prerequisites for being on a SOTIF team is you cannot have a significant other, or children. They wanted us able to focus on our jobs."

"In other words," Quack said, "we're single."

Relief flooded through her. "Oh." Then she started to consider the flip side of that equation. Maybe this wasn't a great idea.

Damn, they're cute.

Wasn't she entitled to a little fun in her life that didn't cost her anything?

Well, except maybe her heart.

Quack gently placed his hands on her upper arms. "We aren't loose men," he said. "Not saying we're not human, but we prefer not to randomly sleep around."

"We're choosy," Lima joked.

"There is that," Quack agreed. He gently caught her chin and tipped her face up so he could look into her eyes. "We get it that you don't trust easily. That's not a problem for us. But at some point, trust needs to come into play. You have to understand we aren't here to play games."

"I get it. You might have to leave tomorrow."

"No, not tomorrow," Lima said. "Not likely. We'll probably be here for a while."

She didn't want to ask but asked it anyway. "And then what?"

"That's up to Papa," Quack said. "But considering Pandora and Clara are now part of our happy band of misfits, I'm guessing if you wanted to come along, you could."

"Me? But what could I do?" She shoved thoughts about how fast the conversation was moving out of her brain. This was just what-if talk. This wasn't for real. She could humor them.

"Are you not a mechanic?" Quack asked.

"I can fix things, sure. Some things. Not everything. I'm no genius."

“That’s still an important skill. Pandora’s becoming a fighter in her own right. Clara is not only a nurse, but a valuable asset for interrogation, and she’s helping as a lab assistant.”

Wait, what? “But what if your leader guy says no?”

Quack leaned in and kissed her. Gentle at first, gradually more insistent, until, finally, she felt his tongue lightly tracing the seam of her lips.

She didn’t want to give in to that kind of thinking. Didn’t want to let either of them into her heart. Didn’t want to disturb that carefully cultured wall protecting her from people who could hurt her, violate her trust.

But maybe they could help her save Marvin.

Maybe they could do what they said and help get a vaccine developed for Kite.

Did she really want to stay scared and mistrustful and lose out on a chance to make all that happen?

If she did nothing, Marvin was gone, regardless.

Maybe if she listened to them, she might have one more reasonably good chance to save Marvin.

Then again, if I left, who would take care of Aunt Darla?

Maybe all she was destined to have with these men were a few moments here and there before their mission and purpose took them out of her life for good.

But while they were here, there was no reason she couldn’t enjoy them.

With a will of their own, her arms draped over Quack’s shoulders. She felt his cock harden against her, a bulge pressing against her mound through their clothes.

Behind her, Lima pressed against her back. She felt his bulge, too.

Holy crap!

She’d had a lover before. Just after graduating high school, she’d dated a decent enough boy. The first one she’d trusted enough to make love to. But then his parents found out Stacia had no money and they’d forced him to break things off with her.

He’d listened to them, since they were paying his college tuition and expenses.

Same shit, different day. The rich only wanted to be around the rich, and the poor were, in their eyes, dogshit.

She hadn’t bothered trying again.

“Why do you want me?” she asked when Quack let her take a breath.

“Because you’re beautiful,” Quack said. He cupped her face in his hands, tucking her hair behind her ears. “You’re smart. You’re funny. You’re strong. And we happen to really like you.”

“You barely know me.”

“We know that life has gotten crazy, and the future is far less certain than it ever was before. There is an abundance of many things in this world except for time. We want to help change things around. Maybe we find the vaccine for Kite and that helps revolutionize the world’s economy. China is burning itself out with the virus. Lots of shit they made we’ll have to start making here again. Lots of jobs.”

“Meaning lots of money making it into the economy finally,” she said.

“Spread all over the place and not just in the hands of the rich,” Quack added. “I think that’s a great idea, personally. I want to be a part of that. Of making that change.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Me, too.”

“Make that three of us,” Lima said. “And if we screw up, well, time is pretty damn short. I’d rather not waste my time second-guessing myself.”

Maybe she could save her brother. Maybe she couldn’t. He was twenty-five-farking-years old.

And he really can’t help the way he is.

But he was an adult. She’d spent a majority of her childhood trying to help take care of him. Yes, she wanted to save his life, but maybe it was time she quit trying to change him and worried about changing herself.

Or the world.

When do I finally get a chance to do things for myself because I want to, instead of for Marvin because I need to?

Quack leaned in and kissed her once more. This time, he kept his sweet brown eyes open, and so did she. Both men’s eyes were brown, but where Lima’s looked like dark, creamy coffee, Quack’s were lighter, not quite hazel, with little flecks of gold in them.

It was those flecks she committed to memory before closing her eyes again and losing herself in his kiss.

Lima nibbled on the back of her neck. “Please, trust us. We won’t let you down.”

If nothing else, she wanted Lima to keep doing what he was doing.

And she wanted Quack to keep kissing her.

She *definitely* wanted that to keep happening.

Thus far, the men had given more than they’d gotten from her. They hadn’t looked for anything more than her trust. She

suspected if she put the brakes on things right now, that they'd stop if she asked.

She didn't *want* them to stop.

Ever, at this rate.

The men paused to pull off their shirts, and she nearly came in her panties right there. Hard, ripped pecs, solid arms, and while Quack had a light dusting of dark hair across his chest, Lima had a delicious-looking treasure trail that disappeared south under the waistband of his trousers.

Nom!

She felt their bulges pressing into her, front and back, and wanted them *in* her. *Immediately*. Before they changed their minds, or before she did something stupid like second-guess herself and chicken out.

She pulled her shirt off and dropped it to the floor, followed by her bra. The warmth from their bodies on either side of her nearly made her lightheaded, the passion in their eyes, every touch, the way they seemed to take their time, savoring her like a fine delicacy and not as a means to an end.

She felt wanted.

Quack knelt in front of her. At first she thought maybe he was going to go right for her boobs, or start taking off her jeans, but he pressed his lips to her belly, just above her navel, and slowly slid his hands around her waist until they were splayed across her lower back. It wasn't just a kiss. He feathered his lips across her flesh, gently, like a light breeze across a field of grass, barely there yet still making things flutter all over the place.

She stroked his hair, his shoulders, closing her eyes and tipping her head back so it rested against Lima's shoulder.

"You are beautiful," he whispered in her ear. "Thank you."

She turned her face toward him. "Um, you're welcome, but for what?"

He nuzzled her nose with his. "For letting us in. I can tell that's not something you do a lot of."

"Boy is *that* an understatement."

He kissed her, lightly, gently, caressing her cheek with his fingers.

"Relax," Quack whispered against her stomach. "Just relax and breathe and let go for a little bit. We've got you."

She took a deep breath and let it out again. In her life she'd always been an excellent judge of people. Mostly from her innate wariness, her watchful ways. Studying people. Analyzing behavior.

It had saved her ass countless times on the way to or from school, and from work, when she didn't have Marvin to protect her.

Which was most of the time.

She'd learned to run when she needed to. To fight when she had to.

And a valuable lesson from a friend in high school who had four older brothers and taught her if you can't beat them, out-crazy them, because a lot of assholes were ninety-five percent bullshit or bully or coward. Get loud, act batshit, and usually the person not wanting attention drawn to their actions would turn and run. Or they'd think you were crazy enough that you were too much trouble to fuck with.

That had worked.

The way it had worked with Marco.

Although the twenty-five-pound wrench had helped in that department. She couldn't deny how satisfying it felt, in retrospect, to slam that wrench down on the grating next to his head, wishing it'd been his head, not just his balls, that she'd smashed.

Of course all those thoughts were counterproductive to what the men were attempting to get her to do.

"We can stand here all day, baby," Lima said, "until we feel you relax. And we will. We're not interested in sharing your brain with any thoughts other than you being right here, right now, with us. As long as it takes."

"I've only been with one other guy before," she admitted before she chickened out.

"Really?" Lima asked, his thumb now gently stroking her chin.

She nodded.

He smiled. He looked pleased about that. "Good. That means we can have even more fun." He kissed her again, this time taking control.

Something inside her broke free, wanting this more than she'd wanted anything before. She reached up and hooked her arm around his neck, holding on, kissing him back.

When he lifted his lips from hers, he wore that sensual smile again. "There's our good girl. Don't worry, we won't break. Get as rough with us as you want, and you tell us if you want something rougher or softer or faster or slower."

"Yes," she breathed.

The smile crinkled the outer corners of his eyes. He slipped his fingers around the back of her head, gently holding her in place as he kissed her again.

Quack was still kissing his way around and back and forth and up and down her stomach. With her other hand, she slid it from his shoulder to the top of his head and pushed down, firmly enough to give him the idea of where she wanted his attention focused next.

A soft chuckle escaped him. “Message received,” he said as he reached up to unfasten her belt and jeans and started working them down her hips.

He slid her panties down to her knees, then his hands curled around the backs of her thighs. She felt his breath against her pussy before he flicked his tongue out and teased her clit hood.

Now she had to dig in the fingers of the hand curled around Lima’s neck to hold on, because her knees felt like they’d disappeared, replaced by cooked spaghetti. She let out a moan as Quack repeated the action with his tongue again. And again.

Holy crap!

If it felt this good *now*, before they’d really done much, she could only imagine the time she was in for when they got to the even better stuff.

Then Quack buried his face in her pussy, licking and sucking her clit, taking her breath away and driving her so hard and fast into an orgasm it almost felt like she might pass out.

Lima wrapped his arms around her, holding her, supporting her. “That’s it, baby. Let go, let it out. Let us make you feel good.”

Good?

That was *the* biggest understatement she’d ever heard in her life.

And she let go. She trusted Lima not to let her hit the floor, and trusted Quack to keep her feeling like her feet had shaker the tether of gravity and sent her soaring.

At some point Lima had gently lowered her down onto the bedrolls, cradling her while allowing Quack to pull her shoes, socks, jeans, and panties off and push her legs wide apart before he dove between them again with his eager mouth. She threw her head back onto Lima’s shoulder and sucked in a deep breath before blowing it out again. Another breath, and then she was moaning because Lima had cupped her breasts in his hands and was running the pads of his thumbs over her nipples.

Quack slid one, then two fingers inside her pussy and slowly fucked them in and out of her. She was wet, her clit tingling as she succumbed to her next climax.

When her eyes finished rolling back in her head, she realized Quack was looking up at her with a smile on his face. “How was that?”

She nodded. “Please tell me you guys have condoms?”

His smile widened and he held one up.

She nodded again. “Yeah.”

He stood and unfastened his belt and trousers, shoving them and his briefs to the floor. His cock sprang free, eight inches and ready for action. She crooked a finger at him.

He proved a quick study and stepped close enough she could curl her fingers around his shaft as she kissed the tip.

He quickly wrapped his fingers around her hand and held it still. “Sweetie,” he said, sounding a breath away from losing control, “if you do much more than that, you’re gonna get an eyeful.”

She smiled. “Then I suggest you put a condom on that thing, mister.”

He let go of her hand and ripped the foil pouch open. After he rolled it on, she thought maybe he would pull her away from Lima, but he didn’t. Instead, Lima leaned against the wall and spread his legs, giving Quack plenty of room to push her legs apart and slide into position between her thighs. Lima continued softly kneading her breasts, teasing her nipples, while Quack knelt between her legs and swiped his cock up and down through her pussy lips. Her juices coated the condom as he slowly started feeding his cock into her cunt.

When Lima nibbled on the side of her neck, her eyes dropped closed again. “When he’s done, baby,” he hoarsely whispered in her ear, “then it’s my turn. And you know what else? I’m hoping that we get enough time together so that one day you can feel both our cocks inside you at the same time. One of us fucking that sweet pussy of yours, the other inside that nice, tight ass. We need to get you a five-year put in so we don’t have to worry about accidents.”

Reality tried to intrude. “I can’t afford—”

“Lima,” Quack teased, “stop hogging her brain.”

She opened her eyes and found Quack staring straight into hers. He was only halfway in, and thank god he’d loosened her up first or she knew she’d be in a world of hurt. He slowly filled her, until his cock was buried to the hilt inside her.

“I really want to make you come like this, baby,” Quack hoarsely said, “but I gotta be honest, it’s been a long time and you feel too damn good. I won’t last.”

Hell, they’d already gotten two out of her. As far as she was concerned, they were already square. “It’s okay,” she said. “Go for it.”

He smiled, then leaned in and kissed her. His hips slowly rocked, as if testing to make sure she was okay before he picked up steam. He comfortably filled her, in the good way, in the way she knew would likely get her off if he did it for too long. And it didn't take long at all before he let out a gasping cry and fell still.

He rested his forehead against hers. "Baby, that was great."

She nibbled on his lower lip. "No complaints from me," she teased.

He carefully withdrew, holding the base of the condom in place until he got out of bed. When he turned to deposit the condom in the garbage can, she saw he had a tattoo in the middle of his back, between his shoulder blades. Round, it looked like a stylized tribal monkey design.

"What's the tat signify?"

"Our unit," he said. "The Drunk Monkeys. We all have one."

She tipped her head back. "Where's yours?" she asked Lima.

Lima nipped her earlobe. "On my back. Now it's my turn, sweetie. Move so I can get up and I'll show you."

She sat up so he could stand and turn his back to her. His was in the middle of his shoulders, too, approximately in the same place as Quack's. He shucked the remainder of his clothes, grabbed a condom pouch, and lay down on the bedroll. He was a little longer than Quack, but not quite as thick. A fair trade-off in her book. Still, nothing to be ashamed of in the equipment department. After rolling the condom onto his cock, he held his hand out to her and waggled his eyebrows.

Throwing her leg over him, she lined up the head of his cock with her pussy and slowly lowered herself onto him. He laced his fingers with hers, and used his other hand to find and play with her clit.

She let out a moan.

"That's it, baby. All the way down. Get every bit of it inside you and then we're going to make you feel good again."

Quack returned to kneel behind her. He wrapped his arms around her, cupping her breasts. This time he lightly pinched her nipples between his thumbs and fingers, rolling them and sending jolts of pleasure straight to her clit.

Unable to keep her eyes open, she let Quack support her body as she slowly rocked on Lima's cock. The men followed her motions, letting her set the pace as she felt pleasure rolling over her again.

They were good. They were like a precision pleasure team.

Lima started anticipating her motions and at the bottom of each stoke, while his cock was deeply embedded in her cunt, he'd roll and tug on her clit harder, faster. Quack's lips feathering up and down her neck and shoulder sent shivers through her.

Nothing in her sexiest dreams had ever prepared her for pleasure like this.

Nothing.

Ever.

Ev-errrrrrr.

"Do it, baby," Quack murmured. "Fuck his cock."

She rode him until the bubble inside her swelled and burst. The sensation of Lima's cock filling her as her cunt squeezed it made every sensation that much better.

"There you go," Quack said. "See? We just made everything better for you."

It seemed to go on and on, never stopping, as she rode him harder and faster until the last echoes finally silenced.

Lima grabbed her hips and made one final, hard thrust up into her, his body going rigid as he let out a loud groan.

"Perfect timing," Quack said with a chuckle.

Lima finally relaxed and stroked her thighs. "Holy crap," he said. "Perfect. Absolutely perfect."

After a moment, he patted her thigh. "Sorry, baby. You have to move."

Quack helped her sort of plop over onto her side, lying with her snuggled against him as Lima arose to dispose of the condom.

When Lima returned, he took her hand in his and kissed it before snuggling in front of her. "Nap time before round two," he said. "Because we don't want to break you on the first night."

"It's daytime," she corrected.

"Same principle. We'll play a little more when we get up, grab showers, and drive you back to your apartment to change clothes. Then we'll take you to work. Sound good?"

No way in hell she'd argue with any of *that*. "Sounds great."

Chapter Twenty-Four

After the three of them grabbed a playful shower together, and before the men drove Stacia back to her apartment, Clara caught up with her and pulled her aside. “Look, maybe this is a personal question, but you have a five-year?”

Stacia shook her head.

“You want one? If you’ll be making regular visits to these two, you’ll need one.”

“I can’t afford one.” She hated to admit that.

What did it say about her that she could admit to a stranger she’d just had sex with two hunks she barely knew, yet admitting she was broke hurt her pride?

“Yeah, money is no object, in this case. Follow me.” Clara turned to the two men. “Wait right here. I’ll bring her back in a minute.”

Stacia followed Clara to the upstairs room she shared with Yankee and Oscar.

“I brought a few supplies with me from the clinic in Colima,” she said. “Wasn’t sure what I might need, so lucky for you I decided to err on the side of caution.” She dug into her kit and came up with two small packages and an alcohol swab.

“What are those?” Stacia asked.

Clara held up one. “A five-year.” She held up the other. “A thirty-day that will kick in immediately until the five-year takes hold. Well, in six hours. But if you’re going to go to work now, that’ll be plenty of time for it to take effect. Give me your left arm.”

She swabbed a small area on Stacia’s upper left arm and then jabbed her with them.

“That’s it?” Stacia asked.

“That’s it.”

Stacia rubbed the sore spots. “And they charge a hundred bucks for a five-year in the public clinics.”

“Stupid, huh?” Clara threw the used boluses away. “You know how much the manufacturer sells the five-years for? Five bucks.”

Of all the things she’d heard recently, that fact shocked her the most. “Seriously?”

Clara slowly nodded. “I saw the CMI invoices when I worked at the clinic. A freaking five-dollar treatment and they basically ass-rape women over them in the States. The thirty-days are less than a buck each.”

“But I’ll be okay?”

Clara smiled. “No whoopsies.” Her smile faded. “Maybe one day we’ll all be lucky enough to reach a point where we can think about stuff like that. But I think for now we can agree it would be wisest, and safest, if we all take precautions.”

“Yeah,” Stacia said, feeling a slight, wistful pang. She’d never considered having kids before. Not seriously. You needed a relationship and money to have kids.

She had neither.

“So go forth and enjoy,” Clara said. “Guilt-free. Those two are good guys. I’ve only known them a few weeks, but from what I’ve heard from Pandora, and what I’ve seen firsthand, they’re all determined save the world.”

“Or die trying?”

Clara reached out and touched Stacia’s arm. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that for any of us.”

* * * *

The men drove Stacia back to her building and insisted on walking her upstairs to the apartment. She knew her aunt wouldn’t be home, or else she would have refused them.

She didn’t want to explain them to Aunt Darla. That would involve telling her a lot of other facts that she didn’t want to explain to her aunt.

Her aunt had left her a note.

Hope everything is okay. Love you.

She felt guilty she hadn’t called her aunt so she didn’t worry. But in the rush after Marco, and then getting frisky with the men, being responsible had slipped her mind.

Sorry, I’m fine. Missed the bus and slept at a friend’s place.

Hopefully that excuse would be okay for now. She quickly changed clothes and followed the men downstairs.

She was almost too busy keeping a wary eye out for Marco to realize the men were both scanning the area as they walked to the truck.

I’m not alone.

Damn, did that feel good, to know someone had her back who was able to actually stand up for her.

When they reached the plant, this time Lima pulled up close to the main gate and they didn't let her get out until they were sure Marco wasn't hanging around anywhere.

"We'll pick you up again in the morning," Lima said. "You wait inside the gate by the guard shack if you don't see us at first, understand?"

She nodded. She wouldn't have argued with him even if she'd wanted to. Not with the protective tone of voice he used on her.

She headed to the checkpoint and queued with the others already there to get stuck. But her mind wouldn't stop thinking about the men or the hours she'd just shared with them.

* * * *

Lima and Quack sat there and waited until they saw her enter the plant. Only when they were sure she was safely inside did Lima pull the truck away from the curb.

"Thank god we were here this morning," Quack said.

"Yeah." No, Lima didn't know this woman very well. But what he did know about her he liked and wanted to see more of.

A lot more of. And not just because they'd had a fun day with her in bed, either.

Maybe if Papa could arrange something for the aunt, a safe place like he had for Q's family, maybe it would free Stacia to come with them when they eventually had to leave the area.

A guy can dream.

When they returned to the safe house, Papa met them in the common room with a grim look on his face and his tablet in his hand.

"What?" Quack asked.

Lima didn't want to ask.

"Bubba broke the encryption. Well, some of it. Sit down. He summarized and sent me a run-down."

"Do we even want to know?" Quack said.

Papa handed him the tablet. "This is need to know. You can't tell Ak yet. And that's an order."

After Quack read, his expression changing from confused to pissed off, he passed the tablet to Lima. "Sonofabitch," Quack muttered.

Lima took a deep breath and read, knowing he wasn't going to like what he found.

And he didn't.

Yes, there were scientists at the clinic working on a Kite vaccine. Yes, the clinic was experimenting on the volunteers. Yes, they were being brainwashed into their mission.

Yes, it was worse than they could have ever imagined.

Much worse.

Not only were the volunteers already hooked on Kite the drug, they were going to be infected with Kite the virus and turned loose to infect others in the name of spreading a potential vaccine.

What Bubba didn't know yet was the timeframe, where, or how the volunteers would be transported. Bubba was still trying to decrypt all the files, which apparently used different keys.

And now they understood why the drastic file encryption measures.

Unfortunately, nowhere in the system was Reverend Hannibal Silo listed. Anywhere. There were plenty of mentions in the scripts the volunteers were being fed that mentioned "the church" and god and other religious hokum, but nothing specifically naming the Church of the Rising Sunset or Reverend Hannibal Silo.

In fact, from what Bubba had discovered, the facility could only be traced back to what looked like a non-existent person in Saudi.

Lima handed the tablet back to Papa and propped his elbows on the table, head in his hands. "Fuck. Me. When are we blowing it up?"

He did *not* want to be the person to have to shoot Stacia's brother full of po-clo.

"We can't," Papa said. "Not yet. We need to see what else we can get from there first. And it doesn't change the fact that Q and Sin need a chance to get into that lab and see what they can grab before we blow it."

"We might be risking people getting loose and spreading Kite."

"We might risk destroying a vaccine they have already created," Papa said, "and any notes they might have about what they did. You two need to see what else Ak can find out from her brother before we take the operation down."

“Whoa,” Quack said. “We can’t ask her to go back in there and expose herself to Kite.”

“Well, you damn sure can’t tell her about all these details yet,” Papa said. “Is this going to be a problem, gentlemen? Because we have a far bigger problem than your dicks getting sucked.”

* * * *

Stacia was glad to see the men parked directly outside the main gate when her shift ended. They drove her back to the apartment, where she grabbed clothes so she wouldn’t have to return later before her shift that night.

Her aunt had left her a note in reply.

Any news from Marvin? Love you.

She thought about how to answer that and decided a form of the truth might be the best.

Not today. I’ll check on him. Love you.

She realized the men were staring at her.

“What?”

“You all right?” Lima asked.

She forced a smile she didn’t feel right that second. “I will be when we get back to your place and you make my brain explode again. At least, I hope that’s on the agenda, because if it’s not, I’m going to be really disappointed.”

Lima pulled her in for a kiss, then Quack did the same.

“I think we can arrange that, babe,” Quack said.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Back at the safe house, Stacia followed Lima and Quack to their room. She didn't know if she'd come to regret getting involved with the two men, but at that point, she didn't care. Their first tryst together had awakened something inside her that she'd never realized existed before.

Sure, in what little free time she had, she'd read books where the girl got the guy and they led happy lives together.

That wasn't reality.

Reality was hard, made up of lean bank accounts and long farking hours at work and struggling to figure out how to make every single cent stretch as far as she could.

Reality wasn't two gorgeous, ripped hunks who not only had great bodies and wonderful personalities, they had the hots for her.

And, oh yeah, they were trying to save *the world*.

She was more than willing to indulge in this luxury. It was free.

Well, it might cost her her heart later, but that was irrelevant.

It was an indulgence she was more than willing to make the trade-off for.

Especially when it increasingly looked like she might have lost her brother to whatever crazy scheme he'd gotten himself mixed up in.

Spend some time letting two hunks love every last goddamned conscious thought out of her brain?

Sign me the fark up.

Life was short. Too damned short for her to worry about future regrets right now. She wanted this.

She wanted them.

And hot damn, they wanted her back.

The men quickly helped her shed her clothes, and then the three of them were lying naked on the bedroll together. "I want both of you," she said, going all-in. "You know? At the same time."

Lima stared down at her with those gorgeous eyes. "You want that sweet virgin ass of yours taken?"

She nodded.

Both men grinned. "Oh, baby," Lima said, leaning in and nibbling at the base of her throat. "You are in for a treat."

Quack went and rummaged around in his bag, declaring success a moment later and returning with a condom, bottle of lube, and a package of wipes.

"Spread 'em, baby," he joked.

She did. Lima climbed on top of her sixty-nine, his cock dangling over her lips. As she opened her mouth to suck on him, Lima said, "Wait. Swap places, dude."

"Aww."

She nearly laughed at Quack's disappointed tone.

"Dude, you need to be up front. You're a little thicker, I'm a little longer."

"Oh, good point."

They quickly switched places, and then it was Quack's cock dangling over her lips. She reached up and grabbed his ass as she opened wide and sucked at the head of his cock.

Lima pushed her thighs apart, and then Quack had his lips locked around her clit.

Okay, no way she'd ever regret this. That felt damn good.

Then Lima interrupted them again, just as she'd gotten a good moan going around Quack's cock. "Dude, your head's in the way. Roll over."

She let out a little yelp of surprise as Quack did just that, rolling her with him and not relinquishing his lip-lock on her pussy.

"There we go," Lima said as he patted her ass. "That's better."

Quack reached up and grabbed her ass cheeks, spreading them so Lima had better access. She tensed a little when she felt Lima spreading the cool liquid in the crack of her ass, rubbing it on her puckered rim, not breaching yet.

Then Quack redoubled his efforts, fucking her pussy with his tongue and alternating that with licking and sucking her clit, holding her in place with his fingers dug into her ass cheeks.

"Just relax and enjoy it," Lima coaxed. One finger started massaging her rim, the man adding more lube as he took his time and pressed a little, testing her reaction.

She focused her efforts on sucking Quack's cock. She didn't have a lot of experience at it, and hoped what she lacked in that she was making up for with enthusiasm.

She didn't know how long they lay there, but then Quack found a perfect rhythm with his tongue that started her hips rocking against his mouth, and Lima used that opportunity to press his finger a little more firmly against her rim.

When his finger finally breached through her tight ring of muscle, she gasped, but then she felt her orgasm start and she was rocking back on forth on top of Quack, fucking her ass onto Lima's finger, and grinding her pussy into Quack's face.

"Oh, yeah. There you go. You found what you like, didn't you?" Lima asked.

She moaned around Quack's cock, unable to give any other reply than that. Hell, *yes*, she liked it. It felt great!

Lima started moving his hand, now actively fucking her ass with his finger as her first orgasm faded. He took his time, adding more lube, and she wondered what he was waiting for when Quack sucked on her clit and shocked her by yanking a second orgasm out of her that she hadn't even realized she was close to having.

And that was when Lima added a second finger. She whined and tried to stop moving as her body struggled to process the pinching burn, but then Lima slid two fingers into her pussy, too. That stretched out her orgasm, to the point she didn't know if it was the same one, another one, or a long string of them melding together.

But it felt *damn* good.

"And there she goes," he said, a smile in his voice as he had both his hands fucking her, pussy and ass. "That's a preview of coming attractions, baby. Just think what it's going to be like having our cocks there."

Her nipples rubbed against Quack's body, pebbling them to the point they were aching and she wished the men were sucking on them or playing with them.

I'm sure that can be added to the menu.

That thought triggered another climax, and Lima laughed. "Oh, you just came again, didn't you? I think you're ready to play."

When he pulled his hands from her ass and her cunt, she started to whine around Quack's cock. But then Quack patted her on the ass and pushed her up.

"Time to change places, baby," he said, sliding out from under her. He wiped her juices off his face before turning around, lying on his back, and pulling her on top of him. "Put my cock in that sweet pussy of yours," he said.

She reached down and grabbed it, rising up on her knees before impaling herself on his shaft.

Quack cupped her breasts in his hands and started playing with her nipples. "Now you just wait right there until Lima's ready."

Lima had wiped off his hands and was rolling the condom on. He slathered his cock with lube before pushing her down on top of Quack. "Hold her open."

Quack's hands disappeared from her nipples and reappeared on her ass cheeks, drawing a soft moan of protest from her.

"Don't worry," Quack assured her. "I'll be playing with them again in a minute."

Lima pressed the head of his cock against her rim, pausing after he breached her ass. "You doing okay, baby?"

She'd braced herself against Quack's chest. "Uh-huh!"

He took his time, the sensation of both their cocks filling, stretching her unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Every nerve in her body was on high alert, her clit throbbing, nipples wanting more action.

Her hair fell around her face and she stared down into Quack's eyes.

He wore a playful smile. "Oh, baby. Look at you. Gonna get you so spoiled by two cocks that you're never gonna want to go anywhere else, are you?"

She leaned in and kissed him, his words too close to hitting home.

Hell, she was already in dangerous emotional territory even though she knew whatever this was couldn't last.

But she'd keep these memories cherished deep within her heart when the men were gone.

When she felt Lima's thighs pressed against her ass, he let out a groan. "Holy shit, baby, you are so tight and beautiful, you are perfect."

Quack's fingers returned to her nipples, which sent tendrils of need to her throbbing clit.

Lima took care of that for her. He reached around her and found her clit, playing with it. "Start moving, baby. You're driving this time. You fuck us until either we say stop, or you can't take any more. Your choice."

She started moving, slowly at first. It felt so...strange and sexy and full and dirty in the *good* way, all at the same time. Closing her eyes, she rose up a little and then found the perfect angle to hit all the right places inside her.

"Make all the noise you want," Lima assured her. "We're alone in here right now."

Good, because she wanted to moan. "Holy fuck," she whispered. "That's amazing!" She settled on short, deep strokes with the men fully buried inside her body at the bottom of each one.

"Fast and hard as you want," Quack assured her. "You fuck those cocks as hard and good as you want. We can take it."

She didn't know how long she sat there riding the men, but when the familiar tingles started in her clit she picked up speed until she was slamming her pussy and ass down onto them.

“Oh...fuck!” Quack said. “Damn, that’s fucking fantastic!”

A long, rolling moan escaped her, and when the climax hit, her ass and cunt clamped down on their cocks, her body trying to squeeze their orgasms out of them, too.

“Yes!” she cried out. “Yes!”

She thought she might pass out, it felt so damn good.

Then Lima and Quack took over and started fucking her, keeping her orgasm going and going until the men finally added their releases to hers and all three of them were making wild noises she didn’t know humans were capable of making.

All strength fled her body. She collapsed on top of Quack and tried to catch her breath while Lima carefully withdrew his spent cock from her ass.

Quack stroked her hair. “Good?”

She nodded, unable to speak.

He laughed. “I hope we didn’t just break you.”

“No,” Lima said. It sounded like he was cleaning up. “We didn’t break her. We just got her broke in.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Stacia didn't want to spend a lot of time at the apartment just in case Marco was still looking for her. The men helped her go shopping, including buying some things for her with their own money, and carrying the groceries upstairs for her.

She left her aunt another note.

Earning a little extra cash helping some friends with a project at their place. No worries, everything's fine. Stopped by and saw Marvin, he said hi. Love you.

She felt a little bad about the fib, but better her aunt didn't worry. It wasn't the first time Stacia had earned extra money helping people do electrical or plumbing projects, or something else she had skills in.

At least it would explain the extra food, including a package of ground beef, which she'd left in the fridge instead of freezing it so her aunt could cook it when she got home.

Back at the safe house, Pandora and Clara invited her to go with them down to the food market they were using a couple of blocks away from the compound.

It looked like the men needed to have some sort of planning session, so Stacia took the women up on the offer. It would be good to spend some time with women without it being at work. She already felt welcomed to the group by them.

It was good to have casual friends.

Well, as casual of friends as they could be considering the circumstances.

On their way back from the market, Pandora stopped at a car lot on the other side of the road. "Oooh, look at that!"

"What?" Clara asked.

"The RV." It had been marked down at least twice, judging from the numbers on the windshield. It wasn't the newest or in the best condition, and looked like it might be a hybrid that ran on diesel with a solar backup.

"What are you thinking?" Stacia asked.

"Maybe we can get it even cheaper," Pandora said. "They want to move it. It's not like there's going to be a lot of money floating around in a few months. An old RV won't be salable."

"Buy it?" Stacia asked.

"Yeah," Pandora said. She leaned in close to Stacia. "Papa has expense accounts," she said. "And believe me, after the trips I've taken with those monkeys so far, I would have *killed* to have had an RV for part of them."

"But it's a diesel hybrid," Clara said. "The full solar models are better."

"Diesel's still available everywhere," Pandora said. "It'll have a longer range than straight solar. Lots of trucks still use it. And cheaper than gas."

"Let's check it out," Stacia suggested.

"Really?" Pandora asked.

"Well, yeah. I'm not an expert, but I know enough. We might be able to get him down even more on the price."

The other two women stared at each other before looking at Stacia with nearly identical grins. "Okay," they said.

They found the lot's owner, who definitely was eager to show them the RV. "It's actually low mileage. Sat for a while. Tires are good, batteries are new. I need it out of here. I'm trying to move my inventory and get the hell out of the city."

He unlocked the side door and let them go first. It was thirty-five feet long, and while it wouldn't be comfortable for all of them for an extended amount of time, at least it had a bathroom with a shower, as well as a small kitchen.

Clara took the keys and the salesman showed her how to start it. It throbbed to life immediately, the engine sounding smooth.

"It's a pusher," he said. "Engine's in the back."

"Show me," Stacia asked.

He frowned, but led her outside and to the engine hatch cover. Popping it open, the sound of the engine turned into a roar, but it appeared to be running well. She didn't see any leaks, and the hoses looked new. The solar-powered backup engine sat off to the side of the compartment. She climbed the back ladder to examine the panels on the roof.

"Solar works," he said. "I had it checked out before I got it. And it'll run any diesel, including the bio-diesel mixes, or straight bio-diesel."

"What's the bottom line?" Stacia asked him.

"I have a great price on it now," he said. "I'm going to be losing money as it is."

She nodded and returned to the cabin, flashing the women an okay sign in front of her where the salesman couldn't see it. "We need to go talk it over," she told him. "How late are you open?"

"Five."

"Okay, thank you for your time."

Stacia herded the women out of the RV and off the lot. When she was sure they were far enough from the lot to talk without being observed, she stopped them. “Can you get cash from Papa?”

Pandora and Clara exchanged a glance. “Probably,” Pandora said. “But why cash?”

Stacia grinned. “He wants ten five for it. If we show up with nine grand, cash, I bet he’ll take it.”

Clara nodded. “Let’s go ask Papa.”

* * * *

Some of the men voiced their doubts with their expressions, but didn’t vocalize it while the women were explaining to Papa what they wanted to do and why.

When they finished, he nodded. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out an ATM card. “Here you go.” He handed it to Pandora.

She eyed it. “Um, seriously?”

“Yep. Code is 8219.”

“You did hear us say nine *grand*, right?” Stacia asked, still having trouble comprehending that, in their world, they might be nomads in a way, but they had far more financial stability than Stacia had ever had in her life.

“Yep. Trust me, it’ll give it to you.”

“I thought there were withdrawal limits.”

He smiled. “Maybe for most accounts.”

“Okay, but won’t that trigger alarms or something?”

“Nope. It belongs to a Mr. and Mrs. Albert Collins of Los Angeles. He’s a banker.”

“And he is...”

“Fake. Well, me. It’s just one of the personas we’re using for stuff like this. Once you guys finish, we’ll move the money and dump the account.”

“Okay.”

“You want us to go with them?” Lima asked.

“Nope. Might raise more suspicions. You’ll have to withdraw it in thousand-dollar increments,” Papa said. “If the machine doesn’t have that much in it, it’ll tell you how much it does have and let you get that. Just hit another ATM.”

The women left again. Sure enough, the first bank they hit, the ATM spit out the money.”

“Damn,” Stacia said, her eyes boggling. She’d never seen that much money at once.

Ever.

Pandora handed it to her. “You do the deal. You seem to have it under control.”

An hour later, they drove the RV off the lot, Clara behind the wheel since she’d driven larger trucks before. The dealer included the tags and registration without any complaint when he saw green. He hemmed and hawed at first about the price, but then Stacia had simply thanked him for his time, tucked the money into her pocket, and turned to leave.

He’d let her get to the door before stopping her and accepting her offer.

When they pulled up to the gate at the compound, Oscar let out a whistle as he opened the gate for them. “Holy cow, you did it.”

They drove it into the garage, the men closing the door behind them.

After climbing out of the RV to find the men gathering around, Pandora returned the ATM card to Papa. “Just like you said. Remind me not to doubt you again.”

“Plates?”

“Registered to Mr. and Mrs. Albert Collins.” She laughed. “Glad to see cash still talks.”

“Some things never change,” Papa agreed. He passed the card to Lima. “You’re up at bat. Turn and burn the account.”

“Roger.” He kissed Stacia before heading back upstairs.

They gave the men a tour of the RV. “How did it run?” Papa asked.

The other two women pointed at Stacia. “Ask her,” Pandora said. “She’s the mechanic.”

“It’s good. Not the best, but seems reliable enough.”

“We thought it’d be handy for whenever we have to get out of here,” Clara said. “Could be a portable lab, if nothing else.”

Papa nodded. “Excellent thinking. Hopefully we won’t have to leave here immediately, but that will make things easier when we do.”

“And no offense,” Pandora added, “but it’s logistically a little more difficult for us girls to drop trou on the side of the road to take a whiz.”

“Can’t argue with that logic.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After work the men picked Stacia up. She thought maybe Marco had been scared off by the men, because she hadn't seen any sign of him, or heard anyone mention seeing him hanging around the plant.

And to be honest, after two days of romping in bed with the men, she was exhausted and needed a full ration of sleep. Still, she wanted a little time with them.

She was tired, not stupid.

"Come upstairs with me for a quickie," she said, smiling. "It's not that I don't want to go back to your place, but I am ready for my own bed for a few straight hours. I'm exhausted."

"Honey," Quack said, "if you need to sleep, it's okay. We won't die."

She smiled. "I'm not *that* exhausted. I said a quickie."

Fortunately, it didn't take much to coax the men upstairs. Her bed was small for all three of them, but it wasn't like they were going to be sleeping just yet.

As they stood there together, all three of them naked, she savored the feel of their warm flesh pressed against her.

Maybe what they had wasn't forever, but she wasn't going to worry about that now. She wiggled her hips against Quack, smiling when his cock hardened along the seam of her ass. "How about a nice spit-roast?" she said. "Everybody's happy."

Lima kissed her in reply, reaching down to tease her clit with his fingers. Which soon turned into him sliding two fingers into her wet pussy.

Quack reached around her and cupped her breasts, playing with her nipples. "Like this, baby?" he whispered in her ear.

"Uh-huh!"

Oooh, yeah, *just* like that.

The men made her stand there while they got her off not once, but twice. Only then were they content to let her crawl up onto the bed on all fours.

Lima sat at her head. "Look what I've got for you," he teased.

She hesitated. "I know I'm not very experienced, but am I doing that right?"

The men froze. "Huh?" they said.

"Is there something I could be doing better?"

"Um," Quack said, "you suck on it and we come. How can you make that better?"

She glared at him over her shoulder. "You know what I mean."

"No," Lima said, "he's pretty much dead-on. You won't hear any complaints from either of us. Just don't bite it off."

"Or use a monkey wrench on it," Quack added. He patted her on the ass as he settled behind her, between her legs. "We're not complicated guys." He'd lined up the head of his cock with her pussy when he stopped. "Um, are we doing a good enough job for you? I mean, be honest if we aren't."

"Seriously? Those weren't gas pains I was moaning over a minute ago," she said.

They both chuckled. "Okay, then," Lima said. "We're good, you're good, now let's all get good."

Quack slid his cock home. "Ohhh, yeah. That's *real* good."

As she licked and sucked on Lima's cock, Quack apparently decided he wanted one more out of her. They liked feeling her coming when they had their cocks inside her, or when she had one of their cocks in her mouth.

Quack played with her clit and she let the pleasure take over. No thoughts other than enjoying this, them, this time with them.

With his cock deep inside her cunt it made it that much easier for her climb to start. Lima reached under her and found her nipples, gently tweaking them and adding an extra layer of delicious to everything going on.

When her orgasm started, both men groaned along with her as they felt it through their cocks, too.

"That's it," Lima grunted. "See? You're doing a marvelous job."

She reached up and palmed his sac, gently rolling it along her palm, and that apparently triggered him. His cock hardened, then started throbbing as he rewarded her with a mouthful of cum.

"Oooh, yeah," he said. "Just...like...that."

Quack sped up, grabbing her hips and fucking her hard and fast before her orgasm finished. "Give me just a...second."

Her cunt was still spasming around his cock as he finished, adding his load to her pussy.

As best they could in the small bed, they curled up together. "I need to go try to see Marvin today," she said, a yawn taking over as she did.

Lima tucked her hair behind her ears. "Sounds like you need to sleep."

"But we don't know what's going on yet."

Lima kissed her forehead. “Sleep first. We’ll come get you tonight.”

“No, it’s okay,” she said. “I’ll take an earlier bus. Wait, today’s Thursday. I have Saturday off this week. When I get home from work in the morning, I’ll go talk to Marvin again. And I need to do some chores around here so Aunt Darla doesn’t try to do them. You can pick me up tomorrow evening and take me to work, and I’ll go back with you to your place Saturday morning after you pick me up from work. How does that sound?”

“How about we just drive you today,” Quack said.

“Look”—another yawn took her—“I don’t know how long I’ll sleep. I *will* take an earlier bus, I promise. But I really need to do this. Marco hasn’t come around again. You guys scared him off. If I see any sign of him hanging around when I come home I’ll stay on the bus to a different stop. I promise. You two have work to do, don’t you?”

She thought they were going to argue with her, or pull rank, or...something.

But she also needed some alone time to process the crazy whirlwind that was now her life.

She needed to see if she could stand to *be* alone after having been with the two men.

The last thing she wanted to do was trade any kind of a relationship for becoming some idiotic woman who couldn’t take care of herself anymore.

They didn’t look happy about it, but they finally agreed. “Okay,” Lima said, leaning in to kiss her.

Quack did the same.

After the men dressed, she walked them to the door. “So that’s the plan, right? You’ll pick me up here tomorrow evening, and hopefully I’ll have news for you about Marvin. Or, hopefully you’ll have news for me about what your intelligence guy says. Or both.” She yawned again. “Sorry.”

They leaned in and kissed her. “Get some sleep,” Quack said. “You’re exhausted.”

She closed the door and headed to the shower, then decided fuck it, she’d take one when she woke up.

At least she’d go to sleep smelling like her men.

* * * *

Quack and Lima waited until they heard her lock the deadbolt behind them before they headed down the hall toward the stairs.

Quack could barely contain his question until they were out of earshot. “We’re not *seriously* going to let her take the bus to work, are we?”

“Yep,” Lima said.

“Are you fucking out of your mind?”

He stopped and turned. “I didn’t say we weren’t going to be following the damn bus. Idiot. I think she needs some breathing room and didn’t want to say it.”

Quack let out a sigh of relief. “Okay. We’re on the same page then.”

“Duh. What, you think I’m stupid? We’re going to follow her and keep an eye on her. That fucker gets anywhere close to her, he disappears.”

Quack followed him down the stairs. “*Excellent.*”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

As soon as she got home from work Friday morning, Stacia knew she had to go find Marvin. She felt badly that she hadn't done it Thursday afternoon the way she'd planned, but she'd been exhausted, and Marvin was an adult. She'd needed to do chores around the apartment to keep Aunt Darla from doing them, and she was only one person with so much energy.

Stacia also suspected trying to talk Marvin out of the program would be useless. That was her gut instinct's ruling. She'd wanted to put off the disappointment and emotions that would trigger.

She was far more cynical about the world now than she had been a few days ago, and she'd pretty much been a realist before she'd met the Drunk Monkeys.

But she didn't hold on to any hopes of talking Marvin out of the program. Not after her discussions with the men and what she'd learned about what they thought might be going on there. They'd pretty much confirmed her worst fears.

The odds of Marvin staying healthy, much less surviving whatever crazy-assed plan the church had for him, were too poor for her liking, but she didn't think she'd be able to change the outcome short of the men abducting Marvin from the program.

That would be her next step. She'd try the easy approach one more time, just in case.

Part of her tenaciously refused to give up on her brother.

Yet, a dark, quiet part of her brain had already started ticking through the list of ways Marvin's permanent departure would make things easier on her, and on her aunt.

She hated herself for the thoughts, but dammit, Aunt Darla had spent her life sacrificing for them through excruciating pain. And if what Marvin had couldn't be cured...

Maybe things happened for a reason.

Her aunt had already left for work. Stacia grabbed a quick shower and a protein bar and headed out for the church. That's when doubts assailed her again.

Maybe I should wait and get Quack and Lima to help, no matter what I told them.

Then again, despite the soft, dark voice in her mind, Marvin *was* her brother. This was *her* responsibility. If he wouldn't listen to her, he likely wouldn't listen to her men.

The day felt oppressively hot, very little wind, and the sky an ugly brownish orangey color that meant an inversion layer was keeping smog and smoke from the riot fires and brush fires trapped near the surface.

She adjusted her face mask as she walked. It made the day feel even hotter, the way her breath was trapped under the mask by the fabric.

Still wasn't enough to make her pull it down and off her face.

When she reached the church, she stared at the front of it, where they'd already replaced the plywood covering the front glass windows with stained glass panels containing large gold crosses.

Oh, puh-leeze.

It figured they'd pick something as gaudy as *that* to replace them.

Trudging across the parking lot to the front door, she almost expected to find it locked. But it opened when she pushed, surprising her so much that she nearly tripped her way through the entrance.

There were three women in the office, but none of them looked up when she walked in, so she didn't announce herself. She wanted to go find Marvin herself and talk to him.

She still peeked inside the sanctuary as she walked past that door and then stopped, backing up to look again.

A lone figure sat in a chair at the front.

A lone figure with a Marvin-like shape.

Hoping against hope, she hurried in, up to the front row of chairs, and breathed a sigh of relief to find, yes, it was Marvin.

He looked up at her as she stood over him. On his face he wore a beatific smile the likes of which she'd never seen before.

"Marvin?" she whispered, horror coiling in her stomach for a reason she couldn't explain.

His smile widened. "Hello, sis."

She sat next to him. "*Please*, come home with me. Aunt Darla misses you. You don't have to do this. We'll get you out of the contract."

He took her hand in his and held it. There was something different about him.

Disturbingly different.

She couldn't put her finger on it, either. He sounded content, at peace. Placid.

Focused. “This will be okay,” he said. I’ll be home in a few weeks, when my assignment is finished. I feel better than I ever have in my entire life, and I’m going to be spreading the Word of God to people in desperate need.”

“But you have a *family* in desperate need.”

“I wish you could feel what I feel right now, sis. It’s...amazing. Like everything is clear for the first time in my life.”

She knew from his tone there would be no arguing with him.

Didn’t mean she wouldn’t try. “What if you don’t come back, Marvin? What are we supposed to do without you?”

“You’ll be okay. It’s God’s will.”

She’d try logic. It was a long shot, but maybe it would work. “I know what’s wrong with you, Marvin. I found out why the military discharged you. You have a genetic condition that’s like a type of autistic dyslexia, a sensory processing disorder. It means you don’t see the world the way the rest of us do. That’s why you always had problems following through with stuff, because it just doesn’t stick in your brain. It’s a specific genetic abnormality tied in with something Dad was exposed to while he was in the military. It’s all related to your condition, everything. It’s why you always had problems in school. We might be able to find a way for you to learn to work around it.”

“I’ll come back,” he said as if she hadn’t spoken. He looked up as a soft tone sounded three times. “I have to go. Time for my next treatment.” He stood. “It’ll be okay, sis. You’ll see. Love you.”

She stared up at him, at the eyes the same shade of brown as hers, at his brown hair, a little on the shaggy side because he hadn’t been around lately for her to give him a haircut. “Love you, too, bro.”

She watched him walk out of the sanctuary, helpless to do anything but let him go.

* * * *

Lima and Quack sat in the truck across the street from the church and watched the front entrance, time nervously ticking past for them as they waited for Stacia to emerge.

“Well?” Quack asked. “Do we go in? I don’t like her being in there.”

“If we go in guns blazing, we’re liable to get the wrong kind of response,” Lima said. “We don’t know what’s going on or if they’ve improved security since I was last inside.”

“That’s *why* I’m worried,” Quack said. “We don’t know what’s going on.” Bubba was still trying to decode the secret project’s timeline. They suspected things were growing tight time-wise, but Papa wouldn’t give the okay to blow the place until he heard back from Bubba about it.

“We sit and wait,” Lima said. “Just keep your eyes open.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Stacia struggled not to burst into frustrated tears as she left the church and began the walk back to their apartment building.

I cannot farking believe he's going through with it.

Based on what she now knew about the world, she was convinced her brother, and the other volunteers, were being sent on suicide missions. Why else pay them exorbitant amounts of money?

Why would it be *worth* the church paying them that much to go out and spread the “word of God”?

More like hush money being paid to desperate families who wouldn't want to raise too much of a stink later about the source of their sudden financial windfalls.

From what the men had told her about the real reason her brother had been discharged from the military, looking back, a lot of things made sense.

What if they'd been from a rich family? Would a doctor have diagnosed him when he was a kid so he could have gotten the appropriate therapy to help him make something of his life?

Now he was little more than a lab rat for a whack-job religious nut.

Her last shreds of hope lay in the men and the possibility that they might be able to rescue Marvin for her.

When the tiny, dark voice in her mind tried to convince her to just let him go for her aunt's sake, she viciously silenced it.

Stacia stopped at the small park next door to their apartment building. Playground equipment, picnic tables, a small jogging path, there was a little duck pond in the center and a few sections where shade trees provided welcomed oases from the summer sun. It wasn't the most beautiful park, or the fanciest, but it had been there for years, one constant in their lives.

They'd spent countless hours there as kids, the two of them on weekends or after school while their mom and aunt were still at work.

She walked over to one of the larger oak trees which stood there, tall and round. Looking back, she could see how much it had grown over the years, as had she, but only upon reflection was that growth truly visible.

Resting her head against its rough bark, she closed her eyes and thought about her brother.

Dammit, I wish I had him here with me.

They'd spent hours under this tree playing together.

It had been their favorite tree as kids. Back then, she'd never allowed herself to dwell upon there ever possibly being a day she and her brother wouldn't be together. They'd lost their father when she was three, and they had moved in with Aunt Darla just weeks after.

Then they'd lost their mom, too.

That she'd likely never see Marvin again still hadn't quite sunken in yet. Hadn't penetrated the old brainpan.

Didn't *feel* real.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he'll be back.

“Stace!”

She froze, listening. It had almost sounded like—

“Stace!”

Her eyes popped open and she turned toward the voice.

There was Marvin, running toward her.

Of course, he wasn't wearing a mask.

She let out a happy sob and was already reaching out to embrace him when he ran up to her.

He scooped her up in a huge hug and spun her around, the kind of hug he'd given her when they were kids and she was depressed or upset or worried. The kind of hug designed to make all the bad things go away and make her smile again.

A big-brother hug.

“Oh, thank god,” she whispered, desperately clutching him to her.

“I'm still going,” he said, his words almost running together. If he'd been placid before, he was like a whirlwind of energy now. “I just got my treatment and I feel a lot better. I always feel better right after my treatments. I feel bad that you're upset. I forgot to tell you I called Aunt Darla last night. I just snuck out after my treatment. I was hoping I could catch up with you. I'm supposed to be resting right now. I just found out they're flying us out tonight.”

Her happy feelings shattered. “Please, *please* don't go. Stay. Quit. Tell them you changed your mind and don't want the money.”

“Stace, it's okay. I have to do this. *I want* to do this. And when I get back—”

“But you *won’t* come back, don’t you *understand* that?” she screamed against his shoulder. “I don’t know what the hell they’re doing, but they don’t plan for *any* of you to come back!”

He cupped her face in his hands and smiled down at her. It was a peaceful smile, a loving smile. A calm stillness settled over him, counteracting whatever tsunami of energy had infested his body.

“I *know* what I have to do,” he said. “This is God’s will for me. And I’m okay with that because I know that, no matter what happens from this day forward, you and Aunt Darla will be okay. I can take care of myself. I always had you or Mom or Aunt Darla making sure of it before, but you’re right. It’s time for me to step up and do what I need to do for my family for a change.”

“But not like this, please! We don’t need the money. We need *you*. You’re my brother, and I love you.”

His smile widened. “I love you, too, little sis.” His gaze left hers, suddenly focusing on a point behind her. Then the serenity fell from his expression like snow sliding off a roof, horror replacing it. “No!”

Marvin grabbed her in a bear hug, spinning them both around as a loud *crack* shattered the afternoon.

It felt like someone had whacked Marvin across the back with a baseball bat, the impact rocketing through her, too. And then he was sliding, his grip on her loosening, his knees and legs folding, collapsing as she struggled to keep him upright.

“Marvin!” She followed him to the ground, landing on her knees in the grass next to him.

Behind where he’d stood, about thirty yards away, she saw Marco stalking toward them. In his right hand, he held a gun pointed at them.

“Fucking cunt! You goddamned got me fired! Little bitch!” He aimed at her again as she screamed, but then a second *crack*, this one from behind her, split the air.

Marco’s forward momentum stopped. Before he fell backward, she realized a hole had appeared in the middle of his forehead and the back of his skull disintegrated and sprayed chunks of red, grey, and white across the scraggly grass behind him.

She turned to see Lima and Quack sprinting toward her, both of them with guns drawn.

She looked down. Marvin stared up at her, a silly little smile on his face despite the blood pouring from the wound in his chest. It was all over him, and her, too, from where she’d been trying to support him. It coated her hands as she tried to apply pressure to the wound.

“No, no *nonono* no nonononono! Marvin, hold on, we’ll get you to a hospital! You just fucking hold *on*, you hear me?”

Quack fell to his knees next to her as Lima continued on to check on Marco.

“Stacia, are you okay?” Quack asked her as he holstered his gun.

“My brother, please, we have to get him to the—”

He grabbed her by her the arm. “Were you shot?” he yelled.

“No! But we have to get Marvin to a hospital right now.”

Marvin let out a little cough, red bubbles forming and bursting on his lips before he took one last breath and went still.

“No!” She leaned forward as she yanked her mask down, intent on doing mouth-to-mouth on him, but Quack grabbed her with both arms and bodily dragged her across the grass away from her brother’s side.

“Let me go!” she screamed, struggling against him. “We have to—”

Quack shook her. “Stop! Listen to me, *right* now. Just stop. It got his spine. It took out his lungs.” He looked over at the fallen man, and then at his own hands and arms, which were now also coated with blood.

Lima ran up to them and skidded to a halt about fifteen feet away. “Oh, no. *Dammit*, Cody! *Fuck!*” He holstered his gun and turned away from them before turning back, stomping his foot. “*Fuck*, man! *Fuck!* Fucking *hell!* No!”

In the distance, she saw people had turned their way.

“Give me the sticks, Devin,” Quack said, keeping his left hand painfully clamped around her upper right arm so she couldn’t move from his side, while reaching out his right toward Lima.

“Fuck!”

“*Devin!* Give me the goddamned mother*fucking* sticks!”

Lima pulled a small plastic case out of his pocket and tossed it from where he stood so that it landed in Quack’s outstretched palm. Lima ran his hands through his short hair as he dropped into a squat, watching them.

Only then did the significance of what just happened between her two men penetrate through her roiling fog of shock and grief to hit her in the brain and jolt it back into gear. “What—”

“Shh, baby,” Quack calmly whispered as he worked to open the case one-handed, his tone now completely changed. He bore a totally different demeanor from just seconds earlier. Calm.

Eerily calm.

“It’s okay,” he insisted. “Everything’s gonna be okay. I’m not leaving your side.” He looked at Lima. “Devin, go get the truck and drive it over here.”

Lima leapt from the ground and sprinted to do it.

Quack shook a clear test strip from the case with his right hand and reached out, dipping the sharp end that usually poked a person to draw the sample into a smear of Marvin's blood that she'd transferred onto his own left arm from their struggle.

She stared at Quack, watching his face. He closed his eyes, his lips moving without any sound coming out.

She realized he was silently chanting.

Not blue. Please, not blue.

Over and over again.

"Quack—"

"Shh, baby," he said without opening his eyes. "It's going to be okay. Everything's gonna be all right. I've got you, you're safe. We *are* going to be okay."

Her gaze dropped to the test strip pinched between his right thumb and index finger.

It had already started turning blue.

"Motherfucker," he whispered.

He dropped it and shook out another. Leaning, he stretched to reach her brother's body, this time dipping the test strip into blood directly from Marvin's chest wound.

Her brother's eyes remained half-open and staring sightlessly up at the sky. The same brown eyes she had. Her mother always told them they had their father's eyes, what a comfort it was to look into their faces and see their father mirrored there.

The strip started turning blue immediately.

Quack stood, pulling her with him. She wanted to stay but he started dragging her toward the street and away from Marvin's body.

"Quack—"

"We have to get out of here. Now," he said without stopping. "The police show up, they'll quarantine us and we're *done*."

"But what about his bod—"

He stopped, grabbed her by both arms, and shook her again, gently. "He's *gone*, baby. I'm sorry, but we're still alive. They'll burn his body anyway. He's infected with Kite. Eaten up with it for the strips to turn that blue that fast. We *have* to get out of here right *now*."

They heard the sound of a gunning engine. Lima bounced the truck over the curb and onto the grass, racing toward them, the windows up. He slid to a stop next to them, and Quack didn't give her time to react. He scooped her up and dumped her into the bed before jumping in with her.

Lima knocked on the inside of the cab's rear window. "Tarp," he yelled, pointing.

Quack spotted the folded tarp bungee-corded in a ball in the corner of the bed. He ripped it free and draped it over them before he pulled her into his arms, rolling so they were then burritoed inside it.

"Go!" he yelled.

Lima took off. She heard sirens approaching in the distance.

Quack's breath blew over the top of her scalp as he tried to keep her cushioned with his body against the worst of the impacts from their off-roading until Lima finally got them on the street again.

"I've got you, baby," Quack murmured. "I'm not letting you go, don't worry."

"But you're exposed, too."

"Yeah. It's okay. We *will* be okay."

"How'd you find me?"

"We were watching the church's building and saw you come out. We started to follow you but then we saw Marvin come out and waited to see what he did. We followed him. We didn't see that guy come up at first because our view was blocked by the trees. Who was he? I didn't get a good look at him before we blew his head off."

"Marco."

"The monkey wrench guy?"

She sniffled. "Yeah."

"Okay. It's all right baby, you're safe, now. We took care of him."

"But—"

"Shh." He held her even more tightly against him. "It's gonna be okay. I'll *make* this okay, one way or another, I promise. It's gonna be okay. I'm going to fix this for you. I'll make it better. It's okay."

Closing her eyes, she cried, wanting to believe that with all her soul.

It was all she could hold on to. Otherwise, she'd risk losing her sanity.

Chapter Thirty

Stacia didn't know how much time passed, it could have been a few minutes or an hour, before Lima slowed the truck and made a turn. They stopped and she heard a gate rattling open and knew exactly where they were.

Back at the compound.

As someone pulled the gate shut behind them, Lima stopped short of the garage. The engine shut off and she heard the cab door open and shut, then his footsteps as he ran from the truck, calling out to the others.

She started to sit up but Quack held her firmly against him. "No, baby," he said. "We need to wait until they're ready."

"Ready?"

"We're going to need to do decon in a place that won't expose anyone else."

"What?"

He took a deep breath. "Decontamination. It's just a precaution. We're going to be fine. But we have to carefully strip and wash all the blood off us. Then we will go and wait for a few hours, *together*," he emphasized. "Just me and you."

"Why?"

"Because it's what we're supposed to do."

There was still a little logical part of her brain tapping on the glass, trying to get her attention and fill in the blanks.

She ignored it. Right now, all she wanted to do was let Quack take care of her.

Thinking would mean trying to process the fact that Marvin was gone, and never coming back.

That he'd died trying to save her.

After what felt like another forever, but was probably only a few minutes under the stifling tarp, they heard people returning, including the two women.

And another voice, one she'd heard a few times, but rarely saw the owner. Clear, but heavily accented English.

Q.

"Everyone stand back. Anyone who does not need to be here, go inside."

She heard a discontent rumbling swirl through the men.

Then Papa spoke up. "You heard him. Clara, Tango, Uncle. You three stay. Anyone else not on watch or with those names, go inside. Now. That's an order. You, too, Lima."

It sounded like he started to protest, but Papa overruled him. "*Now*. That's a direct order. You can come back out once they're in holding and it's safe."

Finally, the tarp was lifted. She opened her eyes and saw that Q wore a lightweight, full-body protective suit and carried a plastic bag. "I apologize, Ak," he said, "but you both must strip now." He held the bag open. "All clothes in here, please."

She sat up. So did Quack.

"Be careful not to get blood on your face when you take your shirt off," Q cautioned. "Hold your breath."

Quack helped her there, grabbing and ripping the neck of her shirt down the front so she could shrug it off her arms and drop it into the bag. When they were both standing naked in the truck bed, she finally glanced around.

They were at the back of the compound, the high concrete wall shielding them from view of their neighbors. She felt a little self-conscious, but the shock of everything that just happened had numbed most of that.

When they were naked, her blood-soaked shoes in the bag and Quack's tactical boots sitting in the back of the truck, Clara, also wearing a protective suit, brought Q another plastic bag that he sealed the first one in. Then she passed him a larger plastic bag.

"The tarp, please," Q said to Quack. "Fold it up, blood inside, and put it in here. We will burn that. I will use your clothes for samples for testing and sequencing."

Quack did it, and Q sealed that bag inside a second bag, too.

Clara dropped the tailgate for them and Quack helped Stacia out before he grabbed his boots. "Where," he asked.

"This way," Clara said. "I already put towels and sheets out for you, too. There's soap, everything. When you're done, you can sit in the far corner of the garage. I had one of the guys put down a bedroll and some water and snacks."

"Thanks," Quack said. He gently caught Stacia's arm and guided her along behind Clara.

Stacia wasn't so out of it that she didn't realize Quack was keeping them several steps behind Clara.

They had a hose ready, and soap. He soaked his boots first, spraying them down with disinfectant that would kill any hint of the virus on them. Then he turned them upside down to dry and hosed himself off before he grabbed the bar of soap.

"You, first," he told her.

"You've got it on you, too."

“You had more,” he gently said. “I’ll help you scrub down.” He scrubbed every inch of her body with the soap before he dumped shampoo in her hair and held the hose for her while she scrubbed.

Once she’d been soaped up and rinsed twice more, he did himself, only letting Stacia hold the hose for him.

After they were cleaned and dried off, Quack wrapped her in a sheet, then himself, and tucked her against his side as they walked over to their waiting place.

“How long?” she asked as they settled onto the bedroll.

He looked over at Clara, where she stood about twenty feet away. “Did he get the time it happened?” Quack asked.

She nodded. “First stick in fifty-nine minutes.”

“What?” Stacia asked.

He held her tightly in his arms, snuggling with her. “We have to wait a minimum of two hours from exposure to see if we’re blue.”

“And then?”

“Every hour until it’s been ten hours. We go ten hours clear, we’ll be okay.”

“If we’re not?”

He kissed the top of her head. “We *will* be.”

He wasn’t going to tell her, and she knew it.

“I’ll be back,” Clara said. “I need to bleach the truck bed out.”

She left.

A few minutes later, Papa, Alpha, and Lima appeared, stopping about the same place Clara had stood. “Here, and no closer,” Papa said. “Don’t make me have Doc tranq you, and you know I will.”

“I won’t,” Lima quietly said.

Lima looked worried sick. She wanted to pull him into her arms and hold him, comfort him. Maybe Quack sensed that because he tightened his grip on her.

“You can’t touch him, baby. Not yet. We can’t get close to any of them.”

Someone brought a bedroll down for Lima, who seemed to check his watch every thirty seconds or more. Alpha sat in a chair nearby, close enough, Stacia guessed, that he could grab Lima if he tried to violate the safety zone.

Finally, after what felt like forever, Clara returned. “Okay,” she said, pointing. “The strips are there.”

Papa, Alpha, Doc, Q, Sin, Pandora, and several others joined them in the garage. Actually, it looked like all of them had gathered to watch.

No one spoke.

Quack sat up and reached for the container of strips and shook two out. Stacia started to reach for one, but he gently caught her hand.

“I’ll do it,” he said. “Just close your eyes, baby.”

“But—”

“Please,” he said, his voice sounding close to breaking.

She tucked her head against his chest and closed her eyes.

He turned her hand, isolating her thumb, and then she felt the stick.

After what felt like forever, his relieved breath blew past her ear. “See? Like I said, everything’s okay.” She opened her eyes and saw the strip, the blood sample wicking up from the sharps end through the center of it.

But other than that thin red line, the strip remained clear.

She closed her eyes again while he did his, and again his relieved breath signified the good news.

Lima smiled at them from his place. “See? Easy peasy. Now we just have to keep doing it for eight more hours.”

She worried about Aunt Darla. She couldn’t just call her and drop the bomb on her that Marvin was gone.

She looked at Lima. “If I don’t—”

“Stop,” he gently said. “You guys are *fine*. This is just a precaution.”

It took every bit of energy she had to make herself say it. “Promise me you’ll talk to Aunt Darla for me if I can’t Promise me.”

He nodded. “But I won’t need to.”

All she could do was wait and hope he was right.

* * * *

Long afternoon shadows fell through the high windows in the garage doors. The afternoon light had taken on the deep golden glow it usually possessed not long before sunset. The afternoon drifted into evening, then night. Quack made her eat and

drink. The rest of the time, she spent curled in his arms with her eyes closed.

Every clear test pulled her dangerously toward hope.

Hope wasn't something she could afford any longer. Hope broke her heart.

When thoughts about what had happened to Marvin's body tried to come to mind, she shoved them away.

She wouldn't be able to have a funeral for him.

Not that she could have afforded one anyway. The county would pay for a basic charity cremation, returning the cremains in a plastic bag inside a cardboard box, and that was it.

But Kite patients didn't get even that luxury.

As the evening dragged on, it seemed like everyone came down to the garage to watch as Quack made the stick tests.

Every test, he asked her to close her eyes.

And every time, that relieved breath he released allowed her heart to start beating again.

She dozed, off and on. She didn't want to be awake. She'd rather be asleep, nestled in Quack's arms. If she was awake she'd have to think about Marvin, and about how that tiny dark voice deep inside her had gone silent in a slightly smug way that made her want to hate herself.

She was aware of the men talking, off and on, about inconsequential things. Deliberately talking about anything and everything except their situation.

And then at one point, after another stick and relieved breath, she was suddenly being kissed, hard.

That woke her up.

She opened her eyes to find Lima grinning ear to ear and leaning in to kiss her a second time.

"Let's go to bed, baby."

Lima scooped her into his arms and started toward the stairs leading up to the first floor. She looked to see Quack also grinning, holding his sheet around him as he got up and followed them.

They also had to pass through a gauntlet of everyone, including the women, patting them on the shoulders as they walked past them.

He carried her straight to their room, where Quack closed and locked the door behind them once they were inside.

Lima laid her on the bedrolls and quickly stripped while Quack dropped his sheet.

She thought maybe they'd want to make love, but they curled their bodies around her and settled in, their arms protectively draped over her.

Exhausted, and too tired and heartbroken to try to think about anything, she chose the easy oblivion of sleep.

Chapter Thirty-One

Stacia didn't know how long she slept, but it was still dark out when she awoke. The urge to use the bathroom overwhelmed her, so she carefully slipped out of the men's grips and grabbed the sheet Quack had dropped.

After wrapping it around her, she made her way to the bathroom and picked a stall.

The bathroom door opened.

Pandora's voice called out. "Stace?"

"Yeah?"

"I've got some clothes for you. I'll leave them on the counter."

"Okay, thanks."

It sounded like her footsteps paused at the door. "I can't say I know exactly what you went through, but I had a scare with Tango back in Australia. He got exposed, and we had to do the waiting game, too. So if you need to talk..." She let the comment drift off.

Stacia didn't want to talk right now. About anything.

Especially not about Marvin.

"Thanks."

The door opened and swung shut on the sound of Pandora's fading footsteps.

Stacia flushed, emerged to wash her hands, and found the clothes, including a nice pair of sneakers, on the counter.

After washing up, she kept the sheet wrapped around her, grabbed the clothes, and headed back to the room.

Her men were sitting up in bed, waiting for her.

She left the clothes on a chair and returned to bed. "I didn't mean to wake you up," she said.

Lima leaned in and kissed her. "It's okay. You're always great to wake up to."

Before she could think about it, she grabbed him by the back of the neck and kissed him, hard, crushing her lips onto his.

He didn't even hesitate, pulling her down onto the bed with him.

Quack jumped in, stroking her side, kissing along her back. She grabbed his hand and dragged it around to her chest where she put it over her breast and squeezed, hard.

He, too, got the idea.

She wanted something, anything, to take away her ability to think right now.

She didn't want to think.

She didn't want to cry.

She didn't want the image of Marvin dying in her arms in her brain.

She didn't want to think about the fear that she and Quack had come damn close to having to end their lives, had they tested blue.

She didn't want to think about the fear in Lima's eyes every time he watched Quack do the stick tests on them.

The fact that she never would have been able to kiss him again had they tested blue.

She wanted to rage and scream and yell about how unfair this goddamned Kite virus was, and knew that would only get her arrested if she did it out on the street.

Instead, she poured her energy into the men, hoping they were as tough and unbreakable as they claimed they were.

Even better, it seemed they were pretty decent mind readers, because they took over. Lima started to work his way down her body. She sat up, viciously clawing at him to stay there, when Quack cupped his hand around her throat and slammed her back down onto the bedroll.

Inside her, something felt comforted, relieved, even glad, while her body fought back.

Quack straddled her chest and grabbed her wrists, pinning them down on either side of her before he leaned in and crushed a bruising kiss of his own over her mouth.

The harder she struggled, not wanting to fight him off as much as she just wanted to *fight*, the more of his weight he settled onto her body until Lima finally buried his face between her legs and nipped her clit.

She let out a soft howl that earned her a growl in response from Quack. He finally lifted his mouth from hers. "Fight us all you want, baby. Get that bad energy out of you. We can take anything you throw at us and it won't scare us off."

Part of her wanted to break down in tears.

The rest of her poured her energy into her struggles, kicking at Lima until he laid his body over one of her legs and grabbed her free ankle with one hand and drew her leg up, bent at the knee so she couldn't get enough leverage to kick anymore.

Thus immobilized, Quack kissed her again and Lima started licking and sucking on her clit, nothing tender about his

technique, designed to do one thing, and that was herd her straight toward the cliff.

Still, she struggled, fought, even tried biting Quack's lip until he transferred both her wrists into his right hand and then reached down and started twisting her right nipple, hard, with his left hand.

That drove her off the cliff. Her body went rigid as she screamed, the sounds muffled by Quack's mouth, as her orgasm swept through her.

Now satisfied they had her attention. Lima released her ankle and shoved two fingers into her cunt, adding a third after he'd loosened her up. He didn't let up either, changing his technique a little, but now with the added feeling of his hand fucking her hard and fast she soon found herself climbing her way up that cliff again.

After she orgasmed a second time, Quack lifted his mouth from hers, his gaze boring into hers. "You need a good hard fucking, baby?"

She nodded.

In what felt like one smooth movement, the men changed position. Quack grabbed a fistful of her hair, and not a gentle one, either, and sat at the end of the bed with his legs spread. Lima flipped her onto her hands and knees and forced her legs apart with his knees.

She was trying to get her balance but they were now running the show. Lima swiped the head of his cock through her juices before lining up and spearing her pussy.

With the tingles of her last orgasm still fluttering through her, she let out a gasp of pleasure. Quack shoved his cock into her open mouth, deep, filling her and almost making her gag.

"Okay, baby. You wanted us, you got us," Quack rumbled, his tone deep and charged with passion. "We're going to give you what you want, as much as you want. Fight it out or fuck it out, either way. There's nothing you can throw at us that we can't handle. So settle in and let him fuck everything out of your brain except how much you want our cocks inside you."

His words and tone made her moan again, from deep within her, relief filling her. Lima dug his fingers in, nudging her knees even farther apart to get her hips exactly at the height he wanted them. "Fuck yourself against me, baby," he ordered. "Show me how bad you want it."

She did, her body on autopilot as his hard, deep thrusts started her up the mountain again. It took longer, and she felt Lima having to slow down a few times to hold back, but eventually he coaxed a third, smaller orgasm out of her like that.

The fact he'd done it only with his cock made her moan that much louder around Quack's cock.

He'd let go of her hair in lieu of cradling her face in his hands, strong fingers curled around the back of her skull and his cock fucking her mouth in time with Lima's strokes. She used her tongue on him, trying to get him off, teased by the salty tang of pre-cum on her tongue, but he chuckled.

"Oh, no, baby. I'm holding back. This load's going in that sweet pussy of yours, too, after he's done."

Lima sped up his pace once he knew she'd finished coming, until he finally plowed her cunt deep and hard, his cock throbbing inside her as his balls emptied their load.

Lima braced himself against the mattress. "There's one, baby." He grabbed her hair and pulled her off Quack's cock, then switched places with the other man.

"Open, baby. Nothing you haven't tasted before. I love the taste of your pussy."

She engulfed his spent cock with her mouth, tasting his juices and hers mixed together as she sucked on it.

He let out a hiss. "That's it, baby. Maybe you can have seconds if I can get it up again."

Quack didn't waste any time. He buried his cock inside her, no preamble, and started fucking her hard and fast.

"We fuck that fight out of you yet, baby?" Quack asked. "Or you want to go another round with us? We can do this as long as you need to."

She couldn't think—which was not only a good thing, it was the whole point. She let out a soft whimper around Lima's cock.

He eased his grip on her hair, tenderly gathering it all into one hand and stroking her cheek with his other. "I think she got what she needed."

Quack stopped moving. "Oh, good. Then I can do this for her." He reached around her hips and found her swollen clit and started playing with it.

With his cock embedded in her pussy, it felt damn good.

"Oh, yeah," Quack said. "She wants one more. Don't you?"

She hoped they understood her whine was an affirmative.

Lima's cock only reached about half-mast before he said, "No offense to you, baby, but I think I only have one in me right now. But you keep that mouth of yours busy. It still feels good."

She rested her head against his thigh as she sucked and licked his member, glad she could make all the noise she wanted with it to muffle the sounds.

Quack shifted position a little as he thrust forward, working his cock deeper inside her. “There, that’s even better, isn’t it?” he asked as he continued frigging her with his hand.

All she could do was moan in reply.

“The first ones were for you,” Quack said. “This one you’re going to give us, it’s ours, because we want to hear you moan. You aren’t alone, baby. You’re ours, and we plan on taking care of you, however you need us to take care of you. You need to fight, you fight us. You need to cuddle, that’s us, too. You need to scream and cry and fuck like a horny madwoman, you have us. Nothing you can show us will run us off unless you tell us you want us gone. Got it?”

Then he leaned forward and bit the back of her shoulder.

It triggered her release, the sweet pain and the sharp pleasure, everything mixing together and stirring her mind until all she could focus on was them.

“There’s our girl,” Lima cooed. “Enjoy that bliss. Soak it up.”

She started fucking herself back onto Quack’s cock, wanting it hard, fast, deep, but he wouldn’t start moving until he was sure she’d completely crested and finished with her orgasm.

Only then did he sit up and grab her by the waist. “Okay, my turn.” It only took him a few strokes until he finished, adding his load to her pussy.

Lima made her let go of his cock while Quack, keeping his cock inside her, hooked an arm around her and rolled them to their sides, facing Lima. Lima stretched out in front of her, their bodies pinning her in place between them.

It was the best feeling in the world. Anchors amongst the insanity.

Lima kissed her. “Okay, go back to sleep. You need another round when we get up in the morning, we’ll give it to you. We’ll give you everything that’s in our power to give you, whatever it is you need to make it better.”

That sounded good to her, and she let blissful darkness take her away again.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jerald didn't look happy when he entered Silo's office.

Silo automatically assumed he shouldn't look happy, either. "What happened?"

"Well, a slight hitch, sir, but only a minor one."

Silo waved at him to continue.

"One of the volunteers...escaped before he was sent out."

"What?"

"It's all right. He's dead. He was shot."

Silo closed his eyes and took off his glasses so he could pinch the bridge of his nose. "Start over."

Jerald told the story of the man leaving the facility a few hours before he was supposed to be sent out on his mission.

He'd gone to talk with someone they suspected was his sister. But then they'd been attacked by someone who apparently had intended to shoot the sister.

"So he died from the gunshot?"

"Yes, sir. He didn't have any ID on him, of course. I followed up with contacts who said no witnesses identified him, so he was immediately cremated once it was determined he had Kite. The police know who killed him, because that man was also killed, by someone else."

"So who the hel—heck shot the other guy?"

"That we don't know. The woman left with them. Our people think it might have been gang-related."

"But we don't know?"

"No, sir."

Silo chewed on the inside of his lip. "Has anyone come to the facility asking questions about this incident?" He didn't want to scuttle the whole operation just because of coincidental gang activity.

"No, sir. Nobody."

"What about the incident at the facility the other day? The shooting?"

"The police say it likely was a gang incident as well. They've had increased activity in the area. Since no one was injured, and it was only property damage, they haven't pursued any other inquiries with the facility. They're overworked with the ongoing riots."

"That's about the only damn piece of luck we've got. Has anyone else shown up infected with Kite as a result of this incident?"

"No, sir."

"I'm sure you have an opinion on what to do next."

"I say we do nothing. We don't confiscate the payment, obviously. That might lead to more questions if someone in the family objects. It's too soon to get feedback yet on the people we sent out. We won't start seeing results for a week or so, at least. I say we release the extra staff who have been promised stronghold positions. Allow them to advance to their next posts. Wait a few days until we're sure everything has calmed down, finish...disposing of the remaining...materials, and then close down the facility and burn the building. Claim it must have been related to the gang activity, or the riots even. Then restart operations in another facility."

"Do we *have* another facility?"

"There is the lab we are constructing in St. Louis. It's not quite complete yet, not fully operational, but I'm sure we can move the samples and personnel there and have them pick up where they left off in their research in a matter of weeks. We wouldn't want to run another Preachsearch operation from there, of course, but we can easily set that up somewhere else, anywhere, and bring the...supplies in as needed from off-site."

"In other words, you're saying you think if we do anything else right now, it'll draw unwanted attention to the LA facility?"

"Yes, sir."

Silo leaned back and considered it. Jerald had a valid point. "You don't feel it's worth following up with the sister?"

"I don't even know for sure she's still alive, sir. I did a little checking and, if it was his sister, apparently she didn't show up for work for two of her shifts without contacting them, so they fired her. If she is alive, she might just take the money and...well, run. I did not have anyone try to contact her at her home for fear of this all being connected back to the facility."

"And you've thought about every possibility here?"

"Well, in this case, apparently I hadn't. I will definitely improve program security in the future. We didn't want the volunteers or our staff to be suspicious if we locked people in and refused to let them come and go. We certainly didn't want to

risk drawing unwanted questions by using armed security. We thought for sure a combination of being in a strange location, economic factors, and the Kite drug would keep them from leaving for long. Perhaps if the man hadn't been local, it wouldn't have been an issue. In the future, we'll come up with a reason why they can't leave. Perhaps tell them the surrounding area is crime-ridden, and that they're locked in for their protection. Or that the medications we're testing on them means we need to limit their exposure to outside germs so it doesn't skew the research results. I don't know. If we up the Kite dosage a little, or mix in other drugs, it'll make them even more pliable and they'll likely believe it without question."

Time for a little bit of the stick. "I'm highly disturbed by this development. You realize that, don't you? And I'm very disappointed in the lack of foresight used in this instance."

"Yes, sir. I'm disturbed myself. I thought the location we'd picked would be secure enough for the duration of the project, but apparently I was wrong. I take full responsibility for what happened."

Another thing he liked about Jerald, he admitted when he screwed up. He owned it.

And now time for the carrot. "Jerald, you do an amazing job as it is. I cannot expect perfection from you when I cannot deliver it myself. Let's do better with the next phase, right?"

The man looked relieved. *Good.* He never wanted to come down so hard on Jerald that the man rebelled and broke free. Silo kept a lot of velvet glove padding the iron fist when it came to handling Jerald.

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Carry on then, son. Let's get out there and do God's work."

"Amen, sir."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Stacia felt like she'd had her body and soul run through a woodchipper the next morning. She slipped out of bed without waking the two men and carried the clothes she'd been given out to the bathroom, where she cleaned herself up and got dressed. The slightly baggy women's panties and oversized men's jeans would have to do. She'd worn worse in her life. She had to roll the cuffs up on the jeans, but that was okay. The belt would at least keep them up around her hips. The sneakers Clara had given her fit perfectly and felt comfortable. And they'd included a new surgical mask.

When she reached the lookout at the main downstairs door, he gave her a nod. She thought his name was Niner.

"Leaving alone?" he asked.

"I didn't want to wake them. I have to get home and check on my aunt. Do you have any change on you for the bus?"

"Someone can drive you."

"No, I need to be alone for a little bit. It's okay. And my bus pass..." She didn't want to think about that. "I'll pay you back."

He carefully eyed her, maybe gauging if she was really as okay as she said she was, but he dug into his pocket and came up with not only change, but a couple of bills, too. He made her take all of it, pressing it into her palm and closing her fingers around it.

"Thanks."

He wouldn't let go of her hands. It didn't feel sexual at all, it felt...brotherly. "And no, you *won't* pay me back, because you're one of us. You'd do the same for me."

If she didn't get moving, she was going to start thinking, remembering.

And that would lead to crying. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Come back soon, Ak. And be safe." He gently squeezed her hands before releasing her.

She wanted to burst out in maniacal, hysterical laughter at the code name.

She didn't feel like someone who could kick ass and help save the world.

Hell, she couldn't even save her own damn brother, who ironically, had died because of someone holding a grudge against her.

He'd died *protecting* her. Being a big brother for her. Finally, his last act on the face of this earth had been to step up and take care of her.

And he'd paid the ultimate price.

Well, he would have died anyway since he was infected with Kite. Or been better off dead on the long-shot chance he had not died from the disease.

And he nearly took her and Quack with him in the process, but he hadn't known that.

She wouldn't hold that against him, and she damn sure wouldn't let that taint her memory of the intention of his final act.

He'd died as her big brother. The big brother she'd always wanted him to be.

Acting like a man. Stepping up.

How am I going to tell Aunt Darla?

Worse, what if she and Quack had not escaped infection? What if she'd caught it and died, and then Aunt Darla would have been left alone and never known what happened to her or Marvin? Well, Lima would have told her, but who would have cared for her?

She pulled her surgical mask up over her nose and mouth and walked to the closest bus stop. She was physically and emotionally too gutted to walk the entire way, even though she knew she could make it in probably forty minutes if she beat feet. Even the argument of saving herself the cost of the bus fare wasn't enough for her to overcome her exhaustion.

She supposed her job was moot at that point. After missing two days of work without notice, Billy had probably given her position away to someone else.

Now I'll have to go find another fucking job.

She drew in a deep, ragged sigh that almost turned into a sob. She didn't want to start crying. Not then. Not on the street. If she did, she'd be thinking about Marvin, about his dying words to her.

And about how she felt she'd failed him as a sister in the end.

She'd have to grieve Marvin, yes. But right now, she had to go home, get to Aunt Darla. It was six o'clock in the morning and the busses were already running in this part of the city. It was a Saturday, so her aunt should be home when she got there.

Fortunately, the bus stop was on the other side of the apartment building, so she didn't even have to look at the park.

By the time Stacia made it upstairs to the apartment, it was a quarter 'til seven. She quietly let herself in so as not to

wake up her aunt. She would be awake and moving around by eight, usually.

No use ruining her sleep over bad news she can't change.

Besides, it'd give her time to compose herself and figure out how to break it to the woman.

Stacia took a shower and grabbed some clean clothes out of the dryer to put on. She'd wash the loaned clothes and return them later.

The shoes would be a shame to give up, but she'd pick up some thrift store ones to get her by. She still had an old pair of sneakers in her room that she could make do with until then. A few turns of duct tape around the right one would keep the sole from flapping off at the toe.

It would get her by.

But by eight thirty, her aunt hadn't emerged from their bedroom, and Stacia had heard no sounds from the room. Slowly, she cracked open the door and realized both beds were empty and neatly made.

Huh.

There wasn't a note from her on the table, or on the counter, that she was working. She always left a note if she worked a weekend shift.

The notepad and pen lay in their usual place.

An uneasy tingling crept into her gut, eventually coalescing at the base of her spine, much in the same way it had that first day she'd followed Marvin—

She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the sob.

She didn't want to lose it. *She* was the strong one, the dependable one.

She *had* to be.

Especially now.

She washed her face in the kitchen sink and patted her skin dry with a dish towel.

Still, the nasty tingle wouldn't go away. She turned to face Marvin's bedroom door, and that was when she realized it stood slightly ajar.

It hadn't been that way the last time she'd been home.

Stacia's feet moved forward before she realized her brain had issued the command. She didn't want to do this, she knew it, but couldn't stop herself from reaching for the door and pushing it open with her fingertips.

In Marvin's bed lay Aunt Darla. Despite the peaceful look on her face, Stacia knew she wasn't sleeping.

Maybe *because* of the peaceful look on her face. Even in sleep, their aunt had suffered from the agony of her arthritis, her face pinched and lines deeply etched there.

On the bedside table sat an empty medicine bottle, a nearly empty glass of water, a large, sealed manila envelope, and a note written in her aunt's spidery hand. She'd added the time and date at the top. She'd written the note Friday evening, around eight o'clock.

That would have been a few hours after...

Swallowing hard, Stacia picked up the note and started reading.

My dear, sweet Stacia,

Imagine my utter shock when I logged into my bank account this morning during a break at work and found an extra one-hundred thousand dollars there! My goodness, I thought certainly the bank had made a mistake. I even called them, but no, they said it was a wire deposit, named to Marvin.

I suppose this time he was right. He called me last night and sounded odd, rambled on, but kept saying we'd be taken care of financially.

When I got home from work, Ed Escoletto from down the hall was waiting for me. He told me he saw what happened in the park. Everything. Including that you were exposed and you left with some men who you seemed to know. I'm guessing they're your new friends you mentioned. He said he watched and the police questioned people. But they told Ed there wasn't any ID on Marvin's body. Ed said he told the police he didn't know who Marvin was. He worried that they might come take me in if he identified Marvin. He said he knew if I'd been at work I was clear because we test every day.

I hope you get this. I hope to a god I don't even believe in anymore that you didn't catch that horrible disease from your brother. If you're reading this, I suppose you're clear.

I hope so.

I pray so.

I have a confession to make. I haven't been running out of pills every month. I've been saving them up. I kept them hidden from you both. It's taken me a couple of years to fill a bottle completely. I don't know how many are in there, but I'm sure it's over a hundred.

I hope it's enough.

If I'm still breathing when you find this, please close the door and walk away and come back later. Let me end this now. The only reason I hung on for so long was Marvin. I knew years ago you would be okay. I don't mean that to sound cruel, or harsh. It's not that I loved you less than him. But I knew you could take care of yourself if something happened to me.

I am so proud of you. And I love you so, so much. And it's okay, because I know you love me, too. Don't feel you left anything unsaid to me, because you haven't. I adore you and hope you will be able to go on and do great things in your life with this money. Years ago, I'd put you both on all my accounts as my beneficiaries. You will inherit the apartment at its current rate. You will get my benefit payments, my life insurance, which isn't much but still, it's more than we had before. You can already access the bank account. My wedding ring is in my purse. Please, take it. Sell it if you want. Or hold on to it if you feel nostalgic. Either is fine with me.

Have me cremated, please. Scatter my ashes in the Pacific Ocean if you can. It's where I scattered Tom when I got his ashes back. Together, he and I will forever be part of the waters.

That's a comforting thought.

Now no more tears. Call the undertaker and have them come for me and please, please live your life. Be happy. Smile. Take risks. You have the freedom to do that now, before it weighs too heavily on you. And no telling how long you might have if Kite has its way. So enjoy your life. Make every day one you're proud of.

I love you. Remember, I'm out of pain now. I've had arthritis since my late twenties. That's over forty years of suffering.

I've had enough. I have no more fight in me, and now I don't need to keep fighting.

Love you, sweetheart.

Darla.

Stacia closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. In and out, trying to keep the choking sobs quiet and from turning into agonized screams of grief that would alert the whole building.

The room spun. She dropped to her knees and curled up in a ball, still heaving huge gusts of air in and out of her lungs as the grief threatened to take her.

Not both of them.

Please, not both of them.

Marvin had not been the world's best brother, but he hadn't been the worst, either. He'd been able to coax a smile from her during times when no one else could. He could be infuriating, but she knew he loved her and Aunt Darla.

And now the only other family she had in the world was gone.

Alone.

She didn't know how long she lay there, curled up, when she heard the knock on the front door. When she didn't answer, whoever it was repeated it, and again, calling out her name.

Two voices.

Quack and Lima.

Unsteadily, she pushed herself to her feet and aimed for the bedroom door, the note still clutched in her hand. She ended up needing to brace one hand on the wall to keep from collapsing.

The men were pounding on the front door by the time she finally reached it and snapped the deadbolt open. Then they rushed in, their expressions turning furious when they got a look at her.

"What happened?" Quack demanded, on full alert. "Are you all right?"

Lima protectively pulled her into his arms and that was when she shoved the letter at Quack.

He took it, closing and locking the front door behind them, as he scanned the note.

His expression immediately softened. "Oh, sweetie. I'm so sorry. Is she..."

She closed her eyes, nodding, unable to say it.

She couldn't.

Could *not*.

"Where?"

She waved her hand toward the bedrooms and began sobbing against Lima's chest.

"What?" Lima quietly asked Quack.

She heard the paper exchange hands and then Quack's footsteps as he walked over to the bedroom.

Then his sharp intake of breath.

Followed by Lima's.

Make it better, make it better, please make it better...

She chanted it over and over in her mind.

She didn't realize she was saying it out loud until she felt Quack rejoin them, his body gently cradling hers, both of them, their arms around her.

"We can't make this better, sweetheart," Quack sadly said. "I'm so, so sorry. We wish we could. All we can do is help you through it. I promise, even if it doesn't feel like it right now, it does get easier. I swear. And we won't leave your side."

Lima pressed his lips against the top of her head. His breath felt warm against her scalp. "We will *not* leave you alone, baby. We promise. You'll come with us."

At some point she realized she was lying on the couch, her head in Lima's lap, and she heard the sound of Quack talking on the phone.

Then at some other point, a knock on the door, and Quack opening it, talking to a couple of men who brought something inside.

Then Quack knelt next to the sofa, stroking her forehead. "Do you want to say good-bye to her?"

She nodded.

The men tenderly helped her up. She refused to open her eyes, to look, until they had her standing next to the stretcher.

Her aunt looked peaceful. Calm.

Content.

Happy.

Leaning in, Stacia kissed her forehead and gently stroked her brow. "I love you. Thank you for taking care of us all these years. Thank you for being a mom to us. Thank you for loving us. I will never forget you."

Then she stepped back and the world went black.

* * * *

When Stacia opened her eyes, she thought maybe she'd dozed off for a nap and had a horrible nightmare. She was lying in her bed, fully clothed, with a comfortable, Quack-sized and Quack-scented body spooning her.

His arms were wrapped around her, his hands clasping hers.

Out in the apartment she heard the washer and dryer both going.

He nuzzled the back of her head. "Hey."

She didn't speak. If she didn't speak, she could maintain this illusion, this blessedly grief-free bubble of momentary sanity, that all was well with the world around her.

That her family was alive.

Delicious aromas wafted into the bedroom. Her stomach angrily growled in response and she realized it'd been at least twelve hours since she'd eaten. Maybe longer.

"Lima's making dinner," he softly said, nuzzling the nape of her neck again.

Not sexily, not looking for nookie.

Gently, tenderly.

Lovingly.

She drew in a hitching breath.

She rolled to face him, burying her head against his chest. Maybe if she tried hard enough, he could swallow her whole and she could quit *feeling*.

Maybe then it would go away. All of it.

"You need to eat," he said. "You're going to get sick if you don't. Your body is telling you it needs fuel."

She didn't reply.

Eventually, he tipped her face up to his and waited until she finally opened her eyes and looked into his. The little flecks of gold in his brown eyes looked subdued in this light, almost amber.

"We love you," he said. "You are *not* alone."

"When you leave—"

"You leave with us."

It wasn't a question.

It was a statement of fact.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You've got a natural knack for mechanics. We'll find some books and load them on a tablet for you and you can read and learn and work on anything we need worked on. We'll teach you everything we know about surviving. And we will be

your family.”

“Papa isn’t going to want another person to drag around.”

“You don’t understand, *he* will be your family, too. Everyone. You will be part of us. And you will never be alone again.”

“What about Kite?”

“We’ll face it together. Either we’ll fix it, or it’ll get us all at once. The only thing I’m frightened of is walking out that door and you not being with us when we do.”

She heard the bedroom door open, and a blast of the previously wafting aroma engulfed her like a tsunami.

Her stomach growled again in response.

Lima walked over and sat next to her on the bed, capturing one of her hands and bringing it to his lips to kiss it. “Hey, dinner’s ready. You have to eat.”

Despite her stomach’s protests to the contrary, she shook her head. “I can’t,” she whispered.

“You can,” he gently said, “if we have to sit here all night spoon-feeding you. And don’t think we won’t do it.” He gave her a little smile.

She couldn’t smile, didn’t know if she’d ever smile again, but eventually she nodded.

“Good girl.” He kissed her hand again and stood, holding on to her and coaxing her up. Between him and Quack, they got her out of the bedroom and into a chair at the table.

He’d made a thick stew, with chunks of beef in it.

“Where’d you get beef?” she asked.

“The store.”

“How long was I out?”

“As long as you needed to be,” Lima said. “We didn’t leave you alone, either. One or both of us was always with you. Your body and mind needed to shut down for a little while. It’s okay. You obviously needed a system reboot.” He smiled a little.

She nodded.

His smile faded. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “I mean it. You’re not alone. Alone is the last thing you ever will be again. Now eat.”

With a sigh, she picked up her spoon.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The men helped Stacia pack a couple of bags of things to take with them back to their safe house for the night. They would return with her in a day or two to help her sort the rest and decide what to do.

She sat between them in the truck on the ride back, silent, numb. Quack was driving.

Losing Marvin had felt like getting gutted with a dull butter knife.

Losing Aunt Darla hurt, but more like an amputation with full anesthesia. Part of her was missing and she felt the ache of the phantom limb and probably always would.

Could she ever recover from either loss?

“What do we do now?” she asked.

Lima answered. “We’re trying to find the next doctor—”

She firmly shook her head. “I want to blow that building up. You said two of your guys can blow shit up, right? Let’s go do it.”

“Eh, logistics, babe,” Quack said. “We kind of need a plan.”

“I’ll tell you what the farking plan is,” she said. “We walk in there and blow it the fark up.”

Lima waved his hand. “Oh, sure, when you say it like *that*.”

“We can’t stop the people who’ve already been sent out. Marvin said they were supposedly flying him out that night. But we can stop them from doing it to more people. At this facility, at least.”

Quack coughed. “Um, about that.”

“What?”

“The volunteers. Bubba sicced Arliss on it after he finally broke the encryption and pulled the itineraries from the computer system yesterday afternoon. Arliss commandeered two other SOTIF teams who were on-continent. They split up fanned out, and got them. All but one of the people who were sent out were captured and killed just after arriving at the airports. Bubba had tail and transponder numbers for the planes. The people literally didn’t know what hit them.”

“What about the one they didn’t get?”

“It was a volunteer from the first batch sent out, and the team didn’t get there in time. She got away, but they got the other members of that group.”

“She?”

“Korey. Isn’t that the chick you said your brother—”

“Yeah.” She closed her eyes, trying not to hear the naive woman’s Kentucky twang in her mind. “Where?”

“Seattle. They’ve got the remainders of the two teams en route to search for her based on the training info Bubba decoded. But overall, that’s a pretty damn good success rate.”

“But not for Seattle, if she spreads it around.”

“Maybe she will, maybe not. On the plus side, they’re having a chilly, wet spring. It’s harder for the virus to spread in those conditions.”

“Not if it’s direct-injected. And we’re coming up on summer.”

“True. But incidental contact, at least, will be more difficult.”

“Why can’t they put out alerts or something about her?”

“Because they don’t want the public to panic, for starters. Also, we don’t want to alert Silo that we’re onto his operation. He’s liable to scuttle everything before we can recover evidence.”

“I still want to blow the fucking place up.”

“Alrighty, then,” Quack said. “We’ll see what we can arrange for you. We happen to know a couple of guys.”

Lima draped an arm around her and snuggled her close, kissing the top of her head. “Our baby wants big boom, then our baby gets big boom.”

* * * *

When they returned to the safe house, Lima gathered everyone around to tell them what happened with Stacia’s aunt. Stacia sat and listened, still emotionally numb in some ways.

And ragged and raw in others.

“I’m sorry about your aunt,” Papa said. “She sounds like she was a remarkable woman.”

“Thank you. She was.” She tried not to break down crying. She was supposed to be Ak. An ass-kicker. Not some fucking wussy little whiner.

Digging her nails into her palms, she sat there and focused on breathing as Lima and Quack took over the discussion.

Papa agreed. "Based on what Bubba has found out about their plan, that place needs to be erased ASAP. In the final batch of files Bubba decrypted, he also found the security badge files for the workers, which included pictures. None of the people they have listed match what we have for the people on The List, but they'll get us access to the lab part of the facility."

"You sure?" Quack asked. "Fake names, maybe?"

"I had Q and Sin personally look at the files to make sure. They're willing to swear none of the badge pictures of the people they saw looked anything like the people they spent a couple of years locked up with in a lab in North Korea. Disguised or not."

"We are sure," Q said. "But we must search that lab first. Their research notes indicated they were close to formulating a vaccine. I do not want us to lose valuable samples we might need."

"I can make you swipe badges from the files Bubba got," Lima said. "Won't have pictures, but you won't need them. All we need is a few minutes to get in there so Q and Sin can play scavenger hunt, and then Yankee and Oscar can do their thing."

"What do we do about any personnel we come across?" Quack asked.

"Use extreme prejudice," Papa said.

That was the short way of saying that no one but their own people made it out of the building alive, regardless of who they were, civvies or volunteers or whatever.

No witnesses.

"Okay then," Yankee said. "So we're clear to blow that fucking place up?"

"I want to blow it up," Stacia quietly said.

Everyone stared at her, then looked at Papa.

He slowly nodded. "Gentlemen, it's time for us to make a plan. And we need to do so quickly, because we want that place to be little more than smoking ashes come tomorrow morning."

* * * *

Stacia didn't give a fark about their plan. All she wanted to do was avenge her brother. And her aunt, because had Marvin not died, her aunt wouldn't have killed herself.

She stayed out of the men's way and did what they told her to do. When they were ready to leave an hour later, it was close to sundown. Two of the men stayed behind at the safe house with Clara and Pandora. A caravan of several vehicles headed to the facility, each taking a different route. She rode in a car with Quack, an old Toyota solar job that looked like it was overdue for a date with a scrapyard, but was still running.

She didn't see what vehicle the others were in.

"Is Lima going to be okay?" she asked.

He reached over and patted her on the leg. "They'll all be okay," he said. Lima was needed inside the building in case they ran into any problems accessing the lab through the security system.

Quack pulled over and parked on the street several blocks away. "Why are we stopping here?" she asked.

"Because this is as close as you get right now." He turned his head toward her so she could see he had an earpiece in his left ear. "I'm hooked in. My job is to keep you safe and out of harm's way. When it's time for the boom, they'll let me know. You won't miss it." He reached over and laced his fingers through hers. "This won't bring them back," he gently said.

"I know," she told him. "But it'll make me feel a little better for a few seconds."

He squeezed her hand and settled in to wait.

A couple of times, she heard him speak out loud in response to something on the radio, usually a clipped reply, like, "Roger roger," or, "Clear."

He held her hand through the long wait.

Finally, nearly thirty minutes later, he released her hand and started the car again. "Okay, baby. It's time. You do *not* leave this car, you hear me?"

She nodded.

He pulled out onto the street and sped up, sliding around a corner. He pulled a small one-button remote out of his shirt pocket and handed it to her. "Do not push that button until I say so, okay?"

"Yeah."

He picked up a side street that ran behind the church, heading toward the apartment building. She stared at the button in her hand as he floored the car, straining the solar engine as he coaxed it up to over seventy on the quiet street.

They were approaching, nearing, coming up on the facility. She held her breath as they passed the building.

"Now," he said.

She hit the button. Turning to look, she heard the blast as a brilliant orange fireball erupted into the evening sky behind them.

He braked hard, drifting around a corner before flooring it again, taking them away from the area.

“Good enough boom?” he asked.

She turned and faced front again, nodding as she closed her eyes, the negative image of the fireball fading behind her eyelids. “Yeah. Good enough. Thank you.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Once everyone safely returned from the mission that night and Papa had debriefed them, Quack and Lima led Stacie upstairs to their new room on the second floor. The men had acquired a queen-sized mattress and tucked it into the far corner opposite the room's windows and away from the door. With the blinds closed, the light filtering in from street lights outside was dim, enough to see by, soothing and not jarring.

Standing next to the mattress, they slowly, silently undressed her, kissing and caressing every inch of her flesh with each piece of clothing they removed. Including kneeling on either side of her and stroking her legs, taking their time.

Making her feel loved. Needed.

Wanted.

Cherished.

They hadn't even undressed yet, their focus on her.

She turned and tugged on their hands. "Come on," she whispered before sitting down on the mattress.

The concern in their eyes nearly started her crying, but she felt like she'd done more than enough of that over the past few days.

She wanted to move forward. Never look back. Not forget her aunt and her brother, but to hold their memories, the good ones, safe in a protected shrine in her heart.

From this point on in her life, she needed to devote every ounce of energy she had, every bit of strength, to taking down Silo for good. To helping the Drunk Monkeys find as many of the people from The List as possible. Laugh in the face of failure snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Kick.

Farking.

Ass.

To do anything else wouldn't honor the memory of Marvin and her aunt. It would mean their lives meant nothing.

She lay back and pointed her index fingers at them both, circling them, indicating she wanted them naked.

They stood and silently stripped, lying next to her on the bed.

When it looked like Quack was going to speak, she laid a finger over his lips. "No talky," she said. "Not tonight. Not right now. Please?"

He kissed her finger. "Love you," he whispered, a smile curling his lips.

"I love you, too." She looked over at Lima.

"Love you, baby," he whispered.

She finally smiled. "Love you, too."

Quack kissed his way down her body, between her legs. In no rush he took his time, licking and nuzzling, stroking her flesh, exploring. She was glad she'd let Clara put the five-year in her. It meant no condoms to worry about unless they were doing anal.

And she fully intended to do more of *that* with them. There was nothing comparable to the rush she felt with both of them embedded in her at the same time.

Lima cradled her in his arms while Quack nestled his face in her pussy and started working on her clit with his lips and tongue and fingers until the world melted away and he took her to that sweet place where her mind gave over everything else to pleasure.

She let him pull two orgasms out of her before she crooked a finger at him. "Hard and fast," she said. When he started to make a face like he might be about to question her, she shushed him and reached for his cock.

Quack filled her, slowly at first until he was completely embedded inside her. She held on to him, her fingers digging into his back. Looking into her eyes, he started moving, just like she'd asked, hard and fast, a pounding, frenetic fuck that drove her out of her head one more time and made her come. When she did she raked her nails down his back, her cry of pleasure and pain and rage and rapture all mixing and flowing and ebbing until his lips were on hers and making it all go away again.

Desperately, she clutched at Quack, not wanting him to pull out yet, not wanting to lose that contact with him. Lima had his body curled around hers, her head nestled in the crook of his arm while he stroked her hair.

Only when she felt stable again did she finally let go of Quack. She turned her head and kissed Lima. "You, too," she said. "Pound that cock into me."

The men switched places. Lima slid into her and she grabbed him and held on tight.

He didn't disappoint. His cock slid across her clit as he started fucking her, slowly at first until he picked up the pace once he was sure she was okay. When he kicked the fucking into overdrive, she felt the climb start again, gentler than when

they made her come with their mouths, but even sweeter because of it. He held off until she let out a cry that turned into a sob, digging her nails into his flesh the way she had with Quack. He came hard, gasping for air as his balls emptied into her cunt. And then her tears came. She held on to him as he rolled them onto their sides so Quack could spoon her from behind. They didn't try to soothe her. They didn't try to tell her it was okay. They knew. They knew it wasn't okay, that *she* wasn't okay, not now, and maybe not ever again. But she would rebuild herself, with them and their love to hold her, and find a new center of stability. It wouldn't be tomorrow. It would happen, though. As long as Kite or the goddamned assholes who killed her brother didn't get them all first. And she didn't consider Marco to be the one who murdered her brother. It was that damn Reverend Silo and his asshats in that program. They stole her brother from her. They infected him with Kite, and then he died. The bullet was irrelevant, it just sped up the inevitable. If Silo's people hadn't suckered Marvin into volunteering, the two of them never would have been standing there in the park. Marco might have tried coming after her, but Marvin would have been okay. And Aunt Darla would still be alive. She took in a deep, shuddering breath and let it out again. Quack's lips felt warm against the base of her neck. "I love you two so much," she whispered. "I can't do this alone." They both hugged her. "We love you, too," Quack said. "And you are *not* alone. Not ever again." "We will love you forever," Lima said. "And we will not leave you." She didn't open her eyes. She wanted to just lie there and soak up the warmth from their bodies, the scent of their lovemaking all mixed up together. She wanted to just be. With them. Like this. Until they had to get up and kick ass again, at least.

* * * *

The next afternoon, Stacia was sitting in the common room at a table with Clara and Pandora, watching the news on TV. She'd made a final run to the apartment with her men earlier to get the last of the things she wanted and clean out the fridge. She'd set the rent and utilities up to auto-pay from the bank account so they'd have the apartment as an emergency safe house if they needed it. The money was irrelevant to her now. If she needed more, Papa would give her more. It was more important to take precautions so they were all safe. *How quickly priorities change.* A few weeks ago, she would have been ecstatic to know her money troubles were over. Now, money was the least of her concerns. The commander walked into the common room, his tablet in his hand. "Bubba came through for us. He's triangulated the latest signals and thinks he knows approximately where Dr. Perkins is." "Does this mean we're staying in LA for now?" Quack asked Papa. He shut the tablet off. "Yep. We're this close to finding her. We can't give up now." "Do you think Reverend Silo is going to come after us for blowing up his building?" Stacia asked. Clara snorted. "Bet your ass. One way or another, that fucker will be totally pissed off. We took away his toy and fucked up his fun. Expect a tantrum to follow." "If he even puts it together that it was us," Papa said. "Who knows? He was careful enough to make sure the facility couldn't be tracked back to him or the church on paper. Even the planes the volunteers were moved on were rented by a shell company with overseas accounts. All we have is our gut instincts that it was him and his church behind it." "Can you teach me how to do that castration thing?" Stacia asked Clara. The nurse grinned. "Seriously?" "Yeah." Clenching her teeth, she added, "Because I want to be the one to do that to Silo when we take his ass to the fucking ground." "Yeah, she gets dibs on Silo," Lima said. "We need to get proof on Silo first," Papa said. "But yes, duly noted. If there's a way to do it, I agree that Ak should get the honors, if possible." "Thanks." Stacia knew it wouldn't bring Marvin back.

But it sure as hell would help her sleep a little better at night, though.

Love you, bro.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Alone, Silo trudged up the stairs leading from his penthouse office to the top of the building. Standing there, he could turn and take in a gorgeous, panoramic view of Albuquerque. In the early summer temperatures, he watched heat shimmers distort the landscape, a tantalizingly close representation of what was there, but just a little out of reach.

Not unlike what seemed to be happening to him every time he thought they were drawing close to either getting their hands on people from The List, or making their own progress to develop a vaccine.

Raising his head to the sky, he released a pent-up howl of rage, frustration, all the filth he'd swallowed back over the past several days as their plans to spread the Kite virus and drug, and come up with their own vaccine, were not just unraveled, but the strands sliced cleanly through and so thoroughly that there was no way they could restart the Preachsearch project at that time.

Maybe not ever.

He screamed until his vocal cords ached, with his fists balled up and thrust upward to the clear blue sky draped over the landscape. When he finally emptied his lungs and could no longer draw in enough air to scream again, he stood there, staring at the sky.

Tell me what to do, God! If You even exist.

Or *was* there a God? He'd doubted it plenty of times in his life. He hadn't entered religion because he felt a calling for it. He did it for the money, prestige, and power.

The control over people.

No way if there was a God would He have let Silo do some of the things he did.

He was no angel.

He wasn't perfect.

But he'd led countless people toward good, Christian lives. The church's charity projects had done a lot of good for people.

Certainly *that* should give him brownie points, right? Count for something?

Jerald had located security camera pictures from a liquor store just down the street from the facility. In the pictures, it had shown what could only be a small, covert, military-grade operation leaving the LA facility moments before it'd exploded in a fireball. When Jerald went back to the day of the first attack on the facility, he found images of a couple of pedestrians. When run through facial recognition software, a couple of them triggered partial hits on some of the Drunk Monkeys.

It was enough proof for Silo.

While his business was in religion, Silo didn't believe much in random coincidences. Jerald confirmed that it appeared perhaps the Drunk Monkeys had been behind the facility's destruction.

That no one in law enforcement or the press had contacted anyone from the church about the bodies that had been stored in the coolers there and awaiting disposal at cremation facilities, volunteers who'd failed to complete their training and had been euthanized, also pointed to that likelihood. The SOTIF unit wouldn't want anyone putting together their presence with the arson, wouldn't want to draw undue attention toward the facility's true purpose, even if it meant covering up evidence of other crimes in the process.

Even Macaletto was clueless about what had happened, when Jerald finally got in touch with him. Nothing had been mentioned to Macaletto about it via the food chain.

It was as if nothing more than a vacant building had caught fire and burned down.

Unfortunately, taking all their samples and Kite vaccine research with it. They still had off-site backups of the research data, but that was all.

Actually, from the glimpses of what had been spirited from the facility, the Drunk Monkeys likely now had their Kite samples and research.

Silo finally made his way back down to his office where Jerald still waited for him. If his assistant knew what he'd just done, he made no mention of it.

"Yes?" Silo finally asked when he was seated behind his desk once more. He felt weary, through to his bones. "What else? I thought we were done."

Weariness. Exhaustion. Those were not feelings he was used to having, not without the accompanying satisfaction of a sermon given so goddamned well that people were willing to tithe their kidneys and all their children in addition to their bank accounts.

Or the satisfaction of having emptied himself into one of Mary's holes.

"I wanted to run an idea past you, sir."

“If it’s to replace the Los Angeles operation, I don’t think we can risk it right now.” The only luck they’d had was that the “mysterious” fire had destroyed all evidence of what they’d really been up to, including any records that might have led to authorities or, worse, the media, figuring it out.

“No, sir, I know that. I was thinking perhaps we need to strike from another direction. Perhaps we need to be in election mode.”

He arched an eyebrow at Jerald. “Just spit it out, son. I’m tired.”

“We wage a propaganda war. Church of the Rising Sunset—good, long history of charitable work, trying to find a vaccine for Kite, trying to protect people. Drunk Monkeys—bad, renegade crazy men the military has lost complete and total control of, borderline traitors who’ve taken the scientists hostage and who knows what they might do with them? Why, it is suspected they are behind the destruction and tragic loss of life at a Los Angeles Kite research facility, although we can’t be sure of it at this time.” He smiled.

Silo leaned back in his chair and considered it for a few minutes. “We would have to go about it carefully. On top of what just happened, we can’t risk people finding out what we were really up to, much less that we were behind it.”

They couldn’t even risk following up on the twenty operatives they’d successfully deployed. No telling how long before they developed active symptoms and could no longer spread the drug and infection. Or someone caught them, tested them, and euthanized them when their Kite infection was discovered.

The only way to follow up would be to carefully monitor health department reports in the areas where the operatives had been deployed.

Three days ago, Silo’s contact at the CDC in Atlanta admitted in a phone call—he refused to put it in writing in an e-mail—that yes, they were secretly euthanizing people testing positive for Kite in New York. The man thought it might be happening elsewhere, but considering the virulent nature of the virus, and the high mortality rate, it was pointless to let victims linger in urban hospitals, wasting resources and possibly infecting others at the same time.

Far better to cull them early, painlessly, with less chances of the victims spreading the virus to others.

“We have plenty of contacts who can help us get the word out,” Jerald said, bringing Silo’s thoughts back to the conversation at hand. “As much as it pains me to say it, we’d have to start slowly, of course. If we slam the networks all at once, they’ll get suspicious. I’ll set up a couple of blog posts that I know will likely get picked up with some of the more legitimate conspiracy theorists. Not the tin-foil-hat people, of course. The ones we’ve fed inside info to in the past, who turned out to be right and gained notoriety as a result. Arrange a couple of phone interviews with lesser-known journalists. As it gains momentum, stage a couple of ambush questions between reporters and politicians, who will deny any knowledge, of course, but will promise to look into it. I’m thinking in a couple of weeks it might build enough energy to take off on its own. It certainly can’t hurt our own cause. We simply don’t let it be tracked back to us, is all.”

Silo let his focus fade again as he stared at a picture on his far wall. It was a large picture of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Fucking popes.

After several moments, he finally nodded. “All right. Let’s do it. At this point, as you said, it certainly can’t hurt. Don’t push things too hard. Let it organically blossom.” They’d successfully used identical tactics to run behind-the-scenes smear campaigns against liberal politicians in especially close elections.

“Excellent. I’ll get started on the planning right away.”

Jerald turned to go. Before he reached the door, Silo stopped him. “Push to get me an appointment with President Kennedy,” he said. “Soon. And privately. We need to follow up with that avenue of access, although I’d really wished I hadn’t needed to use her this early in the process.”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“She owes us. Time for us to call the favor in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once he was alone, Silo closed his eyes and tried to think happy thoughts.

Like big bank balances.

Full tithing plates.

Young, nubile, virginal brides with their asses thoroughly striped by his belt and tears running down their faces.

Aaaand there’s my center of peace restored.

He reached down and adjusted the bulge now pressing against the front of his slacks. Yes, time to push those plans forward now, to complete all the strongholds and make his final choices for his future brides. Once the larger outbreaks started, it might be difficult to get the construction finished.

Soon. He was so close he could feel it. Right on the brink of reaching the summit. He couldn’t give up now. He’d come so far, it would be a waste not to follow through.

It's just a minor monkey wrench in my plans. Nothing I can't overcome. Everything worth working for is worth working for. If I quit when it gets difficult, I don't deserve it.

He felt the smile return to his face. The Drunk Monkeys were running on borrowed time. He hoped wherever they were that they were enjoying themselves.

Because he was going to fuck up their unholy existence.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

It was sunset. To the west, the sun looked like a reddish orange orb as it struggled to pierce the smog and smoke cloaking the Los Angeles area through its descent into the Pacific Ocean.

Stacia stood on the shore, at the high tide line, looking at the abalone shells and seaweed strewn along the shore.

To their left, seagulls dove and squawked over a sea lion carcass that had washed up about fifty yards away.

Lima and Quack stood behind her, each with a hand on her shoulder, ready to catch her if she needed them.

Since picking her aunt's ashes up that morning from the mortuary, Quack paying the undertaker cash to claim the small cardboard box, she'd held it clutched to her chest and didn't speak.

The men had driven her to a place where they could easily climb down to the beach area from the road. There used to be public beaches and seaside houses along this part of the California shoreline, until the last series of great quakes had shaken them into the sea.

She'd waited until sunset, because she'd wanted the memory of her aunt having one pain-free day, even if only vicariously, and being able to watch an ocean sunset. Her men hadn't questioned, hadn't made suggestions. They'd simply been there for her, holding her, guiding her, supporting her.

Loving her.

Stacia didn't know how much longer she had on the earth. She did know she'd spend it with those two men. No way in hell she'd ever let go of them.

Never.

There also wasn't a single doubt in her mind about their feelings for her, or hers for them.

She'd go down fighting alongside them, if necessary.

And hopefully it would be after personally castrating Reverend Hannibal Silo.

It was between wave sets now, the surf gentle and easy. She pulled the lid off the box and unfastened the twist tie holding the plastic bag inside closed. Then she stepped down to the water's edge and carefully tipped the box upside down so the eastern breeze carried the ashes further out into the surf.

The men moved with her, leaving their hands gently resting on her back, reminders they were there for her.

When she finished, she straightened and stared as the waves claimed her aunt's cremains. She closed her eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath of the salt air. It was comforting to think about her aunt, her uncle, her mom, and her dad now all part of the Pacific. She barely remembered the day she and her aunt and Marvin had come to the water and given over her mom's ashes to the Pacific.

She was too young to remember doing it for her father.

They'd stopped by the park next to the apartment building the night before and the men allowed her to quickly scoop a small handful of dirt from the base of the oak tree and put it in a small baggie. She withdrew the baggie from her pocket, opened it, and tipped it upside down so the contents also joined the Pacific.

"I know that's not you, Marvin, but it's from where we had our best times. Take care of them all for me, okay? I promise, I'll try to make this right. Love you, bro."

She stepped back, into the men's arms, letting them hold her with Quack in front of her, her face resting against his chest, and Lima behind her. The breeze blew across and around them, but they were too close together for it to get between them.

"We'll get him, babe," Lima whispered. "We promise."

"I don't just want him dead," she said. "I want him broken first."

"Roger roger," Quack said, kissing the top of her head. "It'll be our pleasure."

When she was ready to leave, Lima took the empty box and carried it for her as they walked, together, hand in hand back toward the trail up to where they'd parked the truck.

When she looked back over her shoulder, the sun was halfway below the horizon and sinking fast.

Tonight she'd let them hold her and love her and distract her mind from her grief and loss.

Tomorrow, she'd set to work learning everything she could to make sure she kept her promise to Marvin.

If it's the last thing I do.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tymber Dalton lives in the Tampa Bay region of Florida with her husband (aka “The World’s Best Husband™”) and too many pets. Active in the BDSM lifestyle, the two-time EPIC winner is also the bestselling author of nearly sixty books including *The Reluctant Dom*, *The Denim Dom*, *Cardinal’s Rule*, the Suncoast Society series, the Love Slave for Two series, the Triple Trouble series, the Coffeeshop Coven series, the Good Will Ghost Hunting series, and many more.

She loves to hear from readers! Please feel free to drop by her website and sign up for updates to keep abreast of the latest news, views, snarkage, and releases. (Don’t forget to look up her writing alter egos Lesli Richardson, Tessa Monroe, and Macy Largo.)

www.tymberdalton.com
www.facebook.com/tymberdalton
www.twitter.com/TymberDalton

For all titles by Tymber Dalton, please visit

www.bookstrand.com/tymber-dalton

***For titles by Tymber Dalton writing as
Tessa Monroe, please visit***

www.bookstrand.com/tessa-monroe

***For titles by Tymber Dalton writing as
Macy Largo, please visit***

www.bookstrand.com/macy-largo

***For titles by Tymber Dalton writing as
Lesli Richardson, please visit***

www.bookstrand.com/lesli-richardson



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com