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Life After War
Adrian's Eagles

Book 2

by

Angela White

Title: Adrian's Eagles

Book 2 of the Life After War series

Edition: 2017

Length: 830 pages

Author: ©Angela White

Publisher: C9 Publications

ISBN#: 978-1-9459-2704-1

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Chapter One

Hook, Line, and Sinker

April 6th

On 34, near Union Center, South Dakota

1

“Do not kill him.”

Cesar’s guerillas had the lone man surrounded before the gold convertible was fully stopped.

Allowing it, Dean’s harsh countenance dared one of them to make the mistake of touching him. He had come to talk, but like a wounded animal, he would kill right now with little provocation. There was no doubt these men had heard everything over the CB and the waves of energy shooting from the witch would have been impossible to miss. The slaver now had his proof of their words.

Cesar considered these things as he strode toward the black man who’d been sitting in the center of the muddy, abandoned site when they pulled in. It was Safe Haven’s latest area and Cesar didn’t like it that the twin knew him well enough to predict where he would show up.

The guerilla leader had been certain both brothers were dead, and from the look of the

grieving man in the cold center of camp, he guessed only one of them had survived the encounter. It served them right for trying to take her alone.

Why would Dean come? Vengeance for his brother? To try to take over his men and attack recklessly? Cesar did not intend to kill the brother if he could avoid it. After viewing and hearing Safe Haven's protectors, he now wanted every deadly hand he could get. There was no doubt that Dean was that and more. Still, Dean had to know who was in charge.

"You should have called uz. We could have taken her from a group that size."

Dean's face was a mask of hatred that Cesar was careful to ignore for the moment. Business came first. There would be time for lessons later.

"We had an opening and took it. They weren't away from the others long enough for you to get there."

José glared at the disrespect, moving closer to his cousin.

Cesar shrugged, stretching tiredly. "The only thing that matters is what you planned to do once you had her."

Dean glowered up from his seat on the muddy ground, not feeling the sting of the cold wind as it swept over them. "Get our share of the pie."

Cesar frowned, unfamiliar with the saying, and the twin blew out a sigh of disgusted contempt.

“Her first orders would have been to destroy that camp. Yours was next if you came for her.”

José drew his pistol and stepped forward, but Cesar laughed and waved his second in command away.

“Yo hermano was the balls, si?”

“Always.”

“Now, maybe you are both.”

Cesar extended a hand that Dean took warily, letting the slaver help him up.

“Come. Let us share a whore in your brother’s honor and I will tell you about the team I sent to get the tank. They are closing in. We will meet Safe Haven in the middle.”

2

Dawn was still an hour away when Angela sat up with a fast jerk, unaware of the men flinching at the movement. Her nightmare had drawn them and they listened, worried.

“It’s coming.”

Marc was the one they turned to and he understood their hesitation when she peered at him with orbs that held no trace of Angela, only her witch.

“He has to talk to the weather woman. She dreams of it. *Beware.*”

Marc shifted restlessly as the wind gusted, shaking the tent. If Angie said something was coming, then it was.

“It’s the nightmares, right?” Seth asked, mind flashing to the beautiful sorceress who had danced through his. “We all have them now.”

“Not always. Sometimes, it’s something more.” Marc turned to Angela. “Is it the slavers?”

“No,” she answered, haze clearing a bit. “He has to talk to Samantha—today.”

Neil and Kyle exchanged glances, both thinking of the man that had come in with Samantha. Rick was being monitored.

“How long?” Marc asked.

“A week? Maybe less.”

The men around them relaxed a little, some of them lying back down.

“We’ll tell him,” Marc assured her. “You want some hot chocolate?”

“Yes.” Becoming aware that she was the center of attention, Angela flushed. “Who’s my shadow?”

Behind her, Neil said, “That would be me.”

She surveyed his narrow profile. “You had any sleep yet?”

“The same as you.”

Angela put on her boots with cold fingers. “I’ll come back here and lay down in a few.”

“No need to if you’d rather not. I run light.”

“Works for me,” she agreed, grateful.

Kyle and Marc had made a 6’ x 6’ area enclosed by a foot high stack of bedrolls and kits that appeared to be only gear in a neat pile from the outside of the canvas. With Marc at her back, she’d had little trouble falling asleep, but Angela

was definitely done letting the witch dream walk and more than ready to be out of this hormone-filled tent.

She stretched as she rose, unable to stop a small moan of pleasure.

Men's lids flew open at the sound and Marc assumed it was a copy of the one they'd just heard in dreams. He recognized the gut-twisting flare of need in their looks, knew it well.

Angela stiffened at the thoughts, the dreamy images rushing toward her. She quickly strapped on her gun and exited the tent, with Neil and Marc on her heels.

The QZ was layered in thin fog and Eagles. Dog was out roaming, and there were no less than fifteen Eagles in sight. Each confirmed her safety, escorts, and her shadow, before nodding politely as they went by.

"Doesn't he think this is a bit much?" she asked sharply. It wouldn't help these men accept her as one of them if she needed to be babysat.

Marc didn't tell her that he and Neil were responsible. Until the extra protections were in place, she would have help within reach at all times. It was how he'd handled witnesses he had been sent into foreign lands to recover, and it was a plan that he intended to use here. Besides the slavers, there was a grieving twin out there and that one may not come in force. Dean might sneak in and slit her throat while she slept or firebomb her tent if he knew which one it was.

“You can’t stop it, Marc. They’ll come and I have to be ready,” she stated, spotting specks of crimson in his goatee that he’d missed when he washed up.

Marc didn’t say anything because he was positive their idea of ready was drastically different. Angie grew a reckless streak when she was upset, always had. More than once, he’d had to refuse a dangerous request when they were kids, and then she’d waited for him to leave and done it. *Alone*, he remembered, trying not to flinch. He would have to be careful not to push her into anything.

Neil hung back as they ducked under the awning of the little mess, fog curling around their boots. They were the only ones at the small eating area and Angela chose a dim corner while Marc got their mugs.

The larger camp was still silent, only quiet Eagles moving, and she rubbed at her face, yawning. She wasn’t used to a first shift schedule.

“This’ll help.”

She let him set the mug down and pull his hand away before reaching for it.

“Chocolate caffeine.” She sipped it carefully, forcing herself to not wake too fast, but enjoy the time with Marc instead. “How do you feel?”

Marc’s lips grinned, but he didn’t. He sat down, adjusting his matching Colts. “Sore, like after a mission.”

“Sounds like another promotion is in order.”

“That’s your honor.” He couldn’t hide his anger or his awe. “What you did! Thank you.”

“Anything for you.”

Magic sparked between them and Neil distracted a pair of Kyle’s Eagles who were coming in for coffee.

“Neil’s a good friend to have here, I’ve heard,” she commented.

“Sure could have been a lot worse without him,” Marc admitted.

Angela wanted to say more, like how grateful and how mad she was about what he’d done for her, but didn’t. He already knew.

“Did you calm down and get some sleep?”

“Yes,” she snorted wryly, loving his musky scent. “Thanks.”

They shared a grin and it held for a long moment where Marc fought to keep from sliding his hand over hers. He settled for letting his eyes say all the things his mouth wasn’t allowed to.

“We’ve been through a lot, *Wolfman*,” she teased, the caffeine slowly bringing awareness.

“Hasn’t changed much since we’ve gotten here, has it, *that New Woman*?”

Angela chuckled, loving the way he always kept up with her, kept her laughing. “Nope. We’ll still avoid bridges.”

It wasn’t much. Five minutes without Kenn and the camp scrutinizing their every expression, but it was a flash to the trip here for them, sharp and sweet. Their slow starts and finishes to the day

were something they'd grown to love and both of them missed it.

“You did pretty good last night. How does it feel to be the first female here officially allowed to carry a gun?”

Angela felt a sharp prick pierce her good mood, sensing the searching caution in his words. Why couldn't he leave it alone?

“Going through it like an Eagle was great,” she answered tensely. “Wow, Alex is fast!”

Aware of her tension, Marc didn't change his plans or censor his words.

“You'll be that good someday.”

There was a sense of being patronized and Angela cast out a line, hoping not to snag anything, but needing to know. “Adrian will be opening Eagle tryouts for rookie levels soon...for women.”

Marc's attention snapped up from her delicate wrists. “Tryouts?”

When she nodded, showing the V in her chin, his heart thumped painfully. “You're thinking about it?”

She nodded again, and he was aware of those shrewd baby-blues evaluating his reaction. Swallowing his first three responses, Marc sipped his chocolate and thought. When he finally spoke, it was carefully.

“It's rough, the way they do things here. You might want to try a few private lessons with Doug or Kyle first, to be sure.”

It was a perfectly reasonable answer and then his mouth opened again.

“And I honestly don’t know if you can do what they do, honey. You’re awfully small compared to them.”

Listening, Neil groaned at the thoughtless words.

Angela’s demeanor frosted over and that cute chin became a set line.

Damn it! Marc thought. *Why couldn’t I stop there?*

It was an identical wish for both of them.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve said that to me, Brady.”

“And I wouldn’t now, if I wasn’t worried about you getting hurt,” he defended.

Angela pushed away her anger as best she could. “I’m not afraid to get hurt if it means earning something that I want. I never have been.”

“I know that, better than most people,” Marc relented. “It’s your choice, Angie, as always.”

“Yes, it is.” She stood as Neil came toward them and Kyle’s team filled the small area.

Smothering disappointment, (she’d hoped Marc might actually support her idea) she let only traces of it lace her tone. “Looks like there’s hours yet before the camp will be ready to travel. Let’s do our normal drill.”

Marc started to tell her it wasn’t safe for her to be out in the open, but Neil beat him to it.

“I’ll have it set up in 5 minutes. All of us hate missing sets while we’re in the QZ.”

Satisfied she’d be safe; Marc did a fast sweep of the molding trees and bold ants that littered their view. “What’s with the ‘all of us’? It’s your first time in quarantine, right?”

Neil smiled sheepishly, relenting. “So I’ve heard.”

All three of them were laughing as they came from the little mess.

From the edge of the tattered caution tape, Adrian saw them and thought they seemed out of place with the apocalyptic landscape to backdrop their happiness. The brackish sky was a dim, depressing canopy that dripped indifferently over everything.

“Hey, Boss.” Kyle had come to meet him, an extra mug in hand. “All quiet now.”

“Now?”

The mobster took a quick glance around to verify there was no one else in hearing distance. “She had a nightmare. Said you need to talk to the new woman, Samantha.”

“She say anything else?”

“Something’s coming within the week.” Kyle’s voice dropped. “You think Samantha’s special too?”

“The odds just went up on that bet.” Adrian turned toward the larger camp, taking the hot

coffee. “Bring her by while I’m breaking down my canvas and we’ll find out.”

3

“Ready?”

“Yes.” Angela blew out an annoyed sigh. “And stop warning me. It’s like training with someone’s nervous grandmother.”

The Eagles laughed, their eager noises carrying on the wind.

Flushing a bit, Seth lunged with a leg sweep that she jumped and returned, sending him to the ground in surprise.

“Never underestimate your opponent!” Doug growled, huge form moving between them. “Who’s next?”

They’d been at it for half an hour despite her passing the self-defense part in the first few minutes. She’d insisted on more.

“Me.”

Marc stepped forward. His tone was hard to read, but his thoughts said he hated witnessing her wrestle with these men.

“You guys are too easy on her.”

There were scoffs from the four disheveled men she’d cleared and the senior Eagles monitored closely, evaluating. It was obvious that she was better than some of Adrian’s rookies and this would tell them where to place her in training when Adrian openly declared her an Eagle. That he would, his top men had little doubt, though it

had only been a few days. When Adrian wanted something, he got it, and female members of the guard were high on his list. He'd just been waiting to put his faith in the right one.

“Don't hurt yourself, now.”

Marc's challenge came from their mornings spent this way and Angela's face stretched into a grin. Lower level men exchanged disapproving looks at her lack of seriousness, but again the top Eagles wondered. The determination behind that smile said she was anything but distracted.

From the beginning, it was fierce. Marc did what none of them had been willing (in this situation) to do. He tackled her.

Prepared and glad to be on his training terms, Angela locked her ankles and used the momentum from their fall to roll him over and off.

Marc pushed to his feet, hair messed sexily as he stalked her. Contentment melted his angry face back into her best friend and Angela crouched low. “Say it. Say it!”

“I've missed this.”

Her grin widened. “Even the pain, grunt?”

He barked a laugh. “Especially that!”

“Then, let's get to it.”

Before he could rush her again, Angela lunged upward to deliver a harsh hit to his shoulder that he absorbed, wrapping his arms around her upper body to trap her in a tight hug.

Angela immediately dropped to her knees and twisted her elbow into his side. Able to slip free, she ducked his swipe for her braid and kicked out, shoving him away from her.

Angela flashed to her feet, eagerness spilling out. “More, Brady, more!”

It was a blast from their past and it lit up his heart. “Whatever you want, baby cakes.”

In her happiness, Angela didn’t get set for his lunge and the shock of being on the ground under a man sent fear rushing into her mind, freezing her.

“Lock those ankles!”

Angela steeled her panic, calming, and then Marc had his hands full keeping her on the ground as she punched, twisted, elbowed.

As they struggled, there was the sound of their harsh breathing and the mutters of the Eagles, who all wore deep scowls at a woman being on the ground under a man they didn’t trust.

As they rolled over again, Marc still coming out on top, Seth stepped forward to break it up.

“Leave them.” Adrian had come from the caution tape with quiet steps, and it eased his men to have him present, even as their frowns grew.

“Still want more?”

Angela had freed herself and was staying low as Marc circled her, rapidly closing the space.

She didn’t answer his taunt and he eased closer. “Very good. You remember the next lesson?”

“Trade-off.”

“That too much?” Angela shook her head and Marc came forward aggressively.

This time, even Neil went to stop it and only Adrian stepping forward halted the rush to help her.

He stopped as soon as the men did, though, enrapt by the battling warrior woman of his dreams.

Angela swung, connecting with his open palm and Marc immediately returned the motion. Angela had her feet braced and didn’t budge as her hand absorbed the hit.

She threw the next punch with a quick twist at the end and she could feel his surprise that she’d remembered the single five-minute lesson. The blow made him sway to the right and she waited for his hit, gaze locked firmly on his.

Marc knew what she wanted, what Adrian also wanted, and was unable to resist the pull from them both. Angie wanted the Eagles to know she could do this and Adrian wanted the same.

Fine, Marc grunted at the hope as she read his thoughts. *At least with me, she won’t be hurt.*

“Level Two.”

Angela swung at the words, following a right with a left, and Marc stood pat so he wasn’t pushed off balance.

His turn now, he stomped toward her with a raised hand and the fear froze her again. *He’s so big!*

Unsure and very aware of his duty, Adrian stepped forward as Marc's slap neared her face and then she cupped her hands into one fist and slammed it into Brady's unprotected jaw.

Expecting it, Marc grunted at the impact, but kept coming and she flashed out with a punch to his kidneys that sent him to his knees at the unexpectedness of it.

Calming, Adrian motioned the Eagles back, but he stayed close as Marc lunged for her legs and got a boot in the shoulder that sent him rolling and then onto his feet.

"Switch."

Angela's grin stretched her lips into a fierce snarl as she attacked.

Now mostly confident they'd done this enough times to keep her from getting hurt, Adrian observed the reactions of his men. He tried not to wonder how many of Marc's hits had landed when she'd first begun to learn these moves.

Angela swung from the hip, letting her anger out a bit and Marc's duck was quick. He jumped from her leg sweep and managed to avoid her left hook, but the right caught him squarely on the forehead and he hit the ground.

Stunned, Angela rushed to him, not thinking about anything but him falling from the mangled Blazer. What was she doing?

"Marc?"

Marc's body was shaking, but not from her hit, and his snort shot out at her worried tone.

“I’m fine,” he ground out through the laughter, “Just finished thinking you wanted me on my ass and then here I am.”

Angela chuckled, offering a hand up that he took and kept for a second.

“Nice switch. That enough or you want some more?” he challenged as if he’d won, making her grin. The sparks between them were thick.

“That’ll do, Brady.”

Her amused sigh was full of long-suffering and she exited the circle with his chuckle in her ears and a lighter heart. Marc didn’t want her to be an Eagle, but he did want her to be happy. If this was what it took, he would give it to her.

“Let’s have a lesson.”

Adrian’s words caught Angela’s attention and she lingered nearby, hoping she’d be allowed to observe. Sweat rolled down her spine and she shivered as a cold gust of wind gave her a chill.

Adrian led them toward the rear of the long tent that Neil had indeed directed them to less than five minutes after they left the little mess.

“Open matchups.”

All the Eagles grinned, stripping off their gear, and when Angela stayed near the door, Adrian gestured toward her. “Eagle Four has lead. Rookie session during, Eagle Three.”

For reasons she soon understood, their spirits went up another notch.

Neil motioned toward her. “You should have a front row seat for this.”

Angela went willingly enough, happy to be allowed to watch, but she was aware of Marc's good mood being gone as he fell in on her left. She also noticed a few of the Eagles giving her strange looks, but their thoughts weren't open in her distraction.

“What was the first thing you learned in my self-defense class?”

Adrian's voice was full of a command that he hadn't used with Angela yet and the sound of it was mesmerizing, drawing her closer.

“To duck!” the Eagles answered in unison.

“And the second?”

“To hit back!”

Adrian gestured to the empty space in the center of the tent. “The basics. Square off and show me.”

Angela observed in fascination as the men chose each other and started brawling. Except it wasn't a chaotic fight with wild swings and reckless moves. It was a choreographed play of punches and ducks that made the men doing it come across as puppets on a stage, their strings being wielded by a master.

“That's the first set you'd learn if you were an Eagle,” Neil stated.

Angela was mesmerized. Not a single swing was out of place, no missteps that sent them into each other or to the floor. This was the basics?

“It wasn't so smooth in the beginning. It gets this way over the course of time and repetition.”

Not sure why Neil was telling her these things, Angela was aware of Marc's disapproving grunt on her left.

Adrian spun a finger. "Level One."

Now the hits were landing into open palms, much the way she and Marc had done. Only these punches were hard and fast, making men move from the force being used.

The slaps of skin meeting skin rang violently through the tent and Neil waited for the right moment to speak, surprised to find he could read her as easily as he did the males. "By the end of this level, your arm muscles are so sore you feel like you can't move, and the bruises on your palms last for weeks."

Angela didn't respond, thinking she'd had a small taste of that when Marc had finally agreed to give her the training she wanted. He'd pulled most of his hits, she knew that, but she'd also made him stay at it until she ached, just to make up for his easy touch.

"Level Two."

The first punch took Seth to his knees and Angela stiffened her lips into a line to hide the fear that bubbled up. This is what she needed to discern, what she had to know.

Seth wiped the blood from his mouth, slinging the scarlet drops as he swung back.

Marc had refused to do more than trade hits with her open-palmed. Would she be able to take that? If not, she'd never be an Eagle.

“Three.”

Adrian led them up the levels, giving them the release and nerve-steadying workout they needed, and he studied Angela as the fighting got harder. She needed to know what she was walking into.

“Camp rules say when you bleed, you’re out,” Neil stated with a tone of longing. “But as an Eagle, there’s no crying off. Blood is part of what we do.”

Angela could hear Neil wishing he was part of the lesson instead of sitting here with her and she kept quiet, hoping he’d understand that he didn’t have to miss the fun to explain things to her.

To teach you, the Witch corrected, awake and scenting the tent’s odors of strength and pain. *You’re the rookie he’s instructing.*

“Level Six.”

Angela winced as Daryl smacked into the ground near her feet, but his wink and grin told her he wasn’t unhappy and when he delivered a brutal ankle kick to his opponent, his roar was full of life.

“They love this,” she murmured wonderingly.

“Enough to follow his orders no matter what they are,” Neil said pointedly.

Angela heard the warning, and the tone that said she wasn’t strong enough to do this, and raised her chin. Just because she was scared of something didn’t mean she couldn’t do it, especially when there was so much at stake. When the slavers came for her, when Dean came, she had to be able to hold them off long enough to kill their

leader. With the head cut off, Adrian and his men would be able to go in and wipe out the rest.

“You okay?”

Marc’s voice brought her back to the lesson and she gave a nod, frowning as she realized the men were all cleaning themselves up. She’d missed the end.

“We have another half hour. Anyone feel like a challenge?”

Adrian stepped into the center of the tent, removing his 9mm, and the excited reaction of the men was nothing to the thumping in her heart as Adrian stripped his shirt. She surveyed the tattoos, recognizing some as Marine and others that she suspected went much deeper into the underside of the military. They stretched over his back and arms in beautiful, exotic detail.

Eagles moved his way and Adrian’s stance said he wanted it as much as they did. Angela sighed. *What is it with men and fighting?*

“They won’t hurt him,” Neil assured her. “Now them, well, that’s another story.”

“Let’s thin things out a bit,” Adrian stated. “No one below Level Three.”

There were good-natured groans and movements that left half a dozen men in the ring with Safe Haven’s nearly naked leader. When they all rushed him, Angela tensed, drawing a disdainful thought from the other man at her side.

She knows they won’t hit him, right?

Thud!

Marc's lids narrowed as Adrian took a sharp hit on the jaw and fired a blow that sent the offender to his knees.

Thud!

Another punch landed on Adrian and a second Eagle hit the floor an instant later.

Damn, he's fast, Marc thought, surprised. He had known Adrian was lethal in many ways. It was in his body language, but Marc hadn't expected the 40-something-year-old to be so quick.

Angela observed with her hands balled into fists to keep her emotions from showing. The witch was whispering, muttering of the wasted energy, but Angela could feel their need for this. Adrian was giving them a release from the tensions of being perfect all the time in front of the camp.

And showing you what to expect, the Witch cautioned, fading. *Pay attention, if this is what your future holds. You'll have need of it.*

Another man went down and Adrian took out the last two in one very fast leg sweep that made the Eagle next to Angela almost whimper in longing.

"He's been practicing," Neil muttered, forgetting his duty as the desire to join in flooded him. Matchup with Adrian was an incredible rush.

"Anyone else?"

Unable to stop himself, Neil asked, "Request permission to trade off."

Adrian allowed it and Neil motioned Seth over to cover his duty as he moved toward the blond.

“Level Ten.”

Neil froze for a brief second before starting to strip his hat and Beretta. “You got it.”

Each Eagle there suddenly didn’t envy Neil the personal time. They recognized the punishment. Level Ten was only for tests and even then, few passed.

Angela had never witnessed anything so brutal. The hits were cruel, intended to inflict pain as well as injury, and yet it was a vivid show of the power in a human body that had her cheering along with the rest of them.

Certain that Neil needed a reminder of his place and the plans being made, Adrian didn’t pull his punches.

Neil hit the ground, hard, and quickly rose. He adjusted his strategy and attacked, only to be driven back with a brutal hit to the shoulder blade that sent him to his knees. For every swing he got in, Adrian’s fist was there to make him pay double.

“Get him, Neil!”

“Come on, man!”

With Marc also cheering next to her, Angela was caught up in the rush, and she let the witch free in a burst of uncensored pleasure. *We like it here!*

Energy exploded, sending a gust of heat-drenched air through the tent in a resounding blast that echoed off the canvas walls and bounced. It hit men with an unexpected flare of furious need that

sank deep and immediately vanished, leaving them all a bit confused as to what had happened.

Angela wanted to slip out, sorry she'd lost control, but they would know she was responsible for sure then. She turned to Marc with a casual tone instead. "I'll be adding that one to the journal. Remember the heat flash we felt in Indiana?"

Marc's words were careful. "That one lasted longer."

She shrugged, aware of the men listening. "Things are different now."

There were mutters of agreement and the two men in the center shared a look that said they were done.

Adrian collected his gun belts and shirt. "We leave in an hour. Is everything set on this side?"

He barely sounds winded, Angela observed as Adrian used the shirt to wipe his bloody face. His jaw was already swelling, skin bruised, and she realized Kenn and Marc having shiners wasn't something so big here. The camp had to be used to witnessing their men this way.

"All set, Boss."

Adrian handed out the next punishment he'd settled on. "Good. Neil has Point until midnight."

Neil stiffened, recognizing another reprimand, but didn't say anything as Adrian left. Point man was a great duty during camp times. On travel days, it was hell.

"What did you do?" Kyle asked curiously.

Neil spoke without thinking. “I wasn’t paying attention to the lesson he wanted me to give the Barbie doll.”

Silence fell, and this time Angela did duck her head.

How does that feel? the Witch asked bluntly. *Because there’s more of the same waiting, if you choose this path.*

Angela’s cheeks were blazing, and most of the men expected tears or a tirade.

“Don’t blame me for slacking off,” Angela fired Neil’s own warning at him coldly. “When he gives me a job, I’ll follow orders, no matter what they are.”

She spun from the tent as voices rose behind her and stopped when she saw Adrian waiting outside the flap.

“You handled that well. Would have been better if you’d hit him for the insult.”

Inside the tent, there was now a fresh silence while ears strained to hear and Neil cringed.

“I’m not that good yet, but I want to be.” Angela gave the wolf a comforting rub when he appeared at her heel.

“And will you give everything? They do.”

“Yes. I want to be an Eagle in your Army.”

Inside the tent, Marc froze and everyone waited, almost holding their breath.

“I’ll get back to you on that,” Adrian said finally.

“I’ll be here,” she stated evenly.

Behind her, the Eagles started coming out of the tent and Angela went to the bathroom to clean up and get herself under control. She was also anticipating a couple minutes alone to think. Adrian had given her a clear view of what she was in for and she'd asked anyway. Was she insane?

Marc watched her, trailing behind, and heard Kyle's well-meaning words.

"He woulda said no if he thought she couldn't do it."

Marc didn't answer. That wasn't the problem. He'd known Angie when she was that young girl playing with fire and delighting in what she learned from the burns. In time, she would be able to hold her own with most survivors, man or woman. Then, why was his gut all twisted? Because these men would be training her and not himself? That they were getting his Angie time?

Marc grimaced. If that was the only reason, then she'd had every right to be upset with him. Not that it mattered either way now. A no from Adrian would have shut it down, but instead, she had his support. The leader hadn't said yes, but Marc knew clever tactics when he saw them. That whole show had been about getting her in, drawing her closer, and it had succeeded. The biggest part of his issue with that was how willing Angie was to turn control over to Safe Haven's leader. She'd only known him for a few days!

Marc was sure whatever she was getting from Adrian's thoughts must be the reason, but it still

bothered him and he was glad when she spent the next hour sitting on the hood of her Blazer.

Busy writing in her journal, Angela didn't notice it had been parked between three trucks, blocking it from even the best sniper, but she was aware of how many guards lingered near her, all wondering in silent speculation.

4

“Kyle said you want me?”

Adrian and the rest of the large camp were taking down tents and packing to go, and Samantha wished she were as good. It had taken her half an hour to dismantle her own.

“I'll be right with you,” Adrian stated.

Instead of waiting, Samantha started on the last side of his large tent. She needed the extra practice.

“Thanks. How'd you sleep last night?”

It was a normal question and shouldn't have drawn a nervous twitch.

Adrian frowned at her. “Why are you hiding, Samantha? You pull your weight and I know you're one of us, but you still don't have a single friend here. You don't eat meals in the mess and you're neutral about what comes out of your mouth. There's something keeping you from the shelter of this camp and I want to know what it is.”

“You know all,” she retorted sharply, flushing. “You tell me.”

“Okay, I will. You’re a loner and you think you’re different than anyone else here.”

Samantha snorted, flashing to the man in the compound. The man she’d killed. “I am different.”

“You’re special, Samantha, but not more so than everyone. Angie said I should talk to you. Today.”

Samantha crossed her arms over her chest, not letting his aura of persuasion distract her. “Speaking of special, I don’t know her. I didn’t even think she remembered my name.”

Blank blue eyes waited for his response and it pleased Adrian that she used one of his favorite tactics against him. Women were always harder to handle than men, but they were also more likely to be gifted.

“We are not adversaries, Samantha. You’ve been hurt enough since the war to know that.”

She flushed again under the scolding tone. “It’s good here, really. You’re good.”

“So are you Samantha, but as long as you cast that outsider image, these people won’t pull you in where you can relax and belong. You have to give them a fair chance.”

Samantha’s expression didn’t change and while her control impressed him (like Angela, this one was a fighter who didn’t know her own worth), he hated how censored she was. Where were the real emotions, the fire?

“How do I do that when every simple conversation goes bad?” Samantha asked.

She was referring to the argument she'd gotten into yesterday with a small group of women who didn't like her opinion on making a stand against the slavers. Their town had been attacked by Cesar, let through the barricades by a traitor who had left buried messages, and they were terrified. Samantha, who had been face-to-face with the Mexicans and escaped, hadn't been able to stop herself from recommending they should have tried harder to kill the evil men. One of the Eagles, Jeremy, had broken it up before it had come to blows.

"By being useful and honest. I don't expect blind loyalty and from some people, it wouldn't mean as much anyway, but I have to have the truth." He lowered his voice, pushing. "What's coming for us?"

She only stiffened for an instant, and again, it was impressive.

"The final hand of God? How would I know?"

Samantha's tone held deep sarcasm and she expected a threat or at least a warning, but Adrian only waited with a raised brow.

Samantha's shoulders slumped. She wanted to tell him, but then she would have to leave. "I don't know what you're—"

"Don't lie to me!" The bark was mild, but it still drew attention because of her flinch.

"Say you'd rather not tell me or you don't trust me yet or even tell me to go to hell and walk, but lies are *not* allowed."

“You won’t believe it if I tell you.” Samantha’s countenance was covered in the fear that she was about to be alone again in this hard new world.

“Try me. You might be surprised.”

She studied the packing camp for a long moment, feeling much the same as Angela had when she’d made her choice to tell him about Danny being the thief. When she spoke, her voice held the first true emotion of her arrival—terror.

“Might as well tell you, I guess. These people can’t hurt me as much as the war did.” Samantha drew on her courage. “I don’t always track a storm in the ways I told you. Sometimes, I see things...things that happen.”

“Like what?”

There was no doubt in his voice and the surprise of that let her answer openly, unlike the conversation in his tent, where she’d been very careful to imply she used computer data for her predictions.

“Weather. Bad weather is coming.”

“What was it in your dream?”

“Water. Rain was everywhere.”

“When?”

“In the next week... You believe me?”

She was shocked and he answered patiently, “Why wouldn’t I?”

Samantha shrugged uneasily, preparing to lie again. “Because—”

“In the old world, you were mocked and scorned, and then feared when you were right.

They turned you into a necessary evil and you're certain the same will happen here."

"You lie to me now," she demanded. "Tell me it won't."

"I can't. Everything is balanced on the edge." He indicated the camp around them now climbing into the neatly waiting vehicles. "These people need you, even though they don't know it. Help me keep them alive."

"I don't want to be in charge of anything or responsible for them," Samantha quickly denied. "I know that's selfish, but I can't. I'm not worthy."

Adrian let that go. "Just tell me when something's coming, so I can prepare for it."

Samantha had been expecting much more and she let out a tired breath. "I think I can do that."

"And in return?" he asked, needing to be sure of her ethics.

"That was the old world." She regarded him coolly. "I don't want to be a prize rat anymore."

"Tell me what you do long for, Samantha. Maybe I can give it to you."

Horrible pain flashed and her voice choked. "Can you give me back my dignity?"

Adrian pushed his magic over her. "Most of it, yes. You'll earn the rest and then you'll be able forgive yourself for surviving when so many others didn't."

"How did you—"

"Angela."

Samantha frowned. “She knows a lot about me for someone I’ve never had a real conversation with.”

Adrian chose his words carefully, hoping this would bring the two women together. “You’re not the only one here who is special, Sam.”

She let that sink in, realizing things had changed for her again. Angie was different, too. And she was already on Adrian’s payroll.

“What else would you want me to do, besides the warnings?” Her tone was leery, but hope lurked.

“Ride with me and we’ll talk.” Adrian was careful not to show too much excitement. “Later, that’s up to you.”

“Okay.”

Nearby, Neil watched Samantha climb into Adrian’s rig, almost gawking, and his right-hand, Jeremy, took notice. Was there anything he could do to help that along? Samantha was cute and she shared Neil’s feeling on taking out the slavers. Maybe some match making was needed.

5

“This is Safe Haven mobile refugee camp. Is anyone out there? Hello? Can *anyone* hear me?”

Mitch’s cheerful voice rang through the radios as Safe Haven pulled out five minutes late, with everyone accounted for. Adrian was always afraid they’d be short people and the fear of hearing that

allowed him to offer Samantha the honesty she obviously required.

“I need to know when it’s coming, Sam. I have to have time to get ready.”

He noted her sigh.

“I can’t tell you the exact moment. I know it’s within a week, but probably less. I’m listening for it.”

Adrian felt the frustration rise up and forced it down. Beginnings were always hard and he wasn’t prepared for this conversation any more than she was. Keeping that in mind, he softened his tone.

“Where should we be when it comes? Where would *you* take us?”

Her unease grew. “We need a basement area that’s underground and out of sight. Sometimes, storms...hone in on things.”

“Things like heat or even people?”

“Happiness. The big ones are jealous of peace and happiness. It’s a calm state they achieve only when they die.” Samantha wasn’t quite able to believe it was her mouth spilling these long held theories.

Adrian took a minute to decide if he could accept storms as living things with not only intelligence, but also emotions, and found it easier than expected. How many times had he heard stories of survivors swearing the funnel cloud had come down just for them?

“I’ll get you a list of places like that near us and you’ll circle the ones we’d be safest at. I’ll have Kenn give you a sheet each week.”

“I’d rather not know which ones you pick, if that’s okay,” she stated, shifting pressure off the healing cigar burn on her hip.

“Why not?” He already knew by her nervous tone.

“I...I’m still keeping track of Rick, even though you said I don’t have to and it might get people hurt if he catches me.”

Adrian’s anger grew with his certainty that the man was a wolf in sheep’s clothing, but the sights out his window confirmed his choice. Everything they were passing was burned, charred. A battle had taken place here, one of thousands still happening across their broken country, and most of his people wouldn’t last long on their own. If he spooked them and they ran, it would be a slaughter.

“Why haven’t you thrown him out?”

That was a question he’d been asked too many times already by his top men and Adrian gave her the rehearsed answer they’d all received.

“If there’s a rabid dog on your farm, you can track him. You have an idea where he’ll attack. If you put him outside the fence, he’s hurting others, and sooner or later he’ll find a way to slip back in and rip your throat out.”

“And if you put a bullet in its head?”

“Are you sure enough to pull the trigger yourself?” Adrian demanded, surprised.

That stopped her next words and he gave her pale profile a brief glance. “Personally, I think you’re right, but until he makes a mistake, I can’t...remove him. For now, he’s being monitored. Letting him loose out there is like condoning murder. At least here, he’s following the rules and that alone is a better alternative than to have him hurting others.”

“And that’s why these people will follow you anywhere,” Samantha realized. “They know you give a damn.”

Adrian’s heart twisted with his secrets. “I’m giving that and more.”

6

“It’s time. Switch to channel seven.”

Kyle consulted his glossy notebook again, getting settled as they followed Marc’s new black truck out of the parking area. They were seventh in a line of ninety.

Glad to have noise filling the tense silence between her and Neil, Angela listened in fascination as the two Eagles riding with her held what was clearly a lesson on a second radio that was cleverly hidden in the glove box.

“From where we left off last night,” Kyle instructed.

“A first instinct is to use the hostage for protection. Don’t give them the opportunity. Make

contact with the enemy when he is as far from the victim as possible,” Neil relayed over the mike. “Never direct attention to the hostage or depend on them to react the way you need them to. Assume they will either panic or freeze.”

Word for word, Neil repeated it into the radio from his front seat position. He was also working on a drawing of the camp at the same time.

This lesson is about me, Angela realized. She steered carefully around the charred frame of a school bus, purposely not viewing the small skeletons still inside. What awful, new landmarks the war had left!

“Be ready to shoot the hostage, to kill the enemy. Minor leg and arm wounds are preferred in this situation, but at no point should the hostage ever be in mortal danger from a stray round. Be precise. If not sure on the angle or line of fire, do not take the shot. I repeat, an Eagle who accidentally kills a hostage, even if the enemy is eliminated, has committed murder.”

Angela wanted to protest that one, but caught Kyle’s headshake in the mirror, and clamped down on her words as Neil repeated it over the secure channel.

“Break for discussion. Questions?”

The radio was silent and Angela opened her mouth hesitantly. “Are there exceptions to that rule?”

“Such as?” Kyle demanded, ready for her.

Angela flushed at being put on the spot as the rookies were. “Well, like if the enemy throws or pushes the hostage into the line of fire, or if there’s a big fight.”

Kyle gave her an assessing once-over, thinking many of Adrian’s Eagles were likely discussing those options right now. “Yes. There are exceptions to every rule, but each situation has its own way of being handled. During a fight, we would ideally try to wait for an end to it or for a sure opening.”

“Rescue missions are chaos. Care has to be taken,” Neil added tonelessly.

She responded the same way. “And it has to be made a priority, thus the harsh rule. Got it.”

They exchanged a look at her casual acceptance, not certain she understood the gravity of what it meant.

“An Eagle found guilty of murder, accident or otherwise, isn’t tossed out of Adrian’s army or banished. They’re executed, by Adrian himself,” Neil clarified.

“It ever happen?” she demanded of Kyle, trusting him not to lie.

“Not on my watch.”

“Would he?”

“Yes,” Kyle answered immediately.

Angela let that sink in, not sure that their impressions were correct. That sense of life having great value to Adrian was hard to miss. Maybe he

did these things anyway and dealt with the pain afterwards? That, she could believe.

Neil took a quick sip of water and when Kyle made a motion, Neil pushed the button on the mike. “Discussion questions?”

There was silence and the lesson resumed.

“In a hostage situation, we do not negotiate. We will not meet demands or even talk about them honestly. We do not allow the enemy time to think. Quick and hard plans work best.”

Angela listened to the rest of the lesson in rapt silence, absorbing as much as she could. She would have been just as interested in the conversation going on between the three Eagles in the black truck ahead of them.

7

“What if they come during the night?”

“I expect them to, or in the wake of a storm,” Marc answered. “Too many stories going around to ignore their pattern of attack. They’ve met no challenge so far doing it that way. They won’t change what works.”

“How do we guide the sheep to the trucks?” Seth asked.

“Red, white, and blue lights,” Jeremy answered from the backseat. “Adrian will love that.”

Wrapped in a heavy blanket because of the windows being down to clear the smoke, Seth was busy taking notes. He hadn’t adjusted to the cold

weather yet, despite spending all winter in it. “I can rig that up. Can you connect it to the wrist alarms?”

“Yeah, but it would be more dependable if Kenn did it,” Marc answered as they slowed to make a turn.

“Only way that’ll happen is if Adrian tells him to. He won’t listen to anyone else,” Seth stated.

Marc shrugged. “If Kenn won’t, I can. It just won’t be as solid. He’s better at that shit than I am.” He lit a smoke, hating it that some of these plans rested on Kenn being forced to cooperate.

“What about the maps?” Jeremy asked.

Marc was glad for the reminder. “Neil says he has that covered. Kyle and I will look them over when he’s done and adjust where we need to. Who gets to make her driving schedule?”

“Kenn does those.”

Marc motioned. “Add that to the list.” He sighed. “There’s no way we’ll be done by morning with all this.”

“Adrian will distract them so we can keep working,” Seth soothed. “Don’t sweat it.”

Marc allowed himself to be drawn back into the plans. They had to get these things set up before the slavers or the remaining twin came. He wouldn’t rest until it was done.

Marc scanned the dim sky above them. Not that there would be much of that if those clouds meant the storm Angela had warned of.

His gaze went to the lead rig, wondering what those two were talking about—Rick or the weather.

8

“Have you always been able to predict the weather with your gift?” Adrian steered the conversation to a more personal level.

Samantha opened her mouth to lie and gave honesty instead. “Yes. Used to freak my parents out at first, but it helped them, so they learned to accept it.”

“And the rest of your family?”

Samantha was facing the dusty window, where the burnt frames of buses, cars, and bodies littered the road. “My cousin stopped coming around right after I told her a tornado was coming for them and then her roof blew off.”

“You saved her with a forbidden call?”

Samantha shut her lids as they rolled by a farmhouse with an obscenity on the porch that she didn’t want to view later. “She never came to our home after that. *Ever.*”

Adrian was quiet for a minute, letting her deal with the grief of the past. Sometimes those ghosts didn’t want to let go, no matter how hard you tried to escape.

“I learned to shut up or push my information off on data from my parent’s lab so I could keep friends, but none of them were close. I think they knew that deep down there was something...wrong with me.”

“Wrong? You think of your gifts that way?”

“I saved Milton’s life so he could sabotage us into the end of the world,” she admitted shamefully. “I can’t feel any other way.”

She missed the reaction to his father’s name and Adrian was quick to skip the conversation along. “You are not responsible for this new world, Samantha. Surely you know that?”

She didn’t say anything and he frowned. “Samantha?”

“If I’d left it alone, he would have died.” Her expression said she was lost and searching for which way to go.

“And then the next president would have caused the end. This was in the works long before your warning.”

“I want to believe that, but it’s too easy.”

“I know it to be true. It sickens me that he was spared that day, but it wasn’t your choice to make. It was fate’s and she’s a tough bitch to understand.”

Samantha snorted, smiling wryly. “No argument there.”

Needing to give her something to ease the worry lurking in her tones and body language, Adrian switched subjects. “You’ve made good progress already, in the gun class.”

Samantha’s mind flew to Neil. “I like it.”

“I have a couple of other things you could work on, while you listen.”

“Sure. What?” Samantha knew he didn’t want to talk about the past anymore, neither did she, but she was unprepared for his distraction.

“I think you’d be a good hunter. If you pass the first level in the gun class, you can go.”

Her first instinct was to say no, but the waking heart told her he’d hit his mark. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Adrian hid a grin at her stubborn refusal to show interest in anything. *She’s definitely a female*, he thought. *Now, where did I put that pry bar?*

“I’d also like to have you supervise the new garden.”

That got her full attention. How had he known she liked to play in the dirt?

“Sounds fine.”

“Good. I’ll set it up.”

Yeah, I’ll bet you will, Samantha thought. She knew she could trust him, but that genius could just as easily be used for evil. If he ever became corrupt, it would be the same old shit starting up again.

Bright light winked at them from the rear of the convoy, drawing her attention. She would bet some of that old world pettiness was being planned in the last truck. What she wouldn’t give to be a fly in Kenn’s ugly green bronco.

“You want me to pick a fight or something?” Zack’s voice was low even though he and Kenn were alone in the truck. “Plant something dangerous next time to get him thrown out?”

Kenn flipped on the heat. *I’ve gotten soft during my time here*, he thought. On missions, he never used to notice the cold.

“Sure, and while you’re at it, slap her a few times, right in front of Adrian.”

The truck driver snickered meanly, loving the idea after having her pull a gun on him, and the two men let that roll around for a minute, enjoying the images.

With most of the top Eagles in the QZ for a full day, Kenn and Zack would be busy and in charge, the way they both preferred it. Sometime after they made camp, Angie and the others would be out and then the issues would restart, but without Kyle, Neil, and Seth, very few of the lower level men had the balls to stand up to Kenn. As a result, he and Zack had been able to work on plans of their own.

“You got her driving schedule sorted out?”

“It’s in the glove box, along with yours and mine for the next two weeks. Keep her busy,” Kenn ordered, spotting Lee, one of Zack’s men, glaring toward Angela’s Blazer. *Good*. At least the trucker had them in line, unlike his sons.

Zack got the sheets of paper out. “No problem. Someone needs to shovel the dog shit and dig the new latrine holes.”

Kenn chuckled, knowing Adrian wouldn't let it happen, but wishing it just the same. "You talk to your boys yet? Make it clear Charlie's off limits in this."

Zack shrugged. "If the wolf isn't with him, I can't make any promises. Your boy pissed mine off and they hold a grudge."

Kenn wasn't as worried about it as he had been before. "Yeah, getting your ass kicked by someone younger and smaller will do that."

Zack frowned, but didn't answer and Kenn continued, confident he'd made his point.

"You have the surprise waiting for Brady?"

"All tucked into his bedroll, even as we speak."

"Good. It won't drive him out, but it'll keep him unhappy."

Zack let his mouth fly. "Hard to get laid when you're busy being punished. He'll have to leave her alone for a while once we set him up to attack you."

It was only the truth of their plan, but to hear it spoken so openly, made Kenn wince at how wrong it sounded. He switched them to the next item.

"And his pet?"

This time, Zack scowled. "No takers. None of my team will do it, even for more privileges or a rank jump."

"Damn. Keep working on it."

"I could—"

“No, you can’t. It has to give the impression of an accident. Adrian will know if *we* kill the wolf.”

10

All of the important conversations came to a grinding halt as the convoy reached Rapid Valley.

The refugees stared in horror at what remained of the buried tourist town. A recent slide had sent waves of the debris-laden glop straight through most of the small neighborhood. The mud was across the streets in thick layers that Safe Haven had little hope of driving through. In the near distance, the small town peered at them from mud-slicked hills and garbage-covered valleys that used to be rooftops and windows.

“Convoy halt. Kenn, find us a turn-around.”

“Copy.”

“He should keep going. Turning around is a bad idea.” Angela’s words were low. She didn’t expect Neil to believe her.

“It’ll take us hours to clear the road,” Neil stated, frowning when Kyle immediately took the maps from the kit at his feet. “We’ll lose a lot of time.”

“Better time than lives,” Kyle stated, thinking about the slavers who were catching up to them.

Neil frowned. “*If* there’s a problem here.”

Angela didn’t want to wait for them to argue it out and alert Adrian, but she didn’t want Kenn or Marc to hear a mental call. She watched the door

open on Adrian's rig, understanding what would do it quicker. "*He's* not safe here. None of us are."

"And what do you suggest?" Neil demanded, terrified of the next thing Adrian would ask of him where she was concerned. To get Adrian's vote for the Eagles, each man had to pass a private lesson that only Neil taught and he had no idea how he would be able to do it for a woman. "Don't go back, can't go forward."

"Go Around."

"Around."

She and Kyle spoke at the same time.

Neil let out an annoyed sigh, picking up the mike. "Three to base."

Adrian ducked into the truck and Angela closed her lids, trying to estimate exactly where it would happen at. "Faster would be good, guys."

"Go ahead."

"We'd like to suggest going around instead."

There was silence for a minute as Adrian considered what that meant. Around was venturing off the beaten path to the south and into the Dakota wilderness. No way of knowing what waited to be found.

"We do know what's behind us, though," he muttered, ignoring Samantha for the moment. "Death."

Adrian pushed the button on the mike. "Agreed. Five minute stop, full guard and then we're on the road."

“You have a lot of faith in them,” Samantha stated.

Adrian didn't tell her that the message was from Angela. “Yes, I do.”

“And if they're wrong?”

Adrian surveyed her with a teacher's patient gaze. “Sometimes they are. It's part of learning how things work now. Without risks, it means nothing.”

“And it creates bonds that draw these people closer to you and what you want.”

“What I need, Samantha. Only what I need to keep them alive and free.”

Her gaze went over the mud-covered town. “Will you do any searching for survivors?”

“No,” Adrian denied. Angela would have mentioned it if she felt any life still here. “If there's anyone left, they'll hear us and follow. We can't stay out in the open and wait for the next slide.”

Adrian nodded to Daryl as he went by the truck on his first sweep, but his words were for Sam. “You should probably go ride with Hilda and the others now. It might get rough up here.”

Disappointed, her shoulders slumped. Her time being useful to him was over until the storm came.

“Samantha?”

She looked over as she opened the door and her breath caught at his inviting expression.

“Why don't you sit with us for mess?”

“I’d love to.” Flustered by her response, she quickly left.

Adrian waited until Samantha was out of hearing distance before closing his lids, concentrating. On his line, they would only hear each other. He would teach Angela to do the same. *Which way is it coming from?*

Northeast. Something’s happening there. Not sure what.

Her answer was quick and Adrian could feel her impatience with the stop. *The slavers?*

Maybe. There’s a clear sense of danger.

Adrian swept the people getting out of the cars now that the Eagles had given the okay. *There’s always plenty of that. Watch your six.*

You know it.

11

Minutes after Adrian directed the convoy south, she had them stopping again.

It’s coming. Hold on here.

“Convoy, halt.”

Adrian didn’t answer further. Like the rest of the refugees, he was staring in surprise at the enormous herd of deer crossing the valley below. At least a thousand of the grass-loving creatures were slowly venturing through the area and most of the camp observed happily, lifting younger children to their shoulders for a better view.

“Well, she said big,” Adrian murmured. There wasn’t a sense of danger yet, but if she’d been

right about one, she was right about the other as well. He pushed the button on the mike. “No shooting. If they stampede, we’ll lose half our vehicles and people will get hurt. Let them go by. We’ll wait.”

It was something that would have raised brows in the old world, giving wild animals the right of way, but Adrian had no wish to draw more fire from nature than they were already under just for being alive. They could roll through with the trucks first, shooting and crushing until the others scattered, or they could wait fifteen minutes for the herd to go by. It was moving south and would be past them shortly.

That thought made him uneasy. It was spring. Shouldn’t they be migrating north?

Yes, unless something was bad there, too. And what would make so many deer band together? Herds were never more than a few hundred at most. This was as if every deer in the state was migrating southward and had joined up along the way.

“Like us,” he muttered, picking up the map as Daryl went by again. How far south could they go?

“Four to base. There’s something moving in from the north. Sounds...big.”

Every head craned that way, hands reaching for guns.

Mike still in hand, Adrian stepped onto the foot rail of his truck for a better view. She’d tell him if they needed to move, right? Unable to take the

chance, he questioned. “Should we roll, do you think?”

It was very unlike him, to ask openly over the radio, and each Eagle listening knew it had something to do with Angela.

“Negative, Boss,” Kyle responded. “We’re 5-by right here.”

North of Rapid Valley, a dam had burst, sending shocks into the ground that rushed out ahead of the debris wall. Already blocked with garbage blown there by the war, the riverbed overflowed and a huge mud wave was sent into the valley below. The slide thundered down the hillside like a rocket, cutting down fully-grown trees and tearing houses away from their foundations in its fury. As it got close to the convoy, the sounds grew louder.

The deer in the valley below heard the rumbling, ears tilting up in fear, noses scenting the rank air and then the entire herd stampeded...right toward Safe Haven.

An instant behind their panicked reaction, the wall of muddy water poured into the valley without mercy. The running herbivores had nowhere to go. The front of the stampede disappeared under the brown weight in seconds and more liquid death crashed down the hills. It cut off any hope the animals had for retreat and half the chaotic herd vanished as the hillside ran brown.

“Stand your ground!” Adrian ordered, heart squeezing painfully as the roaring sound magnified until his ears hurt. If she were wrong, the entire camp would be lost.

“What’s he doing?” Neil demanded, horrified that Adrian would risk them all this way.

“His job,” Angela stated coldly. The Blazer rattled harshly around them. “Saving their lives.”

“And you’re sure?”

Angela didn’t respond over the roar of the debris barreling toward them. She’d already given her answer to the man who mattered.

Two hundred yards from the stunned convoy, the mud found the path of the valley and turned away from them.

Adrian rested his head against the seat, waiting for the pain to fade from his arm and chest. The risks he took were never assumed lightly and he wasn’t sure how many more like that his heart would survive.

The flow of mud down the hill dissipated quickly after the first huge wall, leaving the refugee camp untouched and the herd decimated. The difference had been one ‘go around’ and one ‘hold on here’—roughly half a mile. She’d known he planned to take them north for a pickup from the mental map.

Adrian's voice belied the chaos of his thoughts. "Let's get ready folks. Check your lists. We leave in five."

All around him, people moved quicker than usual and Adrian allowed himself a brief second of weakness. How many more of those would he face and win before these people were safe? With each one, the odds against survival went up. He had to get them to Little Rock, alive.

Neil, scared of what came next and still upset over being corrected publicly, couldn't stop his mouth from opening. "Guess you think this proves you were right, but all it shows is how close to death you put Adrian."

Angela sucked in a wounded breath as Kyle stared at Neil in surprise.

"I don't agree. At least here, we had a chance to go uphill and get away. If we'd still been on 34, we'd all be gone," the mobster argued.

Pissed, Angela pulled her iPod from the glove box. "It's not my fault you were slacking off Neil. Try doing your job and you won't feel this way."

She traded the driver's seat for the gusting wind before he could respond.

Neil stared after her for a moment before unhooking his seat belt. "Guess I'll drive."

He got out and found himself alone in the Blazer when he slid into the driver's seat, Kyle also leaving him to his bitterness.

Parked nearby, Marc rolled the window down and was surprised when Angela opened his door and immediately ducked behind the seats to climb in with Dog and Jeremy.

“You don’t mind an extra passenger, do you?”

Marc ignored the curious witnesses. “Not at all.”

“You can have front.” Seth offered.

“I’d rather be right here,” she stated, putting her earbuds in. “If I’m riding in the rear, I’m welcome.”

Adrian observed it in his mirror, not doubting Neil had said something stupid and he waited for all of them to be settled before pushing the button on the mike. “Count-off as we go. Eagle One, here.”

12

They made camp at the top of the highest hill that Adrian could find, trees and wind-blown greenness their evening view. The signs of a world gone by were three gigantic crosses in the far distance, made to capture the light of the day to make them glow at night. Much dimmer than before the sky had been blanketed with grit, they were still a shining beacon that had people tripping as they stared.

Angela exited the truck, yawning tiredly as Kyle fell in on her right. In time, the crosses would

burn or fall like everything else and she had no trouble ignoring the unusual view.

“He didn’t mean it.”

She shrugged, not wanting to talk about Neil’s meanness. “The first of many I’ll have to put up with to be one of you.”

“You’ll never be one of us!”

Kenn’s voice at the edge of the tape drew attention. He flushed as men gaped at him, but didn’t back down. “You’re a female. There’s no place in his army for you.”

“That’s not true.” Kyle’s voice was angry, keeping Marc, who was behind them, from answering. “And get on the right side of the camp before I tell him you broke quarantine.”

“That’s what he wants,” Angela muttered, stepping around them all. “Doesn’t understand he’d be getting himself thrown in quarantine and we’ll be out in a couple hours.”

She entered the cold shadows, feeling the guard on her heels. “Later, Marine, we’ll talk.”

Kenn watched her go, ignoring the hard glares from the Eagles. He knew Angela was responsible for the convoy avoiding the mudslide and he couldn’t help being grateful that she’d saved them, but the anger of her actions afterward wouldn’t leave him alone. She’d broken the driving schedule to ride with Brady. She would pay for that, but right now, there was another moment of vengeance he wanted more.

Kenn lingered around the QZ as Zack got things squared away, needing to be close by when Marc found his surprise.

Angela spotted Charlie on the other side of the tape, glad to discover the wolf by his side. Kenn was in a strange mood and she felt better knowing her son had protection. Dog and Charlie were together more often than not now and she gave them both a warm smile as she stopped a few feet away.

“Hey, boy. You okay?”

“You did it, right? Made him stop?”

“Nope.”

Charlie stared at the lie. “I know you had him turn us around.”

Angela sighed, not sure how much of this side of their gifts he was ready for. “Can we talk about it later? I need to help John get us tested and cleared.”

“You’ll be out tonight?”

“I should be. We have a few results coming and two tests left to do.”

“Yours and John’s?”

“Very good.”

Distracted, Charlie’s face eased at her praise and he turned toward the larger, well-lit camp. “See ya later.”

“Yes, you will.”

“I love it that you taught him that.” Marc’s tone was full of emotion. “I haven’t thanked you for not turning him against me. You could have.”

“Not me. I secretly hoped you’d get to be his dad someday.” She smiled softly. “Still do.”

“Me too.”

Eagles walking by broke the moment and her warmth faded. “We’ll be out tonight. John about has us all cleared.”

Marc wanted to ask her what Neil had said, but knew it was better not to make the anger fresh again. “Great. You need anything?”

Angela swallowed her first response (*yeah, you!*) and went toward the medical tent. “I’ll be fine after I get some sleep and calm down.”

Marc snickered, but wasn’t fooled. She’d gotten her feelings hurt and it would get worse if she meant to try out for the Eagles. Some of these men were dead set against it.

That thought made him feel worse. It was unfair of them to deny her the chance that Adrian had given them, and Marc suddenly wanted her to succeed as much as he wanted her to forget the idea. He hated her being refused anything she truly wanted, and it was clear that this was top on her list right now, even above his feelings.

“Not fair,” he muttered, ashamed. Their time was in the future if they had one and he had no right to expect her to sit quietly and wait. Being a Marine had been the highlight of his life most years and she wanted the same comforts.

“And strength,” he stated to himself, drawing attention from passing men that he ignored. “In case they come for her and we can’t protect this camp.”

“You think so, too?”

Marc wasn’t surprised to discover Adrian outside the perimeter, behind the QZ. “Yes. She’ll turn herself over to save her son and these people. Never doubt it.”

“I don’t.”

“That’s why she’s agreeing to this.”

Adrian didn’t tell him that wasn’t the only reason. Deep down, Marc already knew it was more. “It won’t come to that. Those are not my reasons.”

“I know yours, too, but I don’t agree with all the secrecy. You’re lying to them too much.”

“I know,” Adrian agreed, surprising Marc.

The leader paused to light a smoke in the thick breeze. “But until they’re stronger, this is the way it has to be. When they’re ready, honesty will come from all of us.”

Adrian slipped back into the shadows with those words and Marc frowned. What did that mean?

Tired and stressed, he went to the only empty tent with his kit. Seth was on Angie’s heels, the wolf was out defending Charlie, and Marc intended to get a couple extra hours of sleep. Hell, maybe he would stay in the QZ until morning and be saved the trouble of putting up his tent.

Trying to let go of his thoughts for a while, Marc tossed his kit into the corner and followed it down. One quick tug had his bedroll open and him laying on it, not bothering with his boots. It felt good to stretch—

Marc's hand brushed something stiff under the thick padding and he was up an instant later.

He snapped on the penlight around his neck and yanked the top layer up. There was a slip of paper and something dark swaying with the breeze he'd created. Uneasy, he bent down and picked them both up as he holstered.

The wind howled against the tent, pushing the cold draft through and the scent of vanilla teased his nose. He relaxed, thinking Angie had slipped him a note like a school kid. He inhaled deeply of the lock of hair, its softness and ebony color marking who it belonged to, and he flipped the small photo over eagerly, wondering what she'd left for him.

Marc gasped, entire body clenching in hurt.

The photo was one he recognized instantly from his time on base, and fury pounded at the graphic image of Kenn and Angie in bed together. Showing her upper body, it was enough to tell she had ropes around her wrists.

Marc felt the rage filling him, and didn't try to pull it in. Kenn had flashed this photo around, making cracks and snide remarks about how he owned the woman in the picture. To realize that had been Angie was more than Marc could take.

Kenn will pay for every word! he vowed, storming from the tent with eager feet. *Where is that cruel bastard?*

Kenn was waiting on the other side of the yellow tape, full of triumph, as their glares met across the distance.

Boo-ya! he celebrated silently as he braced himself to take what Brady was about to dish out. It wasn't only members who would witness it, but also Adrian, who was talking with the guards on the QZ. *Perfect.*

Angela stepped from the camper with wet hair and hurriedly thrown on clothes, finding Marc's furious form already moving toward Kenn. She ran hard, but it wasn't fast enough to stop the effects of Kenn's surprise.

Picture now wadded inside his clenched fist, Marc registered his target, and didn't stop to duck the tape as he swung.

Kenn hit the ground, grunting, and held himself still as Marc swung again. This hit sent blood flying from his mouth and so did the next.

Beyond reason, Marc used his fists steadily on the Marine, fury growing when Kenn didn't fight back.

That's how Angie felt! his pride shouted and Marc swung again.

Kenn waited for someone to pull Marc off, allowing himself to be hit repeatedly.

Thud!

His head snapped to the side, blood spraying, and then Marc shoved the photo into his mouth, sitting on his chest to hold him down.

“Eat that you worthless fuck! Isn’t so easy when your victim hits back, is it?!”

Kenn was struggling now, but Marc’s rage made him stronger as he shoved the wadded image deeper.

“Fucking coward!”

Marc was grabbed from behind and torn away, slung into the dirt by Doug’s huge arms.

“Stop it!” Angie’s voice barely registered.

Marc lunged toward Kenn the instant he hit his feet. “I’ll kill you!”

Kenn saw the Eagles were now standing between them and rolled over, coughing.

The photo he’d torn from his mouth drifted in the scuffle and Neil casually put his boot over it. He’d seen everything except the image that set Marc off.

“Stop it!”

Doug’s rough shake had Marc drawing back.

The Irishman gave him another jerk. “Snap out of it, grunt!”

He sounded so much like a superior officer that Marc was able to regain some control—until he noted Kenn’s smirk and then he lunged again.

“What did you do?!” Kyle demanded of Kenn, he and Seth using their bodies to keep Marc away.

“Nothing. I was just standing here and he attacked me!”

“You lying bastard!” Marc exclaimed, struggling harder.

Neil retrieved the photo while everyone was distracted.

“I’ll rip your heart out!”

“That’s enough.” Adrian stepped in front of Marc, words cold. “Stand down!”

Jarred out of his rage at the tone, Marc was startled at the hostility. *Why is the boss pissed at me?*

“You need to work off some steam. Go help Chris.”

Realizing the mess he’d been provoked into creating, Marc wrenched away from the strong arms holding him and stormed toward the vet area.

Angela let him go with worry lurking in her heart. They were pushing him too hard. If Kenn wasn’t careful, Marc would kill him.

Satisfied he’d done the best he could; Kenn picked himself up, subtly hunting for the photo.

“What did you do to him?” Angela demanded.

“I told you, nothing.” Assuming the wind had blown it away, Kenn turned toward the larger camp, wiping at his bloody face. “He’s not safe to have here if this is how he acts. I didn’t say one word to him today.”

The Eagles sent a disapproving glare after his retreating form.

“He did something,” Kyle insisted.

Neil nodded, the photo tucked safely in his pocket. “Yeah, he set him up to get in trouble and got away with it. We can’t let that happen twice.”

13

Adrian’s last stop of the night was Kyle and Neil, who were monitoring the far corner of the QZ while they waited to be cleared. Adrian approached them from the rear, listening hard.

“That’s the worst thing he could have done, though. Didn’t he know Kenn was trying to get him in trouble?”

“Check this out and tell me you’d have done different.”

Kyle’s quick intake of breath was part lust and part anger. “That son of a bitch! Those are ropes!”

“Exactly, but we can’t show this or it’ll help seal it with the camp, that she’s Kenn’s. Or get him banished and hurt Adrian’s plans.”

“Burn it.”

“I will... Did you hear that?”

“A patrol going by.”

“I’m telling you—”

Kyle waved a hand. “It’s Adrian.”

The blond stepped from the shadows, grinning. “I remember the first time I did that. Both of you nearly shot me.”

Kyle joined in the amusement, but Neil shut his mouth, now feeling on the outside after everything that had happened with Angela.

“One of the rookies still might, Boss,” Kyle joked, doing a fast sweep to ensure everything was okay.

Adrian didn’t say anything about what he’d overheard. “I’d like to talk to you guys.”

Guilty, Neil opened his mouth, “I’m sorry, I am.”

Adrian pinned him with a hard look, while continuing as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “I need honest impressions on what value she might add to my army and that means yours too, Neil.”

The jab hit and Neil was ashamed. “I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“Answer my question and we’ll handle the other shit later,” Adrian snapped, tired. “We’re wasting time with your *emotions*.”

Kyle winced at the slap, but it woke Neil from the self-pity haze he’d been functioning in all evening.

“Her...power speaks for itself. I’d vote for it on that reason alone...” Neil sighed, realizing he believed what he was saying. “And she’s good on some things. She likes it as much as we do—the fighting anyway. She’d probably be easy to teach.”

“No one expects this to be smooth at first. Ease up on her and yourself. If it all falls, I seriously doubt either of you will be the cause of it.” Adrian raised an expectant brow at Kyle.

“She’s got my vote, did after the airport kids, but today seals the deal. We mighta lost half the camp if she hadn’t stopped us.”

“The slide was east of us, not west,” Neil pointed out, not understanding what they meant. Kyle was the only one Adrian had told about the mental map. They’d marked the places together.

Kyle ignored him. “She’s a Level Two fighter right now and a Level Four, or maybe even Five with a gun. That sounds like the start of a good Eagle with the right personal training.”

Adrian took a sheet of paper from his pocket and gave it to Kyle. “Check those lessons over and tell me what you think.” His voice lowered. “You and Neil only, for a while.”

“You think he’ll come around enough to do it?” The mobster asked, not worried that his friend could hear them.

“Absolutely. Neil is one of the good guys. He needs to accept that he can trust her with our lives. When he does, he’ll be her biggest defender. After the wolf, of course.”

All three men laughed at that, the tension broken, and the light of Safe Haven’s boundaries began to glow with powerful magic.

Their bonds circled the camp and wove a golden net of invisible protection over them. Weakened by anger and strengthened by love, the glimmering strands crisscrossed through the night, creating a bubble few of them could discern, but all of them felt in one way or another. Six of Safe

Haven's guardians had gathered and their power was strong.

14

"The problem is fuel."

José's voice was annoyed. "They have to drive the tank in some places, to crush a path through."

Cesar slammed his scarred fist onto the hood of the muddy gold convertible, knocking his bottle to the dirt. "They must come faster!"

José reluctantly held silent. One day soon, this camp would be his and maybe sooner than Cesar may suspect, if he didn't find a fresh batch of women to ease the restlessness of their men. "I will tell them."

Careful not to let the wind rip it from his fingers, the younger Mexican handed Cesar a dirty baggie with slips of paper inside. "Rick's message."

Cesar read the sheets quickly, glowering at the warnings he read. The white man was telling him to wait, but Cesar wasn't going to do that. The tank team was on their way and in a few days, Safe Haven would belong to him!

The slaver scanned the remnants of the refugee camp, despising the signs he saw of rebuilding and strength. These people were organized, powerful. He had to stop them now.

"No whiskey. Tell them that as well."

Groans met this order, but no one protested despite Cesar rolling them by a town yesterday that

clearly had survivors. They hadn't taken a town in over a week and the guerillas were unhappy. Not nearly as much as Cesar, though. The stocky slaver was in a foul mood today and they knew better than to cross him.

One of his whores had managed to get his gun and kill herself. Normally, he wouldn't have cared, but this one had been pregnant with the first of his many bastards and he took it as a bad omen for his plans to seed America with his descendants. Timed with the defiance of these patriotic refugees, the only answer seemed to be death for them all.

Chapter Two
Island Drama
April 7th, 2013
Luke's Cabin on Pitcairn Island

1

“I still think this is a bad idea,” Luke stated sternly. “It might weaken your system to do so much, too soon.”

“It’s been four days since I’ve even sneezed!” Kendle protested.

Switching tactics when he grimaced, she smiled innocently at him. “Can I come out and play now?”

Luke chuckled. “We’re going, under protest.”

Kendle was glad. Her minor cold had come on suddenly and Luke had made her stay in bed, wanting to be certain she didn’t have a relapse, but if she didn’t get outside for a while, she’d suffocate.

“I’m fine, really.”

“The second you show signs, I’m picking you up and bringing you back here.”

The movie star’s grin widened. “You know there’s only one way to make sure I stay in bed, right?”

Magic sparked between them and the former pilot laughed. “I thought about that, too, but we need provisions.”

“Yeah, like razors,” she muttered, thinking of the jungle on her legs. No way she was letting LJ get anywhere near her until she could shave.

“You got your jacket?”

This time, she couldn’t stop the sharpness in her tone. “Yes. I also have extra socks and water. Can we go now?”

Luke sighed, feeling her impatience. He was always impressed with her ability to do what she needed to without railing against fate. The woman he’d viewed on TV before the war was a risk-taker, not afraid of any danger, and it had to bother her that she now had limits.

“Yes. Let me lock things up.”

That had her brow puckering. They’d recently begun to lock the cabin when they went somewhere. It was a result of two women on the island going missing. All the evidence pointed to them being abducted from their bedrooms, and the townspeople were up in arms. There had already been two searches, both of which Luke had locked her in for and joined, but no signs of the women or their attackers had been found. It was causing changes on this small island that even the end of the world hadn’t.

Kendle turned toward the jungle, not wanting Luke to know what she was thinking about again. The people here refused to believe there had been

a war, despite all the signs. She and Luke had made a second trip to town yesterday, and left without any supplies after getting into an argument with two other patrons in Baxter's. The men had overheard her comment about the sunsets, comparing them to the shots of the sky after a nuclear detonation, and it hadn't taken much from there to spark the fuse. Admit it or not, the people here were worried that whatever had happened might find its way to this tropical paradise. Denial was how they were handling it.

"And sarcasm," she muttered, flushing at the memory of their words. She'd never been called a whore so harshly and it was still stinging. Even Luke knocking the snob on his ass hadn't helped. He'd gotten her on the bike and out of sight before the tears came and she'd let them run down his back, unable to do more than hang on. As LJ sped them furiously home, she had been certain that would be the last time they went to town for supplies. Whatever they needed from here, they'd make or go to the crazy woman for.

"Ready?"

Kendle shifted her kit more firmly onto her shoulders. "I'm right behind ya."

Instead of moving toward the jungle, Luke stopped by her and held out a thin cord of strong rope. "Around your waist."

Kendle did it without argument, handing him the ends so he could tie it the way he wanted. She knew she should have thought of it. Tied, was the

only way she'd ever let her crew travel through a jungle, but the time before felt so far away most days that she often forgot who she'd been.

Luke dropped into the soft grass at her jean-clad legs, hoping this wasn't as bad an idea as it suddenly felt like. His hands snaked around her, tugging the ropes into place.

When he stood up, so close and warm, Kendle leaned in to place a soft kiss on his jaw. "Thank you."

He let the worry out a little, gruff tone covering his response to her action. "Stay close."

Luke tied the other end of the rope around his own waist, leaving them about four foot of space.

"Like I could get far in this setup."

Luke didn't grin. If not for them being out of so much, he'd put his foot down and stay here. This was a two-day trek and funny things were happening on the island. Besides the missing women and fruitless searches, there were also rumors of townspeople sighting nonresidents in the jungle that fled when spotted. There had also been two people who swore they'd heard boat engines last week.

He and Kendle had only been in town for a little while, but there had been more of the residents there at one time than ever before. Each of the small rooms the shopkeepers sometimes rented out were full of their neighbors who lived in the more isolated areas. *Bad times found their way to Pitcairn Island after all*, he thought.

Luke set an easy pace and for a while, there were only the sounds of the island around them. Kendle let her mind wander. She was still so grateful to be on land that it was common to find her staring at the sand or trees for long minutes. Being surrounded by nature was a sedative to her nerves that increased when they continued to get further from the roar of the ocean. She was anticipating the liquid death not being the first thing she heard upon waking for once. She'd survived and she wasn't alone. It was still enough to make her happy and she followed contentedly, enjoying the sights and smells.

Luke was glad to be able to give her something she wanted, but he still wished he could have left her at the cabin. The searches for the missing women had taken him away for a few hours of whacking and insult ducking, but there was no way he could stand to leave her unprotected for two entire days. Now that they were out here though, the feeling of danger was getting stronger. Even so many years out of action couldn't dull the instincts he had once trusted his life to and LJ sped them up a little, hand staying close to the sheath on his belt.

In his hurry to get her somewhere safer, Luke stepped over the very shallow grave without recognizing it for what it was. Whoever had put it there hadn't been concerned with the body staying buried.

An hour later, the feeling of menace had faded and the afternoon commenced with a sudden brightness that lifted Luke's spirits. He loved being in the jungle again. Before, when he'd been so alone, the greenness had been suffered through. Now, because of Kendle's love of nature, he'd begun to make peace with his past. She finally knew his full story.

He'd told her while she was sequestered in bed last week, and he was still stunned by her easy acceptance of the mistake he had made. Adamant that it hadn't been his fault, her comforting arms had broken through the shroud his guilt had built.

The enemy had purposely held the POW's below that Laos village, hoping the innocent civilians would provide a cover. When he and Frank had gotten the others clear and called in that they were alive, the small town had been firebombed despite their attempts to convince HQ to handle it from the ground. Luke had carried the guilt all his life until Kendle. She'd gotten through the wall and her needs were now more important than his. When she'd said she wanted to hike, he'd had to force himself to agree, but once out here, the beauty had returned for him, bringing peace.

Because of Kendle.

Who's probably hungry, he thought, able to hear her quiet footsteps behind him, but no sounds of her being winded yet. Their hiking was returning her strength and he was glad her cold had

been only that and not more of the pneumonia that she'd been battling when he found her.

Luke steered them around a large, vine-covered Miro tree and stopped, using his arm to wipe at his forehead.

"Are you feeding me now?" Kendle joked, shifting her kit from her shoulders to the ground.

"Some bread and water, and then you're back on the road."

She giggled, the noise echoing off the thick pad of treetops above them. They ate a small meal in the shade of an enormous Piñon tree that had more branches than she could count. Obviously old, she wondered what stories it might tell about those who had come this way before them. Some of the bark was petrified, and near the top of the branch, there were lines that she spent a few minutes examining while they finished eating.

The markings were rough, old, and she strained to make them out. What name was that? It started with an A, but that was all she could make out. The rest of the lines weren't in any order that she could discern, not even forming a picture, and she wondered if it was an ancient map. Maybe to a pirate treasure?

That was the old world, Kendle told herself sharply. Fame and fortune weren't worth shit now.

"Did you say something?"

Kendle was still busy trying to banish that part of herself that had sent her into films and the spotlight. "No, why?"

“Thought I heard...engines?”

They both waited in silence, listening hard, but there was only the jungle –chattering monkeys and chirping birds.

Luke laughed it off, gathering their mess. “Hearing things again.”

Kendle raised a brow. “Again?”

Luke’s shrug was embarrassed. “I was doing rounds of the cabin last night and thought I heard footsteps.” He grinned. “I’m old, it happens.”

Kendle wasn’t fooled by the joke. He was worried.

Luke handed her kit over. “Let’s roll.”

She snapped a smart salute. “Yes, sir!”

3

The excitement of the trip wore off for Kendle as the day warmed and sweat rolled down her neck. Skin covered for protection, the heat was smothering, and she was glad when the glaring sun finally faded behind the treetops. Soon, it would cool off.

Luke passed a canteen of water and she sipped at it, stomach unhappy with the heat and walking. None of their hikes had lasted more than a couple hours and she was feeling tired, something she recognized as a side effect of the radiation or whatever she’d been blasted by. It hit her hard when it came and she swayed a bit, steps no longer careful.

Luke knew she needed a break, but he wanted to reach the creek before dark and he tugged gently on the rope until she was at his side. He slid an arm around her and kept them moving, feeling her relieved body melt against his. Damn, she was hot.

“Maybe we should make camp around here and go on in the morning,” he suggested and wasn’t surprised when she disagreed.

“I’m fine. The sun will go down and I’ll get a second wind.”

“We’ll be at the creek in another hour. We’ll camp there and get our supplies in the morning.”

Kendle was too uncomfortable to insist. She’d made good progress, but it was clear she had a long way to go before she would be healthy again.

The day got warmer as they wound through the jungle, following a faint path that Luke kept track of. The tracks he saw were old, mostly animals, and it made him feel better to know they were the first ones to come through here in a while. Much like when he had been Whacker in Vietnam.

“Do you smell that?”

Luke inhaled deeply. “No. What?”

Kendle sniffed again, sure it was strong enough for him to pick up too. “Sort of like...oil or gas fumes.”

Luke didn’t know if there was anything in the air or not. He wasn’t picking up much beyond the plants and animals around them. “People here have stashes. It’s probably a resident.”

Kendle slipped on a sharp rock, clutching at his arm, and LJ hauled her into place, thinking she was still too light. “All right?”

“Yeah, my shoe flap caught a rock.”

That was one of the many things on their list, what they had gone to Baxter’s for yesterday, and Luke steered them around the more obvious ruts and stones. Damn stupid townspeople!

Kendle could feel his sudden upset through the rigid lines of his body and guessed what had triggered it. “You know there’s a good chance I wouldn’t have gotten a pair anyway, right? Did you notice that puke green tennis shoe? Who wears that?”

Luke chuckled despite his anger. She hated him to be upset. When he fell into one of his...moments of the past, she was quick to snap him out of it with a joke or comment he wasn’t expecting. Life with Kendle was all peaches and sunshine. But for their past and the apocalypse, their life together would be perfect.

With Luke supporting most of her weight, Kendle was able to get her wind back and cool down a little. The sun was beating harder, but his big shadow kept some of it from her and she instinctively leaned into his side like a lover, enjoying being so close. He was hard and rippling strength against her, sending those stray curls of want into her stomach whenever he gazed down at her.

No, she definitely didn't view him as a man old enough to be her father. Luke was as far from that, for her, as it got.

Wondering about her thoughts, Luke didn't want to interrupt the moment with words and settled for pressing a gentle kiss to the top of her head and drawing her closer. Her arm went around his lean waist, the rope now coiled in his free hand, and the rest of the walk to the creek flew by.

4

An unnamed snake winding through Pitcairn's lush greenness, the creek was a narrow, deep waterway with mossy banks and a slow current. It twisted out of sight in both directions, almost hidden by the bushy leaves, and Kendle stared in awe.

“Beautiful.”

There was no paralyzing fear at the sight of it, as Luke had been half expecting.

“Can we swim across?”

Before he could answer, the water rose near the bank, crystal drops swelling into the air as a large crocodile padded out.

Kendle recoiled in horror, stumbling into LJ's arms. She stayed there.

“Yeah, she might not like that.”

The amusement in his voice calmed her and she flushed, thinking of the survival challenges she'd been on. She knew better.

“I didn’t realize crocodiles were so far south,” she stated, watching the huge animal pad into the shade of an uprooted tree.

“They’ve been moving further away from the big landmasses. We get a lot of things out here that are trying to escape progress.”

Kendle shook it off, peering around for a bridge. “So where do we cross?”

Luke motioned to the rippling water. “There.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“Is there a boat or something?”

Luke was busy digging through his pockets. “Or something.”

Kendle waited as patiently as she could. Thanks to the crocodile, she was now feeling the same dread that struck her when she heard the ocean. When he began tying ropes together, her brows drew together in concentration, trying to figure out what he was doing.

A few minutes later, her lips curved into a grin as he put together a rope ladder. Upon recognizing it, she tilted up to find a tree house. Cleverly built around the trunk, the small shelter was so well hidden; she doubted many people even knew it existed.

“We’ll hang up there til morning and then cross.”

Her thoughts drifted to spending the night in the small shack and she blushed.

Kendle's thoughts changed as they climbed up. From the garbage and personal items she got a quick glimpse of, someone was using this as a home and she wasn't surprised when Luke immediately got them down and out of the area.

What bothered her was the concern on his face. Did he mind that someone had been using his place? Kendle frowned. Was it even his place?

It took her a minute to realize he was leading them back the way they'd come and she stopped. "Hey, what gives?"

Luke kept walking, tugging her along. "We have to get to town."

Kendle stopped resisting at his tone. "Why?"

"I need to talk to the Mayor."

Kendle flinched. That was Ethan's daddy.

"For what?"

"I saw something that I need to tell him about," Luke ground out, wishing she would leave it alone.

"What was it?"

Luke increased their pace, mind flying. They would have to walk in the dark. He could put her on his back if he had to.

"Is this about the missing women?"

Luke flinched. "Yeah, come on."

He led them onto a more traveled path, not liking the quietness of the jungle around them.

Voices came to them, male, and Luke started moving again. "Good."

They went a few feet into the thick greenness before Kendle could hear what he had. Footsteps and... muttering?

“Who’s out there?” Luke called.

“Who indeed, you ruffian! Tired of the game finally?”

Luke and Kendle emerged from the bushes into a small clearing, and found three servants in tan slacks and vests surrounding a fourth man. This one was tall, expensively dressed, and very angry.

“You’ll be paying for this, Mr. Johnson! I’ll see to it personally.”

“What are you talking about?” Kendle asked, but was ignored.

“I’m glad you’re here, Kraft. We found something...”

“Of course I’m here, you idiot!” the Mayor snapped, “You led me on a merry chase, but it’s finished now and I’ll have my cloak!”

Luke frowned, listening to the man this time. “What?”

Their complete confusion was obvious and the man wilted before their concern.

“It wasn’t you.”

“No, but listen, we found something in the creek shack. You need to gather a group of men and we’ll do another search.”

The Mayor regarded him as if he was a fool and Kendle recognized that glassy stare from her own terrors. He was afraid of something.

She stepped forward. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not.”

He gawked at them with eyes the same shade of green as his Ethan’s were.

“I’ve been following the ghosts, and now one of them has stolen my favorite cloak and I can’t get it back.”

Shock, Luke thought.

Kendle took it a bit more seriously. “Did you see someone take your cloak?”

The Mayor fidgeted from foot to foot distractedly, removing his hat to wipe at his forehead, “I saw a shadow grab it from the line right after the maid put it out. I was in my common room with the valets.”

His accusing glare went over Luke as he said this, making Kendle want to slap him, but she kept pushing for answers instead. “What did you witness exactly?”

“There was a man...a ghost man. He had my eyes!” The Mayor shoved himself away from her. “I’m getting out of here.”

“We’ll help you get home,” Kendle offered and was shocked by the revulsion in his response.

“I’d sooner walk with the ghost. Excuse me!” He was gone a few seconds later, his valets trailing silently behind him.

“He’s nuts, too,” Luke muttered.

“And scared. Something spooked him.”

“What do you think he’ll do?”

“I’m not sure he even heard me.”

“Who else can you tell?”

His snort was quick. “There’s not been any real crime on Pitcairn in years. There’s one police station, on the other side of the island, and that’s it. If someone goes missing, the residents usually band together and go searching.”

“Do you want to go try to get a search party together ourselves?”

“Won’t do any good without one of the Krafts’ there to nod and say ‘yes’ in the right places. We’ll have to tell the Bounty Bay sheriff.”

Kendle waited patiently and Luke finished his thinking aloud.

“We already sent for him when the women went missing. If he’s coming, he’ll be here in the next few days. It’ll take us a lot longer to go to him and we might miss each other along the way.”

He glanced up at the sinking sun. “We’ll keep going to Jenna’s store. Sheriff Cole should be in town by the time we get there. If not, we’ll go find him.”

“There’s a bridge or something, right?” Kendle asked.

Luke tried not to think about what he’d found in the shack. “Or something.”

Luke led them to the base of a cliff wall that was overgrown with vines and moss. Under a far edge, he tugged, and a wooden plank slid out from under the stone. He hefted it over his shoulder.

“Come on.”

The plank was thick and sturdy, and when he brought them through the trees a bit further up, she grinned in delight.

“Or something, all right.”

There was a rope seat hanging from a high tree branch. Connected to more cords that stretched across the dangerous creek, all it was missing was the actual seat that Luke had over his shoulder.

“Ever do this?”

“I didn’t get to do the tree flying or the research when we flew to Brazil. The plane crashed.”

Luke slid the wooden plank in place. He’d watched the documentary after she had been rescued, thinking how lucky she’d been to survive at all, let alone only losing one crewmember. The crash itself had been captured on film by another plane and it was ugly.

“This is simple. Hang on. It sways a lot more than a normal schoolyard ride.”

He guided her into it and when he sat down beside her, she snuggled into his embrace.

“Hang on,” he ordered and she obediently clutched the harness with a tight grip.

Luke pulled the machete from his pocket and whacked through the anchor rope with one harsh swipe.

The swing jerked, sliding toward the water and Kendle laughed aloud. *I’m finally flying!*

The jarring stop as they hit the ground on the other side tossed her from the swing and she landed in a pile at his feet, still giggling.

“I’m gonna...wanna...do that...again.”

Luke let go of his rigid control, caught up in the moment. “Whenever you want, Darlin’, just say the word.”

Happiness was foreign to both of them, but it felt natural to lean in and seal their joy. “I love you, Kendle. You know that already.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “And I’m happy with you, Luke, honestly. This feels good.”

It wasn’t what he hoped for, but it was enough for now and he dipped to her lips for a longer, fire-building kiss that had them both a bit dazed when he finally pulled away.

“We should go.”

Kendle melted against his side once more, grinning. “As long as we get to do that again on the way, you can take me anywhere.”

5

The crazy lady across the creek was indeed that-crazy.

Kendle liked her on first sight, waving to them with a gun in one scarred hand and a cigar in the other.

“I won’t sell ya more than two of anything and I ain’t got two of much.” Her voice was younger

than her face and she motioned at Kendle. “You go first.”

Kendle turned to Luke in confusion and he flashed resigned amusement. “She won’t let more than one shopper in her place at a time. House rules.”

He didn’t sound worried, and Kendle stepped up onto the wooden porch and followed the woman inside.

Now that she was closer, Kendle saw that the woman was barely that, more of a girl in a woman’s body and she wondered briefly what had happened to make her pick this way of living.

“What’s your list?”

Kendle reached for the paper in her pocket and the gun rose.

“Real slow.”

Luke appeared in the doorway. “She’s getting the list, Jenna.”

The woman calmed at the sound of Luke’s voice and lowered the big weapon. “Things ‘r funny now.”

They both agreed, thinking of the Mayor and the shack. Kendle handed over the list with a friendly smile and got a toothless grin.

“She’s cuter than the last ‘en you brought round here.”

Kendle froze and behind her, Luke did the same.

“The last one?”

The woman gave her a worried look, “She was torn up some. Don’t let him hurt you like that.”

Sure she had Luke confused with someone else, Kendle grinned. “I’m the one he’ll have to watch out for.”

Instead of an answering comment, the woman turned to Luke. “You paying gold like usual?”

“I have cash. I’ve never paid you with gold.”

The woman studied Luke as if she hadn’t met him before. “Who are you?”

“Luke Johnson.”

“The outcast who killed those people in Nam?”

Luke flushed. “Yes.”

Kendle felt her anger begin to grow. Would this woman treat him badly too?

“Always hated those darkies,” she muttered, shocking Kendle. “Should be a hero.”

The woman began to gather the items on the list and Luke rolled his eyes, mouthing *crazy*.

Kendle hid a snicker, agreeing. The woman had definitely been alone too long.

“Ain’t got no cream left, but there’s sugar. Find a quart of milk and make your own.”

Luke grunted. He usually did that anyway, but the trade-off of...milk with the maid at Baxter’s was over now that he had Kendle.

As if she’d heard the thought, the woman glanced over at him. “Mora was here yesterday, asked about you.”

Luke glared. “I’ve told her.”

“Aye.” The woman stuffed things into one of her net bags. “Coffee’s long gone for town folks, but I might still be able to find a small amount for ya.”

“In exchange for?”

The woman pointed upward at Luke’s question. “Got a hole and no man help.”

“That’s worth a lot more than coffee,” Luke protested.

“Guess I could feed ‘n house ya for the night too,” the woman gave in reluctantly.

“Saves us the trouble of making camp in the dark,” Luke stated, looking at Kendle.

Kendle shrugged. “Whatever you want to do is fine.”

“The wood’s under the porch. You’ll find the rest already up there,” Jenna instructed.

“You’ve had someone working on it?” Kendle’s question was drowned out.

“Hello in the hut!”

Jenna gestured at Luke. “You make sure she don’t touch nothin’.”

They stayed inside as the woman went out to greet the new arrival, and Luke gave Kendle an apologetic glance. “I told you she’s not all there, didn’t I?”

Kendle wasn’t offended. “I’m not a resident. It shows.”

Luke wasn’t sure what to say to that and was saved a response by the conversation going on outside.

“Won’t tell you nothin’! Get off my property.”

Luke went outside.

Kendle followed.

“I’m not here for your traps, Jenna. I’m searching for... There you are.”

The sheriff scanned them both with a knowing smirk. “Figured you two would be heading this way after what happened in Baxter’s.”

“How long have you been in town?”

The man’s weather-beaten face went cool at Kendle’s question. “That’s none of your concern, Ms. Roberts. I’m interviewing everyone on the island.”

The sheriff wasn’t putting off the vibes of a friend and Kendle added little as Luke told him about the things that had been happening.

“And you say the Mayor was upset or jumpy?”

“Scared, shocked.”

“What about the shack? Any tracks in the blood to go with that handprint and hair?”

“I didn’t stay to do your job. I got her out of there and we headed for town,” Luke snapped, angry the man would spill something so awful in front of the two females. “That’s when we stumbled across the Mayor.”

“Stumbled upon Mayor Kraft...” The sheriff was writing in his little notebook. “You run across anyone new on the island?”

Kendle waited for the wide man to walk toward her, but he didn’t.

“I thought I heard an engine on the way here. Faded too fast to be sure.”

“You buyin’ something or gettin’ outta here?”

The crazy woman had either forgotten she’d told the Sheriff to leave or changed her mind, and the uniformed man didn’t remind her.

“You got any of that fly soap left? Damn bugs are worse than last year.”

“Got half a bar some dumb tourist tried to steal and broke when I chased him off.”

“That’ll do.”

The woman came inside and Kendle followed, not caring for the way the lawman’s leer crawled over her red skin when Luke looked away. He was a sleaze, she’d bet on it.

“Can I do anything while he’s working on the roof?”

“You read?”

Kendle wondered if the woman’s sight might be going bad. “Yes. Would you like me to recite you something?”

The woman snorted, handing her a thick book from a nearby shelf. “Read yourself that and then come here and we’ll make our plans.”

It was the Holy Bible.

“Is she staying with you permanently?”

The insinuating question drew Kendle’s attention to the men outside.

“Yes.”

“You know her from the mainland?”

“No.”

“You’re giving me very short answers. Wanna tell me why that is, Mr. Johnson?”

Luke glared at the man. “Well you’re askin’ some real stupid questions. Unless you think she’s the person responsible for those missing women, she’s none of your concern!”

The sheriff’s countenance filled with satisfaction. “So, the rumors are true. Have you told her about your past?”

Luke flushed with anger. “Yes, she knows it all,” he ground out.

The lawman frowned coolly. “I’ll check into that.”

Luke’s fist locked into place to keep from hitting the bastard. “You do your job while you’re at it, and find out who’s causing trouble or October’s elections could include a new peacekeeper. Won’t take much after the way you’ve handled things.”

That struck a nerve and the man snapped his pen in and put away his notebook, suddenly finished. “I’ll stop by the shack next. If I need to talk to you again?”

Luke hedged, not sure why, but willing enough to lie now. “We’re leaving tonight.”

He heard the woman and Kendle come out onto the porch, and waited for one of them to give away his bluff, but there was silence.

The sheriff stepped by to get his package, neatly covered in a sheet of plastic wrap. He

handed the woman a stack of coins. “Put the rest of that on my bill, mother.”

“I will, Cole. Be safe.”

He left Luke and Kendle speechless. He was her son!

The woman cackled, going to the side yard. “Love that one. It never gets old,” she snorted in amusement. “Usually only works on mainlanders.”

Kendle and Luke shared a rueful grin at the joke that had been played on them, and followed the woman to their assigned chores.

6

“They’re calling a town meeting,” Luke told the two women as they ate supper, thinking that Jenna probably didn’t care one way or the other.

“The Sheriff said one of the items being voted on is whether or not we should draft a crew to go to the mainland and find out what happened.”

I might be on that ship, was Kendle’s first thought, and she looked up to find Luke staring at her knowingly.

“I told him we’d be there for the meeting.”

Kendle managed not to say anything, swallowing her fear of seeing Ethan.

“Well, I won’t,” Jenna stated firmly. “As long as those Krafts’ are in charge, won’t nothin’ good be done no matter what way you vote.”

“You’re not the only one who thinks so.”

Jenna's voice was grim, "That won't matter, neither. They'll rule this island until they die, like their murderin' relatives did."

"How long has their family been in charge?" Kendle asked curiously.

The woman made a crude motion. "They're from those that came in 1790, the Mutineers."

"You mean the legend of Bounty Bay?" Kendle had studied it for a book report in high school and been fascinated. "I've read about that."

"Weren't no legend. Those pirates settled this island and their offspring's been rulin' ever since."

Kendle thought quickly, sensing the woman had a piece to the puzzle she'd found earlier on the tree. "Have they always been so..."

"Evil? Deranged? Yes. They get or take what they want. Always have." Jenna gestured at their mostly untouched plates. "How's them cricket balls? It's a new recipe."

7

The sheriff had no trouble finding the creek shack, and the ladder still hanging there gave him a chill. No one on Pitcairn ever left rope or the like behind, unless they were in a hurry. Something up there had spooked the Vietnam vet and that was a problem. Luke was one of the toughest people on this island and, like him or not, Cole was glad the hard-ass would be at his mother's place tonight. No way would Jenna let them leave after darkness fell.

The sheriff peered up as the shadows came in with the sun sinking below the haze of clouds. Maybe he'd hang around and discover if someone came here during the night to clean things up. If so, he would have some answers. If not, he'd go up and try to fit new pieces into the puzzle.

The choice made, Cole swept his tracks into the couple's scattered markings and settled himself in a low tree half a dozen yards away. With his gun in his hand and a pouch of extra bullets, he felt confident that he could handle whatever came up.

8

Luke labored on the roof well into the evening. Kendle sat in a chair and went back and forth from watching him, to reading the book Jenna had given her. Instead of the laughter she'd expected, the woman's face had lit up in satisfaction at the sight of her opening it and that had been enough to get Kendle to keep going. Now that she had, the world of life's creation was dazzling her with all the possibilities. What if man wasn't created in God's image at all, but in that of—

“There's a page further on you might care for,” the woman muttered as she went by, being careful not to let Luke hear. “But you mind what comes between just the same.”

Kendle flipped through the pages, curious, and found a folded corner near the rear. It opened to Revelations and held a single sheet of dingy yellow paper. Sensing the way Jenna wanted it

handled, Kendle first glanced up to be certain Luke was out of sight before opening it.

“The Mutineers rushed upon our beach like a storm, the leader killing my dad and taking his place. He wasn’t a ghost, I saw him bleed, but he was a demon! and he possessed my father. Brought back from a saber to the heart, he has become the evil that stalks this island. Not only does he rape and pillage, he takes free women and natives, selling them into slavery. My beloved little sister has met this fate and I’ve no choice, but to try to kill him. Please God, help me! There’s no one I can trust, not even mother, whom I fear is also possessed. My heart mourns the life I once knew.”

Kendle felt tears come and blinked them away. She had questions flying through her mind, but Jenna was nowhere in sight. Was it the Kraft family? Where was this girl now? Was it Jenna? Was she a Kraft?

Not thinking to tell Luke she was stepping outside, Kendle moved that way with the slip of paper in her hand.

9

“Kendle?” Luke scanned the kitchen before stepping onto the porch. “Kendle? Jenna?”

There was no answer and he came down the stairs slowly, identifying her tracks. He followed them around the side of the house, aware of the

lack of normal jungle noise. He drew up short at the voices.

“He wouldn’t tell and I won’t either.”

“You’ve given your word.”

“And I’ll keep it, but I don’t understand why you’ve told me all—”

“Because you have to take my place.”

Kendle’s voice sounded shocked. “Are you kidding me? You are crazy.”

There was no response to that and Luke stepped around the side of the building to find them both thumbing through stacks of books they’d pulled from crawl space boxes.

“Here it is.”

The woman handed a sheet of paper to Kendle. “That’s my dad. *Before.*”

Kendle pretended she hadn’t noticed Luke and he slowly faded into the jungle to observe.

“Do you have one of him after?”

“Not even a town picture on the wall. Cameras can’t capture images of the Devil.”

Luke’s mind raced. Someone in town was her father, someone who didn’t have any photos of themselves on the community walls...

Only one person didn’t have pictures up. It was a big joke between the shopkeepers to surprise him into one. The crazy lady’s father was Mayor Kraft.

“And your brother?”

Jenna flinched violently. “That thing is not my baby brother! The mutineers dragged him into the jungle and when he returned, he weren’t Ethan no

more, but some slobbering pile that lie on our floor and wet himself. He calmed down after a year or two and started acting right again, but the humanity was gone. They got my whole family!” She glared at Kendle wildly. “And they’ll get you, too, if he’s not careful. They’re already watchin’, waitin’ for the chance to possess you, movie star.”

The woman went toward the house and Luke waited for her to be out of sight before joining Kendle by the fire of the heat-can that also served as an ‘open’ sign.

Kendle held out the photo and Luke stared in shock at the image of Mayor Kraft, an old man in his sixties at least.

“There’s no way that’s *this* Mayor, right? The last one?”

“She’d have to be at least that old, too. She’s lying.”

Kendle handed him the slip of paper and kept studying the photograph. There was something about it.

“This proves nothing. You know that, right?” he demanded, dropping the yellowed letter on top of the closest box as if it was too hot to hold.

She nodded, but for her it was another clue. That was a page torn from a terrified girl’s journal and it had reminded her strongly of her twin, Dawn, whom she had lost in the war.

“She’s suffering from a trauma, Luke. Something happened when she was a kid and she’s hoping for help. Can’t we check it out?”

Luke stared. “And do what? Force him to acknowledge his daughter? Didn’t seem like she wanted him around.”

“She wants me to kill him for her,” Kendle blurted.

Luke’s scowl took up his whole face. He snatched the items from her hand and tossed them on top of a nearby stack.

“Crazy Bat!” He tugged her close, ignoring her protests. “I’m staying by you until we get the hell out of here.”

Kendle gave in, snuggling into his warm embrace. “You’re the boss.”

Kendle and Luke spent the night in a corner bunk with their blankets and each other to keep them warm, both scanning alertly at every sound of the creaking hut. By the time dawn found the island, they were back in the jungle, leaving the small woman to her craziness.

The feeling of danger Luke had noticed on the way there returned when they finally neared the cabin. He was glad to discover the door untouched, his alarms still in place. He also didn’t find any prints, but there was a clear feeling that someone had been here and he combed the area for any signs. Something was going on here, something dangerous, and he doubted it had much to do with ghosts of the dead pirates who had settled this

island. His bet was on the living. They were usually the problem.

Chapter Three

Troopers and Trackers

April 8th
Near Plainview, SD

1

Adrian moved his herd hard and fast after leaving the Black Hills, making almost 70 miles in three days.

Now that they were camped for the next few, his worry was increasing. Every break they took allowed the slavers to get closer. His gut twisted at that thought and he controlled the grimace as he slid into his tent. There were already people lined up outside, and he motioned the first of them in with a warmth he didn't feel. The heartburn was worse than usual.

He had sent out trucks to clear paths in two directions in case they needed to run, and everyone was on high alert. He could have kept going, got them further away, but his witch said an attack was coming and there was no outrunning fate. It was something he wouldn't even try. Without her words, what would he be doing right now?

Adrian directed Brady to the empty chair as he stepped inside and the wolf curled up in the doorway. *Much the same*, he answered his thought,

sighing. If the camp knew the slavers were coming, they'd panic and run. They weren't strong enough yet to even think of challenging the killers.

“What can I do for you today?”

“I'd like to talk to you about some holes in security.”

Despite knowing their deaths might be coming, Adrian couldn't prepare openly or warn his people, and it was hard to keep his mind on the things at hand. The worry was relentless.

By the time he had cleared the short line waiting to speak with him, Adrian found himself calling out to her. Surely, there was something else he should be doing?

Angela heard him clearly and got up from her seat at his mess table without speaking. She'd been waved into the happy crowd for each meal, and while she was grateful to be welcome, she hated how everyone followed those center people so closely. *It's like... sheep watching the shepherds to know when to run*, she thought, finally understanding why the Eagles and Adrian sometimes referred to them that way.

The four men at the table didn't speak and their eyes followed her toward the men's tents. A few seconds later, Seth casually followed. Her guards were still mostly unnoticed by both the camp and lower three levels of Eagles, and it had to stay that way for now.

Angela walked quickly through the people she was coming to care for, not responding to greetings or questions. She'd done what they wanted for the last two days. She drove; had a shift with the doctor in the medical tent; spent time with Charlie in his new canvas; had a shower surrounded by shadows; and then went to her tent to spend the night tossing. Then got up and did it again.

It was a routine that she didn't care for. In fact, she hated it after even such a short time. The sentries that she had begun making friends with in quarantine were hanging back, waiting for Adrian's choice, she assumed, and she was firmly on the outside. That brief time had given her a glimpse of the world Adrian was offering and she wanted it.

There were three people in line waiting for Adrian when she arrived at his tent and she was surprised when he cut things short with them and shook his head at two more moving his way. Standing in the flap, he motioned her in, and then shut it behind them.

“Thank you for coming.”

She surveyed his spotless canvas home in the manner the Eagles always did, verifying things were okay by the state of his tent.

“If you're busy, I can come later.”

“Now is better for them too, they just don't know it.”

Angela heard it in his voice, the assurance he needed, but couldn't ask for, and gave him a smile that was a bit fuller than she'd intended. "Well then, I'm all yours."

If only, was his first thought and he smothered it. She already had two dogs sniffing at her heels. She didn't need a third.

"How are things?"

Angela sighed, impatient too. "I don't need to be warmed-up."

Adrian frowned, a bit stung. "I need to know some things about the remaining twin and the slavers. Like where they are and if the brother will come alone or with help."

Adrian observed in fascination as she searched for him.

"Not far enough. The Black Hills, using our old site." Her lids opened to reveal a smoky, rolling blue that waited for his next question.

"And the twin?"

"The weaker of the two. He'll want help, but he'll sneak in during the night if he has to."

Her voice sounds like endless minefields, he thought. "We have plans."

"But, you have no faith," she warned as the magic slowly faded. Angela couldn't stifle the yawn fast enough and quickly tried to distract him before he could bring it up.

"I've stayed out of sight about as much as I can stand."

Adrian heard the confirmation of Marc's words in her tones. "Brady was by earlier and he made your unhappiness very clear. As of this moment, you are free to come and go."

"But you won't lift the guard."

"No." He saw her brows draw together and shrugged. "They wouldn't listen to me anyway on this one. Your man has them in line."

"When?"

"When you're safe."

Angela snorted unhappily. "That could be a while."

Adrian was torn between needing her protected and making it possible for her to stay. "We might be able to change it to no protection during meals and activities with the Eagles."

She waited, sure he'd give a little more and he let out another sigh.

"No guard during the day, unless we're traveling, or there's trouble."

"Thank you."

Her happiness faded and he noted the small glint of fear.

"I need something."

"Name it."

"I want that sentry to go on Charlie, an Eagle who won't let him leave without my permission. Not for any reason or with anyone, but me or Brady."

"He talked to me about that this morning too, was surprised you hadn't."

“I hadn’t made up my mind.”

“So you’ve chosen the *other* Marine?”

Angela stiffened. After the flashes the witch had put her through last night, the thought of talking about her love life with this man was mortifying. “Things are over with Kenn. I’ll tell him soon or he’ll provoke me into hurting him with it, but I have no idea what he might do.”

“Accept it.”

“That’s my hope.”

“And when you do go to Brady?”

She blushed, but didn’t deny it. “That’s too far away to think about yet. For now, I’d like to be considered single.”

“You’re waiting to discover if Kenn’s going to be a problem? Trying to ease him into the idea of you with another man before you actually do it?”

She gave him a short nod of embarrassment, pale cheeks stained with color at the conversation.

That would give the camp a choice, but it was one that none of them would care for, including her men. And it wasn’t what she wanted, either. He felt that.

“But it will give me the two things I need most, if I’m careful,” she forced out, needing him to know she’d thought it through. “Right now, I’m not strong enough to be an Eagle and the mate to a man like Brady. I’ll be constantly pulled between the two things I love and one of them will suffer.”

“But if you’re already in my army...”

“Then I’d never let it be taken from me. I’d know going into things that I’d still be an Eagle first, no matter what.”

They were the words that each of his highest men had told him in confidence after realizing his dream, and to hear it coming from a female was a bright moment for Adrian. It was not only proof of his hard work and plans; it was also a sign of their future finally starting.

“There’s a private lesson tonight, during mess. First, you have to find it without being stopped by any of the guards. If you still want to be an Eagle when it’s over, you can train publicly.”

2

“You’re sure?”

“Sorry.” Samantha shrugged apologetically. “I’ve never seen him before. Are you certain you did?”

“Yes!” Cynthia snapped. “He was government, I’m positive of it.”

So am I, Samantha thought, but only gave the reporter a cool glare. “Lies like that could get him banished.” She turned away. “Or you killed.”

Samantha entered the area behind the supply trucks, pondering her defense of Adrian. Cynthia was the enemy, representing the old ways that she was always accusing Adrian of. She was so blinded by her obsession to know who he’d been, that she couldn’t perceive her own flaws. The camp appeared to have written her off as another

bitter star from their past, but Samantha thought Adrian needed to be very careful or the reporter would figure it out. She was far from dumb.

As for who Adrian had been, Samantha had already placed him. It had come to her late last night and taken only a short deliberation to understand it didn't matter. It may have if she hadn't spent the time alone with him in his rig. He wasn't like the leaders of *before*—he actually cared. Adrian wasn't responsible for the mistakes of the old world, no matter who his father was and she thought most of the camp would agree. It was those few who wouldn't, that would keep the rest of them stirred up until he was forced out and Safe Haven collapsed. Like it or not, he was right to hide it from them.

Samantha mouthed a hello at the ponytailed sentry sitting on a high branch of the tree that overlooked the gun class, enjoying his surprise. Billy hadn't thought he'd be spotted with all that leaf cover, but Sam was getting better at feeling extra eyes on her. She strode toward the bleachers with a small smile.

Since her ride with Adrian, some of these healing people had also been friendlier, and she was glad, but that feeling of doom was impossible to shake. Even having the doctor tell her all the tests had been negative hadn't erased it.

“Morning, Samantha.”

The den mother was alone with two steaming mugs on the bench next to her, and Samantha

joined her reluctantly. It wasn't that she disliked the German, she just didn't feel like listening to her today.

“Morning, Hilda.”

Knowing it was rude, Samantha chose to sit at the far end, not in the mood for all the chats these women wanted to have or the advice they gave. She needed time to think, to figure out how to—

“Death surrounds you.”

Now standing in front of her, Hilda's words gave Sam a deep chill and she automatically took the mug that was held out.

“It followed you here. You and the other one he wants us to view as a man.”

Ready to do battle to get out, Samantha was unprepared for the woman's harshly spoken words.

“It is good, ya? You have led them to their deaths. Those they've slaughtered will be grateful.”

The woman left and Samantha sipped the strange brew that smelled like tea and tasted like coffee. Was Hilda right? Was it supposed to work this way? If Adrian and his Eagles could handle Cesar, then she hadn't done anything wrong.

Samantha sighed. That evil man wasn't the only problem. When the slavers attacked, Adrian would be busy protecting his people from outside threats, not insides ones. With Rick already here, Adrian was in danger.

“Hi.”

Samantha looked up to discover Neil and his team walking by with hands full of equipment and realized they were teaching the class today. She'd noticed him before now, but with the dim sky to compliment the golden flecks in his hair, her body responded. *He's cute.*

"Hello. I'm Samantha. Sam."

"Right on top." Neil studied his sheet as if he didn't already know who she was. "You're early. No breakfast?"

Samantha was aware of his team giving her funny looks. "Not hungry."

She flashed a smile Neil saw through. "Besides, I wanted a chance to get here first and mess with things so I can pass."

Neil chuckled, surprised by his instant desire to help her feel welcome. What was it about this group that had come in? Other than Rick, they all had a spark that drew people.

"Come help us set up, then. Better chance that way."

Very self-conscious, Samantha followed Neil into the midst of the working Eagles and none of them missed the way her hand hovered over the gun on her hip. They recognized the weapon as Adrian's, but the males were well trained, and none of them asked about her having it, even though she hadn't been through the class yet. There was only one way she'd gotten the boss's gun, and they wouldn't question his choice.

"What can I do?"

Neil gestured at the line of targets. “Help me roll these onto the spots they’re marking off.”

The roller-bound targets were large and bulky, but she was sure Neil could have done it by himself. Make-work to keep her from feeling so alone? *Probably*, she thought, shoving against the ruts in the ground. It was nice of him.

“This is good. Let’s get the next one.” Neil used a subtle gesture to tell the Eagles to leave the remaining targets for him and Samantha.

His team obligingly labored on other things, and studied them both curiously. Did Neil like the blond woman? Jeremy had mentioned his suspicions to the rest of their team and Neil was unaware of his every expression being scrutinized.

Samantha and Neil placed all the targets onto their marked and measured places, silent except for his directions. Each one took them further from his men and the large rollout put at 200 feet was nearly at the edge of the caution tape.

Samantha saw Neil scan those on duty before sweeping the area himself. Comforted, she asked, “Anything else you don’t really need help with?”

Neil laughed. “I’ll think of something for you to do, Miss Moore.”

The offer sounded very personal, he realized, but before he could make it clearer, she surprised him again.

“If Becky hears you say that she might try to kill me.”

Neil froze and Samantha realized she had made a mistake. She'd found out by listening to the other women gossiping. Neil knew it wasn't a secret, right?

Apparently not, because his mouth was open and his cheeks were flushed.

Samantha sighed. *I can't get the hang of things here.* "It was a joke, sorry."

She strode toward the bleachers at a fast clip and Neil stared after her in confusion. *Awfully jealous tone for a joke*, he thought. What the hell?

She stiffly bypassed the filling seats and disappeared behind them. She wasn't staying for the practice now. *Damn.*

The rest of the gun class was tedious for Neil. He kept watching for her to return or even walk by, and he wasn't paying attention. Usually, this was the best lesson to be in charge of, but shortly after the women began firing, he found himself shuffled to the rear by his own team. It was where they put Eagles who were having a bad day, so that it wouldn't rub off on the women—something that no one wanted—and it was humbling to find himself in that position. Then it was torture as he spotted the object of his frustrations coming back toward the class, but couldn't go talk to her.

Samantha stepped around the corner of the bleachers with determined feet. Neil was the one who liked young girls. Why should she miss her test and the hunting trip? She strode to the guard

with the clipboard, pretending the trooper wasn't watching her heatedly. "Am I too late?"

Jeremy subtly rotated so that he could view Neil's profile. "Nope."

He waved her to the line, noting the sudden life in his team leader. "Last shooter."

Neil's XO took a minute to study her paperwork and her. This was the first woman that Neil had shown any interest in, other than Angie, and who could blame him for that? Neil liked to flirt, especially with little Becky, but he needed someone stronger, and Jeremy began evaluating Samantha as if she were in line to be Neil's mate.

"Whenever you're ready."

Samantha got set, trying to remember everything, and she jumped at the man's low voice near her ear.

"Grip's too tight. Try to relax; pretend none of us are here."

His soothing tone allowed her to do just that.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"Three hits at fifty feet. Pass. Pack it up," Neil ground out, instantly hating how close Jeremy was standing to her.

He sounds mad, Samantha thought. "Can you tell him I didn't mean anything by it?"

She turned to leave, but Neil's second in command stepped in front of her, following those instincts that Adrian was slowly teaching them to trust.

“Level Two test, now.” Her chart notes came to mind. *No blindfolded attempts yet. Apt to panic and fire randomly.* “No blindfold,” he amended.

Samantha opened her mouth to say no, but met Neil’s angry glare over the guard’s shoulder. Tension crackled.

“He doesn’t like this, you talking to me,” she guessed.

Jeremy didn’t deny it. “It is for him, though.”

Curious. Why wouldn’t Neil want her talking to his team? Because of Rick, maybe? Samantha shrugged. “Okay.”

She needed five bulls-eyes in any target or one in the farthest to achieve Level Two. She wanted to go for those closest to be sure of passing, but at that moment, she wanted Neil’s respect more. To get that, only the best shooting would do.

“Are questions allowed?”

“Absolutely,” Jeremy answered, pleased she had one.

“What’s the wind at? I know it’s south to south-east again, but I can’t feel the gusts for the bleachers.”

The Eagle automatically checked the flagpole dials Adrian had put up, not avoiding the glare. With that blanket of skycrap, as the teenagers were calling it, still lingering above them, there wasn’t any. “Ten to eighteen.”

“Thanks.”

Jeremy wasn’t sure what else to say and cleared her a wide line of fire. She’d asked an

Eagle's question. Would she be like Angie and want to join the Eagles? Did it matter? Wouldn't being an Eagle make her a better candidate for Neil's side or would a strong woman intimidate him?

Bang!

"Damn it!"

"Bulls-eye, farthest target!"

Samantha's exclamation was mostly lost under Neil's impressed call.

"That's a pass."

"Got a band aid?"

Jeremy saw her hand dripping blood and instantly knew what had happened. "I've done that so many times I almost don't feel it anymore. Come on over here."

As soon as the sentry pulled out the first aid kit, they were surrounded by men, Neil the first to reach them.

"She okay?"

"What happened?"

"That sucks."

"Slide got her."

"Can't tell you how many times I've done that."

Instead of scaring her, Samantha felt that uneasiness lift a bit at their concern. She held up her hand as Jeremy opened a bottle of alcohol. "A bleed is an automatic pass, right?"

There were snorts and chuckles from all of them except Neil, and Jeremy leaned a bit closer to

the woman than he needed to, testing the strength of Neil's attraction. He had a plan forming, but Jeremy was suddenly positive he would be the one unhappy when it was done.

"This part'll hurt a bit," he soothed, drawing a smile that was cut off by a grimace of pain as he dumped the bottle over the gash.

"Damn it!" Sam squeezed her lids together against the sting, barely aware of shuffling noises.

"Think you used enough?"

Neil's voice was full of a hardness his team wasn't used to hearing, but Jeremy glanced up innocently. "Do you think I should do it again?"

Lids still shut, Sam tried to pull away. "No!"

"Stop it, let me check it out."

Samantha froze, realizing it was Neil now gently holding her throbbing hand.

"It's not that bad, but there's gun oil under the edges. John or Angie should clean it out." Neil fished through the kit for a bandage, trying to hide how touching her had affected him. "You can look now."

Samantha grinned sheepishly as she took the bandage. "Sorry. I'm a coward at heart."

"The opposite, maybe," he responded as she slapped the patch on without wincing. "Do you want someone to walk you to the medical tent?"

He realized they were alone, his team suddenly busy packing things up, and grunted at the obvious matchmaking. "I'll walk with you. I need to talk with John anyway."

“I’ll throw some Neo on it later. I’ll be fine.”

Neil chuckled. “You don’t want the alcohol again.”

“Or the time,” she admitted. “I needed to pass the first test today, so I can go hunting.”

Storing the knowledge that she’d come for a Level One test, but gotten Level Two, Neil pushed his hat up, countenance still as cool as ever. “I’m surprised you’d want to. It’s bloody work.”

“Life is bloody.” She wiped her stained gun down the side of her jeans before sliding it into its holster with a loving pat. “I’ll clean you up after. Our work is not yet finished.”

Sam moved toward the parking area, adjusting her bandage. “Catch ya later, Neil.”

“Yes, you will.”

It shocked him to hear those words fall from his own lips, and he spun around to keep her from reading it as she turned back around curiously. Those were the words Marc and Angie used.

His team observed the want and the confusion, and exchanged grins of recognition. Neil did have an interest and they were glad. It took a real woman to complement a real man, and they wouldn’t let him destroy the harmony of their team by choosing a mate who was too young to handle the secrecy of what they were doing. Samantha, on the other hand, was a grown woman who knew life’s lessons well. If Neil was willing to switch his affections to her, they might be able to support it.

3

“Do you still plan to join the Eagles, even though everyone is dead set against it?”

The question wasn't unexpected. “Yes, Charlie, I do.”

The teenager was quiet for a minute, letting that sink in, and Angela could feel his disapproval and fear for her. She wanted to tell him it would be all right, that she wouldn't be hurt, but stopped herself. She had no idea if it was true, only that she was willing to take the risk.

“Why?”

“It's how I want to help, contribute.”

“But you're already doing shifts here.”

“I've got more to offer.”

They were in a corner of the medical tent sorting through files, and though the doctor and his wife could hear, neither of them censored their words.

“Eagles are men. The camp won't like this.”

“They'll adjust.” She gave him a pointed look. “And so will you.”

Flushing, he ducked his head and Angela let out a sigh. “Adrian needs the help, Charlie, and I can give it. Should I tell him no?”

Torn, he hesitated. “Maybe.”

“Would you?” Her tone softened. “Could you?”

Telling him she knew of his hero worship of Adrian.

“I don't think so.”

“Same here.” She handed him a stack of folders. “Put those in E-F. Have you seen your dad today?”

He was certain which male she meant and glanced at the doctor and nurse before answering lowly, “They’re at the trucks, still sorting the new stuff. Dog, too.”

Angela hoped Neil or Seth would keep him from reacting to anything else that Kenn might try. Marc had spent all day yesterday helping the vet and she hadn’t spotted him once since then.

“It would be nice if you could find some time to spend with him. He came a long way to meet you.”

Charlie’s words came quickly, “He came for you, not me.”

Angry and full of a teenager’s temper, he shoved himself up off the floor. “I’ve got things to do.”

Angela let him leave, ignoring the sympathetic gazes of John and Anne. He was scared of pushing Kenn into hurting anyone, but he was also angry that Brady hadn’t been in his life all these years. They would have to talk about that before any real bond could grow between them. His fault or not, Marc had time to make up for and questions to answer.

John monitored her, as did Anne. They weren’t sure of the new female healer yet, still a bit uneasy about her beauty and her tag-a-long, but it was

obvious that there was a hard road ahead for Angela and her son.

For us all, John thought, stiffening at a fresh wave of pain in his burning gut. The war hadn't ended yet.

4

"I want you to switch me or Neil on the driving schedules."

Kenn didn't come out from under the hood of Adrian's overheating semi. "No."

"Kenn."

"What? We won't be alone. Zack and Lee will be with us."

"Yeah, your biggest fans. Switch one of us and take it out on that one."

"No." Kenn still hadn't looked up. "Go away."

Kyle gave a mock sigh that instantly had the Marine's full attention.

"Okay, but you know it'll be hard for my Eagles to concentrate on covering your six, if they're worried about hers."

Kyle left for the mess as Kenn stood up angrily.

"It's something to think about. Anything can happen out there on the road."

Kenn didn't hide the hatred on his face as Kyle left. One day the mobster would push him too far.

"You want I should kill him for you, Boss?"

Zack's heavy mock-Italian accent had Kenn snorting laughter. "The sooner, the better."

Zack's grin faded. "You gonna switch the schedules?"

Kenn shrugged resentfully and wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Probably. They're playing hardball right now."

"Rumor says she's gonna be an Eagle."

Kenn stiffened. "What did you hear?"

Zack frowned, remembering Kenn was out of the loop now. "She told him she wanted to be in his army."

"What did he say?" Kenn demanded, fear tightening, stretching his nerves.

"He'd get back to her."

Kenn's heart sank. That was as good as a yes where their leader was concerned. Adrian was only evaluating the reactions to take care of any problems that might arise.

"The men are worried they'll have to hit her."

"She won't draw numbers for cage matches, bet on it."

"It won't matter, if she fails the private lesson with Neil. Or if Adrian's own guard dog grows a spine and refuses."

Kenn had forgotten about that and instantly felt better. The trooper was a boy scout, like Brady. "He won't be able to hit her."

Zack swept the trees, narrowing in on a shadow padding through the molding foliage. *Just that damn wolf*, he thought.

“Not so sure about it, boss. She got him in trouble with Adrian, and he’s been worse than usual with the Eagles.”

“She won’t be able to take it. One hit and she’ll be on the ground, crying like she always has.”

Zack’s voice was soothing. “Either way, she’ll never really be one of us, will she?”

5

“So what does it take around here for a guy to become one of you?” Rick’s tone was just right. “Cause it’s getting lonely on the outside.”

Mitch was surprised the man was taking the time to talk to him. He’d picked out how important that group was and immediately started sucking up. If the other three would be high up here, maybe this one would too.

The radioman leered. “Yeah, these people know how to give a cold shoulder.”

The traitor extended his hand. “Richard.”

“Mitch.”

They shook firmly, and the drunkard bobbed his head at the peaceful camp behind them. “They like people who are useful. Do something big for the boss, and you’ll have more friends than you want.”

Rick beamed. He did indeed have something big planned for Safe Haven’s boss. Just last night he’d begun to cut the hole in the rear of his tent that would give him some freedom to set things up.

“Got any suggestions?” The slaver-in-disguise leaned in. “And can I do anything for you?”

Always one to grab an opportunity, Mitch lowered his voice. “I always need things.”

“Maybe I can get them for you.”

“Everything okay here?”

Kevin didn’t like the new guy talking to their communications man, and his stance was hard as he came closer. “Where are you supposed to be?”

Mitch glared. “Ease up, Kev. We’re talkin’. He ain’t askin’ anything he shouldn’t be.”

Kevin ignored the hostile tone. “And what did he ask?”

Mitch and the sentry were not friends. Kevin could feel Adrian’s quiet dislike, and the Level One man had made no secret of the fact that he thought Mitch should be banished for being drunk on the job. Because of that, the ex-dispatcher didn’t think twice about covering for his new friend.

“If there were food and clothes limits. Look at him. He needs new rags.”

Kevin wasn’t fooled, but knew he’d get no other story and he went to find Kyle so it could be added to their nightly reports.

Behind him, the two men exchanged satisfied glances that had other Eagles in the area glaring until Rick was once again in the main camp.

A little before evening mess, Adrian was with Brady in a supply truck. They were on the bumper, smoking and waiting for another full trailer to be brought around so they could keep sorting.

Adrian turned to Marc as the wolf disappeared into the bushes that surrounded the camp. “You know what answer I’ll give if she passes the private lesson?”

Marc snorted in anger, voice sharp. “Of course. You set it up that way.”

Adrian didn’t rise to the challenge. “Will you leave over it or stay and suffer because you don’t think we can keep her safe?”

Marc’s mouth was fast. “Safe? How about alive? I know you can’t protect her yet, and that’ll hold me here more than any of these little bonding moments, so you can keep the offer you’re about to make.” Marc looked away. “I’m not going anywhere, anytime soon.”

Adrian let out a sound of annoyance. “You’re either a leader or a follower here. Want a chance with her? This is how you get it.”

“And in return?” Marc asked, suddenly weary again. “What do I have to do to stop being the extra man she brought along?”

“Embrace the dream, Grunt,” Adrian’s stated flatly. “Not blind and unquestioning, but not the half-assed shit you’re currently delivering, either. Stop fighting the current and swim with us, help me *lead* them.”

As the hunting crew pulled in, Adrian left the truck, not lowering his voice. “If you can’t share her, you can’t have her. She’s as much as said so. I’d spend some time concentrating on winning her respect and learning to play better with others.”

Adrian’s remark had Brady shaking his head in annoyance. He knew the warning, understood that the leader knew Angie might want to be an Eagle now more than she wanted to be his mate, and Marc resented him for it. If not for Adrian, she might be his even now!

Marc sighed, pushing away the bitterness. He and Angie couldn’t be together until they found out if Kenn was crazy enough to get himself banished and sneak back in as he’d threatened. As someone who knew every detail of camp defenses, there was no way they’d ever be able to protect her from all sides against Kenn.

And Marc knew if he were climbing into the rack with her every night, he’d never stay alert enough. The dangerous Marine needed to be right here where they could monitor him and that meant pushing him, small steps at a time, to determine if he needed concrete shoes.

7

Instead of the normal rookie shift, most of Neil’s team was on duty when the two trucks of hunters pulled in. Safe and sound, covered in crusty animal blood, Sam left the truck amid calls of good work.

The five men guarding the area understood that it had been a test of her own strength and she'd passed. Usually, only rookies did that and it helped seal Jeremy's decision. He knew Neil wouldn't be happy with Becky for long, even if she wasn't so...flaky. He'd always be the teacher. With Samantha, Neil would be challenged. His entire team had been hoping he'd show interest in anyone else, and now that he had, they would try to make him happy and secure their new lives. Of all those here, Neil tried the hardest to emulate Adrian, and it made him easy to follow.

“Com to Eagle One. Huntin' crew pulled in. All's 5-by.”

“Copy.”

Jeremy faded into the background to wait, wondering how strong the pull was.

Less than a minute later, a state trooper's hat appeared through the fog.

Samantha wasn't aware of anything, except that she was back in the normalcy of camp.

The trip had been worse than she'd expected. The hunting had consisted of cornering a very small herd of deer and opening fire. Only two of the eight members who'd gone along had been able to do it when Doug's call came; Lexa, a gun shop owner who'd thrown up afterwards, and Samantha.

Samantha pushed away her revulsion at the memory. She'd stepped forward without any

qualms, eager to practice her new skills on the fleeing targets. The Eagles had called her headshots perfect. Even Zack had given her an arrogant gesture of recognition. She'd passed their test and failed her own.

I liked it. I like to kill.

“It’s the same, for some of us.”

Sam was startled to find Neil next to her. They were behind the shower camper, almost out of view of everyone.

“What’s the same?” she asked distractedly.

“We loathe that part of ourselves that likes to spill blood.”

“How did you—”

“I’ve been there,” he stated, watching her red-streaked hair blow in the stiff wind. *Sexy*. And odd that he thought so.

“We all have. Facing the evil inside is hard, but you’re always better off knowing your true limits, your true self.”

It sounds like he actually cares, Samantha thought and raised a brow, “Do you always meet the new killers when they come in?”

He laughed, but his face was serious. “Yes, ma’am. I meet the survivors too.”

Neil tipped his hat to her and joined his team, eager to know why they’d volunteered for duty again so soon.

Not sure why, Samantha felt better. *Because I’m not alone in these feelings or because it came from Neil?*

Confused, Sam let the water beat the tension from her shoulders, but the sight of herself murdering all those terrified deer wouldn't leave her mind. What if they'd survived the mud wave just to be eaten? What kind of a caring creator made a life-circle based on violent death?

When she stepped from the camper, Samantha had settled some things, but all of them were forgotten when she spotted an intimately familiar shadow lurking in the darkness nearby.

“Hello, Samantha.”

Instantly on edge, she stopped. “Rick.”

The grimy black bandana and those greedy green orbs were all that remained of the man she'd traveled with, and she sensed more strength, more danger in him.

“How are you?”

“Better. And you?”

Rick flashed a menacing grin. “Oh, I'm good, baby. I'm settlin' in and getting real comfortable.”

Sam retreated several paces.

He was gone an instant later, and she sucked air into her lungs. He was warning her that he hadn't forgotten their deal. Had anyone noticed?

Neil's icy face was right behind her. “What did he say?”

“That he was settling in and getting comfortable.” Instead of scorn, she got an answer that allowed her to breathe again.

“Good, he’s relaxing. He’ll get cockier and then we’ll have him.” Neil’s voice softened. “Until then, keep that gun close.”

“I will.”

She turned toward the mess, sighing when she noted how crowded it still was. *Lovely.*

Neil was drawn to the sound. “You got plans for dinner?”

Samantha’s heart thumped. She should tell him yes, put an end to things here and now.

“No.”

A bit arrogantly—he was high up here, after all—Neil said, “Good. Hang on a minute.”

He made motions to one of the shadows nearby and the Eagle went to make the report to Adrian. Anything on Rick went straight to the boss as soon as it happened. They hadn’t even given him a job yet, hoping the free time would allow them to catch him in the act. So far, the janitor had spent each day doing what any other refugee here did.

Neil regarded Samantha with a feeling in his stomach that he accepted reluctantly. He might want her.

“Come eat with us, and afterwards I’ll show you how we work off the extra tension.”

He saw happiness and caution flood her countenance in equal measures and felt his own expression lighten. She might like him, too. That always made things easier.

Unable to resist, Samantha gave in and they traveled toward the main camp, side by side.

Behind them, more than just his team gaped in surprise.

8

“Adrian has sent all of you here for various reasons and I promise you’ll leave bleeding. Be sure. This is no easy lesson.”

Doug swept the men waiting eagerly in the dark. “You’ll notice there are some others here, observing. They’ve been invited to witness what you have to go through to become an Eagle. Don’t disappoint them, or him, by giving up because of a little pain—”

Doug glanced up as Angela stepped from the shadows. When she gave him a cool nod that said she had Adrian’s permission to be here, he winced, but kept going. She reminded him very strongly of a man he’d served with, had that same look of confident kamikaze that Joshua had gotten when shit hit the fan.

“This lesson will cover the basics of a type of fighting that all Eagles must be proficient in by Level Five. Kenn and Daryl will demonstrate.”

The dozen men craned their necks, ignoring Angela. The two men squared-off with hard glares, but Doug kept his attention on the newest rookie he was about to be training. He and Josh had been drinking off-base, suckin’ ‘em down to forget a bad moment they’d shared. A cute girl with more chest than brains had asked him for a dance. When Josh said no, that he had a woman waiting at

home, the drunken party girl had asked him who the hell he thought he was. The immediate response had been one Doug had never forgotten.

“I’m a dirty, nasty, filthy, Army grunt, and the bloody tip of my nation’s spear. *Who the hell are you?*”

That’s what Angela would be to Adrian, Doug was suddenly positive of it. The big man continued instructing, wondering if Marc would be able to handle it.

“If you watch this and think ‘I’d never be able to stand that’, leave as soon as you have the thought, because you’re right. If you see the blood and think ‘that’s okay, I’ll take a Tylenol before it starts’, you might belong here.”

Angela slowly moved toward the small ring of hay bales, stomach in a hard knot. He hadn’t said Kenn would be here.

“*You didn’t ask,*” the Witch told her. “*Now, you know better.*”

Kenn and Daryl were already trading hits, but not the average punches. These blows were done with sharp, fast jerks, and graceful slides into the other man’s personal space, to deliver a vicious hit. It was the fighting style Adrian and Neil had used while they were in quarantine, and Angela inched closer to get a better view.

“You’ll notice it’s quick in and even faster out. This type of fighting is called Kai and only one person in camp knows all of it. He’ll be here in a few minutes to start your training.”

Angela assumed he meant Adrian and wondered if he and Kenn would be fighting. Daryl was good, but not nearly enough. Kenn's big hands were currently giving the Eagle what he'd given her so many times.

"Kai accomplishes two things, quickly. It causes severe pain and puts your opponent out of commission for a while."

With those words, both men delivered two of the ugliest shots Angela had ever witnessed outside of the movies.

Daryl was the one to eat dirt.

"Not everyone can be good at it. Tonight, you only have to survive." Doug gestured at the biggest of the five pale men. "Jake, you're up."

9

"Aren't you eating?"

Neil sipped bottled water as she devoured a plate of fries covered in ketchup. She was putting on a little weight. It looked good on her. "I have a lesson in a few minutes."

Samantha frowned. "I thought we were going somewhere."

"We are."

He was taking her to a lesson? She shrugged. "Okay."

A little disappointed, she picked at her fries.

Neil hid a smile. She thought he was taking a test and wanted to show off. Good. She'd be

distracted from her thoughts about Rick and the hunting trip.

They had spent a quiet ten minutes at the center table so far, the crowd around them falling silent the instant they'd gotten in line, and it hadn't changed. There were dozens of witnesses and Samantha had quickly acquired a permanent pink streak across both cheeks.

"I'm not supposed to be at this table, right? That's why they're all staring?" she asked suddenly, unable to wait until they were alone.

"Sorry, I thought you knew," Neil said quietly. "They're surprised because I've never done this before."

"Done what? Had a meal..." She blinked. "They think we're on a date!"

He reddened a little and she raised a brow. "Are we?"

Put on the spot, Neil couldn't lie, but his first thought was, *yes*.

"Not unless you'd like it to be."

Not expecting a hint of affection, Samantha wasn't offended and even teased, "What if I did, Mr. O'Neil?"

Neil smiled, body language saying more than his mouth. "I'd be flattered and happy to play along."

Play along.

Now the sting was there. "I'll let you know. I'm not sure I like how you asked."

They were both laughing as they stood up and Samantha was very glad to be gone from the mess a moment later. Out here, it was just the cool breeze, the darkness she'd been in since the war, and Neil's comforting body next to hers.

"I'll be there for about half an hour, and then we can do something else if you like." He leaned a bit closer than he normally did with the women here. "I know the boss. I can sneak you into the training tent for a quick drill."

Sam smirked, sliding further into his personal space with no hesitation. "Can I have the sweaty towel, too?"

"Of course."

Still chuckling, the couple went toward the area that Angie had found by using her gifts.

10

"Now that the warm-ups are done, Neil will teach you three basic moves that you'll practice every day on your own. Do it or not, you'll still have to get by him for every test and he's no easy mark."

Kenn's tone was gloating. He'd beaten on all five of the bloody men who were now listening with a much clearer idea of what they'd signed up for, and he couldn't wait for Angela to duck into that tent. It was about to be over and he'd have his life back. "When he calls your name, leave the guns out here."

During the last two matches, Angela had been studying those gathered for the lesson instead of the battles themselves, sensing Kenn might be hitting harder than he had to in order to show off for her. If he thought she wasn't paying attention, he would get it over faster and not hurt them as much. While she was scanning the half a dozen extra observers, she'd gotten hostility. None of them were willing to accept that she, too, was one of Adrian's hand-picked and it made her angry. She had as much need to be here as they did. Kai was harsh enough to allow her to handle any man.

"Here's the teacher."

Neil and Samantha emerged from the darkness.

"First man to the tent is...Tucker."

Hoping she wasn't on the list waiting inside the tent for him, Neil directed his new friend toward Angela. "Keep her company, will ya?"

Samantha wasn't sure the woman wanted it and she stopped a few feet away as Neil slid into the tent. The two females exchanged polite smiles, but not words as they listened.

"And you're sure?"

"Yes."

"Then, let's get to it."

There was the sound of a struggle and then Neil's voice.

"Like this." *Thud.*

"Lower." *Slap.*

"Faster." *Thud.*

It sounded as if each order was followed by a hit and they didn't have to wait long to have it confirmed.

When Tucker came out with a limp and a bloody face, less than three minutes later, the women instinctively moved closer together for comfort.

“Anderson.”

It was a very fast private class, which was the good side. There was now a nervous Neil giving the lesson, having verified that Angela's name was indeed on the list. That was the bad side for the new men, but also for Neil. He knew he would treat her like any of the others that Adrian had sent to him for toughening up, and he hated the boss a little for showing him that he and Kenn had more in common than he'd ever realized.

“White.”

Angela went toward the small canvas with a thumping heart. Listening to the sounds of their battles had reminded her of the years Kenn had abused her, and the fear had grown as each bleeding man left the tent.

She and Samantha were the only ones still here besides Doug and a guard whose name she didn't know yet, and now she had to conquer those fears or give up the idea of being an Eagle in Adrian's army. This was why he had sent her here. To discern if she could handle getting and delivering a real hit.

Angela wasn't as scared as she had been during her time with Kenn, but she could feel the sweat rolling down her sides. The Marine had left with a gloating glare a short time ago, but the taste of acid was on her tongue and her body felt stiff, foreign. *This isn't going to go well*, she thought suddenly. *I'll get hurt.*

She paused in the flap, meeting Neil's cool gaze as he stood with deceptive casualness in the middle of the bloody floor. *Is that what I'm afraid of? The pain?*

Angela considered. *Yes.*

And if there wasn't any pain?

"Then I wouldn't really learn it," she muttered, "Pain is a memory-maker."

Neil didn't speak, just waved her in, and she went, determined to conquer her weaknesses.

11

Marc spotted the two Eagles near the small tent, Samantha lingering nearby, and moved their way with a raised brow that was ignored by them and by the stiffly standing woman.

He saw the .357 lying in front of the tent, recognizing the owner instantly, and bristled. Who was in there with Angie and what were they doing?

Samantha felt Marc and Dog come up beside her, but didn't look at them, not wanting to miss anything. Neil and Angela had been in there twice as long as any of the others and not one sound had

been heard until a minute ago, when there had been a thud that she would swear was someone being hit. Was this Neil's idea of blowing off steam?

Thud!

"Again." Neil's voice sounded pinched, as if he was in pain.

Slap!

"Harder!"

Dog on his heels, Marc stomped toward the tent, blood beating furiously. "What the hell is going on here?!"

Thud! "Damn."

"Pay attention!"

"He'll come in—"

"Do you want this or not?!"

Marc hadn't heard Neil's tone of command yet and he froze in the flap at the sound of it. That was Adrian's rehearsed script. This was the private lesson.

Thud!

Marc started to go in, unable to witness anyone hitting her.

"Don't interfere!" Angela had flung a hand out, not taking her eyes from Neil, who was getting set to repeat his motion. "I mean it!"

Again, the tone of command halted him, and Marc winced as Neil slipped inside her ring of protection and used an open palm to drill her shoulder.

Thud!

Braced for it, Angela ignored the dull throb and immediately ducked under his arm to do the same to him.

Slap!

Even hitting him her hardest, she couldn't match the strength he was using against her, and Marc was glad of the brute-like arms that dragged him away from the flap. He didn't want to do anything stupid.

Yet.

Doug let him go a few feet away, ready to defend himself if he had to, but Marc had gone cold; he was too furious to move.

"He won't hurt her." Doug straightened his red vest. "She wants to be one of us. You'll understand that if you bother to try."

The big man left him alone, blending back into the shadows and Marc took his advice, too upset to think clearly. How could she want this? She was a woman, not a man!

Thud!

Marc winced and Samantha did the same. Doug's words hadn't eased her anger either, and she waited for it to be over, eager to deliver a scathing rebuke.

"Do it again, but hold your wrist like this."

Thud!

"Very good. That's your homework. Train yourself to remember that pad and when you've built up some muscle mass, you'll be able to deliver the same force as a small man."

Angela took a moment to get under control as Neil made notes in his book. She was still afraid, but it had gone better than she'd hoped for. Neil hadn't wanted to treat her like the others, but her nasty attitude had forced him to. After a little while, he'd gotten into it, liking how fast she was.

"Thanks. I know this wasn't easy for you."

Still in his shell, Neil shrugged. "Adrian sends 'em and I beat on 'em. That's the way it works."

"Who do I talk to if I'd like another lesson?"

Neil stopped writing in surprise. "Do you?"

She gave him a rueful smile. "In a few days, though, when these bruises heal."

Impressed despite himself, Neil chuckled. "I'll let him know."

They came from the tent together, tension mostly gone, and Angela stopped by Samantha. She whispered into the woman's ear before facing Marc's anger.

Nervous, she turned too fast and couldn't hide a grimace when one of her leg muscles flared up in pain.

"And you want this?"

She bristled at his insulting tone. It said she was nuts. "I can't be an Eagle without passing matchups, Brady. I have to learn, and from someone who'll actually hit me."

"Looks like you found someone, though I am surprised by who it is. I thought cops were the good guys," he accused harshly.

Angela slid into his line of sight before he could pick a fight. “I would have gone through the same thing if I had joined the service, right?”

Trapped, he still responded, “Yes, but this isn’t the US government. It’s a group of refugees playing war!”

“I don’t feel that way about it and neither do these men,” she shot back coldly. “It’s for America.”

“It’s for Adrian,” Marc sneered, honestly angry with her for the first time since they’d been reunited. “And I can’t believe you’re so fast to follow. What happened to not being under some asshole’s thumb?”

“He’s not an asshole and I’m free to do what I want. You should remember that.”

Peering between them, Dog whined uneasily and the sound brought both of them back to where they were and who they were arguing with.

Marc snapped his mouth shut, trying to regain control. When he finally spoke, his tone demanded honesty. “Why an Eagle, Angie?”

Expecting it, she kept her focus on the gritty sky as she answered, not wanting him to discern the evasion. “I like how it felt to help those kids from the airfield. I like how it felt to be a part of something that good. We gave them their lives back.”

Marc didn't call her on the short answer to his question. There was more to it than that and he knew it was important to their future.

“Is it about us?” he asked suddenly and didn't like the dismay and guilt he saw.

“No, I'm sorry. It isn't.”

He tried not to let her see his sting, but failed. “You've got other prospects. I understand you can have—”

“What would make you think that?” she interrupted, too tired and sore to fight with him. “Doesn't matter. It has to do with the women here. In case you've forgotten, Kenn's the only one who always thinks of himself and his wants. I like to help other people, not control them.”

She stomped off and Marc let her go, anger fading. He didn't have the right to tell her to stop any more than Kenn did, but it still hurt. He wondered what her real reasons were. Maybe she still didn't feel safe. Maybe it was about helping the women here.

Or, maybe, he thought, going to his tent with a last glare at Neil. Maybe Angie just lied to me.

Angela wasn't certain why she hadn't told Marc, only that she sensed he'd take it badly. All he wanted was their chance to be together, but she was viewing the women here, suspecting how much she could do for them by fulfilling Adrian's dream and becoming an Eagle. She had a chance to shape the future of these post-war females and it was becoming something she was determined to do. Adrian was trying to clear the way for her, but there would be more problems like this one. Did he

have the camp's reaction covered too or should she be figuring out a way to ease them into it? What about his men? Neil clearly hadn't known she was coming.

Thoughts full of her success and worries over the future, Angela let her feet carry her away from Brady.

“What did she say to you?” Neil asked curiously.

He had joined Samantha without speaking. They'd listened to Marc and Angie's argument and watched the couple disappear, the wolf hesitating before following his master.

“That each hit hurt you as much as her, but there's nothing you won't do for Adrian and I should know that now.”

Neil waited for her to unleash the words that would stop this attraction he was feeling toward her, but there was silence.

“And?” Again, he braced for rejection and was surprised by her words as she turned away.

“And I'll take a lesson like you gave her.”

“What?”

Samantha didn't stop, sure he'd heard her clearly, and she entered the camp with a million thoughts flying. Two of those were strong enough to repeatedly override the others. One was that she wasn't scared of Neil. She liked him, from his sun-marked skin to his thick, brown curls. The other

was that with his help, she could get strong enough to survive alone again if she had to.

More than surprised, Neil didn't follow. Instead, he turned to the extra shadow he'd spotted lingering in the darkness. "I'm not sure I can do that."

"You did it with Angie," Adrian compared.

"But she had to provoke me and if I hadn't already been...upset, it might not have succeeded."

Adrian used the most common of his teaching tools. He distracted Neil.

"How did she do, by the Neil standard?"

Aware and willing to put off the choice, if even for a few minutes, Neil delivered his report, "Amazing for a female, awful for a man. She has almost no upper body strength. I doubt she'll be able to do a pull-up for a while, but she makes up for it in quickness."

His voice lowered as he fell into account mode. "She was reading me in there, able to avoid. She also has the three-set moves down. She'll have it smooth, real fast if she practices it at all."

Adrian waited, knowing there was more, and he tried to ignore the inner man telling him to take Neil's head off for hitting her.

"She's got one fatal flaw, though, unless we can help her. She freezes. She'll cover it like she meant to go still, but it's real."

"The moments we observed in the QZ?"

“Yeah.” Neil’s voice was more embittered than Adrian had ever heard.

“She’s afraid of being hit. She took every shoulder slide with a pinched face and braced feet. I felt so much like *him*, I almost puked.”

“What made you keep going even after you were allowed to send her out?” Adrian led, heart easing.

“The look in her eyes when I started to call it. The disappointment! I tapped her twice after Brady left and I could see her adjusting to it, getting ready for battle.” Neil sighed. “If you can get rid of her fear of those first few hits, she’ll excel at Kai and probably a few other styles we use. It’s like...”

“She was made for it?”

Adrian supplied and Neil gave him what he needed without knowing it.

“More so than even Kyle or Kenn. That’s why I couldn’t stop. She wants this!”

“You’ll use that to train yourself to handle her lessons and Samantha’s. And anyone else we think fits this spot,” Adrian told him as a chilling drizzle start to fall.

“And if I say no?” Neil snapped harshly, already sure that he wouldn’t.

“Then someone else will give her the lesson, probably Kyle or Seth. You don’t have to be the one doing this, Neil. My word.”

That had Neil blowing out a frustrated breath. “It feels bad, wrong.”

“It’s supposed to. That’s a reminder from your heart that they are women. You’ll train yourself to treat them as Eagles first, when it’s called for.”

Not sure how, Neil didn’t answer and Adrian pinned him with hard truths.

“If you can’t, she’ll understand and so will I, but we both know that you can.”

“I don’t like feeling like him!”

“That’s what makes you one of the good guys, one of mine, Neil,” Adrian soothed. “He enjoyed every blow he ever gave her. That’s the difference.”

Chapter Four
Fists at Dawn

1

Of the two days Marc had been out of quarantine, one had been spent doing hard labor punishment. The other had been spent sorting out trucks and wandering, lost without both Angie and Neil. He'd tried to work through some of the issues in his mind, but every time he made progress, something else would happen to throw him into chaos.

Like Angie training with Neil. He'd been hoping to run into her, and enjoy how upset she was at Kenn for the photo, but the sound of her being hit had gone through him like bullets. Even now, the urge to strike Neil as he walked by was strong.

“Morning.”

Marc didn't respond to Neil's greeting. It wasn't fair to Neil, who was doing Adrian's bidding, but there was no erasing the fact that his friend had hurt Angie, and Marc had been forced to allow it. That was a kick in the teeth to their relationship and it wouldn't be repaired overnight unless something big happened.

Marc spotted Angela in the long line for coffee and forced himself to the end of it, ignoring her and the chilly people studying his bruised profile. He wasn't sure that he could talk to her about any of it yet. He was too confused, too torn by wanting her happy and just plain wanting her, and until he could think clearly, he planned to stay back.

Angela felt Brady's coldness and clamped down on the urge to give in. He'd spent so much of the time here mad. He wanted her to keep her head down and only poke it up when it was time for them to be together, but until he realized that wasn't nearly enough for her, she would give him some space to think.

Nearby, Adrian spotted a setback coming, but chose not to step in front of his furious Marine. *It was inevitable for the two men to have it out in public*, he thought, but tension flooded the area when Kenn stomped toward Angie instead of Marc.

Adrian felt the humidity ease, and then the temperature plummeted until he could almost view his breath.

Instantly recognizing the moment, Adrian watched along with the rest of the sleepy camp, wondering if he was about to lose his right hand.

Kenn shoved his way in front of Angela, stopping when their feet were inches apart. He scanned the purple bruises on her shoulder and his

anger went up a notch. He couldn't believe she'd passed.

"How did you get your schedule changed? Today, you babysit!"

Angela gave him a warning look, ignoring the paper he was shoving her way. "I told the vet I'd help him once a week. He probably told Adrian. You're making a scene over nothing."

"You don't get to pick and choose!"

Angela eyed him coldly, trying not to shake. "Are you sure?"

"I make those choices!" Kenn snarled at the reminder of Tonya's warnings. She'd passed Neil's class. The trooper hit her.

Why is he the only one allowed? Kenn thought furiously. Didn't Adrian know he had more experience with that?

Angela had made her decision last night about how she would handle things with Kenn, and now was as good a time as any to strike a match to the fuse. She slowly removed the chain that held the ring he'd given her, drawing the attention of everyone in sight.

"It's over, Kenn. I'm sorry it has to be this way, but it does."

When she held the necklace out, Kenn snatched it long enough to let it fall to the ground. His heavy boot slammed down on the diamond, crushing the band into the dirt.

"Don't ever go through anyone else for a schedule change!" Unprepared for her fast

reaction, Kenn tried to stay on the topic, but the fury was overwhelming. Angela had ended things with him! Publicly!

Realizing his control was wavering, she tried to distract, already positive it wouldn't succeed. "It's a few hours. What's the big deal?"

The line had gone on and she tried to go around, but Kenn slid in front of her again, leaning close. "The deal, you sneaking bitch, is that schedule changes go through me and not your lover!"

Angela's hand inched downward as the camp muttered in surprised disapproval. She knew that tone. He'd gone over the edge.

Everyone held their breath as Marc stepped out of line behind the arguing couple, with clenched fists. "I told Adrian to change her schedule, and I don't answer to you, *bitch!*"

Kenn swung as he spun, connecting.

Brady stumbled, and the rage he'd awakened with flared to life. An outlet. *Great!*

Marc ducked Kenn's next lumbering swing and leaned his weight into a brutal gut shot. The cool hate of the man inside loved Kenn's gasp for air.

He landed a fast hit to Kenn's temple and then another to his cheek. "Don't ever...talk to her...that way again!" Marc accented his words with his fists.

Kenn dropped to the ground, blood flying into the dirt. It sprayed over his dusty boots and the

sight of it had Marc stopping, realizing what he'd done. Again.

He took a step back, and then another, fighting the urge that had been drilled into him to finish the job.

Kenn stayed down, coughing and spitting blood into the dirt at Marc's feet for the second time in as many days. *Usin' the knife next time*, he thought, tired of being hit by his old CO.

The people gathered around watched silently, stunned to witness Kenn taken down so fast. What would Adrian do? Everyone was listening raptly as he stopped a few feet from the trio.

"Does this settle it?"

There was silence and Adrian's hard tone hid his relief. "Go help with the livestock. *Both* of you."

Marc left quickly, stride stiff, and Kenn followed slowly, ashamed and furious.

Adrian was angry, but he was also satisfied. Kenn's words had been nasty. He'd deserved to be knocked down and Marc had even gotten him to swing first. It would have only been better if Angela had done it herself, but had that happened, Kenn would have hit her back, right in front of a mess full of members!

This wouldn't be the end of it, Adrian knew, and he understood. After watching Angela these last eight days, he doubted he'd find a more perfect female warrior to mold. Once he trained her, she'd be deadly, and she would bring Samantha with her,

without even trying. Others would follow, and he would be able to fill out the ranks with an even distribution of power; something that had contributed to the downfall of the old world. Without temperance, without compassion, a leader was a clever tyrant wrapped in a ruler's cloak.

Hoping the rest of the day would be more peaceful, Adrian entered the dank spruce trees that lined the self-defense area, where Samantha was now set up in a canvas-covered truck, weather tracking. Only a few of the Eagles knew where she was and Adrian planned to keep her there even during the meeting tonight. Her ballot would be cast absentee.

2

The training tent was crowded with the top three levels of Eagles, and their voices carried as they competed and worked out. Even over the howling wind, it was a constant noise on days they didn't travel and for it to go silent, was more than unusual.

Having forgone her coffee due to the stares, Angela paused inside the flap at their reaction, waiting. Adrian hadn't given her an answer yet, and to these sweaty men, she had no permission to be here. On the other hand, he'd said free reign and after the scene with Kenn, she needed a workout.

Steeling her nerves, Angela moved toward a far corner. She didn't feel confident enough to

jump right in, but if she hung around, maybe one of them would—

“Over there.” Told to expect her, Doug jerked a big thumb at the game area.

She smiled her thanks, changing direction, and despite the sticky weather, felt the temperature of the tent go from cool to ice.

Angela slid into the first empty seat and pretended they had all returned to what they were doing, instead of staring at her with expressions ranging from hostile to wary, with a few leers to even things out.

“Only Level One. Keep repeating it.”

Angela hit the button at Jeff’s words, grateful there hadn’t been anything said in protest yet. “Thanks.”

“Uh-huh.” Seth’s right-hand man moved away and Angela began firing the orange gun. Duck Hunt was one of her favorites.

After twenty minutes, she had cleared the level so many times that everyone was tired of the annoying buzzer and she looked at Jeff before anyone could complain.

“Permission to play through? Please?”

The guard didn’t sigh in relief as he wanted to. “One set. At the first *game over*, you’re back to reps.”

Angela grinned, hitting the restart button. That might be a while. She’d had a long warm-up.

She didn't advance to the next part of the workout and neither did any of the men. When the hour call came, Angela was on one of the highest levels any of them had viewed and a large group was crowded close to watch. Even the men who were adamant about not wanting her here were drawn to the groans and yells of triumph as she cleared another round of disks and got set for the ducks.

A very simple game of aim and fire, the ducks' evasions were hard, and the Eagles watched her pop the moving targets with admiration.

"Damn!"

"Where'd you learn to shoot?"

"You've played before!"

"She got Seth's record with that!"

They were excited, almost welcoming, and Adrian surveyed it from the flap. With all the noise, he had expected to find a fight. So had Neil, who was stopped behind him in surprise.

"Bonus! Next round. Go!"

Silence fell as she went higher and Angela let their hopes feed her determination. Kenn had the current high score and she wanted it!

"Perfect score. Bonus round."

Disks flew into shards before their odd whining noise could echo; the gun firing with a steady rhythm broken only by her fast right-click to reload.

"Round cleared. Bonus awarded."

"That last one was low!"

“I thought it was gone at first!”

“Great shooting. Wait until *she* hits the real targets with us.”

Jeff’s tersely spoken comment reminded everyone there was a female among them and that awkward silence fell again.

Mood much improved, Angela hit the button with a snort. “I’m not swingin’ a dick, but I can shoot, right?”

She opened fire as the round began, getting more surprised laughs from the crude joke than she’d hoped for.

“Yes, you can.”

Adrian left the tent at Jeff’s confirmation, satisfied she was holding her own. Behind him, that annoyingly wonderful bonus buzzer sounded again, and a loud cheer echoed, refilling Safe Haven with brilliant light.

3

The vet put Kenn and Marc to work without a single question despite the bruised faces. Glad to have the extra hands, he got them worming the camp’s stray cats. Abandoned pets that had been drawn by the sounds of people, most of them were in good shape and Adrian liked having them around to help control the rats and insects. Too bad they were scared of the ants. Other than having the dogs out, Chris didn’t have a solution for the rodents yet.

The vet left them on their own, going on to the animals in the larger pens and the two Marines labored silently, both knowing they needed to make peace, but neither wanting it.

One holding, one shoving the huge pill down the small throat while avoiding the claws, they found a rhythm...as they always had on base. When they finished the cats, the vet switched them to pigs, and then the dogs that had to be brought out one by one, because even standing was hard in that mass of tails and teeth.

An hour after they had been switched to goats, Angela and Charlie joined them, the wolf on their heels. The boy worked with the dogs beside the tent, where Chris could guide him. Angela was left to her own devices after being shown what the vet wanted and she didn't talk to the laboring males, tried not to even look their way unless she had to. She didn't want to make things worse and the time went by slowly.

Well after lunch mess had come and gone, Kyle entered their line of sight, drawing frowns from both sweaty Marines.

“He wants you on the trucks now,” he told Marc, ignoring the other bruised man dripping sweat.

Marc grunted, not sure if he cared what Adrian wanted. He slowly exited the vet area with steps that said to leave him be. He didn't glance at Angela as he went.

The wolf fell in on Marc's right, shaking his coat, and they traveled through the camp with no signs they noticed the whispers. Unable to ignore Adrian's order, he went to the next line of trucks that had come in without acknowledging Neil's second friendly greeting of the day. He hadn't forgiven Neil yet, wasn't sure if he could.

4

Eager to be clean, Kenn left as soon as Marc and Kyle were out of sight. If Brady didn't have to do this shit, then neither did he.

When Kenn came from the shower camper, Adrian was standing nearby.

"People pick-up, asap, Zack has the details. After the meeting tomorrow night, slaver recon."

Kenn winced when Adrian turned from him, but clamped his mouth shut. A recon mission was exactly what he needed. Some time to make new plans and be away from Brady's face for a while. He'd make sure Jeff and Allan, two of Zack's friends, knew to keep track of them, and he would climb in his Bronco and get the hell out of here.

Kenn's chin lifted. Maybe he'd keep going. He had no doubts about his own survival in this new world.

His shoulders drooped at that thought. Even if he found another camp to help with, there was only one Adrian and he was here.

5

Neil saw Brady stalking toward the parking area and gestured, hoping Marc had begun to understand, but received no response. He was still hot. Neil had witnessed the fight and wanted to tell Marc he'd done exactly right, but knew it wouldn't matter. Their fast friendship might already be over.

The Arizona cop was bothered by the thought. During his life, Neil had made few real friends until coming to Safe Haven and he still valued each one. Plus, he honestly liked Marc.

Neil bypassed the training area, going to the hooch they had set up behind a few trucks to give their new storm tracker a private place to work. The sky held that pale pink tone that said to watch out, but most of the camp was oblivious, thanks to the morning's distraction. People were already laying bets on how long it might be before Kenn snapped for real. It was a matter of...*Damn!*

Stretched out on the hood of a dented car, Samantha looked up at Neil's intake of breath, smiling. "I wondered if he forgot about me."

Neil forced himself to act as if he wasn't drowning in a completely unexpected wave of need. Her body was laid out in a way that called to him and he tried to keep it from his voice.

"You have a radio?"

Samantha held up the hand out of his view, showing her set. "Nothing to call about yet."

Neil went to the bumper, fighting the urge to ogle her like a horny teen. He would go take a

shower after this. “He said to tell you it’s too soon.”

Sam smiled, glad of the comfort.

When she shut her lids, Neil let his eyes go up her jean-clad legs and over her sweater-covered chest. *Nice.*

He tore his hot gaze away. “Let me know if you need anything.”

He faded into the lightly swaying trees with a frown, unaware of anything but his reaction to the new woman. What was it about Samantha that drew him so hard?

On guard duty over Samantha, Jeremy chose not to tell Neil he had a tail. Neil had felt something with Samantha, his teammate was sure of it and hoping that little Becky would now prove herself too young.

Neil heard the female steps behind him and turned. “Samantha, can I ask you—”

Becky pressed her body against Neil’s in abandon, pushing her lips to his, and for an instant, his grip tightened!

His mouth slanted over hers with a snarl of need that had her trembling and then he was gone.

“Damn kid!” Neil spat, unable to disguise his disappointment. “With anyone else, you’d be on your back right now!”

He moved away from her, hard body under rigid control. “Get inside the tape!”

Startled by his anger, and frustrated by the age difference, Becky scooped up a thick handful of mud and let it fly.

Neil sensed something coming and ducked before realizing who had stepped in front of him.

Adrian stiffened in surprise as the thick glop hit him in the face and slopped over the front of his jacket in thick clumps.

Everyone froze.

Taking in a tight, calming breath, Adrian slowly used his clean hands to clear the space around his eyes. “Neil?”

Horrified...“Yeah?” he answered harshly, not caring that the girl was now shedding real tears. *Damn kid!*

“Make sure she pitches for the next baseball game.”

They both stared stupidly at him, and Adrian turned toward camp, noting Jeremy’s satisfied look through mud-streaked lashes.

“I’ll be in the shower.” Adrian slung another handful of mud to the ground. “Maybe I’ll practice ducking while I’m there...”

Not sure what he might say to the crying girl, Neil headed for the training tent, leaving Becky alone.

Drawn by the sound of her name, Samantha had witnessed most of it and come from the windy shadows when the men were gone. “You okay?”

Becky stiffened in embarrassment. It just kept getting better. “Fine!”

Sam shrugged. “Just thought I’d ask. He was kinda rough on you, kid.”

Becky didn’t want the older woman’s pity and she cried out in anger, “Slam you!”

The teenager fled and Samantha returned to her area with a feeling she refused to identify. She wasn’t happy that Neil had refused the reckless girl, she told herself, fighting a grin. Not one bit.

6

Before Adrian made it to the shower, he was distracted by the sight of Dog sitting alone near the supply trucks. Not sure why, he joined the wolf.

Dog’s eyes lightened to a warm shade of golden amusement.

It seems we’ve had the same kind of day.

Adrian felt his mind try to resist and locked down on it. He kept his steps even, but stopped from the friendly rub he’d been about to greet the wolf with.

“What kind?”

Adrian gaped in surprise as the animal groaned. Was he being mocked by a wolf?

Use the talk of thoughts so they’ll stop staring, Dog ordered impatiently. He hated communicating this way. It felt wrong.

Adrian noticed the wolf had thick clumps of mud in his fur and understood he had been on duty, running off ants.

There is trouble coming.

Adrian knelt down, pulling a dog snack from his pocket. *Do you like these?*

No. They taste like feet smell. The wolf obediently took the lint-covered treat from Adrian fingers, and snapped it down.

The others around here, like me, are dangerous. You shouldn't linger.

Adrian grinned, hiding his worry. Not ants. Wolves. *Thank you.*

Dog sniffed his outstretched palm gently, and licked away the crumbs. *I watch over the herd... work again. It is my honor.*

Adrian watched the wolf pad toward the perimeter. Fate was giving him all he'd begged for and more.

7

“Get set folks. This one's gonna take a bit.”

Freshly showered and standing by his usual table, Adrian opened his notebook and the crowded mess slowly quieted down. They had finished the evening meal and people were smoking, chatting lightly.

The center fire and cans popped nearby and the wind blew sticky hair from sweaty skin when it gusted. The temperatures were getting odder. It was the second week in April and they were sweating. What was next? Rain for a month straight?

Adrian sent his gaze over his flock, vaguely aware of bug zappers buzzing and guards circling. *They're nervous*, was his first thought. Nervous and ready to run. The sniper attack had them a little spooked. Good thing he was ready to sing.

“This is the 4th mandatory meeting of Safe Haven. We are now two-hundred strong.”

There were murmurs at the large number and Marc took the moment to do a fast check. He noted things that made him unhappy, but they were minor—sentries slightly out of place, a corner not covered—and he would keep track of them. The camp thought the twins had acted alone, but the Eagles now knew otherwise and they were more alert than when he and Angie had first made it here. When the assassins didn't return, the slavers would come...if they weren't here already.

“We'll start with health.” Adrian's countenance tightened a bit, telling them he wasn't happy about something. “Not everyone has been by for the basic tests. If even one person has a disease, we all have it. Get tested. Get current on your shots. We can't handle an epidemic.”

There were surprised glances at Adrian admitting there was something he couldn't do.

The leader understood and drove in the point. “I'm not a doctor and even if I were, it wouldn't save everyone.”

He looked around, pushing the calm over them. “I know you're scared. I am too, each time they

stick me with a needle to find out, but I go and I do it, and you need to do the same.”

He beckoned to the cook, and she and her teenage helpers (Zack’s boys) passed out popcorn and apple juice.

“Next are new people.” Adrian gestured at one of the full tables. “These are the seniors from the Rapid City airport. They have majors from psychology to engineering, so we’ll all get a chance to learn their names while they help us make things better.”

The young adults sat down, and Adrian gestured to the benches behind them.

“We also have a second doctor now. Stand up and say something nice, Angie.”

Face painted with vivid eyes and even brighter cheeks, Marc was impressed with how steady her words were.

“Hi, ladies, come visit me. No paper gowns, cold exam rooms, or roaming fingers, I swear.” She delivered a sexy smile. “Can’t make any promises for the guys.”

She sat down with the laughter echoing, breaking the tension, and Adrian went to John. “Let’s have our medical report.”

The doctor stood up, a paper in one hand, gently smoking pipe in the other. “Things are okay with the people here, for the most part. I’ve found no signs of radiation sickness yet, and nothing contagious is going around. We’ve removed some odd moles and warts in the last weeks. Might be

the start of something, though, so everyone needs to watch for changes in those things and come to me right away so I can take care of it.” John paused, “I have a suggestion and a request.”

When Adrian indicated he should, the doctor went on. “We need to up our iodine intake for when we get around the bad places. It will help keep us stronger against the war’s effects.”

“That sounds reasonable. What’s the request?”

John was careful not to let his discomfort show. The pain had gotten as bad as it had ever been last night, and though it had eased off around dawn, he was extremely sore.

“We need help, two full time students who would take over if anything happened to us,” he stated firmly, motioning to Angela to show his faith in her.

“I’m...I was a nursing assistant.”

It was one of the college kids and Adrian took over, wondering if Angela had felt their value as much as their need for rescue.

“Let’s have a quick show of hands. Those interested?” Half a dozen hands went up and Adrian voiced his approval. “Great idea. We’ll get a signup list posted and John will do interviews.”

He glanced down at the notebook he had laying open on the center table. “Next are the monthly updates.”

Kenn stood up, feeling both the welcome of the camp and the cold shoulder of the highest Eagles. “We’re good on water and fuel for a couple weeks,

and two months on food. As of tonight, the supply trucks will be locked from midnight to dawn. Only the boss and duty man on Point will have access. You will also now sign out anything you take and how much of it, so we can keep better track of how much we'll need to get us through when we settle somewhere.”

The Marine fought his anger when Angela's voice echoed in his head. *There will be no limits. Adrian knows we don't have greedy people here.*

“There won't be any limits, though. Adrian knows we don't have greed here.” Kenn flipped the page in his own book, aware of Adrian's approval for the neat transfer of information. “We have openings in this month's basic self-defense and kai classes, and I need six FND workers for third shift duty. See me after this meeting.”

Thinking there was more “Foot in Door” work than even he and Brady could handle if they fought every day, Kenn snapped his book shut. His tone was harder than most of them were used to.

“Last thing. Anyone caught feeding the working dogs will take their place for a week. They are in training, the same as the Eagles. You wouldn't hand a person a slice of meatloaf five minutes after they've worked out, and you can't do it with an animal either.” He threw in a grin he knew his boss would like. “That's the workers. The breeders are fair game. The fatter the mom, the healthier the pups.”

Kenn ignored Angela's look of respect as he sat down.

Adrian took over, thinking he would have the Marine MC the next meeting. "Next are changes and improvements."

He felt their need for more hope and was able to answer it. "We live like gypsies. No homes or any of the things that come with them. No curtains blowing in the breeze, just annoying tent flaps slapping you awake at odd hours. No light on over the sink, just a candle that burns too fast and too dim. No mattress, no kitchens, no walls."

His face glowed with happiness that he could give them hope for a better way of life. "That's almost over for us. It will never be the way it was, especially not for those here and those still on their way, but I'd have back what we can. Over the next months, we're going to trade in these canvas homes for RVs."

There was a loud cheer that swelled into the night.

During the happiness, apple juice ended up spilling on a few of those in the rear, namely Matt and Charlie.

Only two of the Eagles noticed. Zack, who grinned, and Billy, who thought it was about time Zack's bully-prone boys were taught a lesson.

"We have a great idea for getting water quicker, and if it pans out, that'll mean we can all use campers. Men will be three to a tin can. Women need a bit more room."

Gaffs and snorts echoed at this, but died down quickly as the wind increased.

“They’ll be 2 in a camper. Women and elderly will get them first, as with anything here, by alphabetic last name.”

There were words of thanks and whispers, and Adrian waited for them to settle down before continuing. “We’re also putting awnings over most of the areas, so there will be no more waiting in the rain for bathrooms or mess.”

As if on cue, thunder cracked in the distance and two shoe-sized ants raiding the garbage dove for cover unobserved.

Adrian chuckled through his sudden tension. “We’ll hurry up on that one.”

He scanned Rick, noticed him glaring at someone in the rear of the crowd, and stored it for later. “There are a lot of us here now and I’m also working on a better schedule setup. Only those who have duty that week will be given a copy.” He cracked a grin. “Scheduling for two-hundred people twice a month sucks and Kenn and I are working on a quicker system.”

While Adrian was talking, Doug had been installing a large wallboard onto the hard side of the mess truck. There were many smiles and whispered repeats of what he wrote on it.

Point: *The Boss!*

The Irishman drew a quick US flag in the far corner.

Angela noticed his slight shake as he wrote.

“We’re starting a fire crew, a garden, a newspaper, and a radio station. That last one will be called After War Airwaves and I’d prefer people with experience, even if it’s the basics.”

Adrian sighed, voice resigned. “Now, for the part we all hate—a rule change.”

Tension flew through the crowd and Adrian kept his tones level. “We agreed every able person would pull four, six hour shifts a month, but it’s not enough to cover us. Our size keeps growing and people already have their time in by 28 days, which leaves almost a week where we have to run a light patrol or hope for volunteers.” Adrian flipped the page. “We came up with three solutions. First, we raise it to five shifts and maybe even six if our population keeps expanding. I honestly hate that idea, loathe it even. I want the number of shifts to go lower as we get more people, not higher.”

The groans and complaints became agreement.

“Our second way is to change the structure a little. Everyone who passes a class has to take a week at helping teach it. That would free up enough Eagles to cover those extra days even when we have a double watch posted.” His tone grew cold. “The last way is to do nothing and hope we have a full shift on duty if something happens. I won’t vote for that.”

“Neither will I,” Kenn spoke up, doing his job this time without being guided. “I’d rather do an

extra shift or teach a class to know I'm safe when I sleep."

He didn't regard the smoldering man sitting across from him, positive Brady was thinking something ugly at the remark.

"Agreed. Okay, we'll be voting on shift change or teaching change, and also on some places to go next since nearly all the reports of mutations are north. You'll notice I favored dropping down the way we came in. To the east are Badlands and open country, nothing we need. If we get down into Nebraska, we might find more farms, maybe even a field with corn ready to be smeared with butter." That drew more smiles. Corn, other than canned, was a thing of the past for most of the country.

"I also included a shortlist of places to spend the winter. It's not the final vote by far, but it will give us an idea of the supplies we'll need then, so we can start gathering now. I left an empty line for other ideas. All right. Any new business before we spend some time on the slavers and our defenses?"

There was a tense quiet while he closed his book and waited. He couldn't tell them they were safe here, but he had to make them feel it anyway. Some of the most recent of Cesar's refugees had recognized Rick. There was no avoiding the topic and he had chosen to handle it as openly as he could.

"They're still in northeastern Wyoming, as far as we know. The radio has been quiet, but we've

all witnessed the smoke trails and damage they leave, even if we weren't in one of the towns they attacked. They're moving along Interstate 25 and east of it, so I've only included places south." Adrian swept his uneasy people. "Eventually, they'll catch up or we'll have a delay, and we'll have to make a choice. That's later. For right now, here's what we've been doing: Marc, Neil, Kyle."

There were frowns at the order of the names, most people understanding it wasn't random, and Marc steeled himself as Neil and Kyle held up a drawing so good they'd made Neil sign his name to it.

"We made up some emergency plans," Marc told them, starting with the one labeled: While Camped-Day.

"He thought; I drew," Neil cracked, grinning. "And Kyle made fun of us in support."

There was laughter, and Marc saw Adrian give Seth a pointed nod that said they'd demonstrated the proper use for running off at the mouth.

"If we're camped, the guards will sound the alarm we hooked up to run the length of camp." Marc gestured to Kenn, who angrily hit a button on his wrist band.

"Incoming! Seek shelter! Incoming!"

It blared from all corners of the dark camp around them, horribly loud, and everyone was glad when the Marine slapped another button and made it stop.

Marc wiggled a finger in his ear. “Okay, since we’ll all be deaf from the alarm, pay attention to where you should be.”

He began to explain, leaving Adrian free to judge the reactions of his herd. The leader was hoping this would be enough to temporarily ease the quiet worry he saw lurking.

“We’re steel-plating things, Neil will get into that. All of these semis here will be nearly bullet proof. If the alarm goes off, get to the mess or one of these trucks. They have three drivers assigned at all times, and supplies inside in case you get pinned down or want to make a run for it,” he stated, not hiding the fact that he wouldn’t. “How you know which truck to go to will be covered in a minute. The plan would be to circle around the mess and make our stand if we were out in the open, or move into a nearby building and defend it. If we’re on the road, it’s a little more complicated.”

He waited for the two Eagles to flip the picture over to the side labeled: On the Road.

“We’ll be practicing during travel time, so you’ll get the hang of it. Basically, the lead semi will pull sideways across the road and each of the cars behind will pull all the way up to form a barrier wall. Pull in with a hard right or left, leave your doors open, and line up nice and tight. We’ll be steel-plating car doors too, so you’ll have cover if you stay low. Go to the mess and help each other.” Almost finished and glad, Marc said,

“Copies of these plans and what to do are being put into each glove box. Now, for a nighttime attack, Neil’s gonna fill you in.”

Marc switched places with Neil, grateful his tongue and brain had stayed on the same page.

Neil switched to a 3rd drawing: While Camped–Night.

“After listening to the stories, we think it will be a night attack, so we based most of our plans on that. When the sirens go off, the trucks you should go to will light up-headlights, signals, etc... The highest levels of Eagles will escort the kids; the next two will clear the tent areas. The next will sweep the showers, bathrooms, and parking areas. Rookies will help with livestock.” Neil held up his arm to show a shiny new wristwatch. “You’ll know the Eagles by these. They flash red, white, and blue. For a day attack, the plan is the same, except you’ll know the right trucks by the red cross on them.”

Neil started to take Kyle’s end of the picture, and then stopped, removing a pencil from behind his ear. He carefully erased a smudge from the picture and then replaced it.

Neil reddened as he realized everyone was staring at him. “Sorry.”

Kyle snickered, trading places. “Perfectionist.”

Neil snorted. “Super-trooper.”

“You know it.”

The crowd laughed at their teasing and Adrian gave a subtle nod to Kyle that Marc wondered about. Was the joking staged too?

“Okay, details. We’re keeping boxes of vests and supplies around the camp at all times. We’re also doubling the number of sentries on supply runs, so that means we need more Eagles. We have nine places open. The signup sheet will be posted. We’re also going to train a little harder, so when you hear all the noise in the tents, you know it’s us.”

Kyle was ready to hand over control, but the boss had other plans.

“Kyle can handle questions now.”

Voices and hands went up as Neil and Marc sat down, leaving the Level Six Eagle to fend for himself.

“So, we’re going to fight?”

“When are they coming?”

“Shouldn’t we run?”

“Maybe we should think about their deal.”

“We do not negotiate with killers!” Kyle snapped, causing the crowd to fall silent. “We don’t hide and we don’t hand over our people. We’re Americans!”

“Americans have been doing it since this country was formed!”

“Better a few than all of us!”

Kyle was hot at their shouts, but he lowered his voice. “It’s better to face them now than during the winter, when we can’t get away if we need to.”

The mess filled with protests and shouts, but quieted as soon as Adrian stood up.

Kyle was quick to find his seat, heart worried. They were so fast to be cowards, with no thought of being heroes instead.

Adrian studied his people. “You’re afraid and you have every right to be. They are the worst of the old ways. So, what should we do?”

There was an uneasy silence while Adrian made his point. “There will come a time in every person’s life when they must choose to stand and fight, and maybe die for what they believe in, or run and live and lose it all anyway through shame and guilt.”

He gestured, making sure he had each of them included. “You’ve got your lives. That’s a lot now, and you’re stronger, more able to care for yourselves. You might hole-up somewhere and even survive for a while alone, but you’ll have destroyed the future we’re building here. It’s not just one life in this camp, it’s all life...and alone, Safe Haven *will* die.”

Adrian saw faces that wanted him to fix it, make it go away. “I don’t want another useless war. No more bloodshed! Life matters more than it ever has and I’m so sick of death I could puke, but I’ve made my choice. When that time comes for us, I won’t run with you. I’ll stand.”

“Kick their asses, man!” Mitch shouted in a drunken slur, and there was an immediate chorus

of agreement that allowed Adrian's closest men (and women) to breathe easier.

“Kill ‘em all!”

“We’ll show ‘em!”

“We’re with ya!”

Adrian grinned in relief as if he’d been worried about losing leadership and those who knew the truth held still, trusting him to find them all a way out.

For the next few minutes, he and his men answered dozens of questions. It was loud and serious, and Angela was encouraged. She thought Adrian’s words were flawless.

“So, let’s do some voting and go get some of you going on new classes. I personally can’t wait to attend a Kai class where Neil and Hilda are in the cage.”

There was a lot of laughter at that and Adrian let them go for a minute with the remarks. Humor had a way of clearing a person of fear.

“Kenn and Seth will pass around the slips. Brady and Neil have the pens. Kyle and Jeremy are the counters and as usual, I expect you to watch the totals. Also, there’s a blank space at the end and I read each one, so if there’s something you need to tell me, that’s a good way to do it.”

Marc was impressed with the official appearing ballot. He made his own choices quickly, but it was clear that Adrian didn’t mind people talking about it. Most of the camp hadn’t gotten through more than the first couple items yet,

too busy listening to those around them talk about volunteering to take Neil's lessons too. It was a wise man who knew you didn't get anywhere with real Americans by pushing them around. The more they talked and agreed, the more likely it was that the votes would go in Adrian's favor.

Smart, Marc thought, and sneaky.

Marc reread number five, where to check next for authority. Neil had said it wasn't because they wanted the government, that any organized group could fill that hole. So why were they all military choices? Why not try the city shelters and colleges?

Because those places and people are long gone, and really, you know that.

Marc wiped his face of emotion as Angela and Samantha stepped by on the way to put their votes in the barrel. Hair down and blowing wildly, wearing jeans and a sweat-stained tank top, she was so sexy his breath caught.

Angela couldn't stop a smile and a spark flew at the contact. *Sorry.*

Marc returned her welcome openly despite Kenn's hot gaze already being on them. *Don't be. In here it's like we're alone again,* he sent, amazed at how easy it was. The bond was stronger because she'd saved his life, he guessed, but it also showed more.

Does he know for sure those places are empty? Marc asked when she didn't respond.

Yes. His dreams are full of it, but it's also his back trail. He's been checking much more than what these people have been told.

He keeps a lot of secrets, Marc sent, mind pulling up Adrian's words about Tonya.

That's another line he's walking. The camp would be very upset to find out he's been with her.

Marc didn't shrug, feeling more than Kenn monitoring them now. It's his business as far as I'm concerned, but it makes me leery, too.

Tonya earned her punishments. She's lucky he didn't have her banished.

Adrian caught bits and pieces of their exchange, and it amused him to have Angela and Brady ignoring everything going on, as if they'd known all about the inner details of the meeting. They hadn't, but they had affected it. The emergency plan and almost all the new defenses had come from Brady and the need to protect Angela. Even Samantha had affected quietly. They'd been here a week, and already, big changes were coming because of it. They were definitely his.

“We're going to start counting now, so come on up and make sure it's right.”

Most of the camp moved that way, but Marc waited until Angie and Sam had come by before taking his own ballot up, and then gravitating toward Neil and the rear of the mess.

So, why is he checking bases and compounds, if he's not actually searching for authority?

Angela met his gaze this time, drawing a frown from Kenn that had Eagles gritting their teeth in frustration.

Because he knows that's where average people will go. He's gathering his herd.

She looked away suddenly, like someone had said something sharp, and Marc scowled openly. *Can Kenn hear us?*

No. The bond I have with Kenn is limited because I've always known what he'd do with it. It's much weaker. Adrian probably could.

That told him a lot and Marc observed Adrian as he carefully explained something to a large group of single females. *He's trying very hard to give me reasons to stay...when we're alone.*

You're still thinking of leaving?

Marc could feel her pain. *I won't.*

For how long?

He did shrug this time, turning toward the beckoning rookies who'd tried to give him team lead despite Kenn's words at the level test. *When they've gotten things down better.*

Angela watched him go with pain in her heart, but she didn't stop him or make any promises. The line they were walking had thinned.

The vote went Adrian's way on everything and a light drizzle began to fall as the meeting broke up. The wind was gusting, putting them on edge and no one lingered. When the thick, white mist rolled in, everyone except the guards took to their tents and shut them up tight.

The fog came in fast, curling around their vehicles and weaving its way through the camp to be waist-high in places. The Eagles sat in jeeps and trucks, scrutinizing the foreign landscape around them as it became distant and then submerged in rolling clouds of white.

Angela was in her tent, Charlie spending the night with Matt, and her focus was on the open window. Stray threads of fog wound through the screen, but her mind was on Marc.

He was so unhappy and all he wanted was to be around her, talk to her, and laugh the way they had on the trip here. His loneliness was clear and her own needs were hard to keep in line as the camp around her became too muffled to be a distraction anymore. Marc hated the idea of her being an Eagle. Could she change that? Things would be so much easier if she had his support.

Half an hour later, most of the tents around Angela were dark, the noises of camp hushed, and she slowly slipped outside. The fog was over her head, damp and thick, and she stayed still, calming the part of her that would always hate the dark. She pushed away the sour smell and concentrated. Where was he?

Angela found him by his isolated thoughts. It was almost impossible to view through the layers of swirling white. She was careful not to bump into

anything and alert even her shadow to her absence. She wanted a real Brady moment, on her terms, and she moved his way, not sending any thoughts, just tracking his.

Marc sat in Angie's Blazer and smoked, watching the camp disappear. He wasn't scheduled for duty but he'd come anyway, unable to fight the feeling in his gut that something was about to happen. Subdued sounds of the camp came to him—tent flaps rustling, footsteps, dogs padding around—and he wondered if Angela, too, was watching and waiting for dawn.

Marc's fingers tightened on his smoke as a wolf or coyote sounded in the near distance. He swept the area when Dog jumped from the hood, perhaps to give his answer in person. The big animal was gone a second later, the white mist barely disturbed, and Marc hoped none of Kenn's men would shoot him and claim it had been an accident. The thick fog would be a good excuse and Marc thought maybe the wolf knew it and would stay away from camp tonight.

Marc understood more when the strange howl came again and Dog answered, clear and sharp even through the fog. *A mating call*, Marc thought, getting out of the Blazer to try catching a glimpse of the female.

The fog was damp, unpleasant and Marc sighed deeply, sweeping the moving whiteness. It was so hard to labor all day and stay in his tent all

night. He used to be solitary, but his time with Angie had thawed that layer of ice, leaving him lost without a shield. She was so perfect for him. Why hadn't she called? They'd been so in love! Why had she felt she couldn't call him?

It was my pride at first. I thought you'd sold me out.

There was a pause and Marc swung around eagerly. *Where are you?*

His question was ignored by the shadow tracking his location. *By the time I had Charlie, I realized they'd tricked you, too, but it was too late by then.*

You could have run, after a while."

It was finally time for the truths he'd avoided and she didn't censor her words, as she had during the trip here.

You've seen firsthand how determined he is to own me. Is there any place I could have gone, that he wouldn't have followed?

No. He's obsessed. If we left now, he and a dozen or so would come after us. Even Adrian wouldn't be able to stop them.

Marc watched the fog, hating the ugly place they were in. Here, where she was already starting to outgrow him, she was safe. Out there, where she'd love him and only him, her life would always be in danger.

We walk a thin line. Our son on one side...

The voice fell silent and Marc finished the thought. *And my love on the other.*

There was a silence where he could feel her pausing to let people go by before moving closer.

A feeling I'll return openly if you can wait for me.

He saw the fog part near the rear of the Blazer.
Angie!

Her hair was loose, floating on the mist, and her glowing blue orbs beckoned. He moved toward her feeling as if they were surrounded by his dreams. He needed to hold her. *Will you let me?*

“Yes, Brady. I need that.”

Magic flowed between them. Sharp and sweet, the hunger and need rose up together to steal her breath. She'd missed being with him!

Marc could almost feel her need. There were small flecks of desire in her face, but it was the greedy hunger lurking beneath the surface that he responded to. They'd hidden these feelings for so long!

Angela still flinched when his arms slid around her and Marc pulled her up tight against his hard, warm body. He rested his head against hers and waited, knowing she'd relax when she reminded herself who he was.

“I have.”

Her arms went around his neck, sliding deliciously up his chest to get there, and she nestled closer at his small intake of air. “I haven't given up hope for us, Brady.”

He leaned back to gaze at her. "I'd understand if you had. The things you're being offered are... I wouldn't refuse him either."

"It's not one or the other, it's just one at a time," she stated, and didn't feel awful at her next lie. "You're second because we're stuck waiting on Kenn. For the rest, if I wait, we miss people. I can't live with that."

Marc wanted to believe her and he let a small smile reach his face. "I'm sorry."

She leaned in. "Wait for me, Brady?"

"My whole life if that's what it takes," he answered passionately, drawn in, and his focus slipped to her lips. *Would she...*

Angela sealed their mouths with a hunger that took her by surprise, and felt him tense, before he was crushing her close, taking control. No more holding back or being careful, he kissed her as he used to-until she was trembling and melting against him.

Their breath mingled, harsh and fierce in the charged air, and the tension caught fire as he slid a hand to her hip and deepened the kiss.

"Angela?"

They broke apart fast, flushed guiltily.

"Over here," she called, hoping her guard would think it was the fog making her sound so winded. That had been the old Brady, the one she loved without reservation, and it was hard to think through the memories.

Seth found them easily, Angela sitting on the hood of the Blazer and Marc standing alertly (in more ways than one) nearby.

“Good, you weren’t alone.”

Seth started to take up a post in the shadows, but she stopped him.

“I might be able to sleep now.”

Angela didn’t look at Marc as she walked by, but he observed her small smile of satisfaction and his ego was soothed. In those few seconds, she’d wanted him every bit as much as he’d wanted her, and there hadn’t been a witch anywhere in the background.

9

“Eagle One to the livestock truck. No rush.”

Adrian pushed the button on the mike, nerves already on edge without the code that meant the exact opposite. “Copy. When is Eagle Two due?”

“One hour.”

“Copy, out.”

If Samantha was calling for him, she’d foreseen something. This was it, the slavers and the weather at the same time. Hadn’t he known it would be that way?

The wind was pushing against him as the front rolled in, the drizzle icy compared to the muggy fog. *Tornado weather*, he thought, gut tightening. Another of those he’d needed was about to be proven.

Samantha was leaning against the grill of a nearby semi, head back, and Adrian called out softly so as not to startle her, “You wanted me?”

She motioned at the angry sky, sitting up. “It’s closer now. Should all be over after dawn,” she stated, fighting the attraction. She did not intend to become camp whore number two.

She sighed. It was easy to understand why her body called out to his, though. He was proud. It blared from him like an alarm some days, almost blinding in its intensity and lethal in its power. Because when Adrian was proud, he was happy, and that golden light was enough to lift the two-hundred people here off their feet. He flashed straight, white teeth through full, sexy lips, and women nearby felt their pulse speed up. When his scent blew over them, the urge to run rough, feverish fingers through his golden spikes was nearly overwhelming.

“We’ve picked a place close by that meets your requirements. You’re sure about the safety zone?”

“As sure as anyone can be,” she answered. “There are some places that don’t get tornadoes or even bad flooding. Not whole states of course, but small areas inside them. We’re on the edge of one now.”

“Pack it up. You’ll ride with Hilda and the others.”

Samantha swallowed a protest. *Lovely.*

Adrian continued to the main camp, arriving in time to catch a conversation between his Eagles and Marc.

“Will he stay or go?” Marc asked.

Most of the camp was still up despite the late hour. Adrian had been making rounds, talking to people and telling them to be ready in case.

Kyle did a fast sweep of the muggy darkness. “Go, probably. He hates to take chances.”

No sooner had the mobster spoken, than Adrian joined them, lighting a smoke. “Gather the boys and get us loaded up. Yellow slickers are in truck #6. Mandatory.”

Adrian noticed Doug loitering nearby to break up any possible trouble between Marc and Kenn. They were determined not to let him provoke Marc into another fight.

“I’m sending the camp on. You’re driving my semi. We’ll cover our absence, but have every Eagle, Level Three and up, involved. Tell them to make excuses and fall behind.”

Doug and Kyle hurried off, and Adrian lingered with Marc, finishing his cigarette. It would be the last he got for a while, maybe the last period if things went badly.

“Are they that close?”

Adrian’s voice was hard. “Yes. They’ve left us no choice but to react. We’ll do the best we can to kill them all.”

Marc was for it. “I’m all in.”

Men were coming from every direction. They'd clearly done this before and the camp immediately started getting set to leave.

“Good. I need you on this one, as tight to Kenn as it takes to get the job done.”

“Mission first, all that other shit later,” Marc stated coolly.

“All that other shit is in your mind,” Adrian cautioned. He spun toward his people; voice now a sharp tone of command that garnered instant responses.

“Prepare for travel, people! Get it loaded up! This is a Bug-out!”

Chapter Five
Liquid Steel
April 10th
Near Howes, South Dakota

1

“**E**agle Two just rolled in.”

Adrian moved through the rain, following the headlights to get the report himself. He couldn't wait for it to be delivered this time and Kenn's fearful expression wasn't a comfort as he climbed from the truck.

“Hundreds of them. They'll be here before dawn.” Kenn glanced around, spooked. “Good thing you've got the herd ready to roll.”

Kenn spotted Angela in a yellow slicker like the men, leaning against her Blazer. Half a dozen Eagles were patrolling the shadows around her.

He glared. “She should be with the sheep! What the hell is she doing here?”

“Her duty.” Lightning flashed as Adrian pinned him with a hard look. “Do yours.”

Kenn flushed, trying to ignore the rage he hadn't found an outlet for yet. “What's the plan?”

“We're working on that now. Come on. You're riding with a rookie for cover.”

The gear they were taking had been loaded into trucks and they were set to go. Adrian waited until the check-in had accounted for everyone in Safe Haven before keying his mike.

“Go slow and stay together. Keep the radio clear unless there’s a problem.”

They only traveled for a few minutes before the long convoy was short a dozen vehicles. Men slipped out of place, driving without their lights as they rolled alongside supply and livestock trucks to keep themselves hidden until they could pull behind homes and signs. And all through the convoy, men slipped from their vehicles.

Adrian grunted as he hit the dirt and rolled, swiftly taking himself out of view of the cars now rounding the curve in his blind spot. It bothered the leader to hide as the rest of his herd went by, but he held himself in place.

This has to happen!

As the second half of the vehicles rolled by, Angela’s Blazer came into view and Adrian forced himself not to shout as she opened her door and rolled roughly down the embankment toward him.

Only her driver, Kevin, saw her exit, and Adrian glared at the man as he went by. *Door locks, rookie!*

“What the hell are you doing?”

Angela had landed in a painful pile at his feet and gave him a muddy grimace. “You would have said no.”

Adrian was aware of the last jeep circling for him and he said nothing as the Eagle picked them up. There wasn't time to argue. The men Kenn had left to spy on the slavers had sent a clicked message telling them the guerillas were now coming their way. They would only have an hour to set their trap.

Thirty-five men were waiting for them inside a training canvas when they pulled back up to the empty campsite. Every one of their profiles tightened when they saw Angela in the jeep.

“What’s she doing here?! Take her back!” Marc’s voice was as angry as Kenn’s as he moved toward her. “Have one of them take you back!”

Angela had only said one thing to Adrian in the jeep, but it had been powerful to someone who had already asked so much of her.

You’ll need me to bargain with, if it all goes bad.

Now, after being around her two overprotective men, Adrian found himself agreeing. The slavers wouldn’t attack right away if they thought he would negotiate, and by his side or surrounded by these men, she was still safer here than miles away in camp.

Marc had turned to Neil. “Will you take her?”

“I’m staying!”

Both of her Marines tried again to shut it down.

“No, you’re not.”

“We don’t need the distraction.”

Instead of arguing, Angela met the unreadable gaze of their leader.

Adrian responded as if she were any other man in his army, but used the moment to help them understand that she felt the same way they did. “Tell me why.”

“It’s my duty, too. And you might need me.”

Now glad that she’d shown up, Adrian gestured toward the black rig he was set to drive. “You don’t leave that truck.”

“Unless needed?”

Adrian frowned coldly. “You won’t be.”

Satisfied, she ignored Kenn to handle Marc. Their words were silent and emotional, but after a moment, her firm denial of his demands, *I’m staying!*

She spun toward the truck to discover Adrian holding the door open, and she took the vest from him with a roll of her eyes. “If I’m not getting out, why do I need a vest?”

Her mutter was only meant for his ears, but he didn’t lower his voice when he scolded her, “Because it’s a hard new world you’re so eager to be a part of, and what we’re about to do will ensure that the slavers never stop, never give up, until we are dead and you are under their control.”

Chastened, Angela let out a tired sigh. “I need to go, too. I have to *see* them.”

Adrian waited for her to climb in before closing the door, and meeting two angry faces in

the darkness. His own expression told them it wasn't their choice to make and Adrian moved toward Kyle with an aloofness he didn't feel. Getting her accepted as an Eagle had officially begun, adding yet another layer of deceptions and manipulations that brought guilt, but also pride. He, too, was getting stronger.

Marc moved to the window and waited for her to roll it down. He tried to be careful, but already knew it wouldn't matter. She'd made up her mind.

"You're going to get hurt if you don't slow down."

"I've survived so far," she stated tonelessly.

His countenance twisted and she rounded on him.

"You have to stop now, Brady! It's different."

"Because you think you're gonna be an Eagle and you can do it all."

Marc wanted to pull it back, but it was much too late for that as her chin flattened into that familiar, unarguable line.

"I will be an Eagle," she stated, tone full of warning. "And I don't answer to you. I've made no promises I won't keep, but don't make me choose between you and the new life I'm trying to build here. You won't like the decision I'll make if you can't wait for me."

She rolled up the window so she didn't have to witness his pain, and felt him leave. She had hurt him, but he had to understand that he had no more right to control her than Kenn did. *I am my own!*

Adrian started the engine and the cool shield of battle settled over his nerves. They would do this and do it right.

2

The small convoy didn't go far. Once out of sight, Adrian took them through Howes, proper, and then up a road that ran directly behind the small South Dakota town that had bodies hanging from the windows, porches, and abandoned semis.

Adrian used his hands against the howl of the storm to direct their vehicles into a three-sided box, with only a small gap not protected from the rain. They hovered in the middle of the area, and after Kyle and his team got a tarp over it, had a dry place to plan from as the storm drummed against the trucks and thunder rolled angrily.

The sudden sound of running feet had men reaching for their weapons.

“Battlefields of gold.”

Cleared by the password, Zack burst into their area and went straight to Adrian, spraying cold drops. “The lookouts spotted a second group with heavy hardware advanced on Howes from the east. They have a big carrier with a fucking tank!”

The men went silent, stunned.

“Coming through here?” Adrian asked.

“Yes. The camp is already out of range, but we'll be trapped if we stay too long.”

Adrian thought fast. They had nothing to stand against a tank, did they?

Only Angela. It's her metal monster, he realized.

“There’s only two ways to get a transport carrier close enough to hit our site,” Kenn commented, subtly directing Lee and Zack toward Angela. His gesture said to keep her from doing anything stupid, like being a hero.

“Everyone says they surrounded the towns,” Neil pointed out.

“They’ll come in from at least two sides and try to squeeze us.” Marc was sure. That’s what he would do.

“Rolling or carrying?” Adrian asked, clearly putting stock in Marc’s opinion.

“Carrying.”

Adrian peered at the devastated town below them, standing pat against the wind gusts. Where was the best place to hit them?

“No time for a pit,” Kenn stated.

Adrian waved a hand. “Someone get me a channel so I can listen to them.”

Angela was aware of Kenn’s allies staying close, but unless she was needed, she had every intention of doing what she was told. If Adrian’s plan failed, *then* she would try to save them all.

Marc helped Kenn with the radio, their time together before the war making it smooth, but he scanned continuously to verify Angela’s safety. When this was over, if they weren’t dead, he would have some things to say to her.

“Channel 83,” Adrian instructed, waving at Kenn to stay in control of the portable CB.

Marc flanked Angela.

They only listened to the static for a moment before the radio lit up with evil.

“Nos va a venir a través Howes en una hora...”

“They’ll be coming through Howes in an hour,” Kenn translated.

“Excelente.”

“Cuándo vamos a atacar?”

“When do we attack?” Kenn repeated, heart thumping. They were about to go to war again. He couldn’t wait.

“En el trazo de dos.”

Kenn held up his digital watch that showed it as 1:05 am. “At the stroke of two.”

Now holding a very slim advantage, Adrian flipped off the voices and knelt before his army, K-Bar flashing through the damp dirt.

“They’ll come through the main road of Howes. We cleared it yesterday, took six hours. The other streets were worse. They can’t roll over it because of all the noise, so when they come to the main intersection, they’ll take the cleared path.”

Adrian was busy mapping out the small town and Kenn joined him, working on the outline of their dead camp.

“We assume the main group will wait over the hill, out of sight, so they’ll come in here.”

Neil bent down to draw a very realistic Mexican flag where Adrian had pointed.

“They won’t have a clear view without coming over the hill, so they’ll wait for the tank crew to call and say they’re in position.”

Kenn added a tank to their most vulnerable side.

“When the call comes, he’ll tell them to open fire. As soon as the first hit lands, they’ll know we’ve moved and chase us. They’ll catch up to Safe Haven right about the time they settle down from the storm.”

“He’s dangerous.”

“No shit!” Kenn snapped, hating it that Brady was here. “How about one of the ass-savers you used to come up with? Got anything now?”

The men around them frowned, but Marc ignored the tone, busy studying the map. Adrian had said they’d spent all day yesterday clearing the roads. He surveyed their leader with only a touch of bitterness. “What do you think the weight limit is on that bridge we crossed to get up here?”

Adrian saw it right away. That bridge was the only cleared way across the Cheyenne River within a hundred or more miles. If they took it out, there wouldn’t be a single shot fired and the slavers would be trapped on the opposite side of that churning mass.

“Won’t matter if we help it along.”

“And it’ll take them more than a week to go around. None of the other bridges we checked around here were intact,” Kyle told them.

That heavy sense of doom was easing and Adrian stood up, wiping the dust from his hands. “We have about forty minutes. Let’s get it set up.”

3

It took them almost that entire time to get the bridge rigged.

Adrian wasn’t taking any chances the bridge would hold, and that meant climbing down the sides with ropes attached to keep the brave men from being lost in the dangerously strong winds battering them. The Eagles on those ropes were currently chopping and sawing through the support beams, and it was slow, noisy work that had everyone on edge. They were trapped between the two groups now, in plain sight by anyone.

“I’m swinging!” Marc shouted. “Hold my damn feet!”

“Same here!” Kenn echoed, hanging upside down with a saw while rain pelted his face.

Kyle and his team tried to keep the ropes from blowing so much, but the height of the storm was here and there was only so much they could do.

“Almost through!”

“Same here!” Marc called, swarmed with Déjà vu from their last mission against the Mexicans. They’d done much this same job on a bridge that a

known drug lord was about to travel through. It hadn't gone so well.

“Not now!” Marc ordered, hauling himself upright. He could feel Kenn's bad karma surrounding them now, as it had then. “You through?”

“We're good!” Kenn answered, trying not to think about his previous mistake of not cutting deep enough to topple the post.

Groan... Creak...

Adrian heard the sound he'd been waiting for and gave the signal. “Pack it up!”

The sense of death being around the corner was thickening again, tightening around them as the rain poured, and Adrian was eager to be away and out of sight.

Kyle's team hauled the two men up with fast jerks and low grunts of strain with pain. Neither man was light.

The bridge swayed uneasily at a harsh blast of wind as they were pulled up, sending all of the men running for the muddy ground. And Adrian was satisfied that anything more than a jeep would topple it.

The rest was up to fate.

4

“Here they come.”

Up on the hill above their laboring crew, Angela's words echoed in the damp truck, making

men tense. The cutting team was still out in the open.

Against her single protest, Adrian had put her in the rear of his semi with half a dozen resentful sentries and it was the first time she had spoken.

“Less than a minute,” she stated worriedly. “Tell them to get under cover!”

Neil hesitated, torn. That was Adrian down there, should he—?

“Do something!” she hissed.

When he still didn’t move, Angela shoved him aside, grabbing the Maglite from his belt. She slapped it into Jeremy’s hands, unsure of the code. “Get them under cover and do it now!”

Jeremy was also reluctant to disturb the cutting team, but her tone of command was impossible to ignore and he sent the message with a worried heart. Adrian would be pissed if she were wrong.

There was no response, but all of them were relieved to see the cutting team truck immediately pull onto a crowded side-road near the bridge and steer the front of the semi so that it appeared nearly jackknifed. Parked next to several buildings, once the slavers went by, the men could abandon the truck and escape.

“There’s the tank!”

“Everyone hit the deck!” Neil ordered, realizing they might be discovered at the first swing of headlights.

There was a scramble to get down as the sounds of engines came to them through the heavy

rain. Inside the vulnerable semi, Eagles also ducked out of sight.

“When the bridge goes, they’ll be trapped down there,” Angela realized, wishing she’d spoken up sooner.

“Adrian isn’t trapped anywhere,” Jeremy soothed. “And he’ll bring all of them home.”

Grateful she had warned them, he gave her a nod of respect. “It’s the way he trains us and that’s the way we’ll train you.”

All around her, men stiffened in surprise at Jeremy’s acceptance. He was Neil’s XO, highly respected, and he’d just given his support.

A second later, Angela got a rainy view of the terror stalking her and was suddenly glad Marc had left Dog with Charlie. The wolf would be one last defense if these evil men succeeded tonight.

The trailer carrying the tank rolled over the rain-slicked pavement with a single jeep in front of it and a cluster behind. More than fifty clearly armed men travelled toward the bridge, already on the same street as Adrian’s semi.

Everyone held their breath as the slavers began to roll by that truck, hoping the Eagles inside were well hidden.

The group went very slowly, it seemed to those watching, and each shadowy pistol and rifle was a reminder of how close they were to the boss.

“Someone’s coming fast,” Angela warned them again. “Up here.”

Instead of the tension she expected, relief filled the truck. The men were positive it was Adrian.

Coming through the muddy woods, Adrian and Kenn were first, with Marc right behind them, and Angela couldn't stop the small smile of welcome when their eyes met.

Marc sighed, anger fading. *Why am I always so lost with her?*

Kenn also felt emotions at her response, but with Adrian so close, he was forced to swallow it.

After verifying everyone (Angela) was accounted for, Adrian made hand motions to push the remaining truck over the hill in neutral until they were far enough to avoid being heard.

Those inside made room for all but a few of the returning team, while Kenn went to tell the driver. Those leaving would take shifts pushing, while those staying would follow on foot.

Able to feel Neil's longing to stay (it matched her own), Angela carefully slid from the truck and joined Adrian. Two men jumped down behind her and she moved faster to avoid another argument with Marc. She didn't have to ask him. He wasn't in charge.

Her gaze kept being pulled from the muddy ground to the line of jeeps and one transport truck now approaching the bridge. They had a clear view from up here.

Adrian only stared at her for a long moment and then continued observing the enemy. The tank would go down with the bridge and that meant the

forty-odd men trapped on this side with them would have to be handled.

“What’s that sound?”

They stilled at her question, able to feel it under their feet, even so far above the town. It echoed hungrily, bearing down on Howes like a missile.

“What is it?”

No one answered. They couldn’t, astonished by the sight of death rushing toward the unsuspecting group of killers.

The transport truck was the next to cross, one jeep already waiting on the opposite bank, and none of the Mexicans detected the louder roar or the extra echoes under their tires. Down in the town, the storm was raging.

The wall of debris-laden water swept downstream, wider than the bank as it slammed into the first bridge pillar with no mercy. The jeep on the opposite bank vanished under the flood and didn’t surface.

The bridge trembled, swaying as the sabotaged beams gave way, and the transport carrier tilted precariously over the new abyss.

The wall of water snagged the front bumper, ripping it free of the dock, and the entire load of truck, tank, and bridge fell into the violently churning waves.

Behind it, the slavers tried to reverse, but most were too slow to avoid being swept away. The only ones to get clear were the two rear jeeps and

as if sensing survivors, the torrent of water spilt between the dock and street, roaring through the narrow road in pursuit.

Adrian's semi was pulled out by the waves, and the slower of the two jeeps swerved sharply to the right to miss crashing into it. The taillights flashed as the driver tried to stop, but it was too late and they went over the side of the dock. A huge spray rose in their wake.

The second jeep was gaining ground on the water, staying ahead, and Adrian grabbed the rifle.

"Follow my lead." He got set, and Kenn and Marc did the same on either side of him.

Neil was almost whining with frustration from not being in on the action, but he knew better than to shirk his unspoken duty to protect Angela right now and he stayed with her.

Making fast adjustments, Adrian braced as the jeep charged up the hill they were on.

"Now!" Adrian saw it go perfectly in his mind, and then fired.

The shot punched into the windshield, instantly spraying the inside with scarlet gore, and the jeep veered violently to the left. The two men inside scrambling for the wheel jerked simultaneously as two more shots tore into the vehicle.

Out of control, the jeep rammed onto a downed tree, and lifted off the ground. It slammed to the earth in a loud, metal-spraying crash, landing on its top.

The flattened vehicle rolled once, this time ending up in the mud-slickened grass and it began to flip down the hill, scattering debris. The Eagles watched in shock as it hit the flooded main street and sank into the merciless waves still thundering through the town.

Overhead, the storm abated.

Adrian forced himself to dismiss the death, refusing to shoulder it yet. There would be more of that. “Next time, we’ll take them all.”

He slapped Kenn and Marc on the shoulder and moved toward Angela, shouldering his weapon as the two Marines did the same. “Let’s get home. Mission accomplished.”

Angela fell in between him and Marc at Kenn’s wave, and tried to prepare herself for a short, miserably happy walk to catch up with the others. They were safe again for a little while.

And next time? the Witch asked curiously. *What then?*

Next time, I’ll do my part and no one will hold me back.

5

Doug had done a good job of covering for their absence. By the time the team arrived, the big Irishman had the camp set up in the basement of a steel distributor. Happily exploring the undamaged factory, most of the people thought Adrian was helping with outside patrols until the men with car trouble could catch up.

When Adrian finally slipped inside, soaked and red eyed, no one questioned. It was the same for the Eagles, and the camp slept easier knowing how many high level men had been watching out for them. Even Angela's absence was covered with a few words about being on duty.

The only members not fooled were Cynthia and Rick. Both of them had been wandering during the lack of leadership and knew Adrian hadn't been in camp. The reporter assumed it was another of Adrian's private training sessions, but Rick wondered if it had been more. He had seen the small convoy arrive and the traitor knew what the crash after a battle was like. Had Adrian foiled Cesar's plans somehow? If so, it had been without the notice of anyone in Safe Haven.

Rick decided he would have to make contact as soon as Adrian lifted the blackout. He knew something wasn't right, but he couldn't verify it unless he found a sentry with a loose tongue. Knowing if he was now on his own, was a valuable piece of information to have.

Things had worked out even better than Adrian had hoped. They could relax for a few days once they made it to the Stateline for the pickups he had chosen from the mental map Angela gave him. Out of the three places he'd tried so far, two had held people willing to come along without much convincing. The third, they'd made stubborn contact with once and tried to tell of the danger

coming, but without any luck. They would try once more before dropping down into Nebraska, but they didn't have to run for their lives now.

Unlike the slavers, he and his army knew how to use the tools of the government, and one of their trucks held a pontoon setup. They would double back and avoid the badlands meeting that Cesar was sure to be hoping for. It would put weeks of distance between the two groups, and if the slavers went far enough north, the radiation zones might even take care of the problem for them.

6

“Why have we stopped?”

Dean was shouting to be heard over the wind and the angry Mexicans around him scowled, but didn't interfere. The black man had lost track of Safe Haven in the storm and wanted to keep following, even though there was no longer a bridge to cross. He didn't care that the tank team still wasn't answering their calls or that it appeared a destructive battle had happened at this crossing recently. All he cared about was revenge.

“Hey!”

José stepped in front of Dean before he could grab Cesar's arm. “Stop shouting!”

Dean gave the scarred man a hard shove. “Move!”

Not expecting it, José toppled backward into the mud and the men laughed in cruel amusement.

Dean stomped toward Cesar again and José picked himself up with cold fury, drenched in the brown muck.

The remaining twin heard him coming and spun around, swinging from the hip.

José hit the ground again with a wet slap and the laughter increased.

“Stay down, *Josey!*” Dean snarled, stomping toward the Mexican leader who had finally rotated to discern what was causing the laughter.

Humiliated, José’s hand went for his pistol and the laughter stopped.

Just as he fired, Dean lunged for the muddy ground and the slug pinged harmlessly off Cesar’s hood.

Up in a moment, Dean stalked to the younger man with no signs he feared the weapon still aimed at him.

José panicked, pulling the trigger again, and men ducked as the shot went wild.

Dean hit the mud again for the next bullet, rolling to avoid another, and then he was on his feet and coming in at a fast run.

José screamed in rage and fear, firing again. A wild slug hit the furious devil flying his way, but it didn’t stop him!

Dean half spun as the bullet tore through his upper arm and he rolled as José fired a last time. That Mexican would die now!

He dove at the ugly fighter, twisting to miss the knife, and then he hit José.

Cesar reluctantly saved his cousin's life. He had no doubts José was after command, but he wasn't through with the youngster yet. When he was, the real lesson would be taught and it wouldn't come from this angry soldier.

Cesar stepped over to Dean with a fast lunge that his men both admired and feared, and wrapped Dean up tightly.

“His life is mine. So is yours!”

Dean struggled against the blade for only a minute, the words sinking in.

Cesar tossed him roughly away and the men surrounding them had their weapons pointed at Dean before he gained his feet.

Some of Dean's anger was eased by the sight of the blood José was spitting at his boots. There would be more of that.

“We stop when I say, go when I say.”

José had pushed himself up, hand inching toward his spare gun, and Cesar delivered a brutal kick to his ribs that sent him rolling into the crowd, where he was stomped on when he tried to get to his feet.

“Stay down!” Cesar barked. “I will deal with you!”

The leader swiveled to discover Dean grinning and the guerilla surveyed the black man thoughtfully. “His pain makes you happy?”

“It's second only to hers.”

Cesar's gold tooth glinted. "I have promised you her death. Do not make me kill you before I can keep my word."

"Don't underestimate them, Cesar." Dean tried to reason with the slaver, much calmer with so many guns pointed his way. "Hit them now, while they're on the road."

"With what?" Cesar demanded. "Our tank and team is missing and there is no bridge to cross! We will have to go around and these men desire a break."

There were mutters of agreement that told the evil leader he'd made the right choice. Passing that town, sparing those survivors so he could get close enough to attack Safe Haven, had been a mistake, but he would fix it right now.

"We will circle to where they were hiding in the church and spend a few days teaching them our religion."

The slaver waited for the cheers to die down. The unrest of his men had caused him to consider their wants and now that he had, Cesar liked his new plan better. "I will have them, but it does not have to be tonight señor. We have nothing but time now, si? Time while Richard throws them into chaos."

Dean's growl was the only protest he made and Cesar waved a hand. "You will go find them and keep me informed."

Dean stalked off without another word and Cesar wondered if he would do it. There was a

stiffness to his stride that said he wasn't returning without a good reason. Not that it mattered. Once these men had been rested, the slaver would put them back on the trail of Safe Haven. He'd rushed them, and made a foolish choice that he couldn't afford to repeat unless he wanted to be taking his cousin's orders. The men didn't like José, but that didn't mean they wouldn't follow him if his deal were better. At some point, José would have to be eliminated.

Chapter Six
The Madness Spreads
April 11th
Luke's cabin on Pitcairn Island

1

They need you...

The words flew through the fog, stealing Kendle's breath.

You have to go back!

She jerked upright, startled from her nightmare by the sound of it.

Kendle shivered in the darkness, trying to make herself remember exactly who (*what!*) had been speaking to her from the mist.

She glanced at the dim firelight and the cabin door. Everything was in its place.

She listened for the sound of Luke's breathing below her. It was even, calm, and Kendle forced herself to lie down.

Just a dream, she told herself, over and over until her lids began to droop and she yawned. "Just a dream."

They need you!

Her lids flew open to discover Ethan's leering countenance inches from hers.

You have to go home!

He lunged for her throat, infected fingers reaching out.

Kendle screamed, waking herself up.

Luke flew from the top bunk and pulled her into his arms an instant later.

Kendle clung to him, knuckles in her mouth to stifle a second scream.

Luke rocked her as best he could. When she shuddered, he gently pulled her into his big arms and proceeded to the chair, dragging her quilt along.

She melted into his lap as he settled in the recliner, a huddling ball of live nerves. He rubbed her arm as he got them rocking. “Shhh...”

Kendle sucked in a tortured breath, keeping her hand near her mouth. Not the worst by far, it was still among her least favorite of repeat dreams and she tried to concentrate on the steady beat of Luke’s heart under her cheek.

Luke wanted to tell her she could talk about it, but didn’t, certain she wasn’t the kind to do that anymore than he was. Some things you had to suffer on your own. Her nightmares came often, though, most didn’t end with a shriek. He hated feeling helpless, but didn’t know what else he could do for her. Their garden was full of half-foot high seedlings in uneven rows that they tended daily. They were shopping with the crazy woman across the creek so they didn’t have to have fish every night. Other than that, it was just them, alone together.

Luke shifted at that thought. She hadn't come to him yet, but the light was growing. Soon, he would make her his, and then things would get complicated. Because once she regained her self-confidence, she'd want to go home and he would never be able to let her do that alone.

Kendle felt the warm comfort of his big body and the soothing motions of the chair, but the fear had caused a desperate worry. She'd had the Ethan dream for last three nights and though Luke thought it was just her mind mixing things together, Kendle wasn't sure. The island Playboy hadn't even spoken to her again after telling her she should be with her own kind, but twice yesterday, she was positive she was being observed as they worked on the garden. After so much time alone, it was a feeling that was impossible to miss and she worried things weren't over with the Kraft heir.

Speaking of Kraft heirs, she thought, picturing the Sheriff in her mind. It hadn't occurred to her while they were there, but if Jenna was the Mayor's daughter, then Cole was his grandson. The sheriff was also a Kraft and therefore, couldn't be trusted. There was a lot going on here that Luke didn't want to talk about, didn't want her to become a part of, but Kendle feared their involvement might be mandatory.

Then, there was the stress of her new obsession. Finding a way home was something she'd begun to worry over. She hadn't talked to

Luke about it yet, but was sure he suspected why she now insisted they spend every free moment working out or running through the jungles. She was slowly getting stronger and he had to know it was coming.

“You want a pill?”

Kendle’s grip on him tightened. “No.”

Luke shifted again, settling her further onto his lap and he rocked them, lids shut. The feel of her in his arms was wonderful. She smelled so good! Like ripe berries in the sun that needed to be picked and he let his mind wander their previous kisses. Any day now, she’d be his and for a little while, he would be happy.

“Are you worried?” he asked suddenly.

She didn’t lie. “A bit.”

The town was gathering for a meeting about the lack of contact with the outside world, and Luke planned to voice his own theories, no matter how unpopular. There were less than a hundred people here, but that didn’t mean they were helpless. If war had destroyed their homelands, didn’t that give them a duty to offer shelter to those left?

That was a question most of Pitcairn had been pondering since Mayor Kraft called the town meeting. They were gathering in the side yard of his estate and that was the part Kendle was dreading the most. After the nightmares, it didn’t matter if Ethan never leered at her again. She

wanted nothing to do with him and that included being on his property.

“I’ll be watching after you while we’re there. Try not to get out of my sight.”

She was relieved to know Luke had felt the same menace from their hand-delivered invitation. The sight of those three green-eyed men on muddy dirt bikes had sent a chill into Kendle and she had instinctively retreated from the doorway to let Luke handle it.

“Unless you’d rather I stayed away from you while people are around.”

Kendle’s mouth opened in shock. “I’d never treat you that—”

Luke sealed their lips at her denial. When she tightened her grip, he deepened their kiss. *I want her so much!*

Kendle felt the shudder of need run through him and moaned, pressing her body to his. With that big hand tangled in her spikes and the other crushing her close, she couldn’t go far and was glad when he retreated and let her breathe. As soon as she could, she assaulted him the same way, not letting him pull away until she was full of his taste.

Luke grinned as they broke apart, painfully hard against her thigh. “Still worried?”

She leaned down to place a kiss at the base of his throat. “I don’t want to hide this, when we go.”

Before he could protest, she used her tongue to taste his throat, and felt him tense under her. “I mean it, Luke.”

“The people here like to gossip.”

She smiled softly. “Let’s give ‘em a reason. We’ll be nothing more or less than what we are.”

Luke both loved and hated the image. “Not a good idea, darling. These people can be cruel.”

“Do we need them for anything?”

Luke considered that question carefully, wanting to be open about their growing relationship as much as she did. “I’m not sure...”

“I am.”

He studied her intently, discerning the rings of contentment around her pupils and the dilation from hormonal responses, and still shook his head. “It’ll hurt you later, if we’re wrong about the war.”

“We’re not and it wouldn’t matter anyway. You say no because of your past, not my future.”

She left his arms and went toward her own bed. “And I won’t give myself to a man who makes me hide our love in public.”

“What did you say?”

Kendle wasn’t certain of his mood now, she’d never been sharp with him before, and she kept walking without answering.

“Kendle.”

He was right over her shoulder, steps silent in the dark, and she stopped, but didn’t turn.

“Did you say...love?”

She was saved from answering by a knock at the door and Luke spun towards it, ready to growl at whoever had interrupted them.

He jerked the door open to find Ethan Kraft standing at the base of the stairs, where his slick orbs were able to go over Luke and most of the living quarters.

Ethan instantly detected Kendle standing with her blanket in her hand, pointed *back* to her bed.

Well, that makes the choice then, doesn't it, Luke thought, and pulled out the fierce grin of male pride that he had been saving for this moment.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Ethan. Not sure what he wants yet. Don’t think he can talk now that he’s discovered our secret.”

Kendle reluctantly came to the door, wrapping the blanket around her bare legs.

Even in his shock, Ethan’s slimy gaze crawled over the skin showing from under her tank top. He had honestly believed her when she’d said there was nothing going on with her and Luke.

She lied to me!

Anger slowly bled into Ethan’s sickly expression and Kendle allowed Luke to slide an arm around her tense shoulders and tug into his warmth. “He’ll tell us in a minute I guess. Brace for it.”

Luke’s tone was so happy that Kendle had to smile, feeling this moment was the least she could do to repay him for all the trouble she’d been. “If he’s going to be a while, I’ll go get some coffee on.”

She leaned into him, placing a soft kiss to his jaw. “We’ll pick up where we left off when he leaves.”

Murder flashed across Ethan’s face and he spun toward the jungle. He kept walking, not stopping to deliver any of the other reminders he’d been sent out to give. He also didn’t travel toward the family estate, where some of the townspeople were already gathering. His pace was jagged, uneven, and he swayed against the jungle like a sick animal. *She lied to me!*

They watched for a long minute, even after he was out of sight. The wick was now lit. Would it simply burn out over time or explode?

“Sorry.”

“I enjoyed it too.”

Very aware of her warm body against his, Luke glanced down at her. “Coffee?”

“No. Just me.”

Luke swept her up into his arms, loving her ring of laughter. “That’ll do fine. You say when.”

Kendle nuzzled his jaw, finally feeling like the world might stand a chance after all. “Now.”

Luke’s grip tightened. “We’ll skip the meeting.”

Brought to reality, Kendle gave a disappointed sigh. “Guess it’ll have to wait until after.”

“One more to hold me over then...”

Kendle obediently tilted her lips up for his kiss.

“I think she’s lying.” Mary Jo stood spitefully with the Mayor. “I ain’t putting up anything without knowing for sure.”

“And how should we find out for certain? By waiting?” Luke snorted angrily. “We all know something’s wrong. The question is, what should we do about it?”

The small crowd muttered and called unhelpful answers that made the Mayor’s green orbs glow brighter. The timid man they’d met on their trip to the creek was gone and in his place was the lord of Kraft Manor.

“I don’t care either way and I think most folks here feel the same,” the Mayor said firmly and was rewarded with quiet.

The well-dressed snob also stood to get his share of the attention, earning a frown from Luke that Kendle hoped he might hide. Most of the people here had green eyes. Had he noticed that? And not the normal color, but glowing. They were infected with something and Kendle didn’t think Jenna’s ghost story explained even half of it.

“We don’t want the outside world to come here, not even a small part of it, and we don’t need anything from there, so why should we risk our lives to go back?”

Wanting to help, Kendle forced herself to remain silent, knowing Luke’s cautions on the way here were right. She was an outsider and anything she might add would be instantly rejected. She

subtly searched the shadows, wondering where the Mayor had shipped Ethan off to for this meeting.

“And I say that’s a shitty attitude toward your fellow man. What kind of person only thinks of themselves at a time like this?” Luke sneered. “Wait, I know. The rich kind, who’ve never cared about anything but themselves. That was the whole problem with the world that made most of us come here in the first place.”

Mayor Kraft shrugged off the words with a wave of his gloved hand. “We’ve already voted no, and besides, over two thirds of this group are among that population you’ve so clearly dismissed. And that means you’ll not need anything from us, *the problem*.”

The Man veered toward his Villa. “Please leave this property at once.”

Luke stared in shock as the pristine yard emptied, not understanding he had pushed things too far. *Where is their honor?*

Kendle was glad to see a few people remain. They were grouped together by the gate, staring at her with normal, though cool eyes, and Kendle joined them.

If she could sway enough of the townspeople, maybe they could still get a search party together without the Mayor and his rich friends. Drawing on her nerves, she smiled. “Hi. I don’t think we’ve met yet.”

She extended her hand. “I’m—”

“We know who you are,” the woman in the middle spat, ugliness in her tone. Her jeans and top hung on a thin, grieving frame and her lashes were wet with unshed tears. “We heard when your plane went down. My boy was your cameraman.”

Kendle blanched. Mac had been the only one who hadn’t survived, and Kendle instinctively braced herself.

“I’m so sorr...”

Slap!

Kendle’s head rocked to the side.

“Couldn’t even come to his funeral!” she shouted, hatred lining her aged profile. “*He’s* got a lot of nerve, bringing you here!”

“It was an accident that Mac died, Ms. Webster. The rope broke and we both fell fifty feet. I was in the hospital when he was buried,” Kendle told the woman stiffly.

“I never believed that excuse! Cursed!” Ms. Webster screeched, hand raising.

“I’m giving you a pass because of your grief, but don’t ever lay a finger on me again!”

Kendle jerked on the edge of her jeans, lifting them to uncover an ugly scar. “I was in surgery.”

Kendle waited, furious enough to fight back if the woman attacked her again, but the sight of the scar had an effect and the slow lights of regret began sparking.

“You both fell?”

“Mac landed wrong and it broke his neck. I only had my ankle snap in five places.”

The mother's mouth opened, but Kendle didn't give her a chance to respond. She spun out of the yard with Luke at her heels, still full of shame that she wasn't sure she should be carrying over the crash.

They'd been on a deadline and hadn't stopped for the last fill up. When their pilot had gotten lost, the lack of fuel sent them down before they could find a clear place to land. The private jet had ended up in the canopy, over a hundred feet up and they'd been climbing down when the rope she and Mac were on broke.

Kendle didn't stop until they were almost to his cabin, her steps short and fast, and Luke stayed with her. The people here had always been cruel to him, but he'd thought she would be safe unless they flaunted their relationship. Today, they'd been hand-in-hand most of the time and gotten a few glowers, but it was still the past causing trouble. Didn't the mistakes ever let go?

As the cabin came into view, the surf crashed loudly onto the shore, and Luke was surprised when Kendle bypassed their dark home and proceeded toward the water.

The sinking sun was beautiful, full of colors that didn't belong, and it seduced them repeatedly with vivid shades of purple and red. Gulls swooped over the beach where crabs crawled among the soggy grains and the castaway stared at the waves with horror. It should have been her and

not Mac—would have been if he'd been the star and not her.

Luke hung back, letting her tackle her demons, but he was ready to intercede if she got too upset. One wrong move and he would grab her.

“I wasn't supposed to survive the crash or the fall.” Her voice was like the waves—angry. “And I should have died out there, too!”

Kendle took another step, letting the cold saltwater brush her toes each time the ripples rushed toward shore. “Sometimes, I wish I had.”

She was crying now and Luke gently wrapped his big arms around her shaking body, hoping this would help set her free. Facing the pain was hard, but it was also healing. “Come on, let's go.”

Kendle's voice wasn't quite under control. “I want to spend the night on the beach.”

Luke was surprised, but understood she was trying to banish her nightmares, and he decided to let her.

“We'll need a few things.”

Kendle tried not to let the sound of the ocean get to her, or ruin this. “I'll stay here and gather driftwood while you get the bedrolls and some food.”

Luke studied the red handprint on her peeling cheek, not liking the idea. “You sure?”

She sighed deeply, feeling drained. “Yes. I'll be right here.”

Uneasy, he shifted toward the cabin. With this new tension on the island, maybe it was time to get his guns out of storage.

“Help! Luke!”

Kendle’s shout sent terror through Luke’s mind and he flew back through the jungle with his machete in hand.

She was standing on the beach near where he’d left her, hands curled over her mouth as if to stifle another piercing shriek, and Luke followed her line of sight to the rushing waves of high tide.

What he saw had him quickly ushering her toward the cabin and his dirt bike. Mora wasn’t missing anymore and with all that blood, her death had only come minutes before they’d arrived. There was a serial killer on Pitcairn Island and they were in the middle of his hunting ground.

Chapter Seven

That's a Pass

April 12th

Paralleling 73 near Buffalo Gap, SD

1

“He’s going to have to turn around. This is a dead end.”

Kyle picked up the mike at Angela’s words, not questioning her. “Four to base. I suggest a new check of the map.”

“Copy.”

They were on 61, traveling toward Martin, South Dakota, and the dreary landscape gave little comfort. Instead of being burnt, it was covered in mud. Even the road was splashed with gritty debris and they drove carefully over and around it, all thinking about the deer.

Minutes later, the convoy changed direction, using an alternate route that Angela fed to Kyle. The camp wouldn’t know she had saved them hours of extra travel time, but Adrian would. Did he also know she was searching for people around them while they traveled? Unsure, Angela focused on the semi in front of her instead of the cemetery they were passing, not wanting the stacks of

rotting corpses to be burned in her memory. She already had too many of those.

It still felt odd to be a part of so many people. She and Marc had spent weeks at a time without running across another person, and she wondered if he had adjusted yet or if he still felt crowded and lost in the din.

“You feel like talking?”

Angela shrugged at the tone, glancing at Neil in the mirror. “Depends on the subject.”

“About becoming an Eagle and what it means to Adrian.”

There was a note of warning in his answer that she understood. Neil had been nothing but ice toward her since the tank was destroyed, since she’d made him look bad by being right.

“You want to be sure I’m the real deal before throwing in your support. Always protect your own ass first, huh, Neil?” She snapped her gaze to Kyle before the trooper could respond. “What about you?”

After hearing her ask Adrian to join the Eagles, both Brady and Neil were stewing on how to stop it and Kyle sighed, recognizing the battle that had now begun for this quiet female. She would have to prove herself to the men, including her own. No one would just accept this.

“They’ll adjust.”

Instead of being upset that she was catching some of his thoughts, Kyle grinned, loving the way she felt like Adrian.

“I am not him,” she retorted.

“You could be, with our help.”

Angela was surprised and leery. “He can put me where he wants me, but I don’t need that kind of power.”

Neil raised a brow, thinking Kyle had things to fill him in on. “Then why be an Eagle?”

Unwilling to share her personal demons, she gave a half-truth. “Because he needs it and I can do it.”

Both men were quiet and she listened to their thoughts. So many had been fooled by Kenn and she’d spent years with him, picking up his habits. They wanted to be sure that she wasn’t the same. She would have to let these two in a bit.

“I’ve spent my entire life a victim. Until the war, I had no defenses and he... I was isolated, without my...abilities. I let myself be abused in the old world. That will never happen again. Adrian is offering me a way to be stronger than I ever have and also to help others who need it.” Her voice became a low mutter of determination. “I’d give him the female army he secretly hopes for.”

“Can you?” Neil asked bluntly.

The awful memory of Versailles flashed through her mind. “Yes. I’m able to do everything you can. I only lack the training.”

“That’s a lot of power to hand over to a stranger who claims not to want any,” Neil remarked.

Angela smiled coldly. “You mean to a woman.”

“Both.” Neil tried to even out his tone. “And then there are the things you can do. How do we know you aren’t telling us what we need to hear?”

Angela sighed. She had expected these questions from Adrian a week ago, when she’d brought Marc back from the edge of death. “If I was that kind of person, do you think Kenn, and Tonya, would still be alive?”

There was silence as both men accepted that as the truth. With her gifts, if she were bad at all, the Marine and his whore would have already been bodies on the side of a road somewhere.

“To help Adrian and to be stronger?” Kyle clarified.

Guilt rolled and the observant men noticed the change.

“I also atone, as does Adrian.”

Angela peered out the window and had to steel herself against the small skeletons still lying on the playground they were rolling by. The number of kids lost in the war was worse than the adults in every place that she’d been. Abandoned, left to fend for themselves, lost, taken. It was beyond awful. It was haunting.

“Some sins cannot be forgiven,” Angela stated sadly. “But I’ll spend my life trying anyway.”

There was another uneasy silence and she blew out a frustrated breath. “I don’t know what you expect, but if it’s a confession or oath of loyalty, I

won't give it. Neither of you guys are Adrian, either!"

Purposely blocking their thoughts, Angela didn't say another word, even when they pulled into the new parking area. They were right to question those who joined Safe Haven's leadership, but she had no answers for them. That was Adrian's strength.

2

Hours after a fast meal in the crowded mess, Angela left the training area with an angry pace. Everyone below a Level Four had been told to leave and she was on a slow burn.

Restless and not certain she had the patience to pretend for a crowd, she left the noise, stepping over part of a rotting Christmas tree still wrapped in shredded red garland. The Eagles were gearing up for a mission and she was missing it. She hadn't expected to like the danger, only the safety and confidence that came with it, but the feeling of being left out was undeniable. *I want to go!*

"You can."

Angela fumbled briefly and then her weapon was in her hand and she was spinning to face the threat.

Adrian stayed still, waiting for her to adjust.

"Testing me without a vest?" she picked out. "Not wise."

"It's the way things are done now, how trust is built."

Angela put her gun away, not taking her eyes from his. He needed something from her.

“Why do you want to go so much?”

She concentrated, determined to give the right answers. “I feel...abandoned, like everyone being invited to a party, but me.”

She held up a hand to stop his harsh words. “I know it’s not and I know I’m not good enough yet. It doesn’t stop me from wanting it now.”

Adrian gestured toward where his men were preparing their transportation and trying not to be caught eavesdropping. “I’ll take you along tonight. If you still give me the same answer come dawn, then I have a place for you.”

She pushed away the nagging voice that was saying neither of her men would like this. “I’ll be ready when you are.”

“Ten minutes, cover your exit. I’ll be driving the black truck.”

Angela’s heart eased and Adrian felt some of his tension fade. The slavers were a hundred miles away now, maybe even more. She would be as safe as any of his people ever were in this new world.

“Thank you.”

Adrian blinked away the urge to respond openly. That grateful tone had sent a flash of need deep into his gut. “Don’t forget your vest.”

Angela hurried. The clothes and gear from her days in the quarantine zone were easy to put on

under her doctor's coat and she felt pride at the surprise on Adrian's countenance when he opened the driver door to find her laying down to stay below the windows. She'd beaten him.

Adrian recovered quickly and climbed in with a smile that had her staring. His happiness was stunning. Neither of them spoke as he got set and the sound of engines came to her. The Eagles were leaving.

Adrian shifted into drive and rolled along behind the two full teams. He fell back slowly, until there were only the two protective jeeps in sight.

"You can sit up now."

Angela stretched with a soft yawn, the comforting motion of the ride sending her thoughts to the last weeks with Brady, where they'd been alternating driving to save gas. For a moment, Angela felt naked without his protection. Every rotation of the tires took her further away from him and she shifted towards the dangerous darkness they were rolling through, not wanting Adrian to notice her unease.

"I can take you back."

His tone said he understood, but she shook her head, reddening. "Please don't. I need this as much as you."

"Tell me when it's too much and we'll go home. My word."

"I will." He was warning her it would get ugly.

"Liar," Adrian snorted.

She smiled a bit. “Maybe.”

Angela didn't ask where they were going or what was happening, content to experience it at all. She was also aware that his offer had calmed her down. Adrian was a comfort to a woman, and against her will, Angela began to accept that Marc wasn't the only man who could make her feel safe. Safe Haven's sharp leader also had that magic power and it was a bit disconcerting to discover after believing for so long that Brady was the only man she would ever trust.

3

“We had no choice.”

Adrian was miserable, full of a self-loathing that had Angela's compassion warring with her outrage as they observed the assault. It was a side of him she was positive the camp and his Eagles never saw.

The gang didn't stand a chance. The two teams of Eagles rushed in from all sides, opening fire on both armed and unarmed alike. Awake, asleep, fleeing, none of the gang was spared.

The gunfire echoed heavily at first, then died down to sporadic shots as the Eagles picked off those faking death or hiding.

“They were gearing up to attack a group of refugees near here. We've been keeping tabs on them.”

Angela said nothing as she observed through his binoculars, the entire show lit by the gang's

bonfire. Bodies were everywhere, the flames flickering with armed shadows and in the middle of it all, Kyle. Leading and directing, he was also checking that the dead were indeed gone...by putting a bullet in the brain of every corpse with his Glock.

It was gruesome and Adrian resisted the urge to censor it. This part of being an Eagle was uglier than most women would be able to accept.

Angela reluctantly absorbed the lesson.

When the bodies were thrown on the fire, her expression didn't change, but Adrian could feel her mental battle to understand why he had ordered this.

Minutes later, all that remained of the gang was the fire. Angela jumped as the radio crackled.

"5-by. Movin' on," Kyle called.

Adrian clicked his button in response and when he shifted into drive, she assumed they were going to camp. Instead, he steered them toward the glowing brightness that the Eagles were now leaving, and Angela realized the mission (lesson) wasn't over.

The closer they got to the fire, the harder her stomach twisted. The bodies were charring, stinking despite the windows being up, and she clamped down on her guts, as well as her heart, as he drove slowly by. *This is war, right?*

Adrian rolled them into the cool darkness, sensitive to her tension. He had to let her deal with

it like one of the men, but the urge to comfort her was hard to fight as the Eagles came into sight and she stiffened, expecting more of the same.

“We’ll observe for a minute,” Adrian stated.

The exact words that had begun the gang’s demise made her heart thump and she forced herself to focus as his top two teams once again rushed from their vehicles.

This time though, Kyle’s men carried boxes, and their guns were holstered as they approached the moldy shed. Neil’s team providing a careful guard, after setting the items near the crooked door, the entire patrol then pulled back.

Confused, Angela waited quietly, glad there hadn’t been any more deaths yet and hoping Adrian could justify his actions. If not, this was the end of the path for his plans. She felt the wrongness of the gang, but had only his word about their intended crimes. For someone so against killing, he was very fast to be the cause of it, and she had to know why he’d decided those men should be handled that way before she agreed to be his warrior by day and his sorceress by night.

The shed was big, faded and slightly decrepit, with a wide crack near the bottom of the doors that revealed only darkness, but clearly, there were people inside. The refugees Adrian said the gang had been about to attack?

One of those doors slowly opened to show them the black and white clothes of old-world religion.

Three nuns emerged and quickly carried the supplies inside, each of them doing panicked scans of the darkness around them.

“All women. Some are Black, Mexican, Indian. They tried to stay low, but the gang saw them and followed.”

Angela pulled the rest of it on her own. The women’s thoughts were full of the gang who’d been stalking them, hurting them. They weren’t sure if the boxes might be a trap by those men.

“We saw them do a dry run last night. They were neat, smooth. It wasn’t their first assault.”

“And you couldn’t let them do it even one more time.”

Adrian lit a cigarette. *No, I couldn’t.*

The Eagles were good enough. They’d begun to rescue and dole out justice not that long ago, but each man in his army was already lethal.

“When will you invite them to join Safe Haven?”

“Just did. Waiting for an answer.”

“Notes with the supplies?”

“Yes, but they’ve been hiding so long that it’s begun to feel normal.”

Angela heard his need and rose to it without hesitation. “I might be able to tell you what’s going on in there.”

Adrian saw the mission Eagles fall in behind the two jeeps that were providing his guard. “Can I help?”

She hesitated. “I haven’t...slept well. If I get tired, I may need energy.”

Adrian laid his big hand on the seat between them and his tone dropped to that intimate draw he sometimes used on the camp’s women when the loneliness became too much. “Whatever you need, Angie.”

He hadn’t planned to encourage anything, but her smell! Inside the closed-up cabin, the scent was winding through him like flames.

Angela flushed, slamming her lids shut, and for a minute there was only the sound of their breathing and the stillness of the night around the truck. Concentrating, she narrowed in on the shed.

Adrian made a motion to Kyle, who had pulled into the bodyguard’s place, and the mobster relayed the message. *Radio silence.*

Angela frowned, struggling. The minds of the truly religious were foreign, hard to read, and she slid her hand onto the wrist still waiting on the seat.

Adrian’s quick intake of air echoed in the silence, and then she was in their thoughts and talking to him with that voice of the dead that his men hadn’t quite been able to describe.

“They don’t want to, but one of them is sick...” Understanding fell into her tone, along with anger. “Their leader. Your note mentioned a doctor.”

“Can you get them—?”

“Already too late,” she interrupted, letting go of his hot skin. “They see only men.”

Adrian considered. Would he be doing what he would kill one of his men for? It didn’t matter until she grew the courage to ask aloud, but he didn’t doubt that she would.

“Here they come. The answer is no,” Angela informed him, trying to be patient while he mulled her unspoken suggestion.

The doors opened, revealing the same three women who had carried the boxes inside. Their nervous attitudes and shaky behavior sent Angela to her times of abuse. These women had been hurt by men.

The insight had her searching deeper, determined to find a way to get them to join the flock.

Adrian waited patiently. Like Mitch, he could also feel when something was coming.

“Raped, not sick.” Her voice was cold. “By some of the gang your Eagles eliminated. They left her for dead.”

She regarded Adrian angrily. “I’ll go bring them in.”

Adrian was always amazed at how these plans fell into place with only the barest of setup on his part and she took his silence for hesitation.

“I could just be one of the doctors for this run. You’re The Man.”

He motioned to the jeeps, pleased at how natural those two words sounded coming from a

female soldier. “If you need anything, Kyle is your right hand.”

“Should I put on my white coat to give that old feeling of comfort?” she asked, wondering if Kyle would like that order.

Adrian stared, almost speechless this time. Now he comprehended what Kyle had tried so hard to make clear in his report.

“Wear it.”

Angela heard the admiration, but stored it for later as she got ready. The airfield had been a spur of the moment thing. This time, as far as she was concerned, she was going in as an official member of Adrian’s rescue team and it was a moment she knew she would remember forever.

There were a dozen things Adrian wanted to tell her, to warn her about, but he didn’t, needing to witness for himself how she handled tense situations. Did she know to ask questions? His men hadn’t when they’d first come to him. For her, there was only one that mattered anyway.

They emerged into the chilly night, flanked by Kyle and his team, and Angela asked, “On my own?”

He swept the area again, not distracting her with his approval. “Yes. Unless she’s needed, the witch should stay hidden. The rest of us are at your disposal.”

A bit nervous, Angela dropped behind him and the group of eleven slowly approached the shed.

Those inside were now casting furious shadows and Angela felt their tension as Adrian held up a finger, signaling the Eagles to stay where they were. Unlike during the tank attack, he wanted her in on this one, needed it.

Within a hundred yards of the door, he slowed down to let her fill the place on his right. “Anything jump out at you?”

Angela stepped carefully over a large piece of rusted fence buried in the ground. “Graves to the right, oil drums to the left, leaking what might be water. Lined garbage cans...” She paused. “A lot of scat. Too much, and it’s recent.”

“Sometimes you need what the people tell you, but always gather your own report as you go, from what’s not said.”

With Adrian’s gaze to lead her around the area, it was easy to detect what he did. The roof was covered in droppings and there was wire over the single front window. There was also a truck up against a side door and a stack of rocks blocking what was probably a cellar door.

“They barricaded themselves in. They were under attack.”

“Yes, but by?”

Angela struggled to identify all the prints and scratch marks on the debris. “Dogs, raccoons, wolves, bear.”

“Also gator.” He motioned to a wide drag mark.

“They don’t come this far north.”

“They do now. And they have the exact opposite goal as us. If we leave these people...”

“They won’t survive.”

Adrian’s voice was haunted. “I’d not leave them to this fate!”

Angela snapped her lids shut at the plea, unable to stand his pain and she listened to the witch whisper.

Only one of their own might succeed here.

She drew in a breath, suddenly sure that she could do this. “You’ll have to surrender control of the mission.”

Adrian pushed the button on the mike, not giving away his sudden flood of triumph. “We are Code Raven.”

“Copy that, Boss.”

There was no worry in that answering tone. Adrian was by her side.

Angela drew in a steadying breath. “Stay here.”

It was odd to be telling him what to do, but she didn’t let that distract her as she rotated to the nervous women.

“Hi! I’m Angie. I’m a doctor from Safe Haven refugee camp. We’ve come to find out if we can help.”

Adrian casually got closer to her as she got further away from the men. He swept the shed and the shadows around it, and listened to her tell the three nuns exactly what they needed to hear.

“I’d be happy to treat your injured people while we talk.”

“How much?”

“For free.”

“Nothin’s free in After World.”

Angela raised a brow at the mutter from the eldest appearing of the trio. “Is that where we are?”

The nun’s gray head flopped furiously in the cool wind. “The unworthy have been cast into the Lake of Fire. We’re all burnin’ now.”

The other two women rolled their eyes, telling Angela the older woman had suffered too much.

“Don’t mind Harriet. The Last Days have been hard on her.”

Angela let out a sigh laced with tight pain. “On all of us sinners.”

Three faces cracked with the tiniest glimpse of hope.

“You’re Believers?”

Angela shrugged. “Of many things. Those who don’t, will not cast stones. Not after all that’s happened.”

The youngest of the trio had stayed partially behind the doors and she came forward now. “And yet, the Devil lurks everywhere. How can we be sure you mean no harm?”

Angela swallowed her nerves and motioned two of the nearest Eagles forward with a quick gesture she hoped was right. “In this new world, in our world, women command as much respect as

the men. They do what I tell them and that should be proof enough.”

The two younger women were reluctant, but the older nun appeared shocked by the immediate presence of the two darkly dressed men Angela had called forward to flank her.

“Making him come over to you is hardly proof they follow your lead,” a fourth voice called.

This female was so young that Angela winced, but she was able to respond, “And if I ordered them to storm this shed and drag you all to *my* camp, would that be proof that they do what I say?”

The three women recoiled in fear, pushing to get inside the door, but that fourth voice cracked out like a whip.

“Still yourselves, Sisters!”

The door swung open slowly to reveal a heavily pregnant teenager in all black, pointing a shotgun. “State your business!”

“I already have,” Angela stated, waving the advancing Eagles back. None of them liked a weapon being pointed at her, even Neil.

“Get lost! We don’t need you.” Clearly in charge, the others slid behind the pregnant girl.

A very fast evaluation revealed Angela’s next course of action. Blunt-force honesty.

“True. You need an undertaker. The slavers are coming this way.”

She swiveled toward Adrian, ignoring the Eagles waiting for her to disappoint him so they

could return to the way things had been before she came. “From the tracks, I’d say you’ll experience all kinds of hell before you die.”

Angela spun a finger in the air, voice brutal. “They said they don’t need us. Draft a burial crew, mark the spot on the map, and let’s go.”

To their credit, each of the surprised Eagles responded immediately, Kyle even taking his notebook out to record her orders.

Angela advanced toward the vehicles, delivering the final blow. “Keep the supplies. The burial crew will pick up what’s left when they take care of your remains.”

“Wait, please.”

Angela casually held up a hand and the men stopped, Adrian staying alert. The moment of truth was nearing. Around them, shadowy forms edged closer.

“We’ll let you check out Sister Sarah.” The teenager lowered the gun, shoulders slumping. “She needs help.”

Still tuning out everything else, Angela started the bonds of honesty. “If it’s bad, there’s not much I can do here. Once I determine what she needs, we’ll take her, even without your say so.”

She waited for the teenager to choose, the entire team still poised to leave.

The weary girl nodded once. “You can’t be as bad as what she’s already been through.”

“We’re the future, Beth—yours and theirs.”

Not responding to the instant mistrust at the personal knowledge, Angela entered the sweltering barn with Adrian and Kyle on her heels. Adrian's herd, when it was trained, would be incomparable to even the armed forces of ancient history. Refugees had been straggling into Safe Haven since she'd joined, but these mental map pickups he'd chosen were special.

"Where is she?"

"In the corner, by the heater."

The seven nuns living in the barn shrank from them, but didn't run, and Adrian was encouraged as he swept the warm living quarters. Safe Haven needed what these strong women had to offer. There was a single bed for warmth, a small stove, oddly shaped with vents that ran underground to hide the smoke, and a homemade distillery. The last pickup Angela had done blood work on was three airline stewardesses, who'd survived a crash by squeezing themselves between stacks of luggage, creating a rubber-like shield. Those women were builders, designers in their spare time, and the future would see them used well. Now, these nuns were possibly inventors. The mental map locations he'd memorized had been the right ones and he had Angela to thank for them.

As soon as Angela spotted the woman wrapped in blankets in the corner, she proceeded that way with a grimace. "She needs John. I'm no surgeon."

Ignoring the nervous mutters coming from the six nuns and the shotgun-wielding teenager, Adrian gestured to Kyle. "Get us a litter."

Kyle went outside, but before Adrian could take a post at her unprotected back, Angela knelt down and opened her doctor's bag. "No threat to me. Assist."

Trusting her judgment, Adrian did as he was told. Holding, handing, following simple instructions, they both felt the tension in the hot room ease a bit at another sign she was genuine.

"What's her name?"

"Missa."

"Missa? Missa, can you hear me?"

Angela gave the feverish Indian woman an injection, but didn't even try to peel up the blood-crusted blankets. She wasn't surprised when there was no response to her voice or the needle.

"How long has she been like this?" Angela demanded curtly.

Adrian could feel her anger, her need to stop it from happening to the rest of them. It matched his.

It was the old woman who answered, "Been two days now. They caught us gatherin' wood and chased me off. When I snuck back, they'd all been at her."

Angela used her penlight to check the dark-skinned woman's pupils. "Any fresh blood?"

"Not today."

"She been awake at all since it happened?"

"Only while I was draggin' her. She cried."

Angela stood up, removing her gloves. “She has internal injuries that need more care than I give her here.”

Angela’s gaze swung around the cluttered room. “You can visit her and she can leave as soon as she’s able, but we’d rather help all of you.”

She pointed at the unconscious woman. “That *never* happens at Safe Haven because we’ll kill the man who does it.”

Angela strode toward the door, so furious she was almost shaking. “Make your choice and do it fast. My men are eager to be with their families.”

Leaving them staring at each other, Angela and Adrian stepped out into the wonderfully cool air. She waved Kyle over; glad the stretcher was padded with blankets. “Try not to jar her any more than you have to.”

The mobster was glad for his training, since shock had him speechless. He waved Chris and Daryl over to help.

“We’ve made our choice.” The pregnant teenager was staring at Angela’s white coat. “We’ll go, but we leave when we want to.”

“Agreed.” Angela motioned Kyle in. “The men can bring heavier things out for you after we load Missa.”

Angela took a step closer to the girl who had the shotgun still clutched in a tight grip, barrel now pointed down. “You can listen to your baby’s heartbeat while they do it.”

Angela held out her stethoscope and the teenager's smile was huge. Beth rushed to share the joy with her packing family, tool of life in one hand, instrument of death in the other.

“Perfectly done.”

Adrian's whisper drenched her in pride and Angela felt the last of that outsider shell shatter at his feet. Like the rest of those under his care, there wasn't anything their leader asked of her now that she wouldn't try to give him for more of this feeling.

Neil's team loaded the nuns in one vehicle and their belongings into another, talking calmly with the jumpy women. More observant people might have realized Adrian was important by the way the rest of the sentries stayed so close to him, but Angela's show had been convincing enough to make them think she was also Safe Haven's leader. It was that weight that tipped the choice for the nuns. Missa was nearly dead now; she didn't have to suffer anymore as far as they were concerned. But for the future, to think a woman could lead these hard men, meant there was a new chance to be taken.

When Angela sent this to Adrian, he gave her a gesture his men couldn't mistake, and said, “Right now, you are.”

“Of this mission, not the camp,” she clarified.

Adrian said nothing, aware that at least two of his men had heard. Big changes were coming.

Angela felt the ring to his unspoken words.

Of it all.

“That’s not what I wa—”

“Are you sure?” Adrian cut her off. “Don’t refuse destiny. Sometimes, you only get one knock.”

He rounded the driver’s side of the vehicle and the air suddenly went cold, plunging the Eagles into instant alertness.

Angela blanched as a wave of panic swept over her.

Your gun! the Witch ordered sharply.

“Boss, watch out!” Kyle’s hand dropped for the Glock, already knowing he couldn’t make it from where he stood.

Bang!

The single shot seemed to echo forever.

All of them, except Adrian, spun to discover where it had come from.

Adrian surveyed the dead rattlesnake by his tire, listening to its mutated tails twitch. The attempts on his life would increase now.

The Eagles around them stilled, waiting to discover if she would be treated the same as one of the men. When they saved someone’s life, he gave out a free pass on something or offered a rank they’d been shooting for. What would he give Angela?

“You have one request.”

Angela calmly holstered. “I’ve already asked it.”

Adrian's tone remained neutral, but his expression was intense. "Why do you want to be an Eagle in my army?"

Heart in her throat, she gave him the answer she'd kept from Marc. "Because without it, a woman can't lead in this new world, can't train the others."

"You'll learn my ways, follow them?"

"I'll live by them until I'm dead," she vowed passionately.

"Then I accept you."

"And you'll train me to the best of your ability, no matter your personal feelings or limits?" she challenged.

"With everything that I am."

Lightning flashed and Adrian felt the magic rising up around them to form a future that finally included hope.

"Let's go."

His call was short, a leader back in command, and Angela followed him gratefully. He was right. She was different, and because of the witch, more equipped to do the things he needed. *The life he's offering me!*

Angela lit a smoke and rested her head against the seat, considering. The witch had been right there, waiting to help tonight, but she hadn't needed it, thanks to the psychological games she'd played for so many years with Kenn, and as a doctor. Had she forgotten anything? Was there

anything she could have done better? If Adrian had been bitten, would she have been able to save him?

She observed the dark, corn-filled landscape through the window, but didn't really see the mold-covered stalks. Her mind kept clips of his death running and she was glad for the first time to be without Marc by her side. He wouldn't understand or like this fast bond between her and Safe Haven's very capable leader. He wouldn't care for what had happened tonight either.

Angela sighed. If it had been up to Marc, she would have missed this feeling. He hated the idea of her joining the Eagles and bitterness would come next. After that, he'd stay angry all the time until she gave in or he left. Marc would deny her this way of atoning, but because of her, these women had been spared death and there was no way she would withdraw now. Parts of it had been ugly, but the rest of it was salvation to her tortured soul.

Speeding them up, Adrian handed out a bit of extra praise, unable to wait for her to speak. "You were amazing for not being trained. They'll come around faster now."

She raised a brow. "You're happy, not for the shot, but for proving myself to them?"

"Grateful for your aim, too, don't doubt it, but yes. Now the Eagles will genuinely accept you."

Angela knew he wasn't assuming too much. She was already sensing different thoughts from those with them. Word would spread and there

would be more friendship gestures. *Like he was hoping*, she realized.

“Did you set this up? Did you know about the snake?”

Adrian didn’t think of lying. “Yes. This mission played out in my dreams last night.”

She was quiet for a minute as she ran through what that meant, and then asked, “Were there any differences?”

He held out his pack of smokes when she crumbled her empty one. “It was daytime. I couldn’t hit it from that angle. Woke up at the gunshot.”

Her voice was as angry as shocked. “Then why walk by it? You could have been killed!”

His answer was one she didn’t expect.

“I never try to change what I foresee, only prepare or adjust for the consequences.”

“What?” She frowned. “Karma?”

“Destiny. If I was meant to die and escaped it, death would come later and not take just me, but anyone in the way... My people.”

“And you’d rather it be you.”

Adrian swept the darkness before answering and she heard the worry lurking behind his words.

“Knowing, even if it’s bad, is a comfort. You can change your actions and words, and try to make up for the past, but you cannot avoid the future.”

“Maybe she knew and...set it up?”

Riding Point in front of Adrian’s truck, Neil’s voice held none of the usual suspicious razors bent on finding a reason. He was too busy being glad of her aim to put any real heart into it.

“Do you think so?” Kyle responded, opening his window so his cigar smoke wouldn’t annoy the cop.

“No. I was watching at her, trying to figure out what he’d warned her of. She was panicked at first.”

“What about him? He’s pushing this female Eagle thing real hard with the boys right now. Good show for ‘em.”

The trooper didn’t bother with the normal reproach. It wasn’t required with Kyle. He and the mobster understood what Adrian was. Some of it was harsh, but all of it was useful.

“Maybe.”

“He does usually come to me or Chris for that.” Kyle gently swung it the other way. He didn’t need convincing anymore and Adrian knew he would sway Neil.

“He’s trying to convince us too, this time,” Neil pointed out.

“It’s not like with Kenn,” Kyle stated. “There’s no stink of something being wrong.”

“There is to the camp.”

“That’s ‘cause she can’t do...her things around them. They realize she’s hiding something.”

Kyle steered them firmly toward the bright lights now beckoning in the distance. “Even if it was a setup, did you catch that shot? Around the corner of a bumper! Seth might have made that, but no one lower. She’ll be hell on the records.”

Neil was saved a response by the radio lighting up and they listened to the transmission.

“You are entering an American Military Refugee camp. Identify yourself immediately!”

Matt’s voice sounded older than the 15 he’d just turned, but not by much.

“Purple Mountains.”

Adrian’s voice in contrast was a hard, raspy rock that was timeless.

“Welcome home, Eagle One.”

The team leaders were silent as they rolled without headlights through the side paths, to the rear of camp.

As they gathered their gear, Neil said what they were both thinking. “I owe her an apology.”

“Yep. You will still be begging long after I’m in the clear.”

Neil snorted, grinning at the half joke, half warning. “I was a little rough.”

“Not near what Kenn’s gonna be like with her in the levels. Can you imagine that cage match?”

“No, and neither can the others. If there was a way around that, most of the men probably wouldn’t be so against it.”

“They’ll have help in that feeling.”

Neil sighed unhappily, sliding his hat up. “From both of her men. Marc won’t like this either.”

“Can you talk to him, tell him how good she might be, and how much Adrian needs it?”

Neil shrugged. “Not if we have to do all this in secret. Marc hates liars. It would be easier if we can talk about it.”

Kyle opened his door to a tense Billy. “I’ll mention it to the boss. We need freedom on this one. Adrian wants it and if she’s good enough...”

Neil’s voice was regretful. “Yeah, I almost choked when she said she can do what we do, but now...”

“Now?” Kyle pushed gently.

Neil grunted, forced to accept the truth. “Maybe she can.”

5

Seth met Adrian as he put it in park.

Adrian rolled the window down as he gathered his things, sure it was about Kenn or Marc.

“Kenn switched off Point and both of them have been asking. She covered her absence, but they sent the boy in to check her tent.”

“She’s been in the quarantine zone, helping prepare for new arrivals,” Adrian instructed.

Seth’s curious gaze went over the dark clothes beneath her white coat and those beautiful, battle-glazed eyes.

“John’s already in the QZ. Send him out?”

“No. Tell him to prep for surgery, internal bleeding.” Angela interrupted impatiently. Why should their wounded woman have to wait because of two men with bad attitudes?

Adrian motioned to the surprised man. “Code Raven for check-in.”

Seth moved toward Angela’s door, opening his notebook expectantly, and she gaped Adrian in surprise. “What?”

When he ignored her and strode to Kyle, both she and Seth stared with open mouths. He wasn’t even going to listen and make sure she got it right?

Angela shook her head at a searching glance from Seth. “I don’t know either, but it’s what he wants, so let’s get it done.”

She drew in a lungful of air. “There are seven females, plus one injured woman who may not live through the surgery. Split ‘em between two tents and give them access to showers, a hot meal, and clean clothes. John will be busy for a while, so I’ll handle Adrian and the Eagles first.”

She paused, able to feel the raw emotions of the two men waiting on the other side of the caution tape. Kenn and Marc were standing a few feet apart, waiting with hard profiles for her to give Seth the instructions.

“Let the women know this group is terrified of men. Have them send in the Den Mother and someone to run errands, Becky maybe. If she makes a mess on one of the nuns, they’ll only forgive her for it.”

Angela rotated toward the tape, where four shadows now waited. “And have him check it. Feels like I forgot something.”

Angela stopped a few feet away from the tape as Seth followed her orders and went straight to Adrian.

“John’s needed, so I’ll be staying here until he’s free.”

Kenn studied her coldly, picking out details. “Don’t let her lie, Brady. She went.”

Kenn faded into the shadows. He couldn’t control himself if he stayed.

Angela waited coolly.

Charlie spoke up, “I wanted to know you were okay.”

“I’m fine. Helping out.”

The boy faded into the darkness, followed by Dog and she greeted Marc with a raised brow. “What?”

Marc read the fresh knowledge of life and death on her. “I wouldn’t have told you no.”

“I didn’t know I needed to ask.”

Angela left, ending the fight before it could start.

Marc let her go, understanding she was wound up. From her tones and Adrian’s expression, she’d done well. Marc wasn’t surprised. She really would have made a good Marine. Now, Adrian was giving her the chance to be one and Marc had little doubt she’d take it.

Full of thoughts he was afraid to face, Marc went to his tent to toss and grumble before his shift as her morning shadow.

6

Hours later, all the Eagles were out of the QZ, including Angela. John had cleared her right after them, claiming they needed to have a doctor on that side of the tape, too. She hadn't argued.

After a shower and a fast meal, Angela found herself drawn to the off-limits area. She was allowed to be there now, but if it were already crowded, she would keep going.

The training tent was indeed full of Eagles.

Angela darted behind it and scaled the nearest moldy tree, finally stopping when she had a clear view of not only the area below her, but also the sprawling refugee camp. Her actions tonight had her seeking isolation so she could think and she'd had no trouble evading her rookie sentry.

Angela inhaled deeply, pushing away the urge to try again to make Marc understand how badly she needed this. Eventually, he would accept it, right? If he could hang on a bit longer, they could even be together. That thought sent chills into her stomach and she felt her anger fade back into that calm peace that had come immediately after proving herself to Adrian.

The sky above her was endless black, the grit almost impossible to view against it, and she

studied the camp from her vantage point. Some of their magic had begun to create a thin bubble of protection that dimmed and glowed according to the mood of the people...of their leader. It was fascinating to witness and she wondered if anyone else could see it.

The dome flashed suddenly with bright red streaks, making her frown in concentration. Was something wrong? She hadn't matched all the colors to the emotions yet, though bright shades were definitely better than dark. Right now, half the bubble had crimson streaks moving toward where she was, but there wasn't an alarm so she waited.

Magic flashed out, a green and gold that was spellbinding. It calmed the crimson into a pale orange and Angela shivered. It was so vivid, so real!

He shrinks it tightly around you.

You spend too much time in his dreams,
Angela told the Witch sharply.

And what dreams. How high he'd place you!

Stop.

The witch fell silent and Angela was glad. Mental arguments were distracting and she wanted to figure out a color or two if she could. She already knew three. Light blue was calm and peaceful, content. Red was a problem or worry. And that crimson-killing green and gold? That was Adrian.

“Right about here...”

The three guards on the ground were rookies-in-training, her real protection detail now settled into their own hiding places, and Angela kept quiet. She didn't feel the need to add to the trouble they were already in for losing sight of her, by calling attention to their lack of awareness. All they had to do was follow the training she was certain included the perimeter above them, too.

“Sometimes, a lady wants to be alone, guys.”

Samantha's voice, so nearby, startled Angela into drawing her gun.

Her finger let go of the trigger with not much room to spare and she heard the storm tracker's gasp.

Angela forced herself to put the .357 in its holster, heart thumping. “Clearly, I didn't see you.”

Samantha expression said she was impressed, but also uneasy about a woman being so fast with a gun.

“Sorry. I sort of thought you might...already know I was here.”

“Try looking up next time, rookie! You ever spot a Raven on the ground?” The senior males below faded into the darkness, muttering and hiding snickers.

The two women let the silence hang for a bit, sharing smiles each time one of the bewildered rookies below craned their heads up to verify they were okay.

Sam hadn't planned to be in the training area and wasn't sure if they might now tell her to get inside the perimeter. This was an off-limits area, but she'd been having the feeling someone was staring at her and climbed up to spy on those below in an attempt to verify that impression. No one had shown themselves, and once high enough, the vivid colors of the camp had kept her mesmerized.

"He's very protective." Samantha commented when two more rookies joined the patrol below.

"Good reason to be." Needing the woman to know she understood, Angela let a bit of her own worries out. "They're coming soon. We have to help him."

"I want to, but other than...some forewarnings, I can't do what you're doing."

Angela raised a brow. "Bull. You and I both know there's more to your skills than have been used."

Sam flushed, but didn't deny it. "If they find out..."

Her whisper was laced with bitterness and longing in equal amounts. "I want it, too, but they'll burn us. This herd will panic and we'll be caught in the stampede."

"So you worry about getting hurt again?" Angela asked softly, sure Samantha had been through the same hells and worse.

"No." Samantha's voice was broken. "I worry I'll get these people hurt."

Angela shrugged. “That’s a worthy argument, but don’t forget to weigh how much difference we can make when he has all of this in place.”

“I have. And I’m paying attention, identifying areas where I can help.”

“Me too. The Eagles are another way to do that, you know.”

Samantha snorted, drawing attention again, and her voice lowered. “Me? Just can’t imagine that happening.”

“But you’ve thought about it or you’d be hiding in a tree somewhere else. Like the rest of us, you’re drawn to it.”

“Yes. I want what you’re building, what he’s about to offer to all the women here.”

“Good. Watch what I have to go through and get ready for it. Jeremy and Neil will help you.”

“And Adrian? Won’t he want to handpick the females who do this?”

“We pick ourselves, Sam. If you want it, grab it. Let him know you’re ready for the chance and he’ll handle it personally.”

The man now standing below them pushed the button on his mike. “All levels to the tent.”

Adrian faded into the background, able to feel her indecision. Would she show?

“They don’t want you there, right? Because you’re female?” Samantha asked.

“Yes. They detect only my weaknesses, but that will change,” Angela promised, emboldened by Adrian’s presence.

She came down the tree and stiffly entered the training tent, flanked by Kyle and then Neil.

The crash of silence was instant.

Adrian came in behind them, walked toward the front of the tent. It was all part of the plan.

“Come morning, I’m officially opening Eagle tryouts to females.”

There were hardening countenances, but no response and his set tone warned them to choose carefully. He motioned toward the rear of the tent. “Our first female rookie has been chosen.”

Angela flushed under all the appraising, hostile glares, and raised her chin. How many of them could have made that shot tonight?

“Those who would speak against it, I’d hear now.”

Nearly every head turned toward Kenn, who had fallen into his customary spot on Adrian’s right. Only Angela noticed Marc’s grimace from the corner.

Kenn wanted to speak up, but knew his place would be gone the second he opened his mouth. Hands clenched, the Marine stared impassively, while horrible thoughts crashed like waves.

Adrian softened his tone a bit. “Imagine the camp’s women armed and sure of how to use those weapons...”

There were a few snorts and Adrian let a grin crack his hard face. “Yes, pissing them off will have more...serious consequences.”

There was laughter to break the tension and Adrian used his magic, pushing it out to influence. “We need them trained and ready to fight alongside us.” He found Angela again in the rear of the tent. “You’ll start with her.”

Flushing darker, Angela unknowingly sent out her own wave when she smiled hopefully. “I’m all yours, gentlemen.”

There were more snorts and snickers, but no one spoke against it. What Adrian wanted from these men, he got.

7

“I won’t do it.” Zack’s voice was loud and whining. “I don’t care how good she shoots. I ain’t helping with no lesson that she’s a part of.”

They were still in the training tent, roughly half the Eagles now getting things set up for the next scheduled events.

“Not even if it’s what your boss wants?” Seth inquired, always hoping for an excuse to get the trucker tossed out of the Eagles.

“My boss says she belongs in the mess or babysitting,” Zack retorted, drawing protests from everyone listening.

“Kenn is not in charge here,” Neil stated harshly, coming through the tent flap from a check-in. “In fact, he may not even be a member of this camp much longer, so be sure and tell him *that* while you’re filling him in later.”

The trooper moved toward the hayroom. “I suggest switching your loyalties, Zack, or maybe you’ll be with Kenn when he goes.”

Zack’s face tightened. “I don’t take orders from you, O’Neil, and I won’t do it. Someone trade me?”

The men mostly wanted to, not eager to have any woman under Zack’s thumb for a lesson, but before one of them could volunteer, Marc’s voice echoed from the far corner.

“I’ll do it if you’re so worried about serving with a female.” The tone was full of contempt. “Some Eagle you are.”

Zack spun around, but stopped at the sight of Marc standing up straight, hoping he’d drawn a reaction.

“She doesn’t belong here!” Zack protested, expecting a few of the men to agree, but there was only silence.

“Neither do you, shithead.”

Marc was tense, ready for the fight, and Zack flushed, but didn’t push. After Marc taking Kenn out so easily, the trucker wasn’t about to issue a challenge.

“I won’t do it,” Zack repeated, tensing as Marc came within lunging distance. He was unprepared for the response.

“It’s probably for the best anyway, Zack. She’d feel bad for killing you.”

The tent exploded with laughter.

Marc motioned to Kyle as he appeared in the flap. “The coward here just switched me for tomorrow’s gun class.”

Kyle nodded eagerly as he stepped inside. “I’ll let the boss know.”

Zack paled, despite his brave words of only following Kenn, and the men grinned. Word would get to Adrian about it and there would be a punishment for the trucker, even if it was one that he didn’t recognize as a correction. Probably he’d end up babysitting or escorting the elderly.

“Yeah, run to Adrian whenever something doesn’t go your way,” Zack sneered, hoping Lee or Jeff would come in and support him.

One of those men was close enough to have done so, but Lee was too distracted by the thoughts that had been running in his head for the last few days. They were about his missing wife and Angela’s abilities.

“I’m covered,” Zack continued to insist. “I ain’t switched shifts with anyone the whole time I’ve been here. Pretty sure that’ll give me the right.”

The trucker’s boast was true, but none of the hard profiles glowering at him relented.

“If you don’t think Adrian will know the real reason, you’re dumber than you look,” Kyle observed. “And if you think he won’t make you pay for it, then you’re too stupid to be one of us.”

Zack reddened in anger at Kyle's unforgiving words and the mobster veered toward the hay-ring, where Neil was lounging in the doorway. "Come on, guys. Let's get things set up for tomorrow."

They ignored Zack's protests, moving around him to unpack the gear, and the tension grew when Kenn entered the tent a minute later.

Kenn had been around the side, listening the whole time, but his blank expression indicated otherwise and Zack got the hint to make his report later. Zack and Kenn hadn't known the others had discovered he was spying for the camp XO.

"What's being set up in here?" Kenn asked tonelessly, studying his clipboard. He already knew by the size of the crates they were opening, but he'd wanted to make sure Angela wasn't in here celebrating.

"Field Trip day," Neil answered, waving at the smaller beams and mats being unloaded.

After a fast look around the canvas, the Marine checked it off his list and exited the tent. As he let the flap drop behind him, the real hatred was visible to those on duty. Kenn's countenance said he was planning something Adrian wouldn't like.

8

By 2 am, there was a camp of silence, the new arrivals settled and waiting for word on Missa, who had survived the operation, but only by a thread. The Eagles were also settling for the night and Adrian was making rounds of the QZ,

listening to their thoughts on the mission. He wasn't disappointed and went to her newest hiding place with a feeling of peace that was rare for him.

Angela peered down, holding out the smoldering joint. "I thought you'd be by."

She sounds like John, Adrian thought, taking the weed without touching her. She was in the shadows of the medical tent, reclined in the fork of a low tree. He studied her, thinking about how each day now started with a fast search for her, then normal rounds. It was so different...so excitingly miserable.

Angela was walled-in by her experience, the guilt-relieving rescue fully under her evaluation now, and Adrian let her go over it while he waited.

"They wouldn't have come if I hadn't been there. What about the next run?"

Adrian was impressed again. He had been expecting a complaint or doubt about her actions, not the considerations of the future.

"We've had to face it a few times, leave people behind. The war has caused trust to be given only under dire circumstances."

"I'd go on them all!" she stated forcefully.

"It's not our duty to save them all," Adrian soothed. "*You* told me that."

Angela sighed, hating it. "I know, but what can we do about it?"

The pain in her voice called to him and Adrian allowed his own horror at the situation to bleed

through as he answered, “Keep trying and keep losing those who won’t trust.”

Angela’s heart clenched. So many!

Knowing there was finally someone who felt it the way he did caused Adrian to give her more openness than he ever did the others. “It’s them I dream of at night.”

His voice lowered into despair. “Sometimes I send the Eagles back anyway.”

“And they’re dead?” she guessed from the abject sadness that had engulfed him.

“Always.”

Adrian drew air into a chest that felt like it was made of lead. “Their ghosts haunt me. They say I should have dragged them here against their will. Most of them would have stayed.”

“But you didn’t, because you believe in freedom too strongly.”

She stubbed out the roach on the tree and the witch was awful to hear and yet right, too.

Those people wouldn’t have survived anyway, be it here or alone. Fear rules them, not Change. Those who are here deserve to be.

Picking up the observation, Adrian shelved his true feelings. “Yes, *they* do.”

He moved toward the Com truck with a lighter pace and Angela realized it was true. They would save as many as they could.

And that number will increase, she thought. Now that I’m in his Army.

The guilt faded, letting successes rise again. He'd known exactly what she needed—a moment of personal trust. America's survival meant more to him than a successful leadership. It was everything he was now. If this camp fell, Adrian would likely join the other relics of the old world.

Her instant scowl at the thought had guards in the area sweeping for trouble. Learning to use her like an alarm was already becoming a habit for them.

Adrian's death couldn't be allowed to happen and Angela vowed to do whatever she could to stop his fall.

Even when his secret comes out? the witch asked ominously.

Yes. If he falls, we all fall.

The demon's tone was curious.

Such a fast bond with this man, the demon pointed out curiously. *Perhaps that should be examined as well.*

Those whispered words were ignored.

9

“You look as tired as we feel.”

Aware of the dawn coming and still in the shadows of the medical tent, Angela didn't open her lids. She had mentioned to Charlie that she'd been officially accepted into the Eagles, and instead of the support that she'd assumed he would give, her son had blown up and stomped off. She'd

spent the hour since rethinking, making certain she had the strength to do this.

“Have a seat.”

The two Eagles took up places in nearby branches, exchanging glances.

“He knew it was there.” Angela gave them what she thought they’d come for. “I didn’t save his life.”

Neither of them spoke. Adrian knowing didn’t matter. It had happened in front of the Eagles. That did.

“How much will this change?” she asked.

“A lot,” Neil admitted, settling into the fork carefully. Using trees for cover was something they’d been doing for a while, but as seats or sentry spots had only begun recently, when two of their members had started climbing them for privacy and unknowingly rubbed it off on everyone else. “The camp will be converted, minus a few.”

“The Eagles, too, the ones who understand Adrian’s dream,” Kyle stated.

Angela sighed tiredly. “But not enough, right?”

“No.” Kyle’s tone wasn’t firm. “It will buy some time, weeks if we’re careful with it, and then they’ll call his bluff.”

“He’s not bluffing,” Neil stated. “And it’ll cost him everything if you can’t keep up.”

There was a thick silence and they could feel her determination not to let that happen.

“Work me hard?”

They both nodded and Neil met her eye with a sincerity she understood to be an apology. “Sometimes, if the people are...determined enough, Adrian will give special lessons.”

“Didn’t he agree to give me that?”

“No. He agreed to treat you like one of the men.”

“Good.”

Kyle leaned in, his branch almost even with hers. “There are other lessons that go on here, out of the camp’s view. You know that.”

“Like my Kai lesson that has Marc so pissed.”

Neil grimaced, thinking Marc would be even more upset when he found out they’d given her this new information. “Exactly, except Adrian’s lessons usually handle a direct problem the person has.”

“Or a fear,” Kyle hinted.

“How does a person go about that? Just ask?”

“It has to be suggested by senior level men.”

Angela’s interest was replaced with bitter exhaustion. “And will it be, if I want it? Have I proven enough or is there some other trick you guys want?”

Kyle and Neil both laughed, much to her surprise.

“That’s part of why, too. Not even Seth had that much fire,” Kyle pointed out, talking to Neil.

“I agree.”

“It’s unanimous, then. Yes.”

Understanding they were razzing her like a rookie, Angela immediately set out to please them so they really would talk to Adrian.

“I’m restless when I get off third shift duty. When you can, will you both schedule me an extra hour then? Help me catch up?”

Surprised, they gave short nods and silence.

She dropped from the tree, trying to hide her soreness. “Thank you. Good night.”

She left and Kyle lit a smoke. He took a light draw of the cigar before speaking. What she needed was someone who would hit her.

“Kenn.”

“We can’t let that happen,” Neil insisted angrily. “If he ever does it here, for any reason, this camp will change. We’ll lose everything we’ve worked for.”

Kyle let the note of self-preservation pass in order to get an answer instead of an argument. “What if she can win?”

Neil snorted, mouth opening, but he stopped, not sure what to say. She was good for a female. Marc had gotten the basics down with her and she was quick on the pick-up. Being able to read what was coming was an amazing ability all the Eagles wished they had and Kenn would never expect her to fight back.

“I don’t know,” he said finally.

Kyle was encouraged. He’d expected a set denial. “You’ll think on it?”

“If she could back Kenn down in front of the camp, the way would be clear for her and the others Adrian wants,” Neil said.

“Others we need. There’s too many sheep. We’ll lose a cut and that’ll kill Adrian some more. We have a long way to go in this new world and we need more fighters for the battles that are coming.”

“We need more like her,” Neil replied reluctantly.

“And for Brady to get on board,” Kyle added.

“He’ll miss her first course work out before we go. He’s scheduled for duty over the opposite end of camp.”

“He’s smart to separate them for it,” Kyle stated, meaning Adrian.

Neil surveyed the darkness. *Clear.* “I’ll let Marc know where you’re taking her for the sets, but I doubt it will matter. When she rolls in, he’ll blow up like her boy did. None of our rookies ever come back in the same condition as they went out.”

“Yeah. Wish those three grunts would grow up.”

Kenn overheard the comment as he went by them, but didn’t stop. He was meeting Tonya outside the taped perimeter and he wanted that conversation more than he wanted to pay the mobster back for the insult.

Later, the Marine told himself.

Finding the sloppy setup not far into the darkness, Kenn tapped lightly on the tent flap, ducking inside at the giddy call, and the first hour of their time was spent in an amazing wash of pleasure and pain.

As they lounged on her bedroll in the aftermath, Tonya's voice rose and fell, telling him everything she'd discerned over the last few days. She was quite the able spy and he had no problem using her as such now that he knew her for what she was...an evil genius with an Adrian obsession.

"That's most of the gossip. Nothing unusual among the camp, but the guards will keep talking about it, so I'm sure the herd will know soon."

Tonya sat up carefully, sore and sated. "Neil's team made some schedule change with that blonde woman, and the new guy, Rick, might be following her around. He's slick, so I'm not sure."

Kenn stored both of those and waited. Once Tonya got rolling, she made connections fast.

"Hilda said the new women, the nuns, all think Angela's in charge! Can you imagine?"

"Yes," Kenn stated sarcastically, beefy hands clenching. "Yes, I can."

Tonya winced, patting his hand. "The men won't stand for it, you know that. They don't want any woman in the Eagles, no matter how well she shoots."

“But they will, once he lets her show what she can do.”

“You think he’ll take that risk?”

“I know it. He’s already planning the steps in which to reveal it so the camp will accept it.”

Tonya gasped. “Tell the herd? They’d kill her!”

“Not if they love her first,” Kenn answered, facing his own demons with the words. “If she gets them to like her, helps them like he has, they’ll accept it. Especially if they find out she might have saved him tonight. Heroes are what they live for now.”

“And they have that in Adrian,” Tonya realized, horrified. “But they don’t have the female equivalent.”

Kenn was bitter, thinking of the warning that had gotten the cutting crew out of sight. The stories were currently flying through the levels.

“They didn’t.”

Tonya suggested something she knew he was capable of. “Then you need to make them aware of the fact that she’s a weak female. If she flunks out in her first days, it’ll be a long time until they’ll let another woman try.”

“I have some things planned.”

“Are they bad?” Tonya squealed happily. “Tell me all of it!”

Chapter Eight

Welcome to My Army

April 13th
SD National Grasslands

1

“I think I understand now.”

Adrian peered at the teenager over the engine they were filling with fluids. “Understand what?”

Charlie motioned to a pair of shepherd pups nearby that Matt was walking on short leads. “Why my job matters.”

“Tell me.”

“Because they’re a...warning, an alarm. You knew from the dogs that someone had messed with the water.”

“And?”

“They’re a tool. Without knowing how to handle them, you wouldn’t have known when they were acting differently and we might have lost people.”

Adrian was pleased and a bit surprised the teenager had gotten it right. “Very good. Now, I have an important question. Do you trust me?”

“Absolutely.”

“And if I asked you to...do things? Things the rest of them can’t?”

Charlie's expression betrayed his youth, but his tone was even. "I'd say yes, with conditions."

"So, you don't trust me."

"I don't trust them! If they ever found out..."

Adrian shrugged. "I'm not asking yet, but your awareness made the question necessary."

Charlie was relieved. "I'm loyal too. If my mom hadn't made it here, I'd be your witch."

Shadows not made by his army padded behind the dead corn, Adrian pushed their conversation into the direction he needed. "You've got her courage, and your dad's. It takes a lot of guts to stay someplace you're not wanted."

Charlie recovered quickly from the knowledge that Adrian knew about Marc. "She wants him. He won't leave with an invitation like that hanging."

Adrian's sigh was resigned. "Yes, she does. What about you?"

The teenager tensed and Dog came from his place in the dim sun to heel at Charlie's ankle. "I don't even know him."

There was silence for a minute and then Adrian put a hand on the boy's arm. "Maybe you should correct that. He got her here alive and made her stronger. We both owe him a large debt."

Adrian proceeded to the next stop on his rounds—Angela's first training set in public. "Let me know. I'll arrange some down time."

Angela nodded at Daryl's lowly spoken question. It was her first official session with them as a team and Angela could feel their tension threatening to ignite her own bubbling emotions. The day's workout would be supervised by Kenn, against the schedule Adrian had planned for her. The others didn't know yet that he had switched shifts.

The men walking through the dim dawn around her felt her pause instinctively as Kenn came into sight. Determined to succeed, Angela steeled herself, and advanced.

"He's not on til tomorrow!" Chris stated angrily.

"He knows I'm off then," Angela explained. "He switched with Jeff or Lee, not sure which."

"I'll find out," Kyle threatened.

Angela shrugged, flashing a hard smile. "Don't do that. I'll earn my place here with him as well. He can't accept me as anything else yet. When I can match him in the cage, then that will change."

There was a thoughtful silence instead of the immediate protest she would have gotten from any of the other levels at that goal. Kyle scanned his team, his thoughts mirrored on their faces. More than the appreciation for her good reflexes and aim, she'd given Adrian exactly what he wanted. Being able to get the nuns to join them was something that had taken their leader's coming depression and changed it into joy. For that, these

nine men were now firmly in her corner. “We’ll help you with it.”

Grateful, Angela gave them all a quick glance, sharing her goal. “I hate how this feels. I want to never be afraid of him again.”

There were immediate offers for personal, private training and she accepted each one gracefully.

Angela didn’t see Adrian during her subtle manipulations, but she felt those observant eyes following her progress. She also knew when he realized who would be the training guard today and understood he had a hard time making himself turn away instead of interrupting. Adrian had to play fair, but Kenn didn’t and he wouldn’t.

“Course is set. Rookie goes first.”

Kenn’s gloating call had Angela waving off Kyle’s protest. “I have to be the one to do this.” Trembling, she stepped to the front of the line and started her first run as an Eagle in Adrian’s army.

“Ugg!”

Losing her grip on the slick cord, Angela hit the jagged-edged rocks under the rope with a second surprised grunt, but managed to keep from the groan, or even tears, that her Marine had been hoping for at the pain. She picked herself up, not bothering to wipe at the layer of the dust she was coated in.

Required to repeat it until she got through it, the Eagles in line around her also swallowed their

unhappiness, knowing special treatment would not get her accepted with the other levels who were currently training in the field next to them. Or at least they had been, until she'd stepped to the front of the line. Now, even the instructors were witnessing Angela's first attempts.

“Go.”

Kenn's voice was a hard smirk and Angela knelt down instead of doing the run again. She'd fallen twice from the slick ropes she was supposed to swing on, and she wasn't about to hit those rocks a third time. She ignored the stares and mutters of the small crowd who had lined up near the far side of the tape, shoving large handfuls of the dusty earth into both her jacket pockets.

When she stood up, her team was grinning and Kenn's face had tightened, both recognizing that she'd found the solution.

Angela used her dirt-coated hands to get a better grip on the greased ropes and while it wasn't easy to dip her hands into her pockets between swings, she was able to finish the course on her third attempt.

“Pass.”

Kenn gave it grudgingly, but it couldn't be withdrawn, and it counted.

The Level Six men watched Angela go toward Kenn with a swagger as she hit her feet, and each of them tensed to come to her aide if it was needed.

Sure of how far Kenn could be pushed in public, Angela took her time dumping the dirt out of her pockets onto the ground at his boots. As she did it, her eyes burned into his.

When her pockets were empty, she gave him a hard glare, ignoring the blood trickling down her leg from one of the falls. “You can’t make me quit. If you waste your time trying, you *will* lose everything you’ve built.”

She spun away before his anger could get out of control and Kyle’s Eagles laughed at his furious face, impressed yet again.

3

“Lovely.”

Samantha swallowed a second groan as she reread her schedule.

Babysitting? I don’t even like kids. She hadn’t been around many and they intimidated her a little. What was she supposed to do with them?

Determined not to whine, Samantha got a mug of tea from the crowded mess and headed for the children’s area. Still feeling awkward, she only gave a short nod to those who called greetings.

When she saw which team of Eagles was waiting at the campers, she tripped, sloshing steaming liquid over her injured hand. “Damn it!”

Jeremy spun to yell at whoever was cursing by the kid’s area, but exchanged the reprimand for a smile of welcome instead. He had personally asked Adrian to assign the blonde woman here today.

One of Adrian's simplest tools to test new people was to put them around the elderly or the kids. It never failed to reveal their true nature.

"We're waiting on a few others and then we'll leave."

A bit surprised the sentry was talking to her—she'd thought they were strictly protection—Samantha asked, "Where to?"

"It's field trip day. This time, we're hitting the town."

Confused, but not wanting to seem clueless, she waited patiently and was glad of Jeremy lingering by her when Neil came through the shadows a minute later.

As soon as he spotted them, there were instant questions lurking, hard ones she didn't want to answer.

"There they are."

Sam rotated at Jeremy's words and immediately braced herself for a long shift. Walking next to Anne and Peggy, was Cynthia. Who was asking little Becky's mom things that she didn't want to reveal, Samantha assumed when Peggy's profile tightened. Didn't the reporter realize she was trying to pry information from a convert? Even if Peggy knew something about Adrian, she wouldn't tell.

"Hey, Neil."

"Ms. Kelly."

"*Peggy.*"

Neil flushed at the tone. It said, *When you marry my daughter, you'll call me mom.*

He flicked a fast glance toward Samantha. *Has she found out yet?*

The camper door opened and the excited voices of young children drew their attention away from the sparks.

“All right. Each chaperone will be responsible for two children. The kids get to pick.”

Sam sighed resignedly, viewing the sticky-fingered offspring with trepidation. Some days were hell.

It took a while for Anne and Peggy to get the kids settled with their chaperones, and Samantha tried not to make any contact with the man waiting patiently near the camper door. She envied Neil's coolness in the face of battle.

Samantha smiled uneasily when a girl with short brown spikes pointed her way. The child appeared to be about eight and was sporting a signature-covered cast on her wrist. Next to her was another girl of the same age. This one was so thin that Samantha's heart clenched. They'd known hardships that she hadn't.

Both girls came her way with giggles.

Each one wanted her hand and Sam reluctantly surrendered her tea mug to let them hold onto her. Sticky and warm, she waited restlessly with them as everyone got set, trying not to be caught staring at Neil. She'd been happy that the trooper refused

little Becky, but the idea that he was willing had to have come from somewhere.

“What’s your name?”

The kids were waiting, thin girl’s expression hopeful, and the storm tracker put her thoughts away. “Sam.”

They both giggled again. “That’s a boy’s name!”

Not offended, Samantha grinned at short-spikes girl. “I’ve heard that.”

“Why do you have a boy’s name?”

“Is it a shortner?”

Confused by the garbled word, Samantha shrugged. “My mom wanted a girl, Samantha. My dad wanted a boy, Sam. This way, they both got their wish.”

They laughed harder. “That’s silly.”

Samantha nodded, thinking until they made it here, there probably hadn’t been much for them to be happy about.

She saw Neil get chosen by two very energetic boys in roughly the same age group as her charges. The kids were bouncing, excited, and she realized field trip day must be something rarely done. The rest of the time, Adrian probably kept them isolated for safety, and these moments out of their area were special.

The lives of these kids had been flipped around too, and Samantha felt the need to give them a good day. They were war orphans and the bond she suddenly felt was something she wouldn’t tell

anyone about, but it was there. She'd also lost her roots, along with everything else she had leaned on for stability, sanity. They deserved a fun day and she would be proud to give it to them.

“Everyone ready?”

There was a loud cheer. “Yeah!”

“All right, a quick reminder to the chaperones about the wild dog sightings. Keep your kids close,” Peggy warned. “Okay, our first stop is...Safe Haven’s secret hideout!”

This cheer was twice as loud and Samantha let the girls lead her through the slowly waking refugees. They were right behind Peggy and her group of five tweens, and Sam didn’t envy the woman her sulky 12-year-old charges as she listened to them complain about someone’s dawn snoring.

The line walked across the camp, drawing attention from those up.

Everyone waved. Kids roaming the streets before the war were a sight to be avoided or ignored for their poverty. Here, children were rare and welcome, no matter their condition.

“Must be Field Trip day,” Seth joked, stopping in front of the group as they came to the large training tent. “Unless you guys snuck out again?”

There were giggles all around.

“We didn’t escape,” one of Peggy’s girls retorted sharply, tossing a dark braid over her shoulder. “And you know it. So come on and let us in!”

Samantha was surprised at the rudeness, but saw that the sentry, and Neil, had smiled at her spunk.

“But I don’t know for sure,” Seth protested. “Bad guys can look like anyone, right?”

The younger kids tensed at their own mental horrors, faces tightening.

“Yes,” the girl answered gravely. “Even like you and Adrian.”

“Exactly and that’s why I have to ask every time anyone comes through.”

“Kids can’t be bad guys.”

This came from another of Peggy’s group, and again, Samantha was glad of the two calmly listening kids holding her hands.

“Yes, they can!”

Neil’s hard voice snapped attention to him.

“They don’t always know, because grownups are sneaky. Sometimes they ask kids to do things that are wrong.”

“And do you banish them, too?” one of his little boys asked, clinging to his arm.

“Never,” Neil denied. “It’s not a kid’s fault when a grownup makes them do bad things.”

“The grownup should be punished,” the braid swinging girl exclaimed brutally. “Not us!”

“Yes. If a grownup tries to get you to do things you think are bad, say you will and then come tell Adrian,” Seth instructed.

Listening as closely as the kids, Samantha realized this was also a training session.

The guard checked his watch and did a fast sweep while pretending to be confused. "I wonder where he is this time."

The kids all let out another loud cheer, startling Samantha as they darted around. Hide-n-seek?

"There he is!" ponytail girl screamed, pointing up and the kids clustered around the trunk of the tree that Adrian was sitting in.

"What's the password?" Adrian barked at them, making Sam jump.

"We love America!" they responded together.

Adrian snapped a salute. "You may enter!"

He jumped down and was immediately smothered with little bodies hugging, tackling, and wrestling him to the ground.

Samantha was surprised that Adrian would take the time for this and amazed that he was so popular with the kids. It spoke of his inner person being as good as the one they saw daily.

She started to get closer, worried about the little girl with the broken wrist.

Neil caught her attention. "He's got them."

And he did. From tickling and chasing, to a quick hug, it was clear the kids adored Safe Haven's leader.

"How are you?"

Samantha was aware of more than one set of ears listening for her answer.

"Adjusting." She raised a brow, unable to resist even though she had serious doubts about his

sense of humor. “Did he get all the mud off his jacket?”

Neil’s cheeks went red. “I was afraid to ask.”

“I’m positive he’s had worse,” she commented, chuckling as Adrian started a game of tag.

“You two ready for some coffee?” Peggy called, tone friendly.

“No, thanks,” Neil answered.

Samantha wanted a cup, needed the caffeine rush to fully wake (that or danger), and she was careful to throw out the air that she wasn’t to be messed with.

Samantha saw the woman’s expression cool. Good. *If I decide I want that uptight trooper, Peggy and her flirty daughter won’t get in my way.*

“Thanks.”

Samantha hung around her for a moment as she sipped the strong brew, waiting to discover if there might be a threat, but there was only a series of cool looks exchanged. Because the mother wanted to keep the peace? Becky didn’t care about the rules, so why would her mother? From all appearances, Peggy wanted Neil to be her son-in-law, even though her daughter was only a 15-year-old kid.

Some mother, Sam thought, moving toward Adrian and the happily running orphans. To her mind, Becky was a baby compared to Neil. Did that mean she was attracted to another man with mental problems? *Maybe that was the only kind she could feel ali-*

“Okay kids, line up,” Peggy’s voice echoed firmly and all the dusty children flew her way after promises of a visit from Adrian.

“Get with your chaperone and you can go on in.”

Samantha’s two girls clutched her hands eagerly, almost dragging her forward. “Come on!”

Hilda had said it was where Adrian taught his army to be true men and Samantha entered almost as eagerly as the kids.

Instead of the normal adult setup that would have to be used, the long tent was filled with half-sized equipment. *Kid-sized*, she corrected herself, letting the little girls lead her to the circular obstacle course in the middle.

“We hafta warm up.”

Samantha surrendered the second hot drink in an hour and helped the girl with the cast remove her shoes and socks.

Thinking she might have to learn their names soon, Samantha paced them as they walked the low beam, rolled under empty boxes, and jumped over gaps in the mat. She kept track of the girl in the cast and finally had to call out, “Hey you!” when she leaned too far over the beam. “Be careful... What’s your name?”

The girl hopped down, cast bumping against the hard wood. “Tracy. That’s Leeann.” She pointed. “The rest of them are...”

The recital went on for a while and Sam tried to keep up and still watch out for Leeann.

“Your turn!”

Samantha blinked. *Turn?* Surely, it wouldn't hold her?

Peggy hefted herself onto the first beam and hurried across before rolling under the boxes in an awkward shove that sent cardboard flying.

The kids giggled hard and Samantha went to the beam with Tracy now ready to do the paralleling.

“Whenever you're ready,” the little girl called, holding up her casted wrist and Sam grimaced. They knew to take her place. How cute...and terrible that it was necessary.

Sighing, she walked steadily along the wood, trying not to wince at a lance of pain in her old injury that keeping it straight was causing. If Peggy could do it, so could she.

“You want me to do what?”

Cynthia's voice drew Samantha as she rolled over the mat. She had mostly forgotten about the reporter, and looked up to find a little boy with a bandage on his hand hopping up and down in protest.

“Run course!” he ordered.

Cynthia shook her head. “Not me.”

“I can't, if'n you don't!” the child shouted, but the reporter only denied him again.

“Sorry, kid.”

Samantha smiled down at her girls. “Wanna run the course with him?”

“Yeah!”

They dragged her toward Cynthia, and Samantha snagged the boy's uninjured hand. "Come on."

The child lit up and Cynthia stuttered her thanks, embarrassed.

"Uh-huh." Sam didn't offer more, but her tone said *shame on you!*

Neil felt his respect for her go up. The storm tracker was okay.

Serving as an extra chaperone, Anne enjoyed being with the kids as they played. John had been right to bring them here.

Anne noticed Adrian in the flap and wondered if he knew how lonely he appeared, watching his orphans frolic without him. She didn't see much of him most days. She was either helping John or helping these kids, but soon, she would have to ask him for something. When they'd first come, there hadn't been any reason to tell the leader here about the cancer. Now, that had changed. One of Adrian's chain of command had abilities that might push her husband's illness into remission, and there wasn't anything Anne wouldn't offer in exchange for that.

4

Kyle approached the center table with a casual pace, sure what he was about to do would be hated by the sullen Marine on Adrian's right as much as the morning's start had been. After embarrassing Kenn on the course, Angela had taken a rookie

record from Seth and stolen Daniel's high score on a training game. It had been a busy two hours that had allowed some of the other men to discern how determined she was to succeed.

Steeling his nerves (It amazed him that he still felt any hesitation at all considering the missions he and his Eagles had completed since the war), Kyle stepped over to Angela's side of the crowded center table.

"Hey, Kyle."

"Did you come for coffee? 'Cause this ain't it!"

Those at the table laughed at the well-used joke and the tanned Eagle grinned, eyes full of warning that Adrian took note of.

"Me and the boys are leaving. I thought I'd ask if the rookie wants to come along."

Silence fell over the table and those around them, and then over the entire mess.

"Great idea." Adrian regarded to the blushing female across from him. "Feel like being out of camp for a while?"

Angela could feel his pleasure and Kenn's fury. It hadn't been planned. "Sure, when?"

Wanting to be certain those listening understood that he also supported this, Kyle took over. "Is fifteen minutes enough time for you to get ready? I can give you longer one time."

Angela stood up. "I'll be ready in five, like everyone else."

The pair moved toward the tent area, ignoring the shocked camp around them. There had been rumors and stories, but no actual confirmation. It was true. She'd been accepted as an Eagle, a woman who had only been here for two weeks!

Silence reigned in the mess and it took Neil's full control to play his part convincingly. He and Kyle had worked it out only a little while ago. "Never known a woman who could shoot that well. She hits ninety percent of all targets in Level Three. That's the same as Zack."

Adrian played his own role happily, already perfectly in awe. "A few more like that and we'd have enough shooters to keep *any* bad guys off our asses."

"It takes guts to join the Eagles. You think there are more women here like that?"

Adrian let his blue gaze sweep the openly listening people, making pointed contact with a few. "Yes, but they'll come out when it's their time."

Adrian returned to his lunch and the camp did the same, muttering and whispering. One of those he'd glanced at was only fifteen!

Adrian gave Neil a subtle nod of approval and then switched them onto other business. "All right, the schedules are out. We'll need..."

5

"He's very pleased with you."

Kyle acknowledged the pride he felt at Angela's words. "Then I'm doing it right."

"Thank you. I know it's for him, but thank you anyway."

The mobster raised a bushy brow. "It is for you, too. If you didn't deserve the chance, he wouldn't be giving it."

Kyle's team was currently loading the Excursion that he preferred to travel in because of the huge cargo area. Kyle made a motion to Billy, who relayed it to the others.

Assuming he was telling them how long until he would be there, Angela quickened her step. "I can meet you, if you need to go."

Kyle swept the area. "My team is your shadow today."

Realizing what that meant, Angela was still grinning as she ducked into the small tent that never failed to remind her of her lost time with Brady.

"Two minutes," Kyle called, accepting the fact that she would insist on being treated like any other rookie.

Only half of that had gone by when she emerged from the tent in the rookie gear that had been lying near her flap this morning and unknowingly made them the center of attention again.

Angela belted her sweater over the uniform, hair high and tight under her cap, and slung the small kit over her shoulder, still smiling. No secret

guard. She would be away from prying eyes for a few hours. *Finally!*

Not needing to see her to know that she was as eager as any of his team usually was to escape for a while, Kyle followed her to the vet area. It was gonna be a good day.

Angela ducked into the animal tent to find her son and the vet in the middle of feeding the ever-growing zoo. She stayed near the flap, out of their way. "I'll be with Kyle and his team today. Have Mitch call if you need me."

Unlike after the war, when she'd been weakened by the loss of the baby, she could talk to him over any distance now and Charlie was glad she was still being cautious about their gifts, like before. It didn't occur to him that she was providing cover, as an Eagle would have.

"Okay. Be careful."

Angela tried not to laugh. "I will, *mom.*"

The teenager snickered and after a quick nod at the unfriendly vet, she joined Kyle. "I'm all set."

Kyle glanced at his wrist as he got them moving toward the waiting truck. Less than four minutes, including walk time. It was impressive for the team, but for a female? It was unnerving and they traveled across the camp in silence.

Kyle halted near the bumper and the men gathering around him gave her polite nods, but no words of welcome.

"Let's do the usual check. Weapons?"

Each of the nine men checked their guns and Angela did the same, feeling awkward despite her fingers doing mostly what she wanted them to. They were securing other weapons too—guns in boots and knives on belts—and Angela did a quick check to make sure her wrist blade was fastened securely. She had picked it up a few days ago from one of the baskets Marc had sorted. He'd been the one to put it in there, she was positive. His scent was still on it, even now.

“Communication?”

Each man strapped a stocked tool belt around their hips and Angela barely had time to wonder if she should ask for one before it was being held out to her.

She recognized the simple walkie-talkie setup she was given to hang on the belt, and she quickly flipped through the dials to channel 77 and then powered it up.

The set crackled to life, blaring static and she flipped the filter switch, then adjusted the volume.

Busy being glad that she didn't have to wait for them to show her how to use it, or worse, have to suffer through a public jolt from the short-wave communications system, Angela hadn't noticed the silence.

“Did he give you the headsets yet? Those are great. They automatically catch the spark and adjust.”

The quiet was thick and long, and she glanced up to discover the Eagles sharing scowls.

“Did I do something wrong already?”

Kyle glared toward the mess. “Not you.”

“He didn’t tell you to go to channel 77 first so there’s no shock?”

There was only the feel of their anger and Angela snorted when she picked it from their thoughts. “Not on purpose. He didn’t want to say he forgot, because he likes testing it out on the rookies.” She shrugged. “That’s the Kenny I know.”

The Eagles continued to mutter and cast glowers toward the man still sitting stiffly on Adrian’s right.

Kyle went on, but his voice wasn’t quite calm anymore. “Gear?”

They began comparing their kits to the sheets of paper from their pockets, and Angela was ready for Kyle this time, going to him instead of the other way around.

She did her check fast and was embarrassed at all the items she didn’t have.

“I’m short a canteen.”

“I need a battery pack.”

Angela steeled her nerves and followed their lead. “I need a complete kit.”

Kyle handed her one without giving any of the praise rookies often wanted to hear for an easy guess.

Not sure if her own items were off-limits, Angela settled for the three things she used the

most and then tossed her kit through the open window of her Blazer.

“All right. Who’s the sucker on drive detail?”

“Rookie.”

“Rookie.”

“Rookie drives.”

Angela flushed. “Okay.”

Daryl tossed her the keys and she was aware of being pointed at as she slid into the driver’s seat of Kyle’s vehicle. The camp was aware of her presence on a training run and it had garnered a lot of attention.

The black Ford Excursion was long, with three rows of seats and Angela had to shift hers all the way up to reach the pedals. She strapped herself in, waiting for Daryl to climb in beside her.

“Why is the driver a sucker?”

The Eagle exchanged glances with the others getting in, voice amused. “Kyle likes to go where no man has gone before.”

Understanding her road skills were about to be tested, Angela grinned. She loved driving.

Kyle paused at the door, scanning the center table and caught Adrian’s nod. It said to do his job and the mobster gave a firm nod in response. *I will.*

Lingering near the showers, Marc watched them roll out with a bit of worry and only a little of the nagging urge to follow that had fallen over him during the airport drama. This time, he knew where she was and what Kyle had planned, and while Marc was glad to know it had already been

scouted, he couldn't stop the curtness in his tone as the day progressed and she didn't return.

6

Still high on her successes, Angela kept her foot on the brake, letting the Eagles survey the hill they were about to roll down. She got set, listening to them. They were only a few miles from camp, but the feeling of being out with an Eagle team was worlds apart from the training tent.

“You sure, man?”

“Awful steep sides.”

“Check out her face. Recognize that?” the team leader gently reminded them. “We were all rookies once.”

Daryl's mind flashed to his own excitement of his first trip. “Those were the days. Rollin' through no-man's land while Adrian shot at us. Fun times.”

Angela's grin widened as she picked up the dusty image, loving the idea that in time, she too, might be trained that way. “You guys ready, or what?”

Kyle tightened his belt and confidently put his hands behind his neck. Inside, his gut was a churning ball of nerves. She might kill them all. “I'm set.”

The others followed his lead, getting excited, and Angela pressed on the accelerator with a bubble of happiness in her chest. She had the start of their trust through saving Adrian and she was an Eagle to them, if only for this minute.

Malevolent attention followed the single vehicle down the steep grade, hoping for a wreck. If Dean followed them, he would be in plain sight. If he went in on foot, he wouldn't be able to keep up.

The man growled in frustration. They were being too careful, which meant they wouldn't come this way to meet up with the camp, so even an ambush was out. The man pounded his fist on the wheel and the jeep shook in response. *She will pay!*

Dean slowly retreated, locking his anger away so that he could think. If he couldn't get to her from the outside, then inside was the answer. He would take a line from Cesar and attack under the cover of the next storm. He would have to test their wire before then.

"I'm comin' for you, baby!" Dean crooned, resisting the urge to spin out and kick up telltale dust. He would lay low for as long as it took.

Angela hit the brakes halfway down the hill, no longer hearing the men who yelled for her to go faster. The feeling of menace was consuming and she shut her lids in concentration.

It would have been natural for the men with her to assume Angela had viewed the next incline and frozen in fear, but Kyle's team had been there for Marc's miracle and each of them immediately swept for the danger.

“Are things 5-by?”

Angela shook her head at Daryl’s question. “He’s traveling to our camp to test the perimeter, searching for a way in.”

“Who is?”

Drawing her courage, Angela grabbed Daryl’s hard wrist, making him jump.

“Sorry,” she muttered, flushing as the Eagle stiffened in aroused surprise. “The radio isn’t an option. Dean can’t know that *I know*.”

She released his hand a moment later. “I told Adrian. He’s tightening things.”

Angela opened her lids...the morning’s feeling of victory returning. It was okay to go on, Adrian had it covered.

Without warning them, she hit the gas and the full level of Eagles bounced, shouted, and slid to the bottom of the dirt and weed-dotted grade that had once been the most challenging ATV trail in the state.

7

“We’ll use these trips to get you caught up,” Kyle told Angela a while later. They were waiting for the other Eagles to check the wooded area, verify their perimeter alarms hadn’t been broken, and set up a sniper watch.

“We’re doing it this way so the camp doesn’t know how much work I need, right?”

“No, mostly it’s the actual training. Camp members wouldn’t understand, but you do, and that’s why we’ve set it up this way.

“I appreciate the rearranging.”

“It’s all Adrian. He’s handling your schedule personally.”

“He has a lot of dreams,” she stated.

Kyle’s curious expression said that he, too, was eager to discover if she could fulfill some of them.

“Let’s make this happen. You ready?”

She flashed a grin he had to steel himself against. “You know it.”

“Good. Take in as much as you can and we’ll cover it all again in the next lessons.”

Angela followed nervously, a bit self-conscious, but determined not to be run out by her own fears.

“Rookie lessons, gentlemen, and I hope you remember them.”

There was a laughing round of groans and good-natured complaints as they settled into the grass at Kyle’s feet.

“You’ll sit on my left, the learning place, until you know the lesson, then you’ll join the team. Right now, you are a rookie. A place with us has to be earned.”

Angela quickly sat down, hoping her face wasn’t as red as it felt like.

“From the very first day, Eagles. We’ll start on the right.”

Daryl stood up and his words carried an instant ring of magic.

“Eagles are men and women who care about the future of their country. So much, that they are willing to sacrifice their lives for it. They are not afraid to get involved and can easily tell wrong from right.

“Eagles are not thieves. Some of them may have been in the past, but no longer. An Eagle can now be trusted with a life, the only possession that has any true value.

“Eagles have hope and suspicion in equal amounts. They believe in the truth when it’s called for, and silence when it’s not. An Eagle helps, plans, searches, and defends without being asked and no payment will ever be taken. They are strong and loyal defenders of those around them.

“There are a lot of reasons to join my Army. Worry over the future, a need to belong to something you can depend on, but it comes down to a simpler fact. We all want to be better than we are—mentally and physically. Humans are an ever-evolving species. Before the war, you were something else. Now, you’re an Eagle in my Army and I’ll accept nothing less than your best.”

As Daryl sat down and Chris stood up, Angela realized these had to be the exact words Adrian had spoken to them as Safe Haven’s army was formed.

“There is no room in my army for slacking off. If you can’t cut it, get out now.” Chris paused

lightly as the words required and then went on, but he suspected that wasn't going to be a problem with Angela.

“America comes first with us. Not that shit to enforce laws that hide greed, but only for the greater good—the survival of our country. The continuation of America is all I care about and there isn't anything I won't do, any one person I won't sacrifice, to make it happen. Be sure you want this. It may be your life that I take to save theirs.”

Kyle stood up. “Two minute break.”

Understanding the mobster was giving her time to process, Angela ran it through again. This time, she could hear Adrian's voice and feel parts of the magic that must have surrounded them as he accepted the first team of men into his army.

Kyle nodded and she listened as Billy spoke.

“An Eagle is the only line of defense between the camp and this hostile new world. Extreme force is necessary and will be used at my discretion, no matter the age or condition of the threat. Mercy in this new hell comes from death and hardly anything else. Be prepared to not only face it, but to also be the one pulling that trigger. Lives are not to be taken lightly but they *will* be taken.”

The oral lesson went on for almost an hour, with Kyle calling periodic two minute breaks to keep her from being overwhelmed. Kyle himself

went last, voice so similar to Adrian's that it rang in her head and her heart.

“We're writing history, here and now. In this new world, we are the first military power. As such, we are duty-bound to each other and the lives we come in contact with. *Their* needs are our needs, and we will always take care of them before ourselves. We are Guardians, shepherds of the remaining American flock, and everything we do, all that we are, is for them, for *Her*. We will be closer than any army was before, more in tune with each other and the environment. Because of that, we have an edge. Knowing what's coming will save us.”

Kyle couldn't help a pause as his mind said that Adrian had been thinking of Angela when he'd told them that in Nevada. He'd known she was coming, even then.

The men around him shared the thought.

Angela waited without telling them that Adrian hadn't known for sure it was real then, or that any of the help he had dreamed of would show. These men could never know he had based their new lives on a maybe.

Kyle went on, voice a bit awed. “I'm going to ask you to do things you'll hate me for and yourself as well. Do them anyway. The motions we make now, are waves we'll ride later, when there are more of us. You'll have doubts and questions, and moments of weakness when you think you're about to fail and maybe cause the fall

of these goals, my goals. Accept it as hard duty and learn to live with your demons. Talk to me, I am here for that, but more so, talk to each other. The old saying of not letting one hand know what the other is doing, does not hold with us. We will be a family inside the Safe Haven community and there will be none tighter than these first teams. You are more valuable than anyone will realize or give you credit for, and if the camp finds out about the things we do on missions, you'll be run out or worse. You must be sure. There is no going back."

Kyle waited for a moment, studying her for that glint of determination not to be the one who was responsible for causing the collapse.

When it came, he fired the final words that had given his own loyalty to Adrian. "None of you were where you belonged in the old world and you felt it every day. In this new world, in this moment, you are exactly where you should be, and I need you."

Kyle sat down.

"Whatever you guys need from me to help him, I'll give it." Angela wiped at her cheeks, heart full of a joy she wished would carry to camp. This really was where she was supposed to be, Adrian was right about that, and she would give it her all, no matter how much it hurt.

Sensing a good moment for the words she'd chosen, Angela allowed them the honesty they needed. "And if that ends up being me resigning, I'll do it without a fight and keep my mouth shut

about what I've learned and heard. It'll be hard for me to know when it's enough, because every second I get to spend as an Eagle will teach me and I won't want that to stop. When it's a threat to his plans, come to me and I'll bow out quietly. I'd never get in his way."

There were nods and relief, and Kyle spoke for them all. "We will, but not unless we have to. Adrian wants female Eagles. He always has."

Knowing she needed to be very clear on how much Adrian was counting on her, the mobster's voice became hard. "Repeat to me the first sentence of Daryl's words."

Angela replayed it as quickly as she could, trying not to get flustered at being put on the spot or distracted by the small pack of mutated ants moving through the knee-high weeds by the Excursion.

"Eagles are men and women who care about the future..." she trailed off, understanding his point.

"Yes. Men *and* women. He wanted you in his army even before there was one and we'd give him this. But you have to *be* one of us for it to work. If you're holding us up, fighting the choices at the wrong time, it will get someone killed. Until we, as a team, give the okay, you won't go on missions, be a part of live fire exercises, and many other things. This is not because you're a female," Kyle stated sternly. "It's because you're a rookie and the rest of us like breathing."

Angela was disappointed, but understood the real okay would come from Adrian, not the Eagles.

Kyle checked his watch... Right on schedule. "Let's do the rookie sets. Put it in that sun spot and I want a sniper sentry rotation, by two, in the next three minutes." His tone deepened. "And anyone caught slacking off on that detail will find himself off my team as soon as we hit camp."

With that warning ringing, they got moving and Angela quickly spoke up. "What should I do?"

Kyle waved toward the 20x20 area that was currently receiving full sun. "You're 'man in the middle' now. When you're ready, join in for a while and then go back to observing."

Angela felt out of place as she stepped into the circle while they set up an obstacle course like she and Marc had done each morning on their way to Safe Haven. Barrels, crates, and beams on blocks, all subtly taken from camp and stored in the rear of the Excursion made her smirk in amazement as they continued to pull items out. She snorted as the punch line of a forgotten joke came to mind. *How many clowns can they fit in that car?*

Unaware of being scrutinized, her amusement was a glimpse of perfection and men stumbled, stared.

Kyle gave a short whistle and such a harsh glower around that Angela's smile faded. She'd been distracting them. *Sorry.*

She pushed it at Kyle absently and he met her eye for a brief moment before regarding his men, never betraying his shock. *She was in my mind!*

“One every ten, let’s go.”

The six men lined up at the start of the mostly round course. At Kyle’s nod, the first of them took off. Ten seconds later, the next went, and so on, until all of them were flying through the course.

Angela was enthralled as they leapt from beam to barrel, jumped a high stack of boxes, tucked and rolled upon landing and then crawled under another stack of obstacles, this one crates.

It was a simple, basic run and yet six Eagles doing it at the same time was almost mesmerizing. She rotated slowly in the center, taking it all in.

They’d gone through it more than half a dozen times before she remembered she was supposed to join in. *Can I do that?*

Angela observed them run it again. Yes. She’d probably fall a few dozen times, but after enough practice, she could do what they were doing.

Kyle had been watching her, waiting for the right moment, and he gave a short motion.

One by one, the six men finished their run and lined up, making Angela pause. Not sure if she had waited too long, she started to ask and then realized they were all looking at her expectantly. She flushed and quickly walked to the line that she would begin this time. Not a word was spoken while she got set, evaluating Eagles keeping her

cheeks red, and she knew the first try would be ugly.

Angela did fine on the beam, balance coming as natural to her as dancing, but she landed precariously on the wobbling barrels. Her foot caught the tip of the boxes as she jumped and they toppled, spilling her on the ground in an awkward sprawl. Cheeks a furious red, she picked herself up and moved determinedly toward the beginning.

A sharp motion from Kyle was all that had kept the men in line at her fall, but it couldn't stop the help they wanted to give.

“Tuck your feet behind your ass.”

“Get set on the barrels before you jump.”

Storing the advice, Angela took off. She remembered to steady herself before the leap of faith, but the stack of boxes was higher than the barrels and her foot caught them again, sending her to the ground.

Kyle saw the problem, but his orders were clear. If she wanted to be one of them, she would have to account for her shortcomings and improvise.

Angela wiped the dust from her scraped palms and paced around the stack of boxes, mind working the problem as the Eagles reset them. When she proceeded to the starting point, even the snipers, with their very fast glances, knew she'd come up with a solution.

Angela got set, tuning out the tense males. When she felt that coolness settle over her nerves, she took off like a shot. Moving twice as fast as the first times, she was over the beam in an instant, and leaping forward with all of her body weight. She touched the barrels only lightly, enough to springboard off them, and she cleared the boxes by more than a foot as she launched into the air.

Angela automatically crouched for the abrupt landing and rolled under the crates, sending one of them tumbling. She scrambled to her feet with a grin at having done it for the first time and streaked toward the beam.

Her fourth attempt was better and she bounced from the barrels and into the air more easily, controlling her arms and legs. She managed the quick tuck and roll again, but went off course and crashed into the crates this time, sending the empty wood flying.

Kyle's motion was ignored, but the men rushing to help stopped short at her snap, "I've got this!"

Angela stood up, blood smeared across her cheek, and reset the crates. The Eagles helped silently, retreated as she took her spot and got ready for another run.

Anger was building. Why couldn't she do this?
You can, the Witch encouraged. *Concentrate!*

By the time the babysitting group left the training tent, all the kids were dirty and happy, their day of exercise and fun underway. When they ducked out of the flap, the little boy they'd taken on the obstacle course stayed with her and the two girls, and Samantha didn't complain.

Samantha noticed Neil had Cynthia's other charge and the reporter was nowhere in sight. She motioned to the boy questioningly.

"Some people got it like that," Neil joked. "And some people want it!"

She laughed, showing a face Neil suddenly thought he could stand to stare at for a long time.

Their next stop was bathrooms for a break and wash-up, and Sam tried not to snicker when Cynthia's boy tugged on Neil's sleeve. He had the child tucked firmly along his hip and glanced down distractedly.

"What?"

"I had an accident." The child grimaced in fear. "On you."

The warm stain ran the length of his side, but instead of a scold, the trooper only sighed. "One of those days, Bobbie. Don't sweat it."

He quickly made arrangements to take the boy to the camper for a change.

While he was gone, Samantha helped keep track of the other boys, occupying them with trying to pick out cloud shapes through the grit. When all of them were ready, they went to the mess for lunch.

“Get them settled at Adrian’s table,” Peggy instructed. “It’s reserved right now.”

Samantha helped them all to the two middle tables that had been pushed together. When Peggy joined them, she had a stack of covered trays that she quickly sat on the edge. “Take one down, pass it around...”

That started a chorus of ‘pass the trays’ that lasted until everyone had one and Samantha found herself smiling more than she had since the war. It was funny, how their happiness was rubbing off, but she was no longer displeased with the duty she’d been given.

Once everyone had a tray, there were contented sounds from the kids and sighs of relief from the adults who surrounded them. It was a rare moment to have them all still and quiet.

“Did you have children? Before?”

Sam hadn’t expected the conversation attempts. “No.”

Peggy helped Bobbie’s younger brother put ketchup on his fries. “You’re doing well.”

Samantha stared, caught off guard. “Thanks.”

“I guess you know I’m Becky’s mom.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Samantha gave the woman a hard gesture. “Go on, get it off your chest.”

The older woman gently wiped the boy’s fingers. “There’s nothin’ to say yet, other than I doubt how serious he is.”

Samantha's anger sharpened. "Why would you sink your own daughter?"

Peggy kept her voice low. "Her age mostly, but like I said, he's not serious."

Sam swallowed her questions as Neil and the little boy, both freshly changed, returned.

Neil wondered what had been said as he sat down. Tension hung over the table despite the happy kids, and he couldn't stop himself from searching Samantha's expression for clues. Had Peggy told her about his fling with Becky?

Does it matter? he asked himself. *Do I care?*

Come October, he would be dating the teenager openly. That was what he wanted. Right? Surely a few odd moments with the battle-scarred woman on his right hadn't changed everything?

Sitting at the table behind Neil and the kids, Marc watched Kyle's truck roll in with relief and a hint of jealousy that quickly became concern when he saw Angela's bloody face, torn clothes, and wild hair.

He started to go that way, but stopped when Adrian appeared at the tape. She looked like she'd been attacked. Would Adrian now tell her she couldn't be an Eagle or would he ignore her injuries and treat her like one of his men?

Adrian only nodded at something she said and he didn't follow her as she walked too carefully to the rear for her gear. Adrian was going to let her get hurt as much as it took for her to catch up.

Anger seethed in Marc, an impotent rage that had him gritting his teeth in an attempt at control. He wasn't sure why he had thought she would ever be happy with just getting here. He'd known the young girl who swung out over the ravine on a tire rope too frayed for any of the neighborhood kids to be comfortable using. After the war, he'd followed her trail across bridges that shouldn't have held. She was reckless. She needed to be protected. Making her an Eagle was likely to get her killed. Didn't Safe Haven's oh-so-careful leader care about that even a little?

Angela could feel Marc's emotions boiling and understood why, but short of her dropping out, there was little that would ease his pain. Not being afraid anymore was a part of this new life, the second chance that Adrian that was offering them all. Even with her many sentries, she still didn't feel safe. She had would-be jailers on both sides of the caution tape and only Adrian was keeping them at bay, trying to give her time to grow into this destiny. Without it, he knew she wouldn't survive, but more importantly, this camp wouldn't either. If the slavers managed to grab her and her son, there wasn't anything she wouldn't do to save Charlie and she had little doubt that destroying Safe Haven would be the first order Cesar gave.

Angela glanced longingly toward the training tent, already sure she would want another workout after she talked to the man studying her from

dusk's orange shadows. Inside that tent, she could be one of the guys for small moments at a time.

Three of Kyle's team ducked into the long canvas and she wondered how that conversation would go.

“Not one.”

“You're kidding, right?”

“Nope. She never even cursed. Just hit the dirt and got up. Musta run it a dozen times before she got it right and we did our sets.”

“Bet that was a mess.”

“Not really. By the time Kyle gave us the go, she pretty much had it down. Went slower than usual, but that was it. She put in a great workout.”

Kenn left the training tent, unable to listen to the words of the returning Eagles. *That isn't the Angela I know!*

His timid mouse could never have run the rookie course, let alone well enough to be a part of a team doing sets. There was only one way she had done it and using her gifts to become an Eagle was something even Adrian couldn't justify. He would have to—

Kenn stopped at the sight of her near the bumper of Kyle's truck, taking in her bloody, dusty appearance. She tucked the schedule Adrian had handed her into a pocket and failed to hide a wince at the movement. She had run it on her own. His Angie was a rookie in Adrian's army.

“Are you okay?”

Marc had been waiting and Angela stopped, hoping he would let it go, but sure he wouldn't. “I have no feeling in my legs, otherwise I'm good.”

“It's not funny!” Marc snapped. He couldn't shut his mouth after that. “You're hurting yourself for nothing. These men will never accept a female Eagle.”

Silence fell around them and she raised a brow, aware of how many people could hear. “You think so?”

“Yes. You should quit now, before something bad happens.”

Tired and sore, Angela let her sarcasm fly. “Sure Brady. I'll go sit quietly in your tent like a good girl until you need me.” She turned toward the shower campers. “Stop pushing, Marc.”

“Maybe I should stop everything.”

Angela swung around. “What's that mean?”

Marc shrugged, heart thumping. What was he doing? “My job is done. Get you here, run if we had to. *That's* clearly no longer on the table and there's nothing keeping me here.”

“Nothing?”

“Just a child I can't claim and a woman who doesn't need me.”

Angela sucked in air. Where was all this coming from? “We've only been here a couple weeks. I told you it would take time.”

“Time I didn’t know would be spent doing shit-work while you go off and put yourself in danger whenever you feel like it!”

“I can’t just be yours. I need more.”

“I need to be certain you’re safe!”

“And I need to do this!”

Their voices had grown steadily louder, drawing even more attention.

Kyle shifted closer to Adrian, ignoring the ugly scene.

“How did it go?”

Kyle ran a fast sweep before regarding his boss. “Even better than you hoped for. You get her message?”

“Loud and clear. We’ve expanded the perimeter and doubled the guards. The dogs are running too, along with the wolf.”

Kyle handed him a folder. “It’s all there. You’ll feel like you’re watching it.

“Did she give you any details?”

“Thinks it’s the twin Brady didn’t kill. Figured he swam across the Cheyenne.”

“We’ll stay alert.” Adrian raised an eager brow. “And?”

“No need to put her with another level. We’ll take her—publicly when you’re ready.”

“That is not my problem!”

Both men swiveled to survey the arguing couple, as did everyone in hearing distance. It wasn’t the kind, patient voice they had come to expect from her.

Angela realized she was shouting and made an attempt to lower her voice. "I'm trying to find a balance here, Marc, I am, but you have to stop now. You're right, I...I don't need your protection anymore, just your support."

Marc spun away before he could say anything uglier than what he had already let out.

Angela sighed unhappily. Kenn didn't want her to be an Eagle because then she might have real power here. Marc couldn't stand the thought of sharing her with all these people any more than he liked the idea of her getting hurt. The men didn't want her because she was female. It felt like the only ones who did want this, were her and Adrian.

Angela went to the showers, wincing at the pain each step was causing. Adrian was the only one who understood.

Before Angela had done more than wet her filthy hair, the camper door opened and her hand automatically went for the .357 on the soap shelf. She saw Hilda step in, Peggy right behind, and let herself pick the weapon up.

She rested it on the top of the stall door where they could view it and leaned her weight against the damp wood for support. She was sore all over. "I'll be out in five."

Both women had stopped at the sight of the gun. "It'll take that long to get all the dirt from your hair," Peggy stated evenly. She had no idea if

the naked woman scrutinizing her so intently would be willing, but for the future, she would try.

“What do you guys want?”

“To help.”

Angela’s mind flew over the possible meanings. “With my grooming?”

Peggy smiled tolerantly. “With the Eagles.”

That had her attention and Angela lowered the weapon to the shelf. She didn’t mind the women here so far, but she didn’t really like them either.

“We have the power to—”

“Sway men’s minds, the right men,” Angela finished, not worried about these two knowing her secrets. They were also Adrian’s, just in different ways than her.

She increased the hot water, smothered a moan. “What do you want?”

Hilda wasn’t used to a female with the courage of a man, but Peggy stepped forward. “We help him anyway, but to further the women of this new world, we would give anything.”

“But we can’t, we’re too old and the younger ones here...”

Hilda’s words trailed off and Angie realized they were regarding her as a champion for women’s rights. She hadn’t considered that the camp’s timid women might want liberation. She’d assumed that she and Adrian would be tricking or forcing it upon them with careful manipulations.

“For the last time, what do you want?”

“For you to succeed.”

“You want more for the girls?” Angela guessed, surprised at the rare glimpse of female fire from these two. They were as determined as she was.

“Yes!” Peggy hissed, eyes flashing. “Need it or not, Becky should have the same life you now do!”

“If she wants it,” Angela cautioned, but Peggy waved it off. “A mother knows.”

“So, you’re here to what? Offer support laced with threats?”

“Advice.”

“I’m doing something wrong?”

“It’s more a matter of...overlooked.” Peggy lowered her voice, realizing she wouldn’t be able to ask for a favor yet. This one was so much like the men that it would require a bond first. Just being another woman wouldn’t be enough. “You can do things. The men will fear it and keep you out.”

“Unless they can do it, too,” Hilda added softly.

“Share?” Angela gasped. *Are they crazy?*

No, the witch answered. I’ve never felt such seriousness in them.

“Yes. He would have an army like you,” Peggy stated. “Share with his men and ensure Adrian’s dream through their support. Do that and all our daughters will have the chance to really live.”

“So, what do we do?” Daryl asked.

Kyle’s team had taken over the sauna room, burning off the soreness of the day, and their rapidly bouncing conversation had only been about one thing.

“It was legit. I checked the books. We were scheduled for it.”

“Kenn didn’t have to make her go first. He wanted her to bleed and she did.”

“He’ll get her hurt, maybe even killed. You know how hard he is on Ray.”

“Yeah, but that’s another one who’s tough enough to be one of us. I thought he’d be gone by now.”

“Both of them will be if we don’t do something.”

Their choices were limited because of who the offender was. Kenn knew how to stay legal, but there was no end to the damage he could do. His methods were often brutal when Adrian wasn’t around, as if he was allowing his true nature free.

“Not much we can do until she’s stronger. We’ll have to watch out for her.”

“We can bring in most of the Eagles, I think, if she keeps this pace. Let them help us.”

“You can also teach her, share your strength.” Adrian was lounging in the corner. None of them had heard him come in. “When she can hold her own, his power over her is gone and then my plans can move forward.”

Kyle spoke for both teams. “We’ve all set up some personal moments with her, but we’d like to give her more than that, Boss. We’d make her dangerous, especially to him.”

Adrian didn’t tell them he already knew or that he, too, would be training quietly with her. “Whatever it takes, gentlemen. Make this happen and there will never be another team higher in my army or in my heart.”

10

It had been a long day for the kids and their chaperones. They’d played football with the Eagles and made Indian bands with the seniors in the craft tent. There had been a quick trip into the animal area for petting a variety of domestic and wild creatures, and even a simple self-defense lesson from Doug.

Samantha had worried for the kids when she spotted the giant in the middle of the hay-ring, but as with Adrian, the orphans had mobbed the red-vested giant until he was forced to surrender. It was something, to witness these grown men being so careful, and also another clear sign of Adrian’s influence. She doubted many of them would have been so open before the war.

To top off their field trip, the kids were now enjoying a movie outside with the camp, after dark. When the younger viewers went back to their area, a more adult movie would be played, but for

now, there were snorts and chuckles over Toy Story.

Samantha had been thinking about her day through most of the cartoon. The shift had been up at evening mess, but she'd chosen to stay with the group and hadn't been surprised when Neil did too. They were the only ones who had. She'd heard the trooper say it was his off day and understood he liked kids. Now, that wasn't such a difference anymore. It hadn't been bad at all. Maybe she could learn to like them, too, if she spent more time with them.

Like kids? Spend more time? her mind questioned harshly. *Are you kidding? When Cesar comes, these kids will be worse off than right after the war.*

Samantha cringed, thinking it would be her fault, and realized Neil was studying her with a raised brow.

“You okay?”

She shrugged, leaning in. “How about that lesson?”

Neil's heart thumped. He'd been hoping she would forget. “Sure.”

“When and where?”

His voice was more uneasy than she'd heard all day.

“Tomorrow night, in the training tent, after the Eagles are finished.”

Sam smiled her thanks and tried to enjoy the end of the movie. If she could get stronger, maybe she could help Adrian get rid of Cesar.

And Rick, her mind reminded. That wolf in sheep's clothing would have to be killed too, and she hid the shame of feeling pain from the thought. Right or wrong, theirs was a bond that hadn't been severed yet.

Rick leaned against the truck holding the projector, not appearing to be aware of Samantha, but he was. Of her and Neil!

Rick burned with a dangerous hatred. *She's mine!*

He could do little about it right now. Cesar hadn't made contact and there was no sign of the Mexicans anywhere. If he was now on his own, and Rick wasn't sure since the weather could have covered the noises of a battle, then he would have to be even more careful, but it didn't change his goals.

Rick saw Samantha say something and receive a charming grin from the trooper in response. One thing was certain, when it all happened, *that* pig would go down in the first body count.

Angela glanced around the large crowd, feeling a wave of danger. She found Kenn in the rear of the spread-out people, but not glaring at her for a change. He was staring at the sloppy man lounging

against the semi. Though only a few feet apart, Rick hadn't noticed her Marine's attention.

Rick's profile was pointed toward the huge screen and Angela tried to enjoy the show as well, surprised to now feel a bit comforted that Kenn was on duty here. She didn't like Rick at all, didn't trust him. She'd come to the conclusion that he was trouble, but with his thoughts so closed to her, she wasn't sure if it was serious enough to directly talk to Adrian about. It was a small relief to know her evil Marine was watching the man too.

And that was about the only relief she had at the moment. Besides the fights with Marc and Kenn, Charlie was also avoiding her, spending his nights with Matt. Now, there was this new pressure from the camp's women. Angela sighed, letting her mind return to the bigger problem. Kenn. She had to keep training with him as an Eagle. What other horrors did he have planned?

Smiling at the screen when those around her laughed, Angela concentrated, trying to pick up the Marine's thoughts. He was so dark some days that she couldn't find the door to get in.

A minute later, she let go of the connection, stretching her legs out in front of her. The only light inside Kenn right now was bright with rage, blinding. There was no way in without being noticed when someone was that ready to fight.

It was a much quieter group that brought the kids back to their area. After a quick stop by the bathrooms, all the children were quickly settled inside the campers and the tired adults were free to go.

Samantha watched the three kids climb into the RV, each with a shy wave to her, and found her mouth opening to volunteer for the next field trip day. Refusing to berate herself for being nice to little kids, she headed toward her tent, eager to get a clean change of clothes and then a shower.

“Hey.”

She jumped when Neil fell in step with her. “Damn it!”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you are.”

Neil studied her countenance, still not sure what it was about this hardened woman that he was being drawn to. Hell, some of the camp still thought she might have a flame burning for the man she’d come in with and Neil wondered if that were true.

“You need something?”

Neil opened his mouth to give her honesty, but snapped it shut at the sight of Becky walking their way. “No.”

Samantha frowned, also catching sight of the teenager. “Ahh, the forbidden fruit shows itself.”

She stopped abruptly, not liking how jealous she had become over a man she’d known for only

two weeks. “You know what they used to say about the grass being greener, right?”

Sam took the opposite direction, voice carrying over her shoulder. “I wonder if you’ll want her when she’s legal...”

That thought had also crossed the trooper’s mind and he didn’t respond. He wasn’t sure.

Still embarrassed, Becky didn’t talk to Neil as she strode by and her unhappiness was a source of guilt. He’d been flirting and leading the girl on for months, and now, when she was about to be his, he wasn’t certain he still wanted her. What had Samantha done to him?

Becky climbed into the kid’s camper with a feeling of relief. There were so many people watching her these days! Some of those were Adrian’s men, and she liked that part, but the newest groups of people were odd. Like that guy, Rick. He’d been doing no work, that she had seen, for the whole time he’d been here, but today, she had found him rooting in the sludge behind the camp. When she’d asked if he needed help, he’d stared at her in a way that Neil never had. She’d almost run right then, would have if the man had made a single move toward her, but he’d only smiled intently and refused her offer.

That feeling of danger had come again later, when she’d asked if he minded her being there, and oh man, the things she could tell he wanted to do to her! Again, he’d only given a short “no” and

she had hung around for nearly an hour, studying his body. Every now and then he would glance up at her with that open want, but he hadn't stopped whatever it was that he'd been doing.

Becky ignored the worried mother watching her climb into the bunk and increased the volume on her iPod. If not for it getting dark, she probably would have stayed longer. *Who knows what might have happened then*, she thought, and a shiver of fear went through her stomach.

Rick was dangerous. And wasn't that why she liked Neil? Becky had come across him and Adrian once, play fighting with their shirts off, and she had been drawn to them both after that. She'd known she had no hopes with their leader, but Neil made her feel all strange inside too, so she'd settled for him. Now, there was another, older woman in that picture and Becky's female heart asked if she wanted to make a switch. If Neil wasn't capable of the emotions she was searching for, maybe Rick was.

12

“So she's gonna be an Eagle, huh?”

Charlie gave a short nod, not saying anything. He was ignoring her and feeling bad for it. Why couldn't his mom be one of them? Because Kenn said so? What right did he have to make the rules?

“Bummer.”

“Yeah.” But Charlie wasn’t so sure. If his mom were an Eagle, Kenn wouldn’t be able to hurt either one of them anymore.

Much like the previous one, most of the next hour in Matt’s tent was spent playing cards and taking short, stomach-hurting swigs off the bottle that Matt had swiped from his dad. Not as bad yet, Matt did have a problem as far as Charlie was concerned. He usually avoided the drinking moments, but this time, he was the one who finished off the cheap wine. He’d pay for it in the morning, but tonight it was drowning out his confusion and the teenager went willingly.

“My dad says she won’t be a real Eagle.”

Charlie frowned, voice slurring, “Why snot?”

“Because she’ll never mak-make it by the cage.”

Charlie let his friend ramble on about what it meant, but inside, he grew angrier. While they were apart, he couldn’t wait for his mom to get here, but now that she was, where was the happiness? Why couldn’t she just be his parent and a doctor?

The semi-adult inside protested, telling him he barely needed her for that now. And if she wanted to be an Eagle, she had every right to try. This was the new world and things didn’t have to be like they were before. But if that were true, why was everyone so upset with her? If it were a good idea, wouldn’t his dad be supporting the idea instead of fighting with her over it?

Full of confusion and anger at the unfairness, Charlie let Matt talk him into sneaking into his dad's tent for a second theft.

Not quite noisy enough to be caught by anyone who would tell on them, the boys were drinking steadily a short time later, sharing the bottle and their miseries.

Marc patrolled the male tents carefully, checking for signs of trouble. He'd openly challenged Zack and Kenn enough times to be watching his back, but he was unprepared for the sound of Charlie's drunken voice calling him a bastard.

"You shouldn't say that!" Matt was horrified. He worshipped his own father.

"Why not?" Charlie blared, tones full of pain. "He's only here for her anyway."

"You don't know that."

Marc tensed, wondering if the other boy knew about Charlie's gifts.

"Has he tried to spend any time with me?"

"You told him to go to hell, right? Grownups don't like that shit."

They both giggled drunkenly at the curses, and Marc hesitated. If Angie found out about this, she'd hit the roof. And if he kept it from her and she found out, their relationship would take another blow. Not sure what to do, Marc moved to the flap, listening. Maybe he wouldn't have to—

“Hey! Let’s sneak out of camp, go have an adventure! That’ll show ‘em I’m a person too!”

“Yeah!”

“No.”

Marc’s voice was harsh as he entered the reeking tent and both boys jumped. The half-finished bottle of wine fell to the floor and oozed greenish liquid.

“Matt, get that cleaned up and then go tell your dad.”

The pit-marked boy paled. “Nn-no way!”

“Yes. Go tell him. Charlie, go get a shower and then tell your mom.”

“No.”

“I won’t d-do it!”

Both teenagers were drunk and willing to fight and Marc reconsidered.

“Maybe I’ll go get Adrian,” he threatened. “Bet you guys are looking forward to a long day’s work with those headaches you’ll have.”

“Will you be coming too, daddy?” Charlie sneered disrespectfully, pushing himself up off the canvas. “I hear you’ve been spending a lot of time there.”

“Just to avoid you, snot-head,” Marc quipped, reaching out to jerk the thin boy onto his feet. “Get over here.”

Marc shook the teenager once, needing him to know he wouldn’t put up with any trouble, and wasn’t surprised by the fear in his son’s face.

“Matt, get this cleaned up.” Marc ordered. “Mitch gonna beat you or something?”

Matt wanted to lie, but couldn’t with those demanding eyes freezing him in place. “Maybe.”

Marc sighed. “Then don’t let him find out. If I get into a fight with him over this, I’ll have a hit or two for you of my own.”

Charlie glared belligerently and Marc gave the teen an easy shove toward the flap. “Come on, adventure boy. Let’s you and I have a man-to-man.”

Charlie caught himself before he fell and stomped out into the cool air with his dad on his heels. “I’m going to the mess.”

Marc neatly wrapped him up under one arm. “You’re going to take a cold shower.”

“Let go of me, you jerk!”

Marc delivered a light slap with his free hand. “*Mr. Jerk.*”

The teenager found that hilarious and sang it, all the way to the shower.

“Mr. Jerk, take a dirk, break my murk, Mr. Jerk!” Laughing, Charlie collapsed onto his knees, dragging Marc down.

The impatient man swung the boy up and over his shoulder. “Come on, before your mom—”

Marc groaned at the slender shadow ahead of them, and felt Charlie tense. “Too late, boy. You’re in deep shit now.”

He relaxed at the sight of Samantha coming from the showers, realizing he’d mistaken them.

“Not her, huh?” the boy muttered, fear bringing him down fast.

Marc took a better grip. “No. Let’s get you—”

Blaaccchhhh!

Marc froze as vomit splashed down his legs, and the blonde walking by flashed him a glance of sympathy.

“Some days are hell.”

The father’s sigh was full of suffering as he walked uncomfortably toward the showers that both of them now needed, the teenager still gagging out nasty wine. “Tell me about it.”

Chapter Nine

Snap, Rumble, and Wait

1

“Repeat it back to me.”

Angela struggled to remember everything, still not completely awake as they trolled the camp. She had been surprised to have Adrian at her tent flap before dawn and that feeling hadn't worn off yet.

“Anything will spook a large group of people, from strange noises to your expression. Keep your face blank. Never let them know how you feel or what you're really thinking.”

Angela nodded distractedly at his repetition, becoming aware of Kenn moving their way with the usual hateful sneer he seemed to wear all the time.

“Why?”

Angela blinked. “Why, what?”

“Why all these precautions? Why not tell them the hard truth and force them to understand they only have one choice, one way? Mine.”

“Because they'd lose faith and leave,” she replied quickly. That was an easy one. “They want a leader to not only save them, but to also shoulder

all the weight that comes with it. They don't want to hear the wolf's at the door, only that he was sent on his way.”

Adrian was impressed. Again, and he leaned in. “You had teaching, right? A military family member at least?”

Ignoring Kenn’s glower, she shook her head, not sure if she should be insulted. “Not other than him. Should I be insulted?”

Adrian was full of the good relief that still came every time she used her gift in front of him. “No. You're taking it all in so well.”

She smiled, a bit bitterly. “For a woman.”

“For anyone. You're moving up the shooting ranks faster than Seth, and Kyle said he'll have to work plans out every night to stay a lesson ahead. It's...”

“Like I’ve already done it, even though I haven’t,” she finished quietly with the answer she'd given herself. She was in love with this lifestyle. She loathed the war, but she had found a purpose in helping these people and not a day was going by now that she didn't do something for them, from searching for hiding survivors, to cooking.

Her happy mood faded a bit. Cooking, with Maria last week. That had been an awkward shift where she'd learned nothing of value.

“Angie?”

She shook it off. “Sorry. Something keeps pulling me, about the cook.”

“She's under guard,” Adrian told her. The Mexican woman had been Angela's first real moment of action upon joining Safe Haven, her first warning, and he would heed it.

“Were you a leader before, training soldiers?”

Adrian shut down and she gave him a cool smile laced with razor sharp edges. “And here I thought we'd become—.”

“What are you training her for?”

Adrian looked over at Kenn's interruption, voice hard. “Can't you guess?”

Kenn didn't want to accept defeat. He wanted to fight for his place, but already knew it was too late to stop whatever Adrian had planned around her. “Never mind.”

Kenn stomped off to resume his rounds on Point and Angela stared at Adrian questioningly. “Well?”

Adrian grinned, but the smile didn't reach far. “He thinks it's to take his place.”

Angela raised a brow. “You know I don't want his spot, right? I don't need to be by your side.”

Adrian gave nothing away. “Why don't you go spend some time on targets? Prove it to the few Eagles who still don't believe you made that shot.”

Shrugging, Angela did as she was instructed. She didn't understand everything he had going on, but she did trust him. They had the same goals—survival and rebuilding. With those two things always in the rear of her mind, it left little room for anything else.

Adrian was aware of all the attention on them. Everyone was curious, some even thinking he may have a personal interest. Hair now kept pinned under her cap, it was still clear that Angela was a woman, from too-slender hips, to the too-full shirt. It caused more than one of them to do a double take upon viewing her in the full Eagle gear. Once their male brains registered the full chest, it was inevitable for them to study her red lips and pale skin for long moments at a time. Her high cheekbones and long lashes were wrong to see under that cover, was a common thought. Only the slightly crooked nose (a result of Kenn's quick hands) and the scar on her shoulder fit the part.

The leader veered toward his tent, thinking his emotions were nothing compared to all the good she would do for these people. This week, it was new people, rookie records, fresh supplies, and the start of first aid classes. Next week, who knew?

Adrian ducked inside the spotless canvas, but stayed only long enough to grab something from a bag Peggy had delivered late last night, and to make a quick call to Kyle about the extra shadows in the corn. He'd discovered Dog running them off and he wanted their other working animals out there helping, too, now that it was day light.

He emerged into the dimness, gaze going to the grit-layered sky. It appeared clear, but he had this feeling there might be trouble on the way again. Nature had left them alone for too long.

All attention was on Adrian as he strode through camp, the rookie jacket over his arm a clear sign that someone was about to be officially accepted into his army. There was a lot of speculation from both sheep and shepherds on who it would be. Adrian had only done this publicly twice, and there was a spring to his step that said neither time had been as important.

Adrian strode purposefully toward the firing range and people watched eagerly to discern what man was in the boss's good graces today.

Angela holstered the .357, grinning at the surprise of the Eagles around her. She'd matched a Level Six shooter on the farthest target they were currently training on.

"Holy shit!"

Kyle saw Adrian coming and made sure he heard the call. "Rookie record. Put it in the books."

Billy hesitated. "Uh, under female?"

"Just rookie," Adrian answered, stopping near his two highest teams, his most loyal men. "I'd have your vote, here and now."

Angela wanted to say, "*Like they'd vote no, when you're carrying my jacket over your arm!*" Instead, she kept her reddening face blank as he'd been trying to teach her, sure Adrian had his own way of doing things like this.

"Kyle?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

“She keeps up, tries to pull her weight.”

“Acts like an Eagle should?”

“As much as any man here, so far.”

“And the vote of your team?”

“Aye!”

Adrian regarded Neil. “Your call?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because she believes as much as you do. She wants to be one of us, in female form.”

Neil’s words weren’t so firm that those listening couldn’t hear the doubt, but the fact that he was willing to give her a chance meant something to all of them.

“And your team?”

“Aye!”

The responses made it possible for Adrian to hold out the coveted jacket to the prettily-flushed warrior woman of his dreams.

“Welcome to my Army, Angela.”

2

Finally breaking free of his blurry, tropical mystery-filled dreams, Charlie groaned. His hands came up to cover his face. Why was it so bright?

The teenager rolled over, and moaned again as his stomach sloshed uneasily. He slowly pushed himself up on one arm, wiping at his eyes with the other and recoiled in shock at the pain from his own touch. What had happened last night?

Charlie wiped at his damp eyes again, this time much more carefully. He and Matt had gotten stinking drunk and...they'd been caught! His dad had dragged him—

“Good morning. *Son.*”

Charlie winced at the lance of pain from the shout. Had he spent the night here? Did Adrian or his mom know? Charlie pried his lids open and slowly swiveled his head.

Marc was sitting on the floor by the flap, covered with his long leather jacket.

“How ya feelin’?”

Charlie clamped down on the waves of nausea to answer, “Like a coyote ate me and crapped me off a cliff.”

Marc chuckled at the joke from last night's adult film, *Purgatory*. It was currently circling the camp. “Been there.”

Charlie raised a brow, too miserable to fight yet. “What makes it go away?”

“Time, mostly.”

The boy shook his head and immediately cradled it in his hands. “What else? I have to work today.”

Marc studied him, impressed. “You're going to work like that?”

The hung-over teen remembered not to move. “I never miss. They'll check me out.”

“I already cleared you for the day. After that, you're on your own with the lies.”

Charlie wanted to be furious at the possible betrayal, but snotty was the best he could manage. “You tell on me?”

“Nope.”

“You going to?”

“No, I thought I’d hold it over you until you do something I want.”

Charlie opened his lids a little wider, trying to shake off the hangover without jostling himself. “What?”

“Listen.”

Charlie tried to sneer, but was sure it came out as a grimace. His stomach was cramping, needing release again, maybe. “Little late for a father-son moment.”

“It’s never too late, smartass.”

The blunt words helped Charlie come closer to being fully awake and he glared at his dad. “Why don’t you get the hell out? No one wants you here.”

Marc didn’t respond. Hurt or not, there were other hard truths to be tackled today.

Sensing a weakness, the teenager pushed harder. “Not even my mom anymore, you know? She wants to be an Eagle.”

It was another searching blow that Marc didn’t react to, and the teenager glared in frustration. “What the fuck do you want?”

Marc grinned. The boy woke up fighting, like his mother. “Peace on earth, immortality; the usual things.”

Charlie was unwilling to snort at the unexpected joke. “Funny.”

He pushed himself onto his feet, swaying. Pale, he moved for the flap.

“Come right back.”

Charlie didn’t answer and Marc’s voice followed him out into the chilly fog.

“Ten minutes and then I’ll come and get you, and I won’t care who sees.”

Angela was distracted by the sight of Charlie stumbling into the men’s shower without clothes or a towel.

He looks sick or something, she thought and the witch muttered, “*Or something.*”

That made her frown.

Neil, still trying to make amends, rushed to make her happy. “I’d like to make a recommendation.”

“And I second that, Boss.”

Angela turned, attention torn, and Adrian raised a brow, still playing his part. “After only one day?”

“Yes.” Neil wasn’t as sure as Kyle, but he trusted Adrian. What he’d told Marc on his second day here, about doubting Kenn, but never their leader, flashed in his mind and Neil added more than he’d planned to. “In time, she’ll lead here.”

Sharp attention went over Angela from hair to boot, pinning her in place. “*This* rookie?”

Neil let Kyle handle it from there. Adrian and the mobster put in more hours together than anyone else.

“We recommend the personal time you gave us.”

“That’s a lot to ask.”

“She’ll earn it, boss.”

Angela was aware of them trying to give her what she wanted, but the sight of her boy still had half her focus, and she didn’t realize she was supposed to do anything until she felt the three men staring at her expectantly. She flushed again, trying to replay their words, and saw Kyle’s gaze go to the jacket still in her grip.

Angela slid the rookie coat on with a feeling of power and pride that made her stand straighter. Her worries over her son were instantly banished as Adrian spoke.

“This is a symbol of your commitment. You will wear it to lessons and on missions.”

Angela’s fingers paused on the zipper, voice laced with embarrassment, “But nowhere else, right?” Her cheeks went darker as they all chuckled.

“Wear it whenever you want. It’s yours and only I can take it away.”

“*Only I can take it away,*” Kenn mocked sarcastically, moving out of the area and away from the empty training tent. It wouldn’t be that way long and he couldn’t be anywhere near it and remain in control. Whenever a rookie jacket was

given out, a workout always followed. They would all be in the tent with Angela, alone, for hours.

Kenn walked faster. He was off duty at noon. From there, the day was his and he would spend it waiting for a moment alone with her. She might have been accepted as an Eagle by Adrian and his two suck-ups, but not by all the men in the levels, and Kenn had things planned to show them how unfit she was.

He would give her one last chance to stop and then he would make her life miserable. He knew how to work the men over without breaking Adrian's rules, his skills at causing unexpected pain had sharpened. If she wanted to be one of the guys, he would treat her that way.

3

Charlie moved back inside Marc's tent with three minutes to spare, not sure if the man was bluffing. The teenager wanted to search the mental doors, but the pounding in his skull said that wasn't an option. He would have to deal with this closed-off stranger on his own.

Marc had been dozing, warm under the leather coat instead of the rookie jacket he'd pitched into the corner shortly after getting it from Neil. So far, he hadn't worn it at all and didn't think he would. Rookie and Brady hadn't even visited each other in decades.

“What did you tell everyone?”

“You ate too many different things last night and need a day for it to clear out. You’re here because you didn’t want to keep Matt or your mom up and you knew I’d be on duty until dawn.”

“You just got off duty?”

Marc’s tired yawn was an answer and he saw the guilt he’d been hoping for get quickly hidden by teenage rebellion.

“Not my fault. You brought me here.”

“You’re done drinking. For years.” Marc’s tone was like steel. Before the boy could protest, Marc held up a pack of aspirin and a bottle of water. “Take these and eat the crackers in your pocket.”

Charlie patted himself in surprise. These weren’t the jeans and hoodie he’d been wearing last night! He took the water and packet with a glare. “You’re not my boss.”

“Okay. Then you should be able to get out of this on your own, right?”

Adjusting his Colts, Marc moved toward the flap, and instinctively ducked the bottle meant to hit him in the back.

Slap!

The bottle hit the floor and Marc stepped over it. “I’ll be done with my next shift around noon. You will be here waiting for me. If not, I’ll go to Adrian first and then to your mom.”

“I hate you!”

Marc stiffened, blinking away bright pain, and forced himself to shrug. “We have to start somewhere.”

Adrian saw Marc come from his tent with a wounded expression and gave the man a nod of recognition for the battle that had begun. Adrian had no problem letting Charlie's father try to handle it. Maybe they would find some common ground along the way. Much like he would have to with his own abandoned—

Adrian stopped the thought. He hadn't abandoned Conner. He was very late.

Adrian's gaze went over the parking area, where Samantha and a small crew were preparing a double semi for the new garden. She was another one who needed to take advantage of the circumstances. Neil's team was trying to match-make and Adrian wasn't the only one who had noticed. Becky was currently skipping her new nursing duty with the doctor to perch in the front seat of Tonya's muddy convertible, out of sight. Neil wasn't in the area yet, but the teenager knew he would be. *She's waiting for him to show*, Adrian thought, though, her youth would likely send her searching for him if he took too long. Becky had become very adept at tracking Neil.

It was all likely to become an ugly mess, especially since Neil's right-hand also seemed to have a thing for the storm tracker. And Jeremy already had a fling running with Cynthia. Adrian proceeded to the coffee line. It was life and he was grateful for each of them.

He moved under the steel canopy of the mess with a welcoming smile and people responded right away. Moods picked up, heavy worries eased a bit, and he was glad to be able to do it. That was a part of his gifts that required no real work anymore. Happiness had its own attractions. Like with the college kids and the nuns. They were all at a double table, surrounded by Peggy, Hilda, and the other females. Talking and eating as if they'd been friends for years, it was another sign he was leading them all in the right direction, picking up those who were worthy.

That was another problem he was trying to solve. Who was worthy? It came as no surprise that he resented having to make those hard choices as much as he liked it. He planned to have Angela meet with all the new arrivals soon, but that too, was dangerous to rely on. She couldn't always tell when there was a problem. Like with Rick. Adrian had asked her and been left frowning at her explanation of dark spots. They still didn't know if the man was a threat.

The slavers had been following Angie and Marc or Safe Haven's radio calls, maybe both, but they'd shaken their tail for a moment and gone quiet. Safe Haven hadn't put out a radio call in days. If there was a transmission, an attempt at contact, they would catch it and that, along with the extra sentries, was the best he could do. If not for the mental map pick-ups, even the radio silence might have been impossible because of his need to

gather survivors. The thought of passing them by was intolerable and he wasn't sure how much longer he would keep things quiet. That made the Eagle lessons even more important.

Speaking of lessons, he thought, exiting the mess. A group of females was reading the tryout notice that Kyle had put up. Adrian veered away before they noticed him and rushed over with a million questions. The try-outs were set for dawn, but he had few hopes of those women showing up. Unlike Peggy and Hilda's troupe of helpful females, these six were a clique and stuck to themselves. They weren't ready, but that would change. Angela would be the first, and second...Samantha.

Adrian turned to discover Jeremy leaning in to the blonde as he spoke. Samantha laughed in response, leaning toward him as well, and Adrian noted the slyness on Becky's face as she saw the flirting. That fiery teenager might fall into his army right after Samantha.

4

"Can I go now? Somebody will get suspicious."

"That's your problem."

"Yours, too, if my mom finds out you've kept me here all morning." The frustrated boy hesitated, pushed harder. "Or Kenn."

Marc's lids popped open. "You want that piece of shit instead of me? I'll get him for you."

Bluff called, Charlie fell back on the bedroll. “What do you want?”

“You’re smart. Figure it out.” Marc shut his eyes again. He’d been back from his short shift and dozing for the better part of an hour now, skipping lunch mess while he waited for this angry child to understand that the path he was walking led nowhere.

“I’m gonna get fed up and blow this open, I hope you know that.”

“And I hope you get it before you start the shouting and bring your mom in here. Why don’t you try again?”

“Uhh! I’ve been trying! You won’t tell me enough.”

“Deep down, you know. Push aside all that anger and concentrate!”

Marc’s sharp command had Charlie reluctantly doing as he said, but the mental door loomed like a wall, and the frustration rose up again.

“Stop fighting it,” Marc coaxed. “You don’t want to feel our emotions and it’s holding you back.”

“It’s private.”

“It’s your story, too, son. Now, open the door. We both have better things to be doing.”

That wasn’t true in Marc’s case. Other than Angie, there was no one he’d rather spend time with than this smaller, angrier version of her.

“Fine!”

Charlie had reached his limit and instead of pushing, he yanked on the mental door and fell into a large room in his father's mind.

A young Angela was what he saw.

She's adorable, was Charlie's first thought. Sitting in a chair in the far corner of a crowded room, *she seems sad*, was his second.

The little girl was dressed smartly for the holiday, almost a Christmas angel, but no one talked to her or offered her anything from the long table everyone else was picking through. Was she being punished?

The number of guests steadily increased and each time the door opened to admit these new family members, the little girl's lids would fly open and give him an awful glimpse of desperate hope. *She's waiting for someone*, Charlie realized, unable to fit that pretty and clearly vulnerable kid, with his adult mother.

The door opened again, letting in another large group and this time, instead of quickly-hidden disappointment, there was a flash of indescribable joy in the little girl's gaze. Only lasting for an instant, it was missed by everyone who had rotated toward the new arrivals, but two of the coat-bound incomers had seen that telling expression. The first was his dad and Charlie had no trouble recognizing this pre-teen boy as the man whose memory he was sharing. They were nearly identical still.

Young Marc grinned, calling out and responding to greetings, and he skipped over the little girl without even a glance.

The group was herded to the full rack to hang their coats up and the snow-covered boy managed to place himself behind it, hanging up his parent's jackets.

Out of sight, young Marc finally glanced her way and Charlie's jaw dropped at the open fire there. *He wanted her! At that age!*

Angered, Charlie started to retreat.

"Wait."

Reluctant, Charlie continued to study the image, the girl. She seemed to have fallen into a doze, but Charlie saw her flush in response to young Marc's fast glance. Her lashes were lowered and she adjusted her hands, stretching out her fingers. Only...had that been a code?

After being around the Eagles so much, Charlie recognized the motions as too orderly and wasn't surprised to see young Marc nod before coming from behind the rack.

"What did she say?" Charlie asked, drawn despite himself.

"That she'd be outside," Marc answered, trying not to let the pain of the past affect him right now.

"I don't want to hear that."

"You won't."

The little girl was slipping out now and no one asked her where she was going or told her to

button-up her coat. In fact, they were acting as if she didn't even exist.

"Why do they hate her?" As soon as Charlie asked, he knew.

"You tell me," Marc instructed, sensing they were finally on the edge of the lesson.

Charlie saw one of the newest arrivals flinch back to let the child go out first. "They know what she can do. They fear her."

"Feared," Marc corrected. "It was a long time ago, but there's more to this than that. She was an example to them, of who not to cross."

The door shut behind the little girl, cutting off the glimpse of her startling profile of misery and hope, and Charlie knew young Marc's would be the replica. He didn't want to see that and he glanced over the other people instead.

My family? Charlie's gaze stopped at the matching features of a tall, intimidating woman standing near the coat rack Marc had been behind. She was imposing, impeccable in her black and white robes...and she was staring at the door too, only her countenance was filled with fury.

"Mother Brady," Marc introduced bitterly.

She was the other person who had noticed the little girl's joy when they came in and she didn't like it. Not even a little.

"Your grandmother." Marc's tone dripped with loathing and pain. "She's the reason you were without a father."

The woman snapped her head around, as if in response to older Marc's voice, and Charlie couldn't tell if she had been fast enough to see the caring on her young son's face.

It wouldn't have mattered anyway, Charlie thought. Feelings that strong couldn't be hidden.

Or fought, he added slowly. The image faded into darkness, but Charlie didn't ease out yet.

"I'd like to know something else."

"Depends on what it is."

"How you found out...about me."

Charlie winced at the instant bright rays of happiness coming from the man now in the Ohio hall in front of him. From the garbage and cracked glass, there was no doubt it had been after the war. When Warren's death came, the world darkened, and Charlie withdrew. He leaned against his hands, thinking about what he'd witnessed.

"You've had a different life than the one your mother and I would have chosen. Some people let that sort of thing eat them up, but considering your parents, I know you're *not* that weak."

Marc lit a smoke and opened the bottom of the flap to clear the smoke, but missed the shadow that had frozen outside as he studied his son.

"Would you like to see more?"

"Not you and...mom stuff."

"I promise."

"Okay... Show me where you guys lived."

Kenn had been going to his tent, but Marc's words had drawn his ear and now he couldn't move.

"...your mother and I..."

Brady was the boy's real father. They had known each other before the war, as he'd suspected!

A wave of rage descended over Kenn's numb limbs and his hands clenched into tight fists. In the rear of his head, two voices were arguing.

One was defensive, wearing Adrian's jacket. The other was the evil Marine who'd once punched Angela and broken her nose. That was the old Kenn. He'd been raised to control and manipulate, and it was the feel of that familiar hatred that snapped him from his trance and spun his feet toward the training tent.

While he walked, Kenn's hands went over the 9mm on his hip and the guard on the area headed for Adrian.

5

Angela had never been so sore, so fast.

"Uhh."

She dropped down into the lounge chair with a pain-filled grunt, knowing when her muscles eased she would get some relief. The workout celebration after getting her rookie jacket, then the impromptu fighting lesson Kyle had suggested, had taken a toll on her.

The large steam tent was empty except for a dozen chairs and towels laid out and she sunk further down into the foldout seat as cold water dripped and thick clouds of damp fog floated from the center ring of hot rocks.

Angela tried to relax as the sweat dripped from her salty skin. She had done the entire workout this time, the one Kyle and Seth did five days a week. Compared to Marc, who did his own course every day instead of working out with the men, the Eagles were in better shape, as hard as that was to believe. They were cut, strong, and she was anticipating that, too. She wanted everything that came with being in Adrian's army.

“Oohh.” She shifted, wincing as she searched for a spot that didn't put pressure on her shoulders. The one-legged pushups were the hardest on her weak arms. The Eagles had warned her she was doing too much and she'd assumed there would be soreness, but this... This was hell. Her thighs, shoulders, arms, and sides were foreign invaders intent on making her cry and every movement was torture. It had taken only an hour to achieve. How long would it last?

“I don't know. You sure? He didn't send us.”

“Yes.”

Voices outside the steam tent made Angela's heart thump and her fingers slid to the gun at her side. Covered by her towel, it was a comfort she went nowhere without. When the two Eagles ducked inside, wearing only shorts, her eyes

narrowed in a warning that they couldn't miss, finger tightening on the trigger.

Slightly breathless from the sight of her cut-offs and half top, both men recognized the clear desire to be left alone, and took chairs that were next to each other, but not her.

“Uugg.”

Seth's grunt had Angela hiding a smirk. He had claimed he was past that level, too hard to be made sore.

The men settled into the chairs, steam flowing from the rocks in neat, soothing waves, and Angela shut her lids. If it had been anyone else, she probably would have left, but these two took shifts guarding her. She had nothing to fear from them. It was time she believed that.

“The others are coming.”

Her eyes flew open. The tension that came into her body had her trying to hide the discomfort.

“Seth and I will stay as long as you do.”

Kyle's words sent reason into her scared mind. Eagles didn't run. “Okay.”

Both males had thought she would leave. The amount of skin she had showing was enough to make a man think bad thoughts and the two Eagles tried to keep their minds from it, not wanting her to know. They would never hurt her in that way, but that didn't mean the occasional image wasn't enjoyed when it was flashed. Adrian had sent her in here to loosen up and then sent the men in

behind her without a warning to toughen her up. It was another lesson.

“Isn't everything with him a training session?” she muttered as more voices echoed.

Kyle had to respond, “Yes.”

Angela shifted again, unable to stifle a short moan. “Ohh... Good. I need it.”

“Did you see that hit?” The voices were right outside the flap now.

“Amazing.”

“I've never seen a girl punch that hard.”

“Woman.” There was good-natured laughter.

“You got that right. Marc's a lucky man.”

The males began ducking into the steam tent, each of them freezing at the sight of Angela laid back, nearly naked, and dripping sweat. Men bumped into each other and then became still, unwilling to turn away.

Kyle and Seth got up and took the chairs that flanked hers. It told the others she had protection, even in here, and testosterone flooded the tent at the clear challenge.

“Stop it!” Angela hissed. “I'm so fucking sore my hair hurts. All I want is to burn some of it off. Sit down or go away!”

Her orders (and that's what they were) brought sanity to the men and they did as they were told. Seth and Kyle kept their seats on either side of her, just in case.

After a few minutes, small conversations were going, men ignoring her as best they could. Except

for the uncomfortable feeling of having eyes crawling along her exposed flesh, Angela now felt little fear despite being mostly naked and surrounded by men who were the same. Her outburst had calmed her nerves. These were Adrian's soldiers. They would learn to be okay with each other.

6

Kenn was searching the camp. After finding the training tent nearly empty, he'd started at the QZ and followed her trail. The steam tent was the only place he hadn't tried yet, and with every stop his fury had grown.

“He’s coming.”

Angela's words caused immediate tension.

“He discovered a secret, I think. I'll handle it.” She quickly looked around at them. “Can you guys pretend I don't need your help? It'll give me an edge I'm hoping to use.”

There were understanding nods at the tactic. Psychology had been one of their recent lessons with Adrian and all of them were eager for the practice, but more than that, they wanted her free to make her own choices and facing her demons was the only way she would get that.

Kenn ducked into the sweat tent...

His gaze went immediately to the rounded body splayed out provocatively between Seth and Kyle. Angela was in here. With all these men.

Alone. In a skimpy outfit that might as well have been her bra and underwear.

Heat began to fill his vision. The bra and underwear would have covered more.

Rage took over and his military mind started sorting it out. When he acted, they others would lunge for him. How could he handle them all and live long enough to end her?

Angela observed the dangerous Marine through narrowed slits, pretending she hadn't noticed him yet.

When she didn't respond to his menacing stare, they all felt his anger grow.

The Eagles were giving Kenn warning glares, telling him she was welcome here, and Marc's words came to him again.

"...your mother and I..."

"You whore!" he muttered in hurt surprise at the wound, drawing harsh glares, but when he headed for her, none of the Eagles reacted, and it threw him off a bit. They had to know he was ready to kill. Why weren't they protecting her? Surely, they didn't think she could handle herself?

"Get up and get the fuck out of here!" he growled. The menacing tone had always cowed her in the past.

Angela shook her head. *"You get out."*

Fury broke over Kenn in an insurmountable wave and the Marine finally snapped, lunging down to grab her by the neck.

Ready, Angela thrust her gun under his chin as his grip tightened around her throat.

“A little more and I'll pull this trigger,” she croaked out.

Kenn was burning as he struggled to control his urge to squeeze, to keep what he'd earned. “That's his son. I'll fucking kill you!”

“Not if I kill you first!” she managed.

The Eagles around them faded, trying to pick the best ways to kill him without hitting her and none of them saw Adrian enter the tent.

Adrian slid closer, picking it from their minds. She'd wanted to handle it. *Can she?*

Kenn's grip slowly loosened and Angela's reckless side was smothered by the need to show him what now waited for him. “You have disgraced the Corps and I'll do my best to get you banished for it!”

Her icy words sank into Kenn's brain, cutting through the haze, as she'd known they would.

“Isn't that what you told Marc? Pick carefully. Everything you are hangs in the balance. Your place, your future,” she sneered despite the awkward position. “Not to mention, your life.”

Kenn's hand was letting go before she finished talking, but Angela didn't remove the gun, instead neatly following him the rest of the way up.

That drew admiring nods. She learned fast. They'd only shown her that a few hours ago.

“I could pull this trigger right now and none of these men would stand on your side at my trial. I'd be exonerated.”

She was gratified to discern an edge of wariness entering Kenn's expression. “If I want you banished, they'll do it right now and maybe, just maybe, leave your body on the side of this road.”

“No maybe about it.” Adrian's voice was harder than any of them were used to.

She felt Kenn's internal flinch and the tension grew as Angela's own anger rose up to lick her with flames of revenge. She wanted him to pay. *Do I want him dead?*

No, but she did want him to ease off. “The next time I pull this gun on you, I'm using it.”

She let her finger tighten a bit further, feeling the hammer sliding, and shook her head before he could react. “I wouldn't. The witch is running this show and she loathes you. Even if I die, *she* won't.”

Kenn froze, stopping his fingers from going for his gun, and Angela stared at him. What would it take?

“I don't want to kill you, Kenn.” She slowly lowered the weapon, sank into the chair. “But I will.”

She showed only a relaxed, confident posture, and the now dread-filled Marine spun around to find Adrian's condemning countenance by the flap.

“You are confined to quarters until the vote or we'll escort you from camp right now!”

Kenn shouldered his way through the elated Eagles, beginning to realize it was all over. “I'll be there!”

Doug's huge form appeared outside and fell in behind Kenn without being told, while Adrian issued orders.

“Notify the moral board and get more men on his tent. Someone round up Tonya too, and put her on ice until it's over.”

“Wait.” Angela's protest was ignored by the men as they began to leave, eager to spread the story. “Something's happening.”

Adrian caught it through the chaos and started to say something to her, but his words were lost in the sudden roar sweeping over Safe Haven from the west.

Twelve hours before, Yellowstone had ejected an enormous geyser of smoke as the plates below shifted. The earthquake spread across the Midwest like a bomb blast, the Wyoming hotspot shaking every inch of dirt for five hundred miles in every direction. It lasted more than a minute, sending a black cloud of ash high into the western sky.

The rumbling died down slowly, gradually lessening into stillness, and lava levels inside the no-longer-dormant volcano rose into the cracks and crevices along the surface. The land around the caldera was now swelled, as if preparing for birth.

As a result, a chain reaction of moving plates and tremors spread across the globe and reached Safe Haven right as Kenn's true character was revealed.

The tremor was strong enough to throw all of them to the ground and Adrian clumsily helped Angela to her feet while he tried to clear the distortion from his ears. Outside their swaying tent were screams, and Adrian hurried toward them, using his hands to give new orders. The Kenn disaster would have to wait behind this one.

Angela stepped out into one of the apocalyptic landscapes that she and Brady had come through on the way here, and stopped in horror. The neat and orderly refugee camp had been replaced with running chaos. Tents were down, some burning, vehicles wrecked, people and animals streaming through the debris. There were damaged cars, a telephone pole lying across the center bonfire pool, and Angela stared in dismay. How would Adrian ever get this back to normal?

Adrian knew speech was still useless and he gently pushed Angie back inside the lopsided tent. He waved Jeremy and Seth over with a short motion and the Eagles followed her in. She would be guarded and he would take care of his camp.

“rin..!”

Adrian could only understand part of Billy's words and he shook his head, signaling. *Can't hear...*

The driver made a fast motion that Adrian understood clearly and responded to in kind.

People trapped.

Show me.

The two men hurried toward the parking area, Adrian making people pay attention by hitting the air horn they all had on their belts since the bird attack in Utah. He strode through the calming refugees, the silence not a hindrance. Thanks to the training they'd been given, his army could communicate in half a dozen different ways.

Get someone in the kids' campers. Do a visual check-in with the perimeter guards. Put the fires out.

The vehicle was trapped partially in a crevice that had opened up directly underneath, and tried to swallow it. Mitch was still slumped inside the crushed Com truck, along with the shadow of someone else they knew wasn't Matt. That boy, with Charlie at his side and looking better, was currently trying to climb down to his dad.

Get those kids outta there!

Adrian studied it for a moment, ignoring the boy's protests as he considered the things that could go wrong. When he thought he had it covered, he directed the restlessly waiting people now gathered nearby.

The Eagles came through a few minutes later, carting a quickly made pulley-system, and the crowd let out a cheer. Adrian would save them. They had faith.

Around the rest of the camp, people were still in panic, shock bringing old terrors to light, but on the ground near the men's tents, one person wasn't moving at all.

Large and dotted with blood, it was almost half an hour before Doug was found and taken to John.

7

Shivering at the fresh bite to the wind, Tonya slid between the trees near the vet area, staying hidden. Where was Kenn? He'd come this way after hitting Doug...

Her hand flashed out to grab the next big shadow running by and she knew to stay low, expecting him to swing on her. "It's me!"

Kenn stopped the punch, registering her voice, and it spun him off his feet and into the side of a large tree.

Damn quake! Damn good shot from Doug too, before he'd managed to use the nose breaker and escape.

"Get over here!" Tonya pulled him behind the largest tent and shoved his kit into his hands. "The black work truck behind the vet tent has keys in the ignition. You're good for a week."

Kenn stared in surprise, checking in for an instant of sanity. "Why would you do that? They'll banish you."

The whore no longer held glints of greed in her depths, only misery. She didn't want him to go. "You should run now, before they find Doug."

Kenn raised a cold hand to her soft cheek, let himself feel some of the loss that was waiting. He would mourn later, after his new mission was over. He ran a rough thumb down her cheek, marking her with a deep red line from his nail.

It didn't bleed, but it was close, and Tonya held still, willing enough to take anything he wanted to give.

"Can't prove it," she whispered sadly. "It's his favorite tactic."

Kenn dropped his hand, reminded of everything he'd thrown away. For a second in time, he wanted to ask Tonya to come along, but the answer wasn't in question.

"Don't wait for me."

Her lip quivered. "No, I won't."

Her sadness was overwhelming and Kenn yanked her forward for a last brutal kiss. He would miss her. That, he hadn't counted on.

Tonya forced her arms away and she sank to the ground as he swiveled toward the black truck he could discern from where they were. She was helping him escape, but she couldn't watch him leave. It would hurt too much.

8

An hour after Adrian had them relocate camp away from the huge crevices, Neil found Samantha at the mess and slid onto the bench across from her. "I can't make it tonight."

Samantha hid her disappointment. “That was an earthquake, Neil. I understand.”

She winced at how loud her voice was. The quake had things distorted and it was strange to be back in even a small part of that silent world she’d first traveled through. She’d relaxed here more than she had thought was possible.

“Another time?” Neil was shocked to hear himself offer it, but after how strong Angela had been in the face of Kenn’s breakdown, the trooper suddenly wanted that for this quiet female.

“I might have an hour in the morning, day after tomorrow, but it’s extremely early.”

Sensing he meant it, Samantha smiled and kept her gaze away from the golden skin of his arms. “I run light anyway.”

Neil grinned at the familiar expression, noticing her quick glance toward where Rick sat, three tables over.

What was that? It hadn’t been anything good, the trooper was certain. If she was still watching the man, there was bound to be trouble. *Trouble I won’t let her be hurt by, again*, Neil thought.

“Five thirty? Same place?”

“Sure. Should I cover?”

Neil hadn’t thought about it and he didn’t now, either. “No. Females are allowed. This is part of your evaluation.”

That had Samantha frowning, but she didn’t tell him no. Maybe a little Eagle training was what she needed. Along with some privacy. The mood

was uneasy, like people waiting for the other shoe to fall and squash out the small lives they'd been able to rebuild for themselves. Sam thought they were right to be concerned. Adrian and his Eagles were good, but in the chaos, there would be no way they could protect everyone.

9

Night fell with a menacing suddenness that none of the sentries liked. The sky went from dim green hues to barely even there; it went black and they lit extra cans. The camp was still up long after an awkward evening mess where Lee and Zack had finally noticed Kenn's absence and began asking questions. By the time the camp finally settled in their tents to mutter, all the levels knew of Kenn's snap and escape. The only good news was Doug's fast recovery from being knocked unconscious.

Adrian put Zack's team (the only one he thought might join the Marine) on duty over the intended target. Then he put two other teams in the shadows to make sure they did their jobs. Most of Zack's men were still on Kenn's side and Adrian hoped making them spend some time with Angela would help. They were the last holdouts to her being accepted, other than a last man on Seth's team, but Jeff had already shown signs of changing. Zack was the one they needed to convert and Adrian had serious doubts that it could be done.

“If it can, I will.” Angela soothed from her over-protected tent.

Adrian didn’t answer, busy concentrating on where Kenn would be and what he would be thinking. All around him, Eagles were wondering the same.

“Where is he?”

“No one knows. Tonya swears she hasn’t seen him and he’s not in camp. We’ve searched it.”

“We gotta find him before he gets to her.”

“You won’t.”

Neil and Kyle found Marc sitting on the bumper of the mangled Com truck. Mitch and Rick had both been rescued from the hole and were okay, except for everyone wanting to know what Samantha’s ex had been doing with their radioman.

“He’s hunting. We might hear the scream, if he lets her live that long.” Marc scanned the darkness. “He’s out there, getting set, reading us by the changes of the normal shadows. He’ll narrow down where she’s being kept and wait for the next travel day for her to come out.”

“What should we do?”

“Kill him, before he can kill her.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“We’ll come with you,” Kyle corrected.

“Not yet.”

All three men jumped at the fourth voice.

Adrian came around the corner of the tent. “We’ll make a call first. Give him a chance to come in.”

“No way,” Neil argued, watching Samantha enter the mess. He would have to reschedule with her, again, if they didn’t get this mess cleared up fast. “It’s giving him more time.”

“It was her call.”

Marc stopped his own useless protest. Of course, she wouldn’t want Kenn’s blood on her hands. And what she wanted, Adrian would give her. If not for all the macho bullshit in this camp, Marc might think Adrian had made it all up, so he could have a chance at Angela.

Instantly fitting that thought in place, he slammed his own mental doors shut and tried to be reasonable. He had no proof of that and wasn’t going to worry. All the men here wanted her. What was one more?

“Do you think he’ll listen?” Kyle asked unhappily. He wanted to do this chore.

Adrian played it cooler than he felt. “If not, I’ll be in that hunting party you were organizing.”

Because of the tremor, the moral board hadn’t been notified, there hadn’t been time. They would have to be ready for what came next with the camp, but first Adrian would give Kenn one last chance to get it right.

He left Safe Haven’s light, trying to find the right words among the new piles of debris and the uneasily resting camp. Even the animals were

making more noise than usual. Despite not being able to view the cracks anymore, it was hard for the camp to settle down, but for the Eagles, it was impossible. They had a sniper hunting one of their own.

Adrian sighed restlessly, feeling cut-off and ill ready to be without Kenn. He didn't know of a way the Marine could keep his high place here, but he might not have to die. His was one life that Adrian wouldn't order his army to take until all other attempts at peace had failed.

Adrian pushed the button on the mike and there was silence from his men as they waited to see how Kenn would be handled.

“Rookie lesson, Marine. Get set.”

There was no answer from the darkness, but after a minute, Adrian went on like there had been, positive Kenn was listening to them, too.

“Eagles are men and women who care about the future of their country. So much, that we are willing to do anything, sacrifice anything, to accomplish that goal. America comes first with us. Not to hide greed, but for the greater good; the survival of our country. The continuation of America is all I care about and there isn't anything I won't do, any one life I won't sacrifice, to make it happen.”

“He's warning him,” Angela realized with relief from where she now stood in the doorway of her tent, and the half dozen Eagles around her

showed relief. To them, it was Adrian proving the loyalty that they were all willing to die for as Eagles. Each of them hoped Adrian would give them the same chance, if they ever messed up as badly. Until this, no one had.

“An Eagle can now be trusted with a life, the only possession which has any true value. Lives are not to be taken lightly but they *will* be taken. Doubts are normal and I’m here for that, too, but your fellow Eagles share a bond that cannot be broken by miles or mistakes.” Adrian felt the right words coming and let them flow.

“An Eagle faces errors and makes amends. Even some of the worst choices in judgment can be given leniency if the person acts like an Eagle and is deemed worthy of another chance. Not everyone in Safe Haven will get such a consideration, but as an Eagle, it came to you unspoken, with the first order that I gave and you accepted.”

Magic flowed out, reaching into the darkness with a brilliant golden light.

“Before the war, grunt, you were something else. Now, you’re an Eagle in *my* Army and I still have a place for you. That hasn’t changed.”

“Is he saying we’ll forgive and forget if Kenn comes back? ‘Cause, that won’t ever happen!”

Marc’s anger was ignored by Neil and Kyle. Adrian’s decisions were just that—his to make. The aftermath of the tremor still wasn’t cleaned up and

probably wouldn't be as good as what Kenn would have accomplished even when they were finished. Kenn had been a thorn in their sides, but until Angela had come, he had also been the go-to man and they were already missing him.

"Surrender and face the punishment. I'll stand with you." Adrian regarded his two highest men.

Neither of them wanted to, but refusing wasn't an option during that moment. Their bond demanded it.

"I won't stand with him, but I won't plot either. Whatever the board votes, my team will go with." Kyle was the first to give him what he wanted.

Neil reluctantly joined them, keying his mike. "Same here, but this only works if you can leave her...*them*, alone. We won't stand for any more."

Adrian hit the button again, not satisfied, but content Kenn now understood he wouldn't be killed on sight. "Schedule switch. Eagle Two has Point from noon until evening mess. Moral board meeting immediately after."

Marc couldn't believe Adrian was letting the dangerous man back in, and earned a head shake from Neil before he could object again.

"Adrian knows what he's doing."

"Giving Kenn a pass!"

"Buying time." Adrian's tone was soothing. "If he thinks there's a chance to keep his place, he'll take it. Kenn assumes Neil and Kyle and you, of course, to be the headhunters. He won't think I've

rigged anything because it'll be much easier if the Eagles vote him back in. Then, we don't have to explain it to the camp."

Marc was confused. "So, you don't plan to let him stay?"

Adrian shrugged evasively. "That's up to the board."

He was gone an instant later, leaving Marc's anger behind. Marc wanted Kenn dead for the mistakes of their past, but Safe Haven needed him alive to help fight for the future.

10

"What punishment did you ask for?"

The question was demanded by Zack, but all of his team wanted to know the answer.

"He deserves the same as everyone else, right?" Angela retorted coldly.

"Death! She asked for his death!" Allan exclaimed. That was the standard punishment for a woman-beater in Safe Haven—the real punishment always carried out away from the camp's sensitive view.

"It's a trap. One of you call him, right now," Zack instructed, not about to let his mentor be tricked into coming in to be met with a bullet.

Angela's laughter stopped even the Eagles in the shadows and they stared at her in wary confusion.

She slowly stopped, wiping at her eyes. “I’m sorry... It’s just that you have so much loyalty for him and he feels none toward you.”

She shook her head. “Such odd alliances have come from this war.”

Angela regarded Lee, his thoughts easily read. “If I tell you what you want to know, will you then support me and abandon Kenn?”

It was the moment some of the Eagles had feared, her using her new freedom to usurp authority, but there was no denying that she was more worthy than the Marine that Zack’s team was ready to sneak off and help.

“To know, I’d swear loyalty to the wolf and his master,” Lee caved desperately.

Angela cracked a smile. “I won’t ask for it. You’ll accept me when you’re ready. As for your question, talk to Adrian. I’ll try to answer it, if he says okay.”

There was a dumbfounded silence as all of them realized she’d reminded them of who was in charge here—Adrian, not Kenn.

She sneered at Zack. “Kyle is coming through the trees to your left. Don’t shoot him.”

“Bossman says for you to meet him in the training tent.”

Angela thanked Kyle as he revealed himself and then left. Around her, shadows followed and she tried not to appear worried. Kenn was out there somewhere, probably with a scope searching for

her. The moment she'd feared for so long was here and it was terrifying.

Kyle had heard her last words and the few Eagles still in the shadows were quick to fill him in.

When he glowered at Lee, the pain there was too great to deny.

"I'll do it this once because she wants it. From now on, anyone else can go to him themselves and explain why it's worth her wasting that kind of power."

11

Angela ducked into the training tent with a feeling of relief, but she didn't let her guard down yet, not sure if it was a trap to get her alone. The Kenny she'd survived before the war was capable of that and worse.

Adrian was waiting for her in the large hayroom and Angela immediately felt better as she read his thoughts. He wasn't as worried and that meant he still had faith that Kenn would do the right thing. She hoped he was right.

Adrian saw her controlling the fear, and knew he'd been right to put himself with her instead of an Eagle. She honestly believed Kenn would try to kill her and that meant he might.

This was the most dangerous time, the chaos while they were closing the gaps in security. Adrian would have to be relieved before dawn came, but for now, his presence would be a

distraction for her and also for Kenn, who should be set up at this point, as Marc thought. Adrian wasn't sure that his radioed words had been enough and until he was, he planned to stay close to her. Kenn wouldn't take the chance on hitting him, to get to her. Anyone else was likely a dead bird.

“Ready for a lesson?”

Angela started to say no, but stopped. She was too wound up for anything else.

“You're the boss. I just hang here,” she joked distractedly.

He kept his distance. “Good. Show me what they've taught you so far in Kai.”

Eager to work off some of the tension and advance in that area, Angela dropped her guns and gear. Outside, a dirty drizzle began to fall, bringing the fog with it.

Chapter Ten

Best Served Cold

1

Dawn hit the refugee camp slowly.

Fog, thick and waist-high in places, had rolled in overnight, covering Safe Haven with a mysterious, dingy gray canopy that had the sentries tripled and everyone who knew about Kenn's snap, on high alert. The Marine could be sneaking in to do what he had threatened.

Stashed in the large hayroom, Angela tossed and worried. The awful dream wouldn't let go of her and she muttered lowly, waking her son with words of danger and death—hers.

Charlie listened with a worried heart, the sense of something about to happen thick in the cold air. He'd been scared when he found out Kenn now knew who his dad was, but he had been terrified for her and was glad Adrian and the Eagles had put them under guard. Not sure what to do, but positive trouble had arrived; Charlie quickly dressed and slipped out.

On duty, Marc caught the teenager's attention as he came from the tent, but got only a tense glance that had the father surveying for signs of

Kenn. Finding nothing, Marc swept the landscape harder, now accepting that his bad feeling had grown into an awareness of blood about to spill.
What did I miss?

Kyle and Neil sipped from steaming mugs, one slowly waking, one refusing to sleep yet. They had finished updating each other about Mitch and Rick, and the hunt for a new Com truck. Both tired males wondered what Charlie was doing, but didn't stop him to ask. His shadow was Seth, who appeared as confused as they were, but with that expression of intense need, there was only one person Charlie wanted and it wasn't either of the men who had a father's claim.

They're coming for her!

Adrian's lids shot open at the silent words, not hearing the camp or his men, only the worried thoughts and images of the boy now begging him to do something.

Adrian met him at the flap. "When?"

The teenager linked their minds as he had with Marc, and then fate was all around them and they both took off running toward the training tent.

2

On the hill above them, where the layers of damp fog concealed everything, Kenn was waiting.

Blind up and ghillie on, he'd been set and ready since midnight. Tonya had packed everything he needed to accomplish this last

mission and it was too bad he wouldn't get the chance to thank her.

The fog below parted, revealing the barest shadow, and he used instinct to help guide him to his target; the *killer* instinct that his government had honed. Small, Kenn would have dismissed the shadow if not for the adult form following. Who would have a guard right now? *My targets.*

Kenn adjusted his scope to cover the main entrance of the training tent, but he scanned what he could discern of the sides and rear, as well. Brady would have her in the hayroom, where the bale walls were too thick to be positive of a kill shot. And where Adrian might still be, too. Smart. Brady knew Kenn wouldn't kill Adrian or even trim him by accident. If Marc kept Angie and Adrian close, it might take a while to get a clear shot.

Kenn studied the hayroom intently. He was on his own line now. There was time to spare and if Adrian thought his rage could be stopped with a short radio call, the leader was in for a shock. It didn't matter that Kenn's heart had clenched with longing to be on Adrian's right or that he'd even been halfway to that coveted place before he'd stopped. They would never really let him back in and the person responsible had to—

Someone's creeping along the ground near the flap of the training tent. Infiltrator!

When Angela left the hayroom, tired Eagles scanned her, but no one told her to stay put and she proceeded to the tent flap. The first-ever rookie tryout for females was about to happen and she wasn't missing it.

She'd spent most of the night worrying, but she'd come to accept that whatever was meant to happen, would. Like Adrian, she too felt they couldn't outrun fate.

As Angela emerged into chilly fog, and saw what she'd failed to account for, it was too late to avoid the knife sliding around her throat.

Time slowed as the blade drew blood and the voices demanded survival.

"Be still!" Dean growled, dragging them toward his waiting jeep.

The knife went deeper, blade spotted red, and Angela stopped fighting. If he couldn't take her out of here, he planned to kill her. She had to survive to meet Cesar.

Adrian and Charlie rounded the corner of the training tent as Marc dropped from the tree behind them.

Realizing he was trapped, Dean jerked her closer, using her as a shield. "Stay away!"

Angela locked eyes with Adrian, knowing only he would have the strength to do it and got his subtle nod. The brother wouldn't leave this camp alive, no matter if she had to fall, too.

"Let her go!"

Neil grabbed Marc before he could rush in, and Doug helped him wrestle Marc back.

“Let me go! He’ll kill her!”

“Eagle lessons, Ten.”

At Adrian’s words, every man in the area retreated and prepared to do it by the book. They dragged Marc along. It took four of them.

Feeling Dean’s determination to take her away or kill her, Angela drew on her courage and relaxed her body as much as she could. Blood trickled down her chest as she shrank against the burning man.

Almost a caress, the surprise loosened his grip for a brief second that she didn’t waste. Twisting, the blade sank in deeper, and she braced against the pain as she swung her arm around to catch his hanging flesh in a yanking vise.

The knife flared into her skin, making her moan, and their sounds were mirrored agony.

“Bitch!”

Angela shoved at his loose arm, ducking beneath it, and Dean swung wildly as she spun away.

“Lookout!”

“Open Fire!”

“Angie!”

“Mom!”

“AAhhhh!” Angela screamed as Dean’s knife sank into her shoulder instead of her neck and her hand clutched her holster as she fell.

Pop!

Dean drained of life as Angela stared up at him in scared confusion. Between his glaringly dead eyes, was a round hole that oozed crimson in small rivulets.

Kenn slowly lowered the rifle, heart now thumping with that familiar feeling of victory. *Boo-ya! I made the shot!*

And they all knew. The Eagles were staring up at him in shock and Kenn snapped a quick salute that Adrian returned. He'd saved her. Now, Adrian would forgive him his flaws and let him back into the fold.

Angela caught the thought through the pain and din of voices surrounding her. She shoved into Kenn's mind as Marc swung her into his arms and headed for the medical tent.

"Only for Adrian and your place?"

You know it.

Then I owe you nothing.

Agreed.

Following Brady, Adrian handed out orders with a steady voice and a worried heart. *We almost lost her!*

"Check-in of all guards. Get everyone in the mess and accounted for. Pull those steel plated rigs around it and get rid of that body! Call in all shifts and set up a perimeter."

No need. Angela's thoughts were surprisingly calm considering how much blood and pain she was covered in. *He was alone. It's over.*

But how would I know that? Adrian sent back, hoping to distract her with a lesson. She'd been stabbed and it hurt. *Careful cover. Remember it.*

Angela was only vaguely aware of how many members were running their way. *I will.*

In the dark about the drama that had played out behind the scenes, the camp was there to greet Kenn as he walked down the hill in his handmade sniper cover. A large part of the startled crowd met him, some of the Eagles as well, but Adrian was nowhere to be seen and the Marine stored it, bitterness still festering. He'd known Brady would run to her side, but he hadn't expected the boss to.

As he strode toward his truck, Kenn tossed the brass to Kyle. "Give that to him. Tell him I want my place back."

Kyle nodded, sliding the warm casing into his pocket. Like him or not, Kenn was needed. None of them had been able to take a shot without hitting her. Even Marc had hesitated when Doug let him go. Adrian had been drawing his own weapon when Kenn fired, but it would have been late even if he could have accounted for the angle. The Marine had saved her life and Kyle had little doubt Adrian would give Kenn what he'd asked for.

Kyle witnessed Kenn being welcomed by Tonya in a way that had the Eagles patrolling the parking area staring in surprise. Most of them hadn't known the two were having an affair.

Kyle frowned at the term. Neither of them was dating anyone else. Theirs was more like a relationship. Would he abuse her, too? Would Adrian care?

Kyle vowed to find out.

3

“Did he know? Did Kenn let him get that close to you intentionally?” Adrian demanded, the need to do something overwhelming. *She was hurt on my post!*

Angela shook her head, wincing as fresh warm drips ran down her arm. She was thinking about how Kenn had lingered long enough to make sure she’d be marked. This searing wound was his payback. “Yes.”

Marc and Adrian both pivoted to John.

“Is she okay?”

Brady’s tone was threatening and the doctor snorted, angrily snapping on a pair of gloves. “Does she look it?” John elbowed his way through them to get to her. “Make a hole!”

Both men instantly responded, going to linger near the flap.

Angela’s grin quickly became a grimace as John dumped alcohol over the heavily bleeding gash and began wiping at it.

“You all right, Lass?” Doug’s big form appeared in the flap, face bandaged, and she held still, flashing a too-bright smile instead of moving.

“Just a bit dizzy, is all.”

“You get that a lot here.” The big man grinned wryly before ducking out.

“Ready?” Angela did nod this time and the hardened men by the doorway both winced at a fresh gush of blood.

“Don’t do that!” John snapped, wishing Anne were here instead of babysitting.

“Sorry.” Angela smiled at him through the stinging and throbbing.

The upset doctor blew out a sigh. “Hold still now, sweetheart, okay?”

“Yes.”

John picked up the needle and Marc snarled, “Aren’t you going to numb it?”

“No.” Angela’s voice was like stone. “I’m losing a lot of blood. Let him get it closed.”

That had the worry replacing the anger and Marc forced himself to memorize the needle moving through her bloody flesh. This was what she was in for as an Eagle and he knew without asking that this wouldn’t be enough to get her to quit. He would have to be able to take her being hurt, repeatedly.

Angela blocked his thoughts after she picked that up. When her stomach lurched, she tried not to let it show.

“Angela?” Adrian’s voice was full of the need for answers.

“He felt it coming and went to higher ground to see through the fog. That’s what you tell them.”

Adrian ignored Marc's warning glare, thinking her being accepted as an Eagle wasn't just ruffling Kenn's feathers anymore. Brady was about to start fighting it for real. "Now, the truth."

"He did it for you."

"To get back in?"

"He was rolling through the motions, getting set, when he spotted...Dean slipping in and made the right choice."

"And, if there hadn't been an attack?"

"He would have taken his own life rather than destroy your dreams. I was only in real danger from him before your call."

She felt Adrian's relief and kept her knowledge to herself. Kenn had weighed killing both her and Dean with a single shot and claiming accident. The only thing that had stopped him was the certainty that Adrian would never forgive him, but Kenn had made sure she would have something to remember from it.

"You should get out of here. It looks funny." Angela's words had one man grinning and the other tensing.

Eager to have the camp normal again, Adrian ducked out, leaving Marc to stare at her remorsefully.

"I'm sorry. So much, I can't even say."

Angela tried to smile, closing her lids as John started on the fifth neat stitch. "You were my shadow?"

Marc's anger was fading into heavy guilt. "Never saw him."

Angela didn't react to the needle now sewing part of her shoulder together; grateful she had a high tolerance for pain. If Kenny hadn't helped her build it up, Marc would be in torment right now at her misery. *I hurt!*

"He used the fog, knew there was no way we could detect him on the ground."

"Adrian will have someone up high from now on."

"Yeah." Angela felt the needle strike the bone as John tried to get it all in place and her stomach twisted at the bright red flash. She needed to get these comforting sessions over with so she could have a personal moment.

"Will you send in the boy? He's worried long enough."

With a last miserable glance, Marc ducked out of the tent, not responding to any of the questions from the dozen or so men waiting.

He gestured at Charlie. "Keep your mom company while I help the Eagles."

Charlie entered the tent gratefully and slid into the chair by her leg after only a fast glance at the bloody wound.

"You're okay?"

"I'm all doped up. Better than okay." She hoped the doctor wouldn't give her away and felt his understanding. The boy was already feeling

like his father, thinking he shouldn't have left her alone even to go get Adrian.

"Gonna have a great scar to show off," she boasted confidently, fingernails digging into her palms when the sharp needle sunk into her flesh for the seventh time. "Could use a different shirt, I guess. And for someone to tell the next group of mourners that I'll be ready in about five minutes."

Grinning and eager to help, the boy was gone in a flash and Angela let out a sigh of relief, sucking in the cool air that rushed through.

Charlie came from the medical tent to find Kyle and his Eagles standing nearby, waiting. "She's ready for the next group in five. I guess that's you."

The easy tone had them relaxing a bit, but the tension returned five minutes later when they trooped inside to catch her grimace as John helped her remove the ripped shirt. All of the men spun around while the doctor helped her put on a clean white tank top from his personal drawer.

"It's okay." John swept her wild, tacky hair into a bun and then wiped the drying blood from her pale skin as Kyle's team gathered around.

"You gonna be okay?"

Angela nodded and had to control her reaction again as the tent spun. "Left arm's hit, I'm all good here."

Men made jokes that were right, but their expressions said they were deeply upset and

needed some way to feel better about how it had all played out.

Giving her a break, John retreated and studied in fascination as her breathing slowed and the static electricity in the tent tripled. When her lids opened, he flinched at the red orbs.

“There are survivors, fuel tankers, and a working radio station in Omaha...medical supplies in Cottonwood...survivors in Martin...”

The list went on for a long minute while John wondered if even Adrian knew what all she might be capable of. John’s thoughts were often consumed by his illness (confirmed stomach cancer that would kill him in the next months) and for that second, there was hope for him. There were stories flying around that she was different. They were clearly true.

When the Eagles left, each promising to stop by later, Angela gave John a sigh. “Finish it now?”

Knowing how much misery she was in had him nodding. After he was done stitching her up, he would find a way to slip something into her system for the pain.

After Kyle’s team, there was still a line of people waiting to be reassured. When she trembled under his fingers, John moved to the flap, glad they were finally done. He didn’t like helping mar that pretty skin with stitches.

“Come back after lunch!” He snapped the flap shut angrily on the protests. “I’m going to the mess. You need anything?”

Angela smiled, feeling the clammy bumps and chills of nausea. “That depends on how long I’m in for, sheriff,” she joked.

The doctor melted. “I won’t chain you either. Give your system time to heal, that’s all.”

“Thank you. For everything.” As soon as he left her alone, Angela reached for the basin.

4

The camp wasn’t doing well. No one knew of Angela’s past with the brothers and now that there had been a few hours to consider what the attack meant, there was unrest. Were they all so unsafe that anyone might sneak in and slit their throats? It was a feeling more than a few people wore.

Adrian hated it, worried about losing them, but he also understood they had to wake up before they could become stronger. Would this be enough to get more of them into his army, where they belonged? Only time would tell. For right now, something had to settle everyone down and make them feel safe again.

Under the influence of the painkillers John had forced on her, Angela still could hear the silent chaos of Safe Haven. It buzzed unpleasantly around Kenn’s newly inflated laughter and the Eagles’ disbelieving shock.

The camp was Adrian's chore (and she would have helped there anyway), but Kenn was her chain. When she regained her strength, she would handle it one final time and be done with the new games he was now hesitantly planning. They didn't have time for it. When the brother didn't report, the slavers would come in force and wipe them out. They'd had a tank last time. What would they ambush these people with next?

Poison came to mind and the doctor inside flinched. In these conditions, there would be nothing that she or John could do.

During her hours of extra stitches, pain, and rest, Angela's mind went over everything that had happened. As she drifted, she hesitantly found that room inside her heart that was hidden deep behind doors covered with webs. She'd only been to this place a few times in her life and she opened the gates with a reminder not to get lost in the past.

Inside the miserable crypt were half a dozen small boxes and she swept each fleetingly; her childhood, Marc's betrayal, losing her infant. This was where she had placed all those things that were so horrific she had to get away from them or be consumed by the grief.

Angela took an empty container from the endless stack on the shelf, mentally cringing at so many waiting to be filled. She pulled the day's horrors together; Charlie's screams, Dean's evil touch, the pretending to be fine when she needed to cry...and shoved them deep inside. A fast flip

had the lid sealed and she slid it next to the box marked *Aftermath*. There were seven crippling horrors in here now. How many boxes would she fill as an Eagle?

Too many to ever go back, the Witch warned.

“Good,” Angela responded harshly. “I’d stack them ten feet high to help these people, *my people*, survive!”

Snapping awake, Angela carefully stood up and staggered to the flap. She could feel the unrest growing, and was shocked to find so many camp members gathered outside the tent to wait for word. She’d found a home with all of these shattered, hopeful refugees and they would stand together. She would help Adrian with all she had, and that included her life. They were hers!

In that moment, she understood how to ease them and she didn’t hesitate to share her story this time. Using a careful pace, with a wolf at her heels, Angela let them in on the personal hatred the brothers had held, and smothered the witch when she told them that she finally felt safe now.

A short time later, the explanation was spreading across Safe Haven, leaving calming notes and allowing that golden light to once again drown out the crimson.

5

“I can’t make it. Again.”

Samantha peered up from the cup of coffee she’d lifted from the mess, hands still dusty brown

from working in the garden all day. “More quake trouble?”

Neil shook his head, trying not to peer down the front of her gaping sweater. “I have to make a run. I’ll be back tonight, but it’ll be too late.”

“Checking for more problems?”

“Yeah. Me and Brady are gonna go have a look around.”

Very glad Angie was okay, Samantha shrugged, smiling. “We’ll do it another time. Be careful.”

“Thanks.” For an instant, Neil thought about asking her if she wanted to come along and turned away instead. What was wrong with him?

“Will you tell him there might be a...storm? A lot of dirty rain.”

“Yes.”

Neil didn’t ask any of the questions he wanted to as he traveled to the parking area. He had already suspected Samantha was special from the way Adrian had her hidden whenever she weather-watched and he wondered curiously about her gifts. How much like Angie was she?

Adrian was silently screaming at the men who had been on duty and they felt every word he didn’t speak. Someone had gotten through the wire. They had failed.

The leader stared at his men for a long time, choosing, reordering, and yet his mind said she wouldn’t like it, to go easy on them. If Marc hadn’t

noticed Dean during the chaos, how could he expect these months-long fighters to?

With nothing to say, Adrian didn't offer comfort or threats. Instead, he didn't talk to them at all. He went to the medical tent while the camp was settling for evening mess, hoping she would be alone.

Adrian paused outside the flap, listening. Was she really okay?

Come in and see for yourself, the Witch invited, always quick to make him welcome.

He ducked inside to discover Angela reclined in a chair, smoking a joint. Her lids were shut, dark lashes on pale skin and she didn't open them.

"I'm better now. Going to either make him pay or thank him later," she muttered, exhaling. "John slipped a few happy drops into the last of my water bottle. He knew I'd guzzle it and notice the taste too late."

He had done it while she was distracted by her son's last quick visit and Angela wasn't sure if she was glad or mad.

"Good." Adrian moved closer to view the red and white bandage covering her shoulder. "How bad is it?"

She was covered in a heated blanket. Adrian had no idea how John had managed to do that, but didn't get snagged on it.

Angela winced at another dizzying lance of pain. "It's fine until I do that."

Adrian grinned tightly, playing along. “Then don’t do that.”

Angela still didn’t open her eyes. She’d heard about Marc leaving on a recon and wasn’t surprised to feel relieved. He would be distracted by Neil and she would have a little time to finish sorting things out. Like Adrian knew when he sent Marc with the trooper, she realized.

“Anyone ever tell these people that they are lucky you chose them?”

“It doesn’t feel that way, watching blood run down your arm.”

She sighed tiredly. “Yeah, that top one won’t stay closed. John will do it again when he gets back.”

Adrian scowled this time and Angela’s tone grew hard. “It could have been worse.”

“Almost was, right? You could have been stabbed and shot.”

That sent her startled gaze to his. “How do you know? I blocked that from you.”

His frown expanded. “It’s common sense. With you gone, Kenn might have been able to earn true forgiveness.”

She raised a brow. “Saving my life hasn’t?”

“No. I’m grateful and I’ll show it, but nothing can ever be the way it was.”

Angela was glad Adrian knew the truth. An honestly good man, Kenn may never be. That didn’t mean they could do without him.

“What comes next?”

“We get ready for the main group to find us again.”

There was silence again as they both considered that final battle and then he broke it, unable to keep from asking, “Where were you going when you left the hayroom?”

Angela’s thoughts were unprotected and he shared the memory with her.

She woke while Charlie dressed, listening to his worried thoughts.

The slavers are here!

Am I ready? No, but it’ll have to be enough.

As soon as Charlie was gone, she prepared herself as best she could for battle. If the evil group was nearby, she would slip out and surrender, give Adrian time to run again.

He won’t, the Witch warned. He’ll fight for you and lose every man.

Not if I can get to Cesar, bluff him down with an offer of giving him my power.

The witch didn’t answer and that was good enough for her. She had to get out of here before all these lives were lost because of her curse.

Angela twisted around to say she had planned to kill Cesar during the power-transfer, and found herself alone in the tent. What would he do now?

6

Worried, and determined not to let the injury interfere, Angela was on duty near the rear of the

vet area before dawn. Set up on a corner post where three rotating patrols crossed, the small dirt bike they'd insisted on placing under a nearby tree made a decent seat when her shoulder began throbbing.

John's medicine had worn off and she stretched her arm slowly, tearing up at the sting. She'd had stitches before and knew the way it worked, but that didn't mean it was easy.

Sighing in boredom and weariness, she stood up and swept the scraggly trees a full minute early. She understood now why she had never been able to get the exact routine of the sentries down. Each area had a rotating part to be covered a set number of times in an hour. It was up to the Eagle to decide when, during that 60 minutes, those patrols took place.

Satisfied things were quiet here, she entered the center of the grid around her. Stepping into the parking area, she exchanged nods with two of the three men on duty, and kept going, assuming the third sentry was on the other side of his route. That happened everywhere in camp so that more than a dozen Eagles would be crisscrossing the entire area at any given time. To make up for those hiding laziness and carelessness, the senior men and Eagle on Point had a set pattern they walked for half an hour and then they did rounds of all the guards, keeping men alert. It was complicated from the outside, but once in on the secret, it became clearer. Twenty overlapping circles that

covered the entire camp, it was smart and very effective. It was also easy on staffing, as it required only two men in each area instead of four.

Angela settled against the bumper of a truck to have a smoke and give her body another quick break. She was pushing herself, but carefully this time, unlike during the trip here with Marc when she'd run his full course and passed out. She'd had to relive her baby's death to explain it, but now she was stronger than she had ever been and not even close to quitting like some people were hoping would happen now.

Thanks to John's care, she could still do her duty, and in the morning when she woke feeling as if she was actually dead? That was what pills were for. She wasn't missing her training time.

Shoulder switching from stinging to throbbing, Angela shifted it to a better position, not hiding her grimace. The rest of the parking lot couldn't see her from here, only her boots, and the shadows were dark, empty except for the two men she could feel on sniper duty over her patrol area.

"I can make that go away."

Twitching, Angela stretched her arm out carefully. She hadn't picked him up at all. He was good.

"Then I wouldn't be able to use it at the first aid class tomorrow."

Angela's hand came up to reveal her gun. She was going to be very fast to pull it again for a

while and she slid it into the holster with a sigh.

“When can we start my real lessons?”

“A week or so.”

“I don’t want to wait.”

“I know.”

“I’m working my regular schedule.”

Adrian’s sigh was resigned and proud at the same time. “I know that, too. It’s why you were chosen for this, why you’ll succeed.”

Adrian saw she had gotten the wound bleeding again by spending time with the camp and then on duty, instead of resting. He concentrated, pulling from his fury at her injury and a bolt of vivid gold energy shot from his hand and sank into her shoulder.

Angela arched at the sensation, body alive with need and then it was gone, as was the pain. She drew in a calming breath.

“My thanks.”

“My honor.”

The pain would return with dawn, but the open show of his own gifts, of their likeness, had Angela fighting the urge to step toward him. She was saved the battle by the sound of a sentry coming.

Jeremy slammed an icy façade into place at the sight of them, at the striking need in the air. “Marc’s coming this way.”

Suddenly bone weary, Angela surprised both men. “I’ll find him in a bit.”

The Level Three Eagle left quickly and Angela tried to resist the comfort that Adrian still wanted to give. Marc would be hurt, but it was still better than his oaths of better protection and guilt. She didn't blame him, but she wasn't ready to spend this time, when her mind was so empty, being refilled with things that didn't matter. This was her life, her choice to make, and those who were really with her would accept it.

Adrian studied her, unsure of the mood. Was she blaming Marc? Did she blame leadership? The Eagles were his and their failures belonged to him as well. He started to say so and then realized that was likely the reason she had avoided Marc.

"How did it happen?" she asked suddenly.

"With the disks out, he must have crawled all night under the fog."

"I meant the shift in power you're putting in place."

Adrian's expression became shuttered, but he didn't lie. "It's destiny, fated."

"And you have no doubts, even though everyone else, including me, does?"

"None." His words were rough with emotion. "It's meant to be."

He didn't say more, but Angela felt it anyway and refused to let the two words even form in her thoughts.

Aware of all the ears on them, she opened her lids to reveal those glints of steel that Marc would have recognized instantly. "Cesar has to die. We'll

never hold this camp together while he murders our people.”

Adrian was relieved to have her agree, but it also sealed his choice. If he didn't get her ready for it, she would do it untrained. Her loathing of the evil man had finally conquered her fear of carrying the guilt over his death.

“Yes, it has.” Like the man she'd killed on her trip here, another life would be sacrificed for hers. It was hard to swallow, but Angela let it slide down her throat like a fine drink after a toast. *Everything I am and will be to eliminate the slavers!*

The man beside her echoed those thoughts. Together, they would give their flock room to grow without the wolf nipping at their heels.

Marc listened to the conversation with only a little guilt and a lot of confusion. He had gone to the medical tent first, expecting her to be there recovering. Instead, he'd been told she was on guard duty in the parking area. He was pissed, wanting her to get to bed, but even with all that frustration, their words sank in. Had his sweet Angie just ordered a hit? And why wasn't Adrian telling her the Eagles would handle it and she would be in the rear?

Marc scowled in the darkness, making Dog's ears tense. Because she wouldn't be. If Adrian had his way, Kenn the Destroyer would be on his right and Angela the Witch would be on his left. With

that type of an opening line, a leader would be nearly invincible.

There isn't anything, it seemed, that the pair wouldn't do for Adrian. And Marc had brought her here, to this...savage garden. To the very place that would take her away again.

7

Kenn was high.

Being in everyone's good graces again had him feeling like there was hope for the first time since he saw those two Blazers in the street and realized she was here. Saving Angela's life had made up for all those little moments with the camp and even with some of the Eagles. When he ducked into the medical tent hours after making the shot, he felt attention on him, but not in suspicion. If he wanted her dead, she already would be. He only wanted to talk.

"She's not here."

Adrian's voice was hard and Kenn knew instantly that Adrian hadn't forgiven him a single hit.

He entered the dim tent, finding the five other stern profiles waiting. "What happens now? You shoot me even after all those pretty words?"

"This is just a conversation." Adrian stated, indicated the empty bench. "A short one."

The leader waited until Kenn was seated before giving him another hard, searching look and leaving the tent.

It told him this had Adrian's full support and Kenn braced for the blows.

Instead, there was silence until Kyle finished lighting a cheroot.

"Is it over now?"

Kenn didn't blink. "Is what over?"

"Your vendetta against her and Marc. Is it over?"

Kenn's mind flew through answers. His first thought was to lie.

"I don't know," he ground out. "Maybe."

"It is!" Seth warned.

"It isn't up to you, scrounger!" Kenn sneered in hatred.

Kyle gave Seth a resigned nod and the undercover cop leaned in.

Disgust crept out in waves and Kenn was surprised to feel a small tinge of fear.

"You think you have the power here." Seth delivered their message. "We'll run you out."

"And we won't give you the chance to sneak back," Jeremy warned coldly. "You won't leave this tent if we're not convinced it's over. We won't let you bring it all down."

"We don't want to have to talk to you again and we won't." Kyle's hand went to his Glock. "If you break this deal, we'll kill you and we won't worry about the herd witnessing it."

Kenn was silent for a long moment, doing his best to shield his thoughts from his face. If he got

his place back, he might be able to let go of the need to hurt them.

“Things will be the way they were?”

“As much as they can be, but there are limits to this deal,” Kyle stated. “Leave her alone. If you can’t help her grow, at least stay out of our way.”

“I already do that.”

“And if she crosses your line and becomes Marc’s legal mate?” Seth was still furious that Kenn was getting off without a punishment. “Because she will as soon as you leave her alone.”

Kenn let his mind go where it wanted, needing to know if he could accept that, and he let out a breath. “I’ll work through it.”

And instantly, he knew he could. She wouldn’t rush into Marc’s arms anytime soon and he would slowly adjust.

“You sure?”

“You sure you can treat me with respect?”

“For Adrian? Absolutely.”

Confident they’d made their point, Seth moved toward the door with his fingers snapping and unsnapping his holster.

“But all is not forgiven, Kenn. You’ll break this deal. I have faith in that as much as Marc does, and since I drew the short straw, I get to pull the trigger.” Seth headed for camp. “It’s worth the wait.”

Kenn snarled his anger, pushing to his feet in a way that had the Eagles tensing to fight.

“We’ve made a deal and I’ll stick to it, but be careful. This trap could still blow up in your faces!”

Kyle shoved forward at that. “Are you one of us?”

“I’m Adrian’s!” Kenn ducked out, hoping Tonya was still awake. “The rest of you can go to hell.”

8

Rick read the letter a bit nervously, not sure if he had missed anything. The camp around him was half-angry, half-happy mob and his frustration grew as music blared to life in the Eagle tent next to his. Had he gotten across the importance of laying back and taking out the leadership here before attacking again?

He’d been able to get Mitch to tell him the truth about the tank and then spent some time with a map. If the slavers were trapped by the Cheyenne River, they would have to take the long way around. He had roughly ten days before Cesar got here using their cleared roads, a week and a half to take out Adrian.

Rick snarled in anger. And O’Neil if he could. *That* one had it coming.

Rick slid the two-paragraph note into a plastic baggie and then deep into his pocket. He would put it in the ground tomorrow as they left. There was too much attention on him to do it tonight. After defeating another bad guy, Safe Haven was in

higher spirits than ever. If Cesar came now, he would need more than a tank.

Chapter Eleven

Tropical Heat

1

Kendle was drowning. Her lungs burned as the shark dragged her below the icy water, and her desperate punches had no effect.

“Home. Have to...”

Kendle thrashed restlessly and Luke listened with a heavy heart. Soon, she would ask him to leave with her and he would go, even knowing he wouldn’t survive it.

He wasn’t certain how his death would happen, was terrified of that part, and yet, he would go where she did. When he’d first found her, Luke hadn’t realized it was his pain that would be healed. He no longer woke with his own screams echoing; no longer slipped into those trances of the past that he couldn’t be wakened from. She had healed the rift, and there wasn’t anything she wanted to do that he wouldn’t help her with.

“Please...”

“Kendle, wake up.”

She jerked out of the dream as if she’d been slapped, gasping for air.

Luke jumped.

“You okay?”

Kendle tried to control her ragged breathing.
“Yeah...shark.”

Luke got her a drink. She'd told him of her battle for survival after her cruise ship flipped and about how, in her dreams, the shark always won. He was amazed that he believed her. Movie star, female, young, and yet one of the strongest people he'd ever met.

“Do you want a pill?”

Kendle considered. She'd refused the last couple of times. “Yeah.”

He got it without a comment, handing her the drink and capsule before going to the small table to roll a smoke.

They'd been in the hole-up for four days as soon as the chilly dawn graced them, and in that time he had fortified their new home. His assessing gaze went over the traps and wires along the baseboards, the caps in the ceiling. Ethan was responsible for the body on the beach, Luke was sure, and it was only a matter of time before the rich playboy decided to tie up the loose ends and take what he wanted.

Luke glanced at Kendle and was glad to discover that she'd lain back down. He couldn't lose her now. They'd spent the last days quietly so he could think it all through and make plans. He'd strengthened the hole-up so that they would have a place to make their stand, and he'd packed them survival kits, but the next phase would be harder

and he wasn't sure if she was ready for it. He had a duty to perform, and soon, before anyone else died.

Kendle's thoughts were more in line with Luke's than he would have guessed. The sight of the body on the beach had woken the old Kendle. Until that moment, she had only been a victim of an unnamed disaster, the sole survivor, and thoughts of her old life had come and gone without much effect. She hadn't been able to recall the Kendle who had bungee jumped, rode the rapids, and spent weeks away from her California home. That girl had been determined to make her mark on the world, fearless.

Kendle after the event, was a ball of live nerves and a terrified survivor who saw only what could have been. Even her grief at losing her twin, her entire family, was second to the need to survive and her waking moments had been consumed with it. Ethan's subtle stalking had magnified that helpless feeling and she'd depended on Luke for security. And she may have remained in that shocked state for an unknown amount of time, if not for the body on the beach.

Mora looked enough like her to give Kendle the sense that she was viewing her future. It had been eerie and scary, but also shocking enough to succeed where all else had failed to reunite her with that other Kendle. The maid from Baxter's was dead, murdered, and Luke was about to be framed, leaving her unprotected. Ethan would

claim her the instant Luke was in custody. And then, he'd make her sorry for the wait.

“Are you all right?”

Kendle glanced up from her seat against the wall. “I will be after we catch him.”

Luke blinked. She already knew what he had to do.

Kendle rose slowly, feeling the strength, but also the limits of her body. Whatever she'd been hit with on that cruise ship had done permanent damage, along with turning her the color of a boiled lobster and she was still hoping time might return more of her health.

“We should go to Jenna.”

Luke wanted to tell her no, but after their confusing trip to the Sheriff, he'd come to the same conclusion himself. The only reason Cole had let them go was so the body could be found by a town resident and complete the frame-up. His ex, on his part of the beach, and now he and Kendle were missing. The residents would think they were guilty. Travel would be dangerous, to say the least.

“Luke.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The crazy woman was related to the ruling family here, but more than that, Jenna had those little details that would help them solve this mystery. Without her, he was going to take the fall. Luke's mind flashed to them arriving in town to report what they'd discovered.

“Very convenient, it being found at your place.”

Luke frowned at the Sheriff. “She’s on the beach. If you don’t hurry up, the tide will pull her out.”

“You mean go there now, at night?”

The Sheriff’s tone was sarcastic, but the fear on his sweaty face was genuine.

“Why should we do that when her killer is standing right here?”

“He was with me.” Kendle spoke up, hating how the Sheriff’s slimy gaze went over her. “We were going to spend the night on the beach.”

Silence fell at the image of her and Luke about to share a romantic evening and Kendle took the moment to check out the room. The two-cell town hall was dusty and obviously not used much. Sheriff Cole had been sleeping in the bottom bunk of the smallest one, but he’d jumped to his feet when they came through the door.

As if he was expecting trouble, Kendle thought, recognizing his instant accusations as distraction.

He’s in on it.

Kendle swallowed her need to strike out in anger, feeling that old fire. This man could lock them up and then they’d be sitting ducks for the real killer.

Luke’s thoughts were along the same line and he waited for the Sheriff to decide what to do next. Things were far worse than he’d thought, even upon discovering that body.

Knowing that locking them up wasn't in the plan yet, the Sheriff turned glowing green irises toward the door. "I'll check things over when I get out that way."

Luke nodded, slowly moving Kendle toward the exit. Those eyes!

"Fine."

"And we'll be by, for your statement."

Luke nodded again. "I'll be watching for you."

That had been four days ago and they had only been to the cabin once. After a fast trip to gather their things, Luke now had them in his hole-up. Kendle had assumed he was making plans and left him alone, but with each day that had gone by, the tension thickened. Mostly, it was because of an answer he'd given a while ago, when they'd come here to avoid an early hurricane.

"Anyone else know this is here?"

"Probably. Everyone out here has a hole-up. It's the way you do things on Pitcairn."

Eventually, the Sheriff and his co-conspirators would show up.

"We'll leave at dusk."

Kendle didn't protest being in the jungle during the night. It wasn't safe for them anytime.

"What causes their eyes to do that? Do you have a theory?"

Luke set his mug down so she wouldn't discern the way his hand shook. "None I care to share."

“I have ideas of my own, you know.”

Luke leered. “Are they naughty? We’ve got a few hours to kill.”

Kendle didn’t return the joke, too worried to be so easily distracted.

“I think it’s something from the war.”

That had Luke’s mind taking notes. He hadn’t thought of that. “Like a side effect?”

She was thumbing through one of the old magazines he’d dug out for her. “Chemical warfare.”

“Our nukes didn’t have that shit.”

“But if there was a world war, not just our weapons were fired, right? And diseases can be let loose too.”

“And maybe it could affect optic nerves, too...”

“Yes. I think parts of this island are contaminated with something that has side effects that include dementia, rages, and changes in appearance, like a mutation almost. Did you catch that twitching the Mayor was doing when we first met him by the creek? Some type of biological agent is what I think.”

Luke felt his panic slowly begin to ease. He hadn’t been able to explain those irises, but her theory made sense.

“We’ll do a scouting trip on the way to Jenna’s. Maybe we can trace something down by the wildlife.”

Kendle surveyed him worriedly. “Will they be monitoring her place for us?”

“Yeah, I think so. We’ll have to go on foot.”

“And if they catch us?”

Luke didn’t lie. “They’ll hang me right then, probably save you for a trial, but it’ll be fixed. You’ll be dead before I’m buried.”

“Then we’ll have to get them first, won’t we?”

Kendle’s harsh sneer took Luke by surprise. That was the old Kendle, the one he’d viewed on TV, and the outcast agreed reluctantly. “Yes, if it comes to that.”

“You already know it will.”

He sighed. “No, I don’t and until it’s sure, we won’t talk about killing them. It’s one of my hang-ups.”

Kendle understood returning to the past that had almost destroyed him was painful to even consider, but she had a feeling that before this was over, Whacker, as Luke had been called in Vietnam, would be required. If Ethan and the others were infected with something, they had nothing to lose and it took them from dangerous to deadly. She and Luke would have to react accordingly.

“How long until dark?” she asked, missing the cabin’s windows, but not the background noise of angry ocean.

“Four hours, give or take. We should get a snooze in.”

Kendle flushed at the instant image of sleeping in his big arms and that sent her thoughts to the mission they were about to undertake. Things would get rough from here; she could almost sense it coming. These might be their last few peaceful hours together and she couldn't think of a better way to spend them.

"I could take a nap," she stated softly, smiling.

Luke felt her need and grinned in return. "You want front or rear?"

"Front."

Her furious blush had Luke forcing a yawn. "Yeah, me, too."

2

Their trek down the cliff took a lot longer on foot. The sun was gone before they hit the bottom and Kendle stayed by Luke's warm shadow as they moved through the darkness. He had them tied together again, but for Kendle, it wasn't enough to dispel the tension caused by the sense of being spied on.

Luke felt the attention on them too, and was glad when they reached the bottom and slid beneath the dense canopy of the jungle. In here, they could move without being glimpsed, thanks to his liking for not taking the beaten path.

They moved steadily through the night, stopping only for short rest and food breaks where they sat close and didn't speak. Now that they

were actually taking action, the seriousness had set in. They were tracking down a murderer.

Dawn was still an hour away when Luke finally called a halt and Kendle sank to the ground gratefully. She was determined not to complain about whatever pace he set, but it was clear that her body wasn't ready for much more than walking.

“You okay?”

She was anticipating curling up with him to wait out the daylight. “Fine as frog fur.”

Luke sniggered. “Didn't know frogs had fur.”

“It's very fine,” she teased as he began to prepare the area for a campsite. They were about a mile from the base of the cliff that hid his hole-up and Kendle tensed suddenly as the sound of water came to her ears. They weren't near the ocean here. What was that noise?

Luke knew her demons well and sought to soothe her. “It's a waterfall, from the cliff. We'll stop by later and cool off.”

Kendle agreed happily. Despite the darkness, the temperature was still above seventy and she'd been sweating heavily most of the trip so far. Cooling off sounded wonderful.

Luke made a motion. “Stay put.”

He sliced through the end of the rope, releasing her and she waited with trepidation. “Where are you—”

She stopped as his shadow began hacking vines from the base of the wall. The machete flashed in the darkness and Kendle wondered if his demons were on him as he cleared the entrance to what could only be an over-grown cave. Moving through the jungle at night had to be a blast from his past.

Luke ignited a torch and he vanished into the small hole in the cliff.

Kendle slid in behind him without hesitating. She wasn't staying out there alone.

The cave was small and dry, surprising since he'd mentioned a waterfall. Flat and curving around to disappear, the area was also spooky and she kept him in sight as he checked it out.

"This should be fine until nightfall," he called, slamming the torch handle into a hole in the center to keep them lit up. "The rear is mostly a dead end, bats in there."

Kendle shuddered at the thought, but dutifully stripped her gear. If he said they were safe here, they were.

Luke got busy setting up their camp. When he finished, he moved outside to cover their tracks and Kendle waited silently by the torch, fighting images of what would happen if he didn't return. She could count on Luke. He would never abandon her. *And I won't leave him either*, Kendle realized, recognizing her feelings. *I love Luke. It isn't in question anymore.*

“Where do you think they’re going?”

Bright green eyes studied the Sheriff with contempt. “Your mother’s place.”

Cole wasn’t sure that a few slaps and threats had been enough to keep his mother from telling what she knew, but said the opposite. He couldn’t let Ethan infect her, too. “She won’t help them.”

“She already did,” Ethan growled in frustration. He’d expected to have Luke locked up by now and Kendle in his private care. “She was supposed to send them off on a wild goose chase, not give them clues!”

Cole hadn’t understood what his mother was doing either and he let out a quick sigh. Since he’d been attacked at the shack, he was always impatient. “You know she isn’t right, Ethan. You shouldn’t have picked her to help frame him.”

Faced with the truth, the deteriorating playboy spun toward the cave. “They didn’t have contact with anyone else. He’s too slick.”

“Where are you going? The Mayor said to wait.”

Ethan spun around suddenly, grabbing the Sheriff by his shirt. “My dad is almost dead. I’m next. Before that, *them*.”

“But the plan-”

Ethan shoved him away in revulsion. “The plan! My father wants to leave our family in charge. If I’m dead, what the hell do I care?”

Cole watched carefully, sensing he was on the edge. If Ethan went nuts, Cole would have to be the one to deal with it. What would calm him down? It came easily enough, after considering Cole's own new, violent urges.

"But if we don't get rid of them other girls first, Luke can't be blamed. They'll figure it out and know it was you."

Ethan had stopped and Cole pushed, but carefully. "Awful way to be remembered, but if you think we should do it now, I'm with you."

"I need to fill it again."

The Sheriff felt a chill at the words, picturing the last mess, and then the future that waited for his own infected soul, but he seized the opportunity. "Why don't you go on? I'll report or keep following them, whichever you want."

"Get the rest of them over to Jenna's and shut her up," Ethan ordered, moving away from the cave. "If you don't, I will."

4

Kendle had been awake for a while, listening to the creaks of the cave and night falling outside. Only desiring his warmth at first, she'd crawled onto Luke's bare chest and pressed tightly, trying not to shiver. Once his heat had begun to seep into her bones, the feel of his naked skin under her cheek had sent delicious thoughts into her mind.

When he'd hugged her tighter in his sleep, it was easy to be carried away and she pressed her mouth fiercely to his.

Kendle knew he wasn't alert yet, knew she should stop after the one good morning embrace, but when he deepened the kiss, claiming her mouth as if he owned it, thoughts of stopping were pushed aside by desire.

Luke was struggling with himself, still in that hazy area between sleep and awake. Her body was hot against him, inviting, and he let his hand drift down to capture her jean-covered cheek. He shifted beneath her as that familiar iron bar returned and his hips tilted upward instinctively.

"Oohhh..." Kendle melted against him at the intimate contact, swept into a vivid river of stunning light.

Luke tensed under her.

"Don't stop yet." She gasped against his mouth. "In a minute or two. Maybe."

Luke answered with a sharp jerk that had her arching against him in stunned pleasure. He pressed his lips to hers, swallowing a growl of need when she spread her legs over his hips. He let the kiss linger, their bodies rubbing, breath mingling.

"Any farther and I won't want to stop, Darlin'. We should get up now."

Swallowing a flip remark that was sure to ruin the mood, Kendle said, "I don't want you to stop. I want to be yours."

Her confession was a tight whisper and his nostrils flared as if he was scenting prey. Luke's lips rose to hers and this time, he was demanding, insisting. He cradled her as he rolled them over and they both arched at the feel of him lying on top of her.

This kiss was hotter, and she shuddered when his hand slid inside her shirt to touch bare skin.

“Easy,” Luke breathed against her cheek and Kendle's heart thumped as he rubbed a taut nipple. His grip tightened, almost to pinching before letting up, and Kendle moaned at the sensation.

Luke slid his lips to her neck, nose full of her exotic smell, and he pressed a kiss to her throat, feeling the hunger wake. They'd necked a lot since his promise to love her, but none of those sexy moments had gone far before she pulled back.

That wasn't going to happen this time, he guessed. Heat flashed out, nearly consuming.

“Kendle, are you—”

Her mouth covered his, tongue tasting, and his hands slid around her bare skin. He deepened the kiss as her silken breasts touched his hard chest.

Kendle moaned lowly at the feel of their skin touching, stunned by the waves of need, and Luke held her tighter, trying to memorize it. He wouldn't be able to go as slow with her as he wanted to, but it would be incredible.

Luke shifted and the heat in his gaze was enough to burn. “So beautiful...” he murmured, sliding a hand down her hip.

Kendle jerked as his hand brushed the button of her jeans and slid the zipper down. Instead of stripping her as he wanted to do, Luke only lowered himself against her.

Kendle shivered when his rough cheek slid across her bare breast and her hands tangled in his hair.

Luke pressed soft, slow kisses to her pert little breasts, her taut, rosy nipples, and finally allowed himself to taste her.

His tongue flicked over a tip and Kendle arched against him.

He repeated the action on the other side, and used her distraction to unbutton his own jeans without her noticing. Then he reached down for hers.

Kendle tensed, but allowed her pants to be pulled off, hands clenching to keep herself from bolting. She wanted Luke, but she had a fear of the pain, too. All of it flew from her mind when he settled against her. Still wearing his boxers, he pushed against her as he suckled a rocky peak and Kendle shuddered at the sensation.

Her body was damp against his thigh, and Luke slid a gentle finger over her folds, pressing. He did it again, a bit slower, and Kendle's breath caught at the dizzying wave of chills. When he kept doing it, the fire between her legs spread out until she felt like she was being consumed.

Luke allowed his finger to press harder, sliding further down to glide through the signs of her

approval, and Kendle's body trembled, muscles clenching in that telltale sign that sent Luke's own need from hot to leaping flames. She was ready.

He leaned down to nuzzle her chest again, pushing against the only G-spot he'd ever discovered, and she moaned, a low, liquid sound that sent a vicious crack through his control. *This is the wire!*

Kendle was pulled from the river of rainbow colors by his sudden tension. Not sure if she'd done something wrong, she waited for him to move again, heart pounding. She'd never been so aware of her body, or felt need like this!

Luke fought for control, but the flames! Against his will, his hand went to her slender hips, and then moved over her taut, pink breasts.

They both drew in air at the not-as-gentle contact. His fingers brushed a peak, drawing another molten sound that sent heat rolling into his toes, and then he was leaning down to claim her mouth in surrender.

Lightning flashed as they kissed, small gasps and groans of pleasure echoing, and she was unaware of all his clothes being gone until she felt his bare knee between her legs.

She tensed, scared, and Luke won a last battle for gentleness. He slowed his movements, finishing the torturous slide between her long legs, but stopping without touching his throbbing member to her slick heat. He kept himself under

tight constraint, his own need screaming for him to take her.

He dropped his head to her neck, breathing harsh. "I love you, Kendle," he whispered.

Simple, it had the desired effect and her body relaxed against his. "I love you, too, Luke. You're so good to me."

His hand slid over her leg and upward. "Let me be good to you a little more?"

Her body jumped under his touch and he let his hand continue its journey. He stroked her nub with his thumb, being sure to linger and she shuddered, regaining that dazed, smoky color he loved so much. He did it again, harder, and felt a rush of wetness that told him she was as ready as he was.

Leaning down, his hands went subtly to her wrists as he drew her into another soul searching kiss and gently pushed his hard body into hers.

Kendle's lids flew open. She flinched and then tried to roll over.

His grip tightened. "Easy, Darlin'..."

She stilled beneath him and his hips shifted, adjusting angles. Her tension was clear despite her want and he leaned back to lock eyes with her as he pushed forward against the barrier. Her mouth opened to protest and he thrust through it brutally.

Kendle whimpered, hands now fists that tried to hold him at bay and Luke jerked forward, sinking deeply into her. "Ohh, God!"

Release flew toward him at the feel of being inside her tight body. Luke sucked in a determined

air that gave him a brief second to regain control that he already knew wouldn't succeed. Until he looked down.

Kendle's lids were shut, tears slowly oozing from the corners and her clenched fists were trembling against his arms. Luke shifted and felt her try to shut her legs.

He held his throbbing body in check and dropped his head to her chest, lips brushing, teasing.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

"Is impaled okay?"

The sting was fading and Kendle opened her eyes, not about to miss this view of her first time, no matter how bad it got. "I'm fine."

Luke chuckled, feeling her body slowly thawing against his. "That's it for the pain. It only feels good from here."

He kissed her as his free hand roamed her curves and she returned his kiss distractedly. Not moving his lower half, Luke used his lips and fingers to remind her of the pleasure and felt her body soften more. When she moaned against his lips, he gently pushed against her.

His head lowered to her chest, drawing a shudder and Luke rocked harder. It was like nothing he'd ever felt when she began to thrust back against him. Helping her become a woman gave him the strength to hold out, to please her. She slid over his member like liquid silk, tight and inviting, and when she reached her pleasure, her

female body clamped down on him in a way that had him thrusting remorselessly in response.

It was heat as he'd never felt. "Oohhh...Kendle!"

The stunned cry had her body clenching in another spasm of pain-like pleasure, and Luke thrust frantically. Over the edge, he gave a last deep shove that had him locking their hips in ecstasy.

5

Despite the lack of flames, they were easy to distinguish through the cave's entrance and the man spying on them shivered in rage as they made love. Glad to be on duty alone instead of with Ethan, the shadowy figure could hear their noises, could feel their passion. When it was over and almost immediately started again, he still lingered. Ethan would know as soon as he saw them. It wouldn't be much longer now.

"That was incredible," Kendle whispered. She'd never felt anything like it. "Is it always that good?"

Luke snorted against her skin, making her jump. "No. That was...magical." During the end, both of them had been oblivious to their surroundings. Anyone could have walked up on them and been ignored.

Luke felt pride rise up at the thick smells on her naked skin. *I put those there!*

He snorted again, making Kendle giggle.

“Share.”

He propped himself up on one arm, their lower bodies still connected. “Just having a man moment.”

He used a soft hand to brush the damp black spikes from her cheek so that he could place a kiss there.

Kendle arched under him in surprise at the new, wet friction of their entwined bodies. Electric heat shot through her at the flash of how much she’d enjoyed his pleasure and she pulled his mouth down to hers.

6

Jenna’s place had been ransacked.

There was no sight of the shopkeeper and Luke and Kendle stared in surprise at the damage. They’d made it here in two days, but it hadn’t been fast enough. Windows broken, goods scattered, it was clear bad things had happened recently. The embers in the fire-can were still glowing.

“What should we do now?” Kendle asked lowly, searching the still greenness around them.

“Back to the hole-up, I guess,” he answered reluctantly. He was almost certain that Sheriff Cole knew where it was. They needed a place that no one would think to search.

“Can we go by the cabin first?” Kendle asked, mind suddenly on their first trip here. She’d

spotted something that day, hadn't she? Something they needed.

“Why? You leave something behind?”

“Not exactly. I...I think I spotted a clue.”

Luke studied her, hating the flashes of his awful past now slapping him. She was his now. If he wanted to keep her, he would have to fix whatever the Krafts' had done to this island. And she would have to help, because he had nowhere to stash her. Damn it!

“Tell me where. I'll pick a different path in.”

Sensing his waiting protests, she answered quickly. “The big tree we ate lunch under.”

Luke's mind flashed immediately to the sense of danger he'd felt going through the area right before that, but he pushed it away to leer at her. “Yeah, I could eat.”

Kendle felt his gaze go over her sore, sated body with a familiarity that made her blush. So that's what the big deal was. She certainly understood the fuss now.

Half a day had gone by when they made it to the big tree.

“It's like a...name.”

Both aware that they wouldn't make it to the hole-up in time, Kendle used Luke's big arm to pull herself up. “That's what I thought, too, at first, but it's more like an arrow, you know?”

Now that she'd pointed it out, he saw what she meant.

“There.”

Luke followed her finger to a similar marking on a nearby tree.

“It’s a map,” she exclaimed excitedly. “Can we follow it?”

He glanced up at the quickly brightening sky. “Tonight.”

Kendle’s reluctance was in her tone. “We staying around here?”

“No. We’ll crash in the cabin during the day, using the hatch.”

The hatch was an escape tunnel behind the cabin that he’d told her about last week, but hadn’t shown her yet.

“That’s perfect. We can track it down by night and hide out under their noses during the day. Sounds fun.”

“Unlikely.” He retreated, tugging gently on their connecting rope. “Come on, Ms. Roberts. We can follow it for an hour before we’ll have to go underground and inspect each other.”

Kendle’s happy giggle floated through the jungle, where it was heard by another admirer. This one listened to the sound with a blinding rage. The ship was coming soon, in the next week, and when the slaves were off the island, the movie star wouldn’t be laughing anymore. Screams would be the only sound Ethan allowed from her.

Chapter Twelve
Hard Lesson
April 19th
Near Arthur, Nebraska

1

Angela ducked into the tent with no signs that her shoulder was throbbing from the quick workout she'd just put in. It had been four days since Dean's attack and while the wound was healing, it was slow and painful.

"Good morning."

The eighteen men mostly returned her greeting, but the nasty cut across her windpipe and then the bandage over her left shoulder had their attention. It was still bothering them to know that she'd been hurt.

Angela tried not to be annoyed, but they needed to get over viewing her as a helpless female. She couldn't take much more of it.

"We've covered sanitizing and wound reactions. Today, we'll learn to care for the wound and then move to stitch removal."

Feeling the tension rise, she got busy laying out the supplies. "Most wounds like this one should be wiped clean once a day, and then

medicated and covered lightly. Wounds that leak or develop an infection require more care.”

She gestured at their kits. “Get your journals out and come up. Tell me something about the wound, and then keep taking notes. These journals should become a part of your emergency kit so that every injury you learn to handle will be at your fingertips for comparison during a mission or emergency.”

Under Marc’s dark glare, Angela slid out of her sweater and hung it over the chair. She carefully pulled the tape up on the scabbing wound and held out the stained gauze. “Observations?”

It was hard for the protective males to ignore the crusty stitch-line that was ugly black against angry red. They were used to injuries on each other, but to view it on a female felt wrong.

“Nothing green yet.”

“There’s only a little yellow.”

“Which means?”

“There’s no sign of infection on the bandage.”

Jeremy’s answer was curt.

“Good. You come up first.”

Jeremy moved a little closer, studying the leaking wound. “Brighter than yesterday.”

He wrote it in his journal, trying to ignore the stares boring into him. “It’s still bleeding.”

“Which means?”

“You need more stitches.”

“The stitches are loose?”

“It means you’re not taking it easy like you should be, so that it can heal.”

Angela motioned Marc forward, ignoring the accusing tone. “Very good. Observations.”

Marc gritted his teeth, still furious she would use herself this way. “It stinks.”

Impressed and stung, Angela asked, “Which means?”

Marc wasn’t sure what she had told them. He’d been too angry to do more than show up that first day, but he didn’t need this class anyway and she knew it. “There might be an infection. You need antibiotics.”

“Excellent.” Angela waved Daniel forward before Marc could disrupt the flow.

“Observations?”

The amazingly good shooter was the quietest man on Neil’s team and his words were short. “You haven’t taken a pill today.”

“Tell me how you know that and why it matters,” she demanded sharply.

The Level Five Eagle squared his shoulders automatically. “By your tension and the way you clenched your jaw when you took off the sweater. You’re in pain.”

Angela waited, not about to let them use her weaknesses.

Daniel’s voice hardened in recognition of her silent order. “It matters because you have to be careful about mixing medications.”

“Good. If the patient already has something in their system, you need to know, but they may not be willing or even able to tell you. Check for the signs.”

She chose Jax, one of the rookies on Marc’s team, next. “Observations?”

Angela went through them all, handling it like someone else’s medical problem to be tended, and they responded by paying attention and following her lead.

“Okay, so what do we know?”

“You might have an infection.”

“The top stitch is coming loose. *Again.*”

“There’s fresh dirt you need to clean out.”

Angela settled herself on the stool with only a tightening of her lips. “We’ll clean it, and then retie that stitch or put in a new one.”

Knowing from the first class that none of them would volunteer, she gestured. “Alex will do the cleaning, and Neil, the stitch. Everyone else, come up and take notes.”

Half an hour later, Angela couldn’t hide the pain as Neil tugged too hard, sending fire racing over her shoulder.

Neil paled even more. “Sorry.”

“Come on man, get it right!”

The other Eagles were getting upset that the cop couldn’t make his big fingers do what he

wanted them to. Angela tried to sound patient, shoulder throbbing. “You’re doing fine.”

Neil sent his hands back to the thin thread, trying to be gentle, but his large pads with almost no nails slipped again, this time hitting her wound directly.

Angela flinched, smothering a curse.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t stop!” her voice lashed out against his guilt. “If I were bleeding it would be a lot worse, but you have to keep moving. Get it done.”

Neil had flushed at her pain and the shouts from the Eagles behind them, but her words were exactly what he needed and he managed to get hold of the stitch this time.

“Good. Now like a shoe lace without the bow.”

The top stitch had come completely untied and they’d all caught Neil’s cringe as he removed the loose thread. To see someone so admired be reduced to butterfingers, was something of a surprise to his team. It had them all crowded around, smothering her with their hard male bodies.

Angela met Marc’s pissed glare over their shoulders. *You’re next. Settle them down.*

It wasn’t an order or a request, it was more of a plea in his mind, and he gave a short nod, but didn’t say anything. He wasn’t sure he could yet, without it causing a fight. The anger was too thick.

“Very good. Now we’ll have Marc come up and slap some medicine and a bandage on it. John

will give me the antibiotics when he checks it tonight.”

Marc came through the suddenly clear path with stiffly set shoulders under his gun-fighter coat and crisscrossed gun belts. Tension crackled.

“Use the Bacitracin ointment. Put a light layer over everything, including the stitches.”

Her skin was hot under his chilly fingers and he frowned as he smeared the white cream over her injury. “You knew this would hurt. Why didn’t you take a pill first?”

Angela braced for more anger as she said, “Because most of the victims they’ll treat won’t have taken anything either. If they can handle my pain, what’s a stranger’s to them?”

“And if we hate the sight of it and want to give a painkiller?” Daniel asked quietly, distracting before Marc could start a fight. They were in his corner now, but that could change if he kept interfering.

“It’s up to the patient, not you. Their wants and needs come second only to their life.”

It sounded so much like Adrian that the two teams of men relaxed.

She had settled them down on her own. She and Marc realized it at the same time. Angela didn’t glance at him.

“Next, we’ll put on a tight bandage. Who can tell me why it’s not a loose one to let in air?”

“Because *you’ll* get it dirty if it’s not tight enough,” Marc stated, voice pointed.

“Exactly. Always judge the person a bit when doctoring. It matters. Grab that box of gauze and roll of tape and we’ll—”

“Oh, gross!” Becky was standing inside the flap. “You’ll never be able to hide that.”

Offended, (*What is it with the redheaded females here?*) Angela put a hand on her hip as she fired. “Like, why would I hide it, when I can disgust sooo many people?”

The men snickered at her mocking tones, even Marc cracking a grin, and the teenager snapped her mouth shut.

“John sent you?” Angela asked normally.

“Yeah, he said to try to help you for a while.”

“He couldn’t take any more,” one of the rookies muttered lowly, causing fresh laughs.

“Have a seat,” Angela instructed, mentally rolling her eyes. *Great.* “We’ll let you know if we need something.”

Becky immediately pranced to the empty chair next to Neil, making every member of his team tense.

Angela noticed it and made a mental note not to have the girl here again while this set of Eagles were. None of Neil’s backup liked her.

“Cut or tear a strip of gauze and try to keep it sterile. Place it over...a bit higher so the tape won’t touch a stitch. Good, now use one hand to hold it in place and the other to get the tape.”

Marc struggled to pull the sticky strips free without placing weight on the wound and was glad when it was done. *This feels so bad!*

“Once the injury has been treated, then you can take care of the patient’s comfort. Medication, clean clothes, warm blankets, whatever you can do for them.” Her voice sharpened again, “*If* they want that sort of care. Some people honestly don’t need it. You wouldn’t rush to coddle a senior Eagle, would you?”

Someone behind Neil smirked, “Yeah, that’s what they should have given Chris when he got trimmed in Cheyenne. Warm blankets.”

Grunts and cackles filled the tent and Angela chuckled. “Exactly. Some people want to be left alone. Pain means very little to them.”

“Well, I’d want meds,” Becky offered, waving at Angela’s shoulder. “Bet that would really hurt right now if you hadn’t had a pill before the lesson.”

There was silence—long enough for the teenager to realize her mistake—and then Jeremy said, “You mean like Samantha.”

He went on as if Becky hadn’t messed up, but his words were a warning to the embarrassed girl. “She took a hell of a recoil slip and didn’t even go get the stitches she needed.”

Alex, also the best natured of Neil’s team (which was good considering his skill with a firearm), supported his XO with, “She was great

with that gun yesterday. Never thought Adrian's extra piece would ride that well against a sweater!"

There was another round of laughter, but it was harder, meant to drive in the differences between the two females.

Like Neil couldn't tell after the mud throwing, Angela thought, but didn't say anything to stop it. She agreed with their assessment too much. Life as Becky's mate would be full of chaos and distraction until she grew up, something none of these men wanted for their team leader, but it was also something the camp could ill afford with Neil being so high in the chain of command.

Unless the girl suddenly switched her affections to someone else, she was set on Neil. Which was unfortunate for him, because she was clueless as a nurse and more than a little annoying with her bad timing and unthinking reactions. Doctoring definitely wasn't her forte.

Angela gestured at the realistic severed arm lying on the table. "John and I put twenty stitches in that prop last night. You'll each remove one. Let's get started."

All of the men did okay, especially Neil, who was determined to make up for his earlier clumsiness, and Angela motioned Becky over reluctantly a while later. The girl had clay hands, but she'd sat quietly for nearly an hour and deserved a reward.

“You take out the last two.”

Becky did all right until she tried to pull the final stitch free. It was stuck in the fake blood Angela had been sending down the gory wound to test their nerves and reactions.

Becky pulled too hard, yanking the prop as Angela hit the button, and the girl picked the arm up to reset it on the tray.

Fake blood squirted wildly and Angela sighed in resignation as fresh crimson dotted her cheek and clean bandage.

“Oh!” Becky quickly swung the arm toward the ground, sending another shower over the Eagles.

“Damn it!” Marc’s shirt was streaked in slimy red. “Put it down!”

Becky let go, retreating. Her face was the color of the thick gel and she moved toward the flap. *I can’t do anything right!*

The girl fled and those who’d been snickering allowed themselves to explode, drawing in the others.

“Looks good on you, Brady!” Neil teased.

Marc let out a sigh, not thinking. “Better than what I got from the other teenager.”

The tent filled with warning gestures and glances, and Marc realized his screw-up too late. Their thoughts rushed over Angela, full of her drunken son.

Marc hadn’t told her.

“How could you do that to me?”

The tent went silent at her disbelieving glare.

Before he could form a response, Angela grabbed her sweater and stormed to the flap. “Class dismissed!”

If she didn’t get away from him now, there was no telling how bad it might get. He’d kept something like this from her and then had the nerve to get an attitude over her open actions? Who the hell did he think he was?

Marc ignored the call from Neil to give her some time, hurrying to catch up. “Angie, wait.”

Angela drew attention that she ignored as she stormed toward the training tent. The fake blood made it appear as though she’d been hurt again, but the guards would have to get in line behind her rage.

The fury of betrayal was ugly, dangerous. Did he know how many beatings she’d taken for that boy? Had he bled, birthed Charlie? Was it Marc’s heart ripping apart as the bombs fell? She increased her speed, holding in the pain. She didn’t want to hurt him. How could she get rid of him until she cooled off?

The training tent came into sight and she broke into a run. She would use the Eagles to her advantage; let them give him a quick lesson on how she felt about shit like this.

Not speaking, Angela hurried straight to the hayroom with a fast glance over her shoulder that told them whoever she was running from was still chasing her.

The men inside the tent took in her upset state, the fresh blood and running feet, and rushed to help. The next body to come through the flap was knocked down and dragged inside to be hit with blow after blow, before he was recognized.

The Eagles had expected Kenn and there was shock to discover someone else on the bottom of the pile instead.

Marc let Seth help him up, tone rueful. “I shoulda been expecting that, I guess.”

He shook off the bells, wiping real blood from his nose and mouth. “It’s what I get for not tellin’ her.”

Understanding filled the men, realizing what had happened. She couldn’t hit Marc right now and hope to do any damage. So, she’d had them do it.

“Hell of a mind on that one,” Doug commented, pulling on his army jacket.

Marc tried to joke through the throbbing and the heavy feeling of doom settling over him. “Not a bad temper at all.”

Doug chortled. “Adrian will settle her down. Maybe you should wait and talk to her afterwards.”

Marc’s countenance hardened. She hadn’t come here by chance.

“Good idea,” he muttered, turning toward the flap. She’d run to Adrian. What did that mean?

His stomach clenched with fresh waves of anger. Damn this place!

It was colder again and the darker skies were a complement to his mood as he exited. When she needed something now, it was clear who she would go to. She'd replaced him.

Marc's gut was burning with injustice. Nothing was turning out as he'd hoped. *Even Kenn is still here!* Marc couldn't believe they'd let that piece of shit return. She'd been hurt, before and after coming here, and they were giving him a pass because he had taken advantage of a prime opportunity. It was so wrong! They'd almost been free of him!

Marc's mind was full of the anger he'd been carrying for the last week, but now despair had begun to creep in. Unless he could get Angie away from here, he'd lost her.

2

Angela had leaned against the hayroom wall, arm tensed to greet Marc as soon as she heard his steps, and Doug's words to him had her swiveling. Adrian was in here?

Adrian stayed still, taking it all in. She'd set Marc up by leading him here and was now ready to give a vicious temple hit meant to disable. How had she planned to deliver enough force with a hurt shoulder? Her gun.

"I wasn't going to kill him, you understand." Angela's tone was conversational. "Just get my point across."

Adrian's expression was unreadable, but she could feel his pleasure. Even emotional, she reacted like one of his men.

"He doesn't understand how much I want this."

"Yes, he does," Adrian refuted. "And that's the problem. On the trip, teaching you was fun. Here, it's serious and he recognizes the danger you're about to be in. It's eating at him."

That fell into place and she put the .357 away. "Yeah, Brady doesn't like feeling helpless."

"None of us do," Adrian stated. "How about a lesson?"

Angela agreed right away. Other than standing duty over the kids' area and her first aid class, they hadn't been letting her do much. "Yes."

Adrian came from the shadows and kept his distance, despite the urge to discover if any of those bloody streaks needed tending. "Why did you come here?"

"It was the best place to ambush him, get some space."

Adrian raised a brow. "And you would have followed through?"

Her nod was fast, but her voice was heavy. "And probably hurt him if he hadn't realized what I intended."

"After the first greeting he received, you hoped he would back off or keep coming?"

"Both."

Adrian gestured at the cracks, where eyes suddenly disappeared and Angela felt the anger grow deeper. She needed a workout that her shoulder couldn't handle. *Brady lied to me!*

Adrian handed her the knife he'd pulled from the target. "Practice and we'll talk."

Angela felt her anger flare higher. *He should have come to me right away!*

She threw the sharp blade with little thought and Adrian wasn't surprised when it stuck in the center.

"What should I talk about?"

"Versailles."

Angela flinched, retrieved the blade. "You're the boss."

3

"New arrivals in the QZ."

"Copy."

No changes in plans were mentioned and Jeremy listened for the next call to come across the radio, along with everyone else who knew.

"Angela to the QZ."

"Copy."

At least she sounded calmer now, Jeremy thought, impressed with her reaction. Kyle's full team was on duty at the QZ today, but Jeremy had little doubt a few other off-duty Eagles would quietly show up, too. None of the higher levels who took turns guarding her liked the idea of her being so close to strangers who might be sick or

dangerous, especially with the bandage on her shoulder that the Eagles still felt bad about.

Jeremy took a quick check to verify their full team was now in their perimeter spots on the garden area, ending with Neil, who had come through the tent area to join them. Jeremy recognized the need and gestured in response to his leader's silent question. *Do you have this covered?*

Neil was another shadow who would be around the QZ anytime Angela was, and Jeremy was glad the tight-assed cop would be there. In a fight, Neil was the only one he wanted on his six. Neil was ruthless.

Jeremy scanned the stalk-covered area again, slower this time. They were still on doubled duty; no sign of the slavers was making them all worry. Most of their team was on this side of the tape, scattered around the livestock and parking corner, and each of them gave Jeremy a motion of disappointment as the trooper left. They'd volunteered to be here because of the new garden being put in, eager to observe their team leader as he protected Samantha.

Jeremy made a motion with his hands. *He'll be back.*

Jeremy scanned the crew now emerging from the trees. Samantha was in the lead, loaded down with gear and appearing eager to start her first project for Adrian.

Jeremy came forward when she peered his way, and was rewarded with a smile that he

returned openly. She was cute. Neil had good taste in *adult* women.

Men behind him shifted uneasily as Jeremy said something that made Samantha giggle. Did he want her, too? It was something none of them had considered. A fight over the new woman would be as bad as Neil taking little Becky for his legal mate come October.

“I’m pretending to be in love with you today. Do you mind?”

She put her bag and box on the ground, feeling his hot gaze slide down the front of her shirt.

“I guess not.” Samantha blushed a bit. She wasn’t immune to the appreciation she read. “You got a role in mind for me too?”

Jeremy chuckled, thinking she’d probably been a great secretary or something. He could easily imagine her in an office. “Got three spots open for the day’s scenes; the screaming shrew, the confused bachelor, and the slightly willing bachelorette.”

Sensing a ring of truth, Samantha shrugged, voice cooling. “Games are fun until people lose. You got that covered?”

“Not yet.”

Samantha studied Neil’s right-hand man intently, ignoring the group of women waiting curiously just out of hearing distance. After adding up the clues from the gun lesson and the babysitting, she had realized Neil’s team was

matchmaking, but Samantha still wasn't sure if she was okay with it.

"It's just for today?" she clarified, not wanting to be involved in any drama.

Jeremy almost caved, but held out. *She's so smart!* "That's up to you." Neil had spotted her first... By their unspoken Eagle rules, he had first claim.

Curious and more interested than she wanted to be, Samantha gave Jeremy a slow, sultry smile that had his team tensing again.

"Just pretend, right? I need that part clear upfront, especially if *you* plan to play the other guy."

There was a note of curiosity in her voice that Jeremy let himself answer honestly. "I can't promise that, Samantha. He may not see your worth yet, but I do and I'd be honored."

Jeremy left the pleased blush on her cheeks, ignoring the reporter staring at him in shock from the parking area. Cynthia refused to let anyone know about their relationship, saying it would hurt his place under Neil. Over the last weeks, since Angela had come, it felt more like the reporter was only with him for the information supply and that wouldn't do. Neil wasn't the only one who would get a wake up.

And if you get hurt in the process? his mind asked. Jeremy answered bluntly, *Then, it's what I'll deserve for chasing her, too, when I know she belongs to Neil.*

Angela caught the thought as she passed by the area, but she didn't react, sure Jeremy didn't want to own Samantha, only care for her. As for Neil...she wasn't sure. The trooper was hiding a possessive streak that was very similar to Kenn's, but it was something for Adrian to handle if he needed to.

Fake blood mostly cleaned off now, Angela was more nervous than she appeared as she approached the QZ. She even managed to keep her expression blank when Doug held up the tape for her, drawing murmurs from the small group waiting near a beaten-up RV.

Doug motioned at a small table under a long green awning, still amused at her tactics. When would the other women here act that way? "We'll be around."

Angela sat down without acknowledging the small group of refugees, feeling them out. John only needed one form to get them registered and it wouldn't take long with these people, she was glad to discover. The little girl on her father's hip was busy whispering her favorite story to him while they waited. It was about hunger. As soon as Angela mentioned food, she knew they would be convinced to stay.

Satisfied they weren't hiding anything big, she smiled in welcome. "I'm Angie, one of the doctors here. Come on over and fill out a paper, and then we'll get you all fed and settled for the night."

“Where do you want me?” Charlie asked sullenly as he joined her under the canopy. Braced for a reprimand, he obviously knew she and Marc had been fighting about him.

“In your tent tonight so we can talk.”

Charlie caught her off guard by sneering, “My *dad* already handled it.”

Angela felt the flames go up, but instead of being nasty, she slid into a comfortable position in the hard seat. “It’s good that you two are getting along.”

Not sure what to say, the teenager reacted with the only emotion he seemed to have for her these days—anger.

“*Someone* needs to protect him from being hurt.”

The wounded mother snorted, shoulder throbbing mercilessly. So much for peace. She was fed up with both of them.

“Marc always lands on his feet, boy. Look at the current problem. He lied and gets your support. I, on the other hand, give you the truth to every question and still get shit. It appears that you have the same double standard as your father.”

Leaving him speechless, she surveyed the curiously waiting people. “My apologies. Even the war couldn’t destroy teenage angst.”

Moving by the over-patrolled QZ, Adrian heard the sharp remark and smothered his amusement and approval. You could only have a

light touch for so long and then a heavier one was required. Adrian got a gesture of things being fine from Doug and kept going. It was Angela's first time meeting the new arrivals without John there to direct her or alert the sentries to any problems, and all the Eagles were nervous about it.

Waiting until he was out of sight of the area, Adrian waved Kenn over, aware that the Marine was ready to leave for a shift on road clearing. Things were far from fixed between them, but the much quieter man was working on it. Kenn had spent most of the last week out of camp, gathering food, water and fuel. Tomorrow evening, he, Zack, and a small team would leave on a slaver recon. In their case, no news was not good news, but a sign of danger.

“I need photos this time. If you get the op.”

Kenn knew he would make the time. On this, he and Neil agreed. The Eagles were ready, but until Kyle put his vote with theirs, Adrian wouldn't budge. There was complete trust of the mobster's judgment there and it bothered Kenn as much as it always had, only now there wasn't a struggle inside to hide it. His true nature, surly and quick to spark, was on view for all to witness. Kenn and the camp were both slowly adjusting.

“Main men, special spots and weapons?”

“Everything. Their chain of command, captives, blood—get it all.”

Adrian's voice had hardened with a frustrated anger that told Kenn the leader wouldn't be able to

ignore the threat much longer. Kenn wasn't sure why it was so important to get it now, but anything was better than being here and seeing Angela welcomed by the Eagles for her determination and strength. He'd tried very hard to crush those things.

“Marc, wait up!”

Neil's loud call drew attention and Kenn spun away from the parking area as if he'd been burned. He may have to accept the changes and he would, but it didn't make the need to kill Brady any easier to deal with.

“Hey, Marc!”

Marc couldn't keep ignoring Neil, like he had been for the last week. After witnessing the way Angela was so set on being an Eagle, he wasn't even sure he was angry about the Kai lesson anymore. A couple of shoulder slides were nothing compared to witnessing the clumsy trooper put in that stitch.

Waiting, Marc saw Charlie sitting next to Angie, Dog at their feet, and felt his heart clench. His happy family...except they weren't his anymore than they were Kenn's. After this morning, Marc wasn't sure if the small hope he had held for them still existed. If Angie wouldn't give up being an Eagle, he would end up leaving and it was that thought that stopped him from doing more than nodding at his son when Charlie glanced his way. *It will be easier on him if there*

wasn't a bond yet, he thought, and realized he had expected the teenager to be upset that his mom now knew their secret. Instead, there was only sympathy in a quick message.

Don't sweat it. She's sharper now.

Marc's mind flashed to the morning's fresh set of bruises. *Tell me about it.*

Neil was glad Marc hadn't embarrassed him by refusing to stop. "Can we talk a minute?"

Marc shrugged wryly. "I've got the time if you do."

Neil gestured toward the small wooded area outside the tape. "Let's take a short walk."

The two men slipped out with only a few witnesses. One was Jeff, the guard on the area and that man hesitated. Those two weren't as needed as Adrian. Surely, they didn't need a tail too? Jeff was the only man on Seth's team who hadn't swung to Marc's side yet and he turned toward Safe Haven in defiance. He and Zack had been from the same Texas town before the war. When the horror had destroyed their lives, they'd set out together and it was a bond not easily broken. What Zack thought was best...Jeff intended to go along with.

Of the other two witnesses, one was hoping the guard might feel that way and the other never considered the danger of following three grown men out of Safe Haven's perimeter.

Neil led them to a secluded area before stopping and then he did what Marc expected least. He took his hat off.

“I’m sorry. I hated it. I only did it because—”

“Of Adrian’s orders,” Marc tried to finish.

“No. Because of Angela. She pushed me too, hard.” Neil sighed, dropping down on a nearby boulder. “She wants it, Brady. Neither of us has the right to stop her.”

“And when she gets killed?”

“We won’t let that happen.”

“Bullshit! If not for me and Kenn, the brother would have already ended her.”

Neil didn’t answer, couldn’t. It was true.

Marc wanted to stay angry, but the sadness was too consuming and he let Neil off the hook. “I’m done. It’ll be her choice from now on.”

Neil sighed in relief, missing the wording. “Good. Now spend some time with her that doesn’t involve an argument.”

Marc let out a snort. “No problem there. I doubt she’ll even speak to me.” He tried not to be bitter when his friend laughed.

“She’s as dangerous as the rest of us, only in different ways.”

“Yeah.”

Now perched carefully in a nearby tree, Becky’s attention was pulled between the talking men and Rick. Clearly, the new guy was spying on Neil and Marc, like she was, but why? Was he a

slaver in disguise? A delicious chill shot into her gut and she forgot to breathe as the suspected traitor turned her way.

Rick's vivid stare held her, saying everything she wanted to hear, and yet nothing. He was an exotic, foreign mystery to her slowly awakening female body, and when he went back to spying, the teenager flushed happily. *He's letting me stay!*

Not sure why she hadn't already alerted someone to the new guy's odd behavior, Becky studied him. He had acquired a uniform somehow and gave the appearance of being an Eagle... The same Eagles that were adamant about Adrian's age rules.

Rick wasn't. She could see it in his hot glances and feel it in his body language. If she offered herself to him, there wouldn't be any hesitation. He would be between her legs before she could change her mind.

As if hearing the thought, Rick surveyed her again. The open need in his gaze had her mind sending up flares of alarm and her body tightening under his perusal. Suddenly feeling shy, she switched her attention back to the conversation, but not before a small smile of invitation crossed her young lips.

“Are we okay?”

Marc answered, glad that he could. “Yeah.”

Neil's relief was obvious. “Great.” He did a quick sweep. “You ready to get back?”

“After you tell me what’s up with you and Samantha. I thought you wanted—”

“Wait.”

Neil’s tone was sharp enough to stop Marc.

“I heard something.”

Becky froze as Neil swept the area she and Rick were hiding in. But neither of them had budged, she realized, and let herself draw in air as the trooper scanned another direction. He didn’t know they were here.

“What was it?”

“Like a...growl?”

Marc’s mind flashed to Nebraska and the wolf battle that he and Angie had fought to get here. “Let’s go.”

Both spies held their breath as the two men walked right by them without noticing. When the Eagles were ahead, their shadows followed silently, keeping track of each other’s progress and the conversation.

“Can I ask you something?”

Marc chuckled as they neared the caution tape. He hadn’t repeated his request, waiting to see if Neil wanted to talk about it.

“Samantha, no question.”

“That apparent, huh?”

“You need more than a game or a chase. Samantha can give you that.”

“I know, but I—”

“Want the other one, too.”

Neil reddened. “Yeah.”

“The problem there is that she won’t stay young and flirty, and you’ll be stuck with a woman who doesn’t have a clue what she wants,” Marc stated as they stopped outside the perimeter tape. “With the other one, it’s different. She’s been through enough, learned what matters. True survival hasn’t even crossed Becky’s mind. She’s a cute kid, I’ll give you that, but in the end, cute fades and you have to be able to live with what’s left.”

Neil’s own common sense and the comments of his team had been telling him that all along and the cop spoke firmly. “I have to be an Eagle first. My woman would need to understand that.”

Marc chuckled. “Good luck there.”

“You too.”

Marc’s amusement faded. “Yeah. We have the gun class together tonight. Should be tense.”

“She’s pissed,” Neil commented, not telling him that he’d heard Angela arrange to switch-off that duty.

Marc didn’t answer, his attention swinging to the woods behind them. Had he heard Neil’s growling noise?

“You gonna try to talk to her?”

Marc swept the trees harder, now sensing a shadow and he berated himself for the lack of awareness.

“Probably. You knew we had a tail?”

“It’s Becky.”

“You allow it?”

“Yes.” Neil brushed away a small fly, thinking for being so small, they bit like mosquitoes. It was early for them, but the vet already had a stockpile of salve for the animals’ ears.

“And what about the things she overhears?”

“I didn’t say anything bad. *You* did.”

Marc laughed and they ducked under the tape feeling like friends again.

Behind them, rage was boiling from both of those listening. Their fears of Neil and Samantha were founded. Instantly bonded by their anger, when Rick sidled over, Becky held still. He would help her keep them apart. And in return?

His expression was one of a wolf about to have a meal, going over her young body with blatant lust.

“I’ll think about it,” she muttered lowly, perched in a tree fork and Rick slid his hands to her small waist to help her down.

“Don’t!”

His hands snapped back as if she’d slapped them and her tone remained sharp. “Never without permission!”

Rick’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “May I?”

Satisfied he knew the rules, she refused. “I have plans later. I can’t smell like you.”

Rick’s sexy grin made her knees go weak.

“Lucky guy.”

“Yeah, wish he thought so.”

The traitor admired her slim curves again, producing an actual jolt of awareness that had her blushing.

“His loss.”

Becky kept eye contact as she marched by him and Rick retreated, aware of how much he liked the sneaky girl. So far, she was the only one who had noticed he was out of his tent without a guard. Maybe when this camp fell, Cesar would let him keep her too. Then he would have both of the females Neil wanted.

Neil’s mind was full of Marc’s words as he joined his team. He wasn’t sure enough to try to claim her, but he hoped Samantha felt like talking about things. He needed to know if the attraction was there for her. The lust he felt for Becky had been sharp for a while, but the need to know Samantha had overpowered it. When he took himself in hand these days, it was cornflower blue eyes and platinum hair in his fantasies.

Struggling with the change, Neil entered the new garden area and stopped in shock at the sight of Jeremy and Samantha entering one of the supply trailers, alone.

We have a problem, he thought, hands clenching.

4

Samantha jumped as the radio on Jeremy’s belt crackled.

She asked the overloaded guard, “Do you need to get that?”

“No, what else is on the list?”

Samantha surveyed the neat shelves, comparing with her list. They were getting things started for their own food source, and tomorrow, they would get a lesson in planting. “A first aid kit, another rake, 2 hand-shovels...”

For Earth Day, she’d been instructed to plant all the trees they had found during the last supply run. When she’d asked Adrian why, his answer had pleased her. *It’s for those who come after us.*

Jeremy followed Samantha willingly enough, arms already loaded down. He had volunteered to cart supplies, still running on the instinct that said Neil would check up on her. *Good call.*

“Would you like to know what one click on the radio means?”

Samantha stared at him in surprise. “Sure.”

“Someone’s coming.”

It took her only a second to guess who and put the clues together. “Act one, scene one?”

Jeremy didn’t think he had ever been so close to personal betrayal in his life at her continued flashes of extreme intelligence, and it was hard for him to laugh as if it didn’t matter. He wanted to steal her from Neil!

“Confused bachelor confronts slightly willing bachelorette and smitten XO. Take one.”

The door flew up, flooding them with light, and Sam gestured with her hand. “Action!”

They both laughed.

Neil took in the scene with surprise. Had he waited too long?

“Oh, it’s Neil.”

She sounds like I caught them doing something wrong, the trooper thought.

“Hey, boss. Just offering some help to the lady.”

Neil wiped his face clean, shoved that rarely witnessed part of him into the cage. “Good.”

He flashed a tight smile toward Samantha. “I have an hour free after mess?”

Samantha beamed, moving his way. “You think we’ll get to do it this time?”

Neil’s stare was intense “Even if I have to post a sentry. For that hour, I belong to you.”

Samantha blushed as hot images swung through her mind.

“Unless Becky calls, anyway.”

Jeremy’s mutter reminded her of the role she’d agreed to play.

Neil swiveled to scold his right-hand man for continuing the dangerous matchmaking game, but couldn’t at the challenge in Jeremy’s stance. His XO meant it.

Determined to do the right thing, Jeremy carefully climbed out of the truck. The tension was thick when he gestured at Samantha. “Take five.”

He left with the supplies and Samantha let him go with confusion and regret. The jealousy in

Jeremy's tone and body language was very convincing.

"He likes you." Neil's voice held surprise.

"He's nice. Attentive."

Neil felt his anger fading. *Attentive*. That's what she would need and Neil wasn't sure he was capable of giving it. She intimidated him too much.

"Can you do me a favor?"

Neil braced to be reduced to a message boy between them.

"Sign me up for third shift guard duty and maybe some personal time. Like what Angie's getting, only quieter."

"I'd be happy to handle that." Realizing how much grovel was in his tone, Neil snapped his mouth shut.

"Great." She rotated back to the shelves. "Thanks. See you after mess."

"Yes...okay."

Neil left in confusion and Sam realized Jeremy had their roles pegged perfectly. So was Becky really a screaming shrew? She was much too young to play that part.

Samantha shrugged. They would find out. It was time for the evening meal now, and it was the big one Adrian liked to schedule occasionally to show them all how large Safe Haven was becoming. That meant twice as many people. *Lovely*.

Samantha straightened her kinked spine, thinking she wasn't caving and sitting with the other females tonight. She didn't want to chat and if she had to sit alone to avoid it, she would.

5

“Can I sit here?”

Angela peered up from her tray with an uncensored welcome that made Marc's heart thump.

“You know it.”

Her words, however, made his anger flare higher. She sounded more like these people every day. “I'd like to talk to you about something that's bothering me.”

“What's up?” Angela answered distractedly; glad the pill was finally calming the heat in her shoulder.

Marc sat across from her and braced himself, suddenly certain it would go badly. “I don't think you should be an Eagle.”

A breathless sort of shock slid over her, but Marc didn't stop. “I'd like you to resign, find something else. There has to be a safer way for you to help him.”

“I see.” There was only ice now. “And your reasons?”

Marc felt the ambush coming, tried to intercept. “There's a lot you're not considering and it might get you hurt. These people don't want you

to do it, not even the women here. Just you and Adrian.”

There was a sneer in his tone that bothered her. He still didn't trust or even like Adrian.

“That's not true,” she argued, thinking of her shower visit from Hilda and Peggy. “There are a few.”

“Trained lapdogs don't count.”

His voice gentled, became almost patronizing to her wounded ears.

“And none of them really think you can either. When the first cage match comes and no one hits you, everyone will see the flaw in his plans.”

Angela knew she should be furious with his lack of support, but she'd already noticed those things hadn't she? Marc's beef wasn't the Eagles at the moment, but Adrian. “You're jealous.”

It was a fact being stated. Marc couldn't, wouldn't deny it.

Sadness hit Angela in waves. “Why can't I have both?”

“What?” Marc had been bracing for her anger, not a compromise.

“Both. You and the Eagles.”

Marc didn't know what to say to that and she leaned forward. “I have the room and I've been working on it from the moment we got here. I want both.” Angela's voice lowered to a plea. “I need both. Please don't make me pick one or the other.”

Marc hated it that he could feel himself turning into Kenn. “How does that work?”

“You have to let me do what I am meant to. If I get hurt in the process, that’s life now. I’ve been held back for so long!”

She noticed the nearest perimeter patrols changing, making contact with the shadows. “And there’s so much I can do, so many ways I can help if I’m an Eagle.”

Angela surveyed him with flecks of steel. “I will be one of them, in every way. I’m almost free of the past, but this can’t hang between us. You’ll have to decide if you can let me live my life the way *I* choose. If you can, I’ll share it with you, openly.”

Her tone became icy. “But that means accepting me as an Eagle.”

“And that’s firm? No room to bend?”

Angela sighed at the stiffness in his voice. “What if I said okay, Marc? I’ll haul my stuff into your tent today and resign, be a doctor. Is that what you want?”

She had tried hard for casual, but the pain was clear and Marc shook his head. “Yes.”

Angela’s nostrils flared. He wouldn’t force her, would he? “I’ll go pack. You tell Adrian and our son.”

Marc’s eyes flashed and she gave him a hard stare, pushing away from the table. “I owe you, right? It’s time to start paying off that debt.”

Was she bluffing? Did it matter? He could never follow through. “I’m leaving soon. Get ready for it.”

Angela stood up, voice scornful. “I was ready for it when you found me in Indiana. Surprised you’ve stuck around this long.”

Before he could respond, their attention was drawn to loud voices from the long line still waiting to eat.

“She’s not an Eagle.”

“Adrian says she is.”

“He’s carrying this women’s lib shit too far.”

“You watch your mouth!”

“Make me!”

Angela spun away from the coffee line where the two men were now brawling. The shouts were drawing more spectators and she was glad Doug and Kyle were rushing to break it up. It was happening a lot. Yesterday it had been two women arguing during evening mess, and last night, Kyle had punched a rookie for a nasty remark about Adrian. Now, yet another fight. Her joining was causing problems and unless she could find a way to fix it, Marc would get his wish.

Female Eagles were a big part of Adrian’s plans. She could feel that clearly, knew he needed her to be accepted, but how could she? She wasn’t a man, her magic was off limits for this, and as far as these men were concerned, she was already being given special treatment, even before the cage match. They had tryouts and tests to become an Eagle and it had just been given to her...

Angela stopped, barely breathing as the solution came.

Would that succeed? She stood there, surrounded by Safe Haven's light as she considered. *Yes. All of it will matter, but if I can stack that one moment...*

Angela changed directions, absorbing the fear and she stiffened her chin into that set line as her target came into view.

Kenn stared at her stupidly a moment later. "You want to what?"

Angela willed her nerves to relax. She and Kenn hadn't exchanged a single word since the sauna scene that had shown his true colors, and she made herself sound confident. "I want to take the real level test with my team."

Kenn laughed unpleasantly, missing those flecks of steel in his relief over her demand. He'd been expecting something else. "You? In the cage? Yeah, that'll happen."

He let out another bray of hard amusement and Angela made a fast choice she wasn't sure of. She ducked, threw out a leg sweep and used her free arm to shove him onto his ass in the dirt.

"Sign me up, Marine. I mean it!"

Kenn was surprised to feel admiration and a strong wave of attraction instead of the anger or embarrassment it should have brought to be put down by a female; by *this* female.

"There's no way he'll let you take the real test." He stood up, brushing himself off and he was careful to stay still so that none of the approaching

Eagles would think he was a threat to her. “Can’t hit a woman here for any reason.”

“I got through Neil’s class. I want to be one of them, Kenny. And there isn’t anything I won’t do, *anyone* I won’t destroy, to get it,” she insisted pointedly.

The complete honesty was a change for both of them, but more for Angela, who had spent so long carefully censoring her words.

Kenn was aware of how pleased Adrian was that she’d been keeping up. He conceded reluctantly. “I’ll mention it to him, but it’ll hurt his plans, if you fail.”

The warning was a surprise to her, showing his caring for the dreams. She’d thought he was only so loyal to Adrian because it gave him the XO slot.

“I won’t.”

Kenn scowled, still hating her new confidence and dreading the hard months he would have to endure while earning what he’d thrown away. “If he says yes, it’ll be on your schedule. Now get to the kids’ area. Your shift starts in five.”

Angela snapped a salute and nodded at Jeremy as he strode by determinedly. She sighed at the images running through his mind. The crowded mess was about to get another show. *Encore!*

6

Samantha had monitored Marc and Angie’s fight with sympathy, but would have gladly traded places when Jeremy ducked under the canopy.

He found Neil first, settled comfortably at Adrian's center table, and then her, sitting alone in the rear of the mess.

His scowl was threatening and Samantha couldn't stop herself from responding to the righteous anger on her behalf. She gave him a raised brow and a short wave, offering him the seat across from her.

His expression lit up and everyone in the area stared in surprise at the happiness he didn't try to hide.

Jeremy joined her quickly, but before any conversation could restart from those around them, his words echoed softly.

“Scene 2: the screaming shrew.” His expression darkened. “I'm sorry for this. The location was a write-in.”

Sam was expecting Becky and she sneered, “Little girls should be careful who they challenge.”

Coming up behind them, Cynthia drew up short at the clear warning...then the reporter shrieked, “I'll show you a little girl! Who the hell do you think you are? I'll—”

Caught off guard, Samantha lost her temper fast and she jumped up to put herself in the woman's space. “You'll what?”

The tone was soft, menacing, and Cynthia realized she had made a mistake.

Samantha slowly gave the expensively dressed woman an insulting once-over. “Be a shame to get blood on Gucci. It won't come out...or so I hear.”

The reporter flinched at the word blood, now trapped. She couldn't shout that Jeremy was hers without the camp discovering their affair, but she wouldn't ease up and lose him either. His connection to Adrian was too good to give up.

“Cynthia.”

Adrian's tone knew, was patronizing enough, and the reporter shot a last lingering glare at Samantha before leaving the mess.

Sam sat down, not looking at Jeremy. He and Cynthia had something going. Whatever she had felt from the helpful guard could have been great acting to make Neil jealous.

And Cynthia, she added a little bitterly.

“Are you mad?” Jeremy questioned.

“I'll have to get back to you. I didn't expect *that* shrew and I'm not a fan of surprises.”

“I can try to explain, if you want.”

“I'll pass.”

There was silence for a minute and then he flashed a charming smile. “Ready for scene three?”

Samantha snorted. “Depends on what it is.”

Jeremy leaned in, aware of being the center of everyone's attention. “Scene three is where apologetic bachelor number two becomes scarce so the slightly willing bachelorette can cool off with still very confused bachelor number one.”

“And you're one of the players, not an actor, right?” she asked, slightly upset “Another alpha male who wants two mates instead of one.”

Jeremy reddened, but he didn't deny it. "That scene comes later in the story."

Samantha snorted again, flattered and wary. "Guess I need a copy of the script."

"I'll see what I can do about that." He stood up, taking his untouched tray. "Try to have fun with Neil tonight. He's a good man."

Samantha was aware of the surprised, uneasy people around them as he left. Jeremy had to know how this would end. He would be left out. As nice as he was, there was no way *that* Eagle would ever be able to break through the wall of ice around her heart.

Samantha's gaze slid to the center table and found Neil staring at her. There was enough heat there to melt an iceberg and she dropped her gaze. There was little choice between the two, but she wasn't sure if she even wanted one of them yet. She didn't have enough of her self-respect back to be in a relationship. All she wanted from either of them right now was friendship and training. Everything was secondary to surviving the slavers.

Adrian's table was much quieter than usual. Kenn tried to keep the conversation going, knowing the boss didn't like the tension, but with Neil distracted, Doug on sentry in the QZ, and Kyle still angry that Kenn had been allowed to return, there was little cooperation.

“I’ll catch you guys later.” Neil left the table and let his feet go where they wanted instead of where they should.

“You ready?”

Samantha jumped when Neil dropped onto the bench across from her.

His tone was defensive and she responded sarcastically, “Shouldn’t we wait and let Becky have her say, too?”

Neil followed Samantha’s line of sight to the teenager staring at them furiously, frozen in place.

The line around her advanced and Becky forced herself to do the same. She did her best to clear her expression, female mind flying through suitable retaliations. She could ignore them and keep up the act that there was nothing going on with her and Neil. She could also cause a scene and force him to claim her early, but she knew both of those options would lose her his affection.

Becky spotted Rick sitting by himself in a far corner and hoped he wouldn’t mind, but didn’t hesitate to carry her tray to his table. *Take that!*

“Talk to her. Tonight,” Sam ordered and Adrian’s gesture demanded the same.

“I will,” Neil answered them both. He glanced at Samantha. “Let’s go now, okay?”

Samantha was glad to escape the attention, but her mind was on Rick and Becky. At this point, not telling the girl some hard truths would be more dangerous than keeping quiet.

The sight of the training tent had Neil's stomach twisting. He didn't want to do this, but the thought of Seth (*or Jeremy!*) alone in there with her was enough to make him follow through.

"So, are you ready to fight?"

"Sure," Samantha responded shakily to the joke.

Neil held the flap for her, and ducked inside after a quick glance around verified only one bitter guard lurking in the shadows. He had no idea how this might go. The fewer witnesses, the better.

Samantha waited by the flap for Neil to light a lantern and lead her into the canvas room. When he took them inside the large area made of hay bales, she held her nervousness in check and followed him without a protest. She'd asked for this and he was breaking the rules to give it to her. She wasn't an Eagle or in official training, so they had to be somewhere private.

This fits the bill, she thought, taking off her gun and placing it next to his. It was so quiet in here, it was almost like they were alone.

Neil kicked off his boots, stalling as she did the same. He was hoping to spot cold feet that he could respond to. If she would give him a sign that she didn't want this—

"So what's first?"

Eager. Damn it! "I'll show you the basic moves and we can go from there."

"No, Neil."

"What?"

“I want exactly what you gave Angie.”

“You’re not ready for that yet.”

They found Adrian in the doorway and Neil hid a sigh of relief, grateful.

“Angela was already a level fighter when Marc got her here. You’ll need to build up to that.”

Samantha could feel how much happier Neil was as Adrian left them alone. He hadn’t wanted to give her the lesson. Afraid to hurt her? Maybe. Afraid to be caught was more likely and she didn’t stop herself from reacting.

Neil was unprepared for her swing and took the full hit.

Samantha saw the blood run from his split lip, and waited nervously for his response. She needed this and if she had to push him to get him to do it, she would. As for Adrian’s rules, well, he hadn’t said anything about a workout.

“What was that for?” Neil questioned, ears ringing from being caught unprepared.

“Lying, pretending, and screwing around with my mind,” Sam stated coldly. “Take your pick.”

“But it was Adrian’s choice,” he protested as her fist clenched again.

“He did it for you. He felt your fear.”

Neil opened his mouth to argue and found he couldn’t lie to her. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Now show me.”

Neil stared at her, more confused, if that was possible, than he had been before. She had a hell of a swing.

“Later. Let’s do a workout first. It’ll settle you down, let you concentrate.”

Samantha raised a brow. “Who says I can’t now? As I’m sure you know, anger is great for that.”

Neil laughed and knew it was a mistake when her fists clenched again.

“I challenge you!”

He had time to think she’d picked up a lot in her short time here, and then she swung and he tried not to fall down.

Thud!

For the fifth time, Neil landed with a hard thump, blood dripping, and Samantha retreated.

“Why are you letting me beat on you?” she demanded, almost yelling.

Neil winced, but didn’t answer. There was a method to his madness. Telling her wasn’t a part of it.

Rolling to his feet, Neil rushed her, dropping under her wild swing and he took them to the ground with his hand braced under to keep her from hitting too hard.

“Ankles!” he ordered sharply.

Sam did as he’d shown her, using the force of her locked legs to gain leverage. She slammed his ribs with quick, hard knuckle punches, and used her head to connect with his nose.

Grunting, Neil rolled over and off to keep from spraying her with fresh crimson and they stayed on

the floor, breathing hard. They'd been at it for almost their allotted hour and Neil was hurting. He'd given her the perfect workout. He let her hit him repeatedly.

"Be at the self-defense ring at dawn," Neil stated, running on instinct.

"You'll clear it?"

"No. It's important for this to appear like your idea. Only the teachers are there so early. Go to Doug and challenge him. After, demand to be signed up for the level classes, not the crap we give the sheep. You're way beyond that."

And she is, he thought. She was clumsy and had bad habits that would have to be broken, but she also had a fury Neil wasn't sure even Angela could match. Samantha had an endless supply of rage to draw from and every hit she'd delivered had been solid. When she was ready, Samantha would follow Angela into the Eagles. Neil was positive of it.

"You okay?"

Samantha sighed, sitting up. "Thinking."

"Yeah." Neil examined his feelings on being in the background while she went through what Angela already had and found he could understand completely why Marc had been so upset. If he witnessed a man hit Samantha, he'd react. It was that simple.

"Can we do this again?" she asked, her voice pointed. "But without the passive teacher."

Neil hesitated, still not sure about anyone, including himself, hurting her even for lessons. Sending her to Doug would make it so he didn't have to see it until he'd had more time to adjust.

Samantha waved a hand. "If not, no big deal. Jeremy will probably—"

"I'll do it!"

Samantha only felt a little guilty for using his jealousy. "Good. You'll let me know when?"

"Yes."

"Great. Thanks, Neil."

"Adrian sends 'em and I beat 'em."

"But Adrian didn't send me and you never hit me. Wonder what that means?"

Her thoughtful voice had his lids flying open.

"Might be nothing," he warned.

She gave him a sharp tone that cut through his indifferent façade. "I'll keep that in mind when Jeremy asks me out. He's very nice."

Samantha retrieved her gun. "See ya, Neil."

Neil was fast, on his feet and then right behind her in an instant.

Samantha stopped, waiting. She'd pushed him tonight, in more ways than one.

"Please." Neil's voice was ragged, tortured.

"Please what, Neil? Don't tease you about Jeremy?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Samantha hadn't turned and the trooper was able to give her the honesty that the sight of her face would have locked up. "I need...time."

Samantha's heart jumped. "For?"

She heard the tremor in her voice as clearly as he did.

Staring at her stiff shoulders, Neil felt his caged need spring forward and he smothered the urge to spin her around and demonstrate his desires. "To be sure."

Samantha let that sink in, understanding she was now firmly in contention for him with Becky.

"I won't play those games, Neil. And I'd never share."

She rotated slowly, let him view her indifference. "Plus, I don't know if I'm even interested."

A dark flush slid up her cheeks and Neil slammed his hands into his pockets. He wanted desperately to expose that lie. "Ouch."

"Sorry. Long day."

"Long life full of pain."

Samantha's voice lowered. "And it's not over. Things are happening too fast for me."

"Did you tell Jeremy the same thing at mess?"

Sam swung to him. "No. I don't need to. He understands that without being told."

Before he could respond, she slipped out of the tent, unable to help a shiver at the immediate darkness.

"Hey, there."

Jeremy's voice was unexpected and Samantha's hand went for her gun.

"Easy. I'm the guard he posted."

Sam cringed at those words, thinking Jeremy had been able to hear them.

"I wouldn't do that to you. I've been in the shadows and on patrol. I heard nothing." His smile widened. "Saw some vicious swinging shadows though. Good workout?"

Samantha realized he knew of Adrian's visit and what it meant. "It helped."

"You gonna have another lesson?"

Samantha heard the familiar tones of jealousy and her voice was cool. "That hasn't been decided yet."

Jeremy fell in step as she took the path toward her tent, wondering what she was thinking.

"He wants me to wait," Sam blurted suddenly, horrified to hear it fall out so bluntly. "Until he makes up his mind."

Jeremy scowled. "He what?"

Samantha instantly wished she hadn't told him.

"He's not sure," she stated, letting him see how stung she was.

Jeremy responded to her need without hesitation. "Come here."

Samantha let him surround her with his big arms, surprised at the way she enjoyed being held. The tears were rare for her and she was glad when only a few rolled down her cheek to soak into his jacket.

“He’s an ass,” Jeremy stated harshly, not caring that Neil had emerged from the tent and stopped in shock. “It’s not your fault he’s stupid, baby. That’s on him!”

Jeremy glared at Neil and then led them away from the training area, fighting the urge to say something nasty to his team leader. What the hell was wrong with Neil that he couldn’t recognize the differences like everyone else? Was that little tart worth his place?

Samantha let the concerned Eagle take her into the darkness, thinking she would have to seal up these feelings that she now had for Neil. If this continued for long, it would hurt her and she couldn’t allow another man to do that.

Neil’s heart thumped with guilty anger. Jeremy would be a better mate for her. Clearly, he was more attentive, as Neil hadn’t even realized he’d hurt her until he’d witnessed the tears when Jeremy led them toward the shadows. But...that male part of him, the side that his dad had built from the ground up, was insisting he could give her more.

What about Becky? his body asked and Neil grimaced uneasily. She was in the shadows behind him and Neil didn’t hide it. “Becky, we need to talk.”

He waited until he heard her behind him.

“Hey, Neil.”

Her tone was cool and he sighed resignedly. It just wasn't his day. "I'd like to talk to you about your new friend."

Her clenched fists told him to brace himself. He had also learned something tonight.

"And don't forget *your* new friend, Neil. We'll have a talk about her, too."

Neil started toward the tent he'd left and Becky sneered angrily. "You know nothing about women, Neil. Do you know that? I don't want to talk in there, where you were with *her!*"

"You need to stay away from Rick...and stop following me."

Becky froze, heart thumping. He was doing it now.

"Did you hear—"

"I heard you! Anything else? Like October isn't happening because you've found something better?"

Neil winced. "It's not like that. I...I need some time."

Becky grew red. "To pick."

He gave a short sigh, realizing she deserved to know the truth, too. "Yes."

"Well, then I don't see a problem with my spending time with Rick while you spend time with Samantha. Maybe someone as a comparison would be a good thing."

Becky spun away, tearing up, and Neil was ashamed at his first thought. He already had a basis

for comparison, but wasn't sure how he now fared against Jeremy in Samantha's estimation.

"I'm sorry."

"Slam you!" floated through the stillness.

Well, that went well, Neil thought sarcastically. He glanced in the direction Jeremy and Samantha had gone, and went to the showers instead. What he wouldn't give to hear that conversation.

"Try not to let it keep eating at you. He'll come around."

"I'm not a second prize, Jeremy. It's already too late for that."

Ignoring how his own heart responded, the Eagle said, "Neil's wired differently than most of the people here, Sam. It's a cop-thing."

The storm tracker became cold. "I'm not interested."

That was supposed to be the end of it. Jeremy heard the tone, but the need to make his team leader and this soft, furious woman happy was stronger than her desire to be left alone.

"Give him a little time, baby, like he asked for."

Samantha's weathered face held no trace of the tears that had brought them to this secluded part of the camp. Showing misery was a luxury she refused to indulge in. There was just too much of it. "And in the meantime?"

Jeremy let a brief glimpse of his feelings show, unable to deny her the comfort she wanted and the

hope his heart needed. “In the meantime, we’ll get to know each other. If he waits too long, it’s his loss.”

Samantha sighed restlessly, thinking again that this man would never hurt her, wasn’t dangerous to a woman, and that was why it wouldn’t succeed. She needed that edge of unknown. Still, at least she wouldn’t be walking through her days completely alone. “Okay, for now. How long I’ll last in this play, I don’t know.”

Jeremy understood completely. “Same here, baby. Same here.”

7

Still running through the dark trees in a wild rage, Becky hit a hard body and came to a jarring stop. They fell in a tangle of limbs and the crying girl’s sobbing increased.

“Slam this place!”

“I don’t think so much of it either.”

Rick was amused, and Becky didn’t get off his chest. The tears were still coming and she shuddered when he slid an arm around her.

“Sshhhh...”

Rick comforted her easily and enjoyed the feel of her young body against his. If not for the guards... He pushed himself up, gently hauling her along, and though he left his arm around her, he put clear space between them. Too bad he wasn’t on his own time right now, but sneaking around had to be done carefully.

“It’ll be okay. You’ll think of something.”

Becky sniffled against his hot arm. “And you’ll help me with it.”

Glad her voice had been barely audible, Rick said soothingly. “Yes. In a little while, they’ll all be too busy to think about her.”

The shadows observed tensely, hoping Rick would cross any line, but the suspected traitor only offered a little more comfort and then gently pushed the teenager toward camp. It would be reported, but without an actual crime, Rick was safe.

Chapter Thirteen
Playing with Fire
April 24th
Safe Haven

1

Fate isn't something you can plan for. Sometimes, all you can do is hold on and steer toward the shallows.

I was expecting all men. My council will be only half that. I'm struggling to be careful with them and the camp. Samantha needs time to adjust before I can pull her in openly. Angie has to be trained, taught. The load has increased, but so have the benefits. Not one Seer, but three!

Fate blessed me and cursed me by sending me so much power it can't be used freely. Somewhere, laughter is spilling on my account, I'm sure.

I now have what I need, but where to begin! What to push the hardest? We're spending the next two days on the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge and I hope to get further in my plans. These women need to be accepted and I have total faith that fate will provide the right places, at the right times.

And if one of them fails, these sheep won't give a second chance.

Adrian turned the page in his notebook, not entirely certain now. It would depend on how bad the flinch was and what it cost—

Got a minute?

Adrian steadied himself against the vivid feel of Angela suddenly being in his thoughts.

Sure. What's up?

I need a schedule switch.

Instantly alert, he shut the newest journal that now held a single entry. He had already filled five others since the War of 2012.

You having trouble?

Not exactly. Kyle said you changed my shifts to mid-morning when I got hurt. Please, put them back?

Adrian's mind raced. Why would she want to be awake so early? Part of proving herself?

Mostly to...avoid the morning sets.

Adrian scowled furiously. Hiding from Kenn?

No, he was out of camp with Zack and his team on a slaver recon right now and Kyle usually had Point at that time. The lower levels all trained on that shift. She was avoiding Marc.

I'll take care of it.

Thanks.

There was a pause as he felt her need for something else, but didn't respond. If it were important, she would ask. Without being able to

view those expressive orbs, he would only be guessing at her thoughts.

Grateful he wasn't pushing, Angela let their connection open further, giving him what he wouldn't ask for as she walked through tents—another view of his dream.

Safe Haven sprawled out over the muddy street and corn, refusing to bend to the will of the ominous sky. People walked, talked and enjoyed being with each other, and there wasn't a single sign of the terror that had brought most of them together. Happiness flowed from those already awake, contentment and peace caused by the caring of one man's determined dream.

His ambitions glowed with life through her sight and it made Adrian's heart fill with pride and satisfaction. These people were in good shape considering all that had happened, and obviously well cared for. Their leader was a good man.

Thank you.

It's my honor.

Adrian was grateful for the peace that allowed for a rare extra few minutes to snooze and think. And what did his mind consider most important right at this very moment? The woman now on her way to give a final class to two levels of Eagles. This is how it had become. Even the threat of the slavers came second most days. And the dreams!

Angela had been here for almost four weeks and each day came with a new awareness of her good attitude, her soft voice. She was the light in

his darkness, only instead of rebuilding, most of his nights now revealed ways to teach this special female everything he knew.

She was unlike any other here, but more than that, she was different than any woman he'd known...except for his mother. Their resemblance was probably part of his growing fascination with the quiet beauty. Both of them were strong, able to adapt, and they loved their sons. It was clear that Angela would do anything for her boy and Adrian was aware of how hurt she was that the teenager was still giving her, but not Marc, the cold treatment.

It was one of those things Adrian planned to help her with, but all these changes happening in sight of the herd meant he had to go slow and he felt his guts twist in a painful spasm. So long!

Adrian sighed, pushing the awful image away. He'd imagined endless months of waiting to have what he now wanted as much as any of the other males here. Did she even feel this pull? Not likely. All she wanted was Marc, but *that* Marine wouldn't be able to make her happy either.

2

"I have eighteen seats and only sixteen students. Who isn't here?"

"That would be us."

Neil and Marc entered together and Angela lifted her uninjured arm. "Two volunteers, come on up."

She gestured at the bench of supplies, “You’ve taken the class. This is the level test. Remove one stitch from my shoulder.”

Countenance tight with disapproval, Marc came up. “You’re the boss.”

He concentrated on the ugly wound waiting to be tended. “Timed?”

“You know it.”

Marc dropped his jacket and quickly scrubbed, clearly agitated.

“Ready.”

“Go.”

Hands steady, Marc opened the packages in the right order and carefully but firmly pulled off the bandage. He couldn’t hide his wince at the ugliness of it against that satin skin.

Angela tilted her arm toward him with a low mutter, “It sliced the K in half. Did you notice?”

“No.” He hadn’t. There had been too much anger, but it was true, and for a moment it was like a sign that things would get better from this point.

Aware that the others would copy him, Marc tried to remember her lessons and forget some of the things he’d been taught before the war. Angie’s classes and basic aid training were worlds apart.

He did fine cleaning the ugly wound with the alcohol pads, pretending it was someone else’s tense shoulder. He chose the right tools to take out the stitch, but when he actually started to do it, he hesitated, unsure. What had he forgotten?

“One minute,” Doug called, supervising from a corner where he still towered over everyone else.

Marc got moving and as he snipped the stitch, it flashed in his mind.

Glaring, he gently pulled the gooey black thread out of her shoulder.

“A minute forty, one mistake. Next.”

“Why did you let me keep going?” Marc interrupted, unable to wait. “Why did you do that?”

“This is a Level test,” Angela reminded him coolly.

“And what if my mistake gets the wound infected?”

“Then I’ll treat it. I am a doctor. Next!”

Marc stormed from the tent and Angela explained her reasoning to the Eagles, hoping they could help him understand. “If he didn’t have feelings for the injured party, this wouldn’t be a problem, but it’s very likely you’ll be doing these things for a teammate. Better that you can handle it. Next.”

Neil came forward. “Ready.”

“Go.”

Neil repeated Marc’s actions, remembering to smear the antibiotic over the tips of the forceps and he gave her a smile as he tugged it out. “First one I ever did that wasn’t on me.”

“One minute, 35 seconds. No mistakes. Next.”

Neil washed up and then quickly ducked out of the tent. It was time for the self-defense lessons

and he wanted to see if Samantha was there again. Since bloodying Doug's nose, it was becoming her morning ritual. Her and *Jeremy*.

Samantha was finishing when he arrived and Neil noted the impressed facades of the teachers.

Showing another flash of why Adrian had given him such a high place in the chain of command, Neil asked, "Ever think about joining the Eagles? We're always hunting for new rookies."

"Not me," Sam denied as she left the hay ring. "I have to be...able to defend myself." Samantha wiped the sweat from her neck. "Everything might...have been different."

"It was bad for a lot of us then."

"Might not have been, if women weren't so weak, so ready to lean on the first set of nuts they met."

"That's one of the reasons Adrian tells everyone to take this class."

"And we appreciate it being available, even when we're sore all over."

She walked away and Neil found himself following. "Are you okay?"

Samantha nodded, tired. "Bad dreams."

She stopped to retie her shoe and Neil found himself peering down the front of her sweater. *Blue lace bra. Hmm...*

"John could give you something."

"That's okay. I need to learn to handle it."

“Alone?”

She frowned up at him. “Yes.”

“Most of the people here had bad things happen to them, Sam. Why not talk to us?”

She hesitated and Neil waved at himself. “Adrian’s, all the way. If he trusts me, so can you.”

Samantha studied his earnest expression. “I don’t talk about it because I don’t think I’d be welcome if people knew.”

“I’m not everyone and I’m guessing Adrian already knows. You can trust me. I’d never judge you.”

Samantha allowed herself to hope. “I worked for the government, before.”

“The government?”

Neil’s dismay was obvious.

“Yes.”

“Weather tracking?”

“Seattle EPA.”

His mouth dropped in quick understanding. “You had a pass!”

“The chopper crashed, got hit by an EMP, I think. It went down in Northern Wyoming. I was the only survivor.”

Her haunted voice reminded him of Angela’s as she confirmed his suspicions and Neil’s mind raced. “You made it to the compound?”

“I didn’t get the chance for a while,” she said, posture rigid. “I had to get away from two painters first. They found the crash site. No one else ever came.”

Neil forced himself to ask, “How long were you with them?”

“Two weeks.”

Her tense body language said that was the moment in time where she’d needed protection, and Neil felt something inside shift. He would have fought for her.

“Then I went to NORAD.”

Neil mirrored her sadness for the once great American icon, but in those blue depths lurked a knowledge of life and death that told Neil she’d also had problems there.

“There was nothing left.”

“Same as the other places the slavers have been through.”

“You’ve been there?”

“We take pictures at most of the places we check.”

“Most?”

Distracted, Neil gave a full answer. “All. Adrian wants concrete proof there’s no safety to be found there.”

“Proof for later.”

Catching himself, Neil didn’t react, didn’t respond, but Samantha knew. “I may not be on the team, but I’m checking in from time to time, learning how it works. He’s very careful.”

“He’s right to be and so are you,” Neil confirmed. “Some people wouldn’t want you to stay.”

She motioned toward the hay ring. “Thus, my not joining. It draws too much attention.”

Neil didn’t pull any punches. “And since you don’t want to repeat your mistakes and join up with leadership, it’s a good excuse.”

Samantha flushed. “Maybe.”

“Like Angie, you’re gifted and afraid of that power being used by the wrong people.”

Samantha didn’t deny it. “I respect Adrian, like it here, but then I liked my old life. Who’s to say this isn’t a good beginning to another bad end?”

“There are no guarantees, Sam. You already know that *real* life is always about the risks vs. the rewards,” he said patiently.

“I’m not afraid of that!” she responded vehemently. “I expect it to be hard, but until I’m a believer, I won’t even pretend. When that changes, you’ll know it.”

Neil was thoughtful as she walked away. Samantha had signed up for every public and private defensive class they were offering to non-Eagles, and it clicked, why. She was expecting to be thrown out and was trying to prepare for being alone again. What was she guilty of?

Neil changed directions. Angela would know.

3

“I’m sorry, I don’t. There’s only darkness, not a good sign.”

“So you think she might be a tra—”

“No,” Angela interrupted, discerning Adrian at the shooting area. Why was she drawn so strongly to him? There wasn’t any danger triggering her reaction, so what was up?

She dropped her head before he noticed. “Samantha feels responsible for things. Guilt is her demon.”

That terror, Neil understood all too well. Not being able to save his father had almost destroyed him. He did a fast sweep. *Clear*. “How can I help her?”

Angela marked her place in the study guide that Jeremy had left her after removing one stitch with no mistakes and no record. She had five minutes until her workout lesson with her team and she was busy cramming.

“Why do you want to?”

Neil blinked, not expecting the question. “She’s one of us. She should be at his side.”

Angela swept the noisy people, and then said, “She helps him quietly, like John. Tell me the real reason and I’ll give you the answer, but I’ll warn you now, you probably won’t like it. I know she won’t.”

“I’m already aware she wants to be left alone, but I’ll do it anyway. She’s not happy...and I don’t like it.”

Satisfied he wanted the information to help, not make Samantha uncomfortable, Angela gave it to him. Their relationship had come a long way since he’d called her Barbie.

“Good. Study her, Neil. Figure out what *she’s* studying, and then you’ll know. Or at least get an idea. And she is by Adrian’s side. I think what she’s searching for is easier found if she’s not so public.”

Neil left Angela alone to study, knowing he would follow the advice. If Adrian needed the blonde accepted, he could help with that. After all, he’d gotten Marc his start here and that had been an ugly mess. Hers wouldn’t be as bad, would it?

4

Charlie spied on the Eagles without moving, surprised he’d been able to sneak by the sentries. He was lying in the corn stalks under one of the trucks surrounding the training area and he quickly blocked his mind as his mom came from the tent

She feels like an Eagle, was his first thought; *a real Eagle*. She had the clothes and cap, and of course, the rookie jacket that everyone was muttering about, but it was more than that. The way she stood, the way she swept the area, even how her hand rested on the butt of her gun. She was really one of them. Not pretend, like Zack’s boys were always saying.

Charlie watched her join Kyle’s team as they came out into the chilly dimness peering through the grit. He was surprised again when she took the bodyguard’s place behind Chris, the team’s second in command. Was she that good?

The Eagles began a complicated drill that there obviously wasn't room for inside. When she covered her charge, not letting the others touch him as they circled, Charlie realized she also looked like she belonged with them. She was fast, smooth, and not afraid. He didn't see her flinch once and his heart was suddenly full of gratitude toward his dad. The trip here had changed her, helped her. Adrian was right. He owed Marc a debt.

The boy slowly inched out of the area, standing, and had to stifle a shout. Adrian was standing inside of the truck that he had just crawled from beneath.

“Something interesting in there?”

Charlie instinctively replied, “Nothing.”

“Good, since this area is off-limits to you.”

Adrian lit a smoke, considering. His bond with this boy would be very important in the future, he was sure of that.

“Don't ever get caught snooping around by the Eagles. It'll cost you a place with them before it's even available.”

The shocked teenager was overwhelmed with emotion as the leader strode to the mess. Too bad Adrian couldn't be his dad.

Charlie thought of his frequent dreams and the island woman now in grave danger. If she survived, she would come here, and the boy had a feeling that Adrian would like the red-skinned castaway. A lot.

“Com to Eagle One. Both crews pulled in. No contact. QZ?”

Adrian pushed the button. “Negative. Send ‘em to the mess.”

“Copy.”

Adrian pulled the battered notebook from his pocket, along with the new one, and the men at the table did the same as he joined them.

“We’ll have a mini meeting now and be on our own time when we make camp tonight.”

Around them, voices lowered. There wasn’t a tension with it, only a curiosity that said they also wanted to know what the recon teams had found. Two of them had been sent out—one to spy on the slavers, the other to locate the wild dog den.

Adrian surveyed Neil and then Kyle, and both men gave him a quick gesture. They would keep Kevin and Zack from saying anything they shouldn’t.

Noise levels increased as the four top men came toward the mess, Kenn and Zack in the lead. Those two returned the greetings loudly, glad to be home. Doug and Kevin followed more slowly. Of the two teams, theirs was the one observed the most. Grim expressions said trouble had come, and the missing tension now found its way into the group of eating refugees.

Adrian waited for the recon teams to be seated, and gestured at two people to join them. A third,

he motioned toward the line, and Charlie left right away to get trays for the returning men.

Angela waited until Kenn was sitting securely on Adrian's right before joining the crowded table, taking the spot to Kyle's left. John sat on the open end by Doug. To Angie, he appeared fragile in contrast to the gentle giant. In fact, he was paler than usual. Was the doctor sick?

Adrian let them get set, ignoring Kenn's angry glare. "Where are they?"

"They've burned parts of Howes. We think there were people still around and the slavers used fire to get them out."

Adrian forced himself to go on as if it didn't matter, but inside, his chest tightened. *I missed them!*

They'd been so busy with the tank that he hadn't thought to have her feel for survivors.

Angela didn't meet his eyes, but he could feel her pain, her guilt. It rivaled his own.

"You get the pictures?" he forced out.

"Two rolls." Kenn made a motion that said there was triple that. "We also staked it out for a bit. Some of them are missing."

"Supply runs?"

"That's what we figured. They've been following us and have run out of food and fuel. Hopefully, they'll be there a while."

"We'll keep making tracks, get off their radar," Adrian stated, writing in his book. "The wolves?"

Afraid to reveal his shaking hands, Doug gave Kevin a glance. His symptoms were worsening and he refused to go to John yet. He wasn't giving up this new life until he couldn't do the job anymore.

"There's a den near Chadron." Kevin paused, noting Angela's interest at the name.

"More than a hundred in one place. They ran after us, attacked the tires. We think that's the spot to target." Doug finished and coughed into his hand. *Damn side-effects!*

The wild dog sightings had caused people to stay out of the high corn and grass, but it had progressed from a sighting to an attack. Thankfully, it had only been on a goat, and Adrian wasn't waiting for it to be a child. *This* problem they could handle now and he knew Angela would want to go. He hadn't had time to fully consider letting her, but he was already sure that she would ask.

"Yeah. They all come to the same area around sundown. No idea why. Lot of females with pups."

"Good. That mission will come right after the tests are done and it's open to anyone, so long as they are a level Eagle."

He turned to John, feeling the men all relax as they realized he'd excluded Angela since she was still a rookie and not scheduled for the tests.

That they know of, Adrian amended. "What did the exams show?"

"There's nothing that explains the overly aggressive behavior, and no signs of mutations or

radiation, either,” John answered, subtly pushing an envelope toward Adrian that the camp missed. The truth was in it.

“That’s ‘cause they’re eating people,” Kevin muttered.

Angela noted Kyle give the rookie a subtle gesture.

“More likely they’re eating animals that aren’t sick,” John covered smoothly. “They can smell it.”

“So there’s nothing that we should be on edge for? No super-wolves?” Adrian led, always singing to the herd.

“Not even wolves, from what I’ve examined,” John stated. “It’s a group of abandoned pets.”

“All right. Anything else?”

There was quiet and Adrian gave Charlie a nod, glad he’d drafted Matt to help.

“Good. Enjoy that warm bread. Only picnic baskets in the vehicles for dinner tonight.”

There were grins and groans at those words, and not only from those at his table. Some of their travel days, like this one, would now start at noon. Each car was packed with a basket of cold dishes that would serve as the evening meal, so they could keep traveling until after it got dark. When they camped, everyone would be on their own time, with only warm tents waiting for their tired bodies.

Adrian subtly searched the people for problems and was pleased not to discover anything that couldn’t wait. Becky and Rick were still

exchanging the occasional glance, but she was sitting with her mother. Neil had assured him he'd told the teenager to stay clear of the suspected traitor. If she didn't, Adrian would take matters into his own hands.

Like he would with Cynthia, if Jeremy didn't make peace. Those two were also exchanging glances, but not the friendly kind. The reporter was sharing some of the glares with Samantha, who sat with Hilda at one of the women's tables. The college kids Angela had rescued were also there, the pregnant mother now glowing with the knowledge that in the height of winter, she would have a new life to care for.

Adrian saw Dog pad to where Charlie was sitting with Matt and stood up, gathering his trash. *Good.* "We leave in twenty. I'll be around."

Kenn felt the air at the table cool and turned resignedly to Zack. For a few days, he'd been mostly at peace. "Make sure it all gets put where it belongs?"

Zack's mouth was too full for speech, but his hands directed Kenn to the bulletin board, where Angela's name was under shotgun.

That old, familiar rage flooded and Kenn shoved away from the table to keep from saying anything. What else had happened while he was gone?

Kenn went to the training tent, where Jeff would be helping pack things up, like usual. That Eagle was on his side and Kenn needed an update.

How much power had she gained while he was away?

6

Angela climbed into the lead rig and shut the door, aware of all the attention it drew. Usually Kenn rode with Adrian. Today, her name had been on the board.

Angela lit a smoke and got comfortable, wondering what Adrian wanted while hoping her being here didn't cause more trouble.

Adrian was waiting nearby, discovering who had a real problem with the driving change. Other than Kenn and a few of his allies, no one seemed resentful, just curious.

He went to his rig. The camp would be told he had medical questions, the Eagles would think he needed her gift, but deep down, it was her safety. He wanted her with him.

"So, you don't have any work for me?" she asked as he got in and shut the door.

"You sound disappointed," Adrian commented as he settled into the seat.

Angela pushed a curl aside, noting members hurrying to load up now that the boss was ready to go. "I kind of expected it. I brought a book."

Adrian picked up the mike, chuckling. "You won't need it." He hit the button. "This is Eagle One. We leave in five. Count-off."

Angela waited patiently, let him work, but she was keenly aware of him, aware of his strong life-

force and his musky, man-smell. She was careful not to glance at him, afraid he would read the unease. The spark between her and Marc was powerful, but the raw, primitive flames in Adrian's quickly hidden looks made it dim in comparison. She was in love with Marc, always had been, but something was growing between her and Adrian and it made her nervous. If anyone found out...

“Ready?”

Angela jerked as he leaned over, pulling a map from behind her seat.

She let out a sigh. “Sorry, yes.”

Adrian gave her the map, tone light. “Which way?”

Angela studied the noisy paper, concentrating. After a moment, she pointed. “People near Chadron, food and water in McCook.” She raised a brow. “That’s what I’m up here for, right?”

Adrian shifted into gear, giving the same answer he’d spoken the first time she’d shown an interest in being an Eagle.

“Among other things. Tell me about the people. I’ll send a team for them.”

“We met them right before Kenn found us. They have our predator problem, too.”

Angela told him the story quickly. “If Marc had been alone, she wouldn’t have helped him, but she was fair. Even gave us the supplies we traded for, trusted us to leave our part of it where we said it would be.”

It's no coincidence, them being so close to where Kevin said the den is, he thought. Fate was providing another opportunity.

"I might be able to convince her to come with us."

Adrian was quiet, considering. No one would like it, but Angela was an Eagle and a member of Kyle's team. The slavers were at their old site, still on the far side of the Cheyenne River. It would be at least a week before the Mexicans could get to the state line, no matter what route they took. More than enough time for a quick team to roll in, wipe out a wolf den and evacuate any nearby survivors. Still, it was a risk. He would have a...talk with Dog about his assumptions.

Adrian heard her sigh resignedly; ready to accept the "no" she expected. He felt his plans shift again. She wanted more and he would give it to her.

"Okay. I'll tell Kyle, you tell Marc."

Angela was surprised into a challenge of his honesty. "And Kenn?"

"Will be taught to handle it."

Realizing he meant it, she beamed, lighting up the cabin with happiness. Her first overnight mission. She paused. Wasn't he afraid she would be in danger?

"Terrified."

Angela liked the connection that sometimes allowed him to pick up her thoughts, like with

Marc, but the honesty meant more. “Maybe they gave up.”

Adrian slid his sunglasses into place. “Maybe.”

“But you don’t believe that?”

“No, be careful. We need you with us.”

She glanced toward the long line of people behind them. “I need to be here. It’s where I belong now.”

“How’s the training going?”

She didn’t whine. “Okay.”

Adrian wanted more details, but didn’t push. Instead, he listened and could hear her thinking about how hard it was to train with all the attention on her.

“Thank you, for adding me to the tests,” she said quickly, not wanting him to know that it was only one set of eyes that bothered her. She used to be so comfortable with Marc around...

“Uh-huh,” Adrian grunted. No one knew yet. Even the Eagles wouldn’t be told until the last minute. Which was good, because he didn’t have it all sorted out yet.

Angela didn’t tell him that she didn’t either, but at least there was a bare plan in her mind. When they settled for the night, she would attend the ‘leaders only’ meeting and get things rolling.

She started to ask if Kenn would be told she was taking the level test, but they were both stunned into silence at the horror coming into view.

The schoolhouse was small and old, clearly unused even before the war. It was two-storied, with thin trees and high grass, surrounded by open land and birds. Big black crows, feasting on bodies. Hundreds of the flying carnivores flew around the area, fighting, falling.

The remains are drying up, Angela thought, failing to get an accurate estimate as the crows rapidly changed position

“Convoy halt.”

Angela jumped at the call, and was glad when Adrian hit the private communication button on his belt.

“There are tracks up here. Four, fall out and search for survivors.”

“Copy.”

Angela spotted the deep skid marks in the muddy weeds as Adrian picked up the main mike again. “Radio silence is over. Get my waves rolling, Mitch, now.”

7

Adrian had them make camp after their normal time for evening mess, aware that people hadn't adjusted to the new hours yet. By making their departure time later here and there, they would spend more day hours aware of their surroundings and less night time when they could be attacked without warning—like with the wild dogs that he now suspected were responsible for the death-

scene they'd rolled by. Those four-legged creatures were a threat.

That thought had him sweeping for Angela's shadow as she opened the door. Anything might lurk in all those stalks. "Wait."

"He's right here."

"See you later."

Angela swallowed an automatic response, unhappy with herself. "I'll be in the training tent after the leader's meeting. I've got a game calling for me."

Adrian chuckled, sensing a wall of determination slowly gliding into place. "You've done your work. Now it's time to play?"

Angela ignored the part of her heart that didn't want to leave his side yet. "Sort of. It's also a workout for my patience. Kenn's still got that damn high score and I want it!"

Adrian chortled as she and Seth entered the slowly forming camp. They hadn't spoken much beyond the obvious things and it had been peaceful. It had also been torture, keeping his eyes off the skin showing from under that black tank top.

He saw Kenn getting out of his Bronco with a gunnysack, Zack emerging from the passenger seat with folders. The Marine would put the photos in his tent later and Adrian was dreading them, yet dying to know what his enemy looked like.

Because of her injury, Angela wasn't supposed to be taking her level test this time around, but the public schedule just posted said she was indeed going to, and word had already traveled Safe Haven. The Eagles were more than upset.

They stood in small clusters, smoking and glaring at her angrily. Their thoughts were full of fear, worried over who would be sacrificed so she could play games.

As soon as the camp was settled in, Angela went to the training tent for the meeting she wasn't allowed to attend. It was the top Eagles all in one place, and she wanted to talk to them.

When she got to the large tent, the leaders and their supports were currently arguing over who would give her the cage match. They were pissed at finding out from the sheet, but not at Adrian for withholding the information. At Kenn and Brady, who they believed to be the reason their boss had to lie about it.

Angela couldn't argue. The camp wasn't showing any signs of concern, only her men were.

“There's no way, not against any of us!”

“She'd get hurt.”

“One hit and she'll be done.”

“And then one of us will be gone, 'cause the sheep won't let that fly.”

“Maybe you're all underestimating her.”

Kenn was surprised to hear Kyle defend the idea. He'd been quiet so far, listening eagerly, but

now he demanded, “You think she could last in the cage with me?”

Kyle said what all of them were thinking.

“She survived you beating on her for years. Who knows your weaknesses better?”

Kenn was in Kyle’s grill a second later and everyone in the training area stilled.

“You should be careful!” Kenn growled at the tanned man in hatred.

Kyle let his own personal fury show. “And you should have been banished!”

“Stop it!”

Angela’s voice echoed through the tent, drawing everyone’s attention, including the two men about to exchange blows.

This has to stop now, she thought as an awkward silence fell. First, how to get rid of Kenn?

She shrugged out of the rookie jacket and tossed it at the Marine, who caught it on-the-fly. “You still want me to quit?”

Kenn was aware of the dirty glowers going from her shoulder to him, and kept quiet.

“Well, tough shit! Your wants don’t matter here anymore.”

Kenn’s face became ugly and he threw the jacket to the ground. “I’m already aware of that, you sneaking bitch!”

He pushed his way angrily through the men and exited the tent as Angela walked towards the center and slid onto the edge of the gun table.

“My joining has caused a split among Adrian’s Army. I told my team on the very first day that I’d bow out if it endangered his dreams and I meant it. If I have to resign to fix this, I will.”

“Adrian wants you right where you are,” Seth stated firmly.

“It’s causing fights and I won’t be the reason his plans fall.” She paused, encouraged that they were willing to listen. Even Zack was keeping his mouth shut.

“The women here want this. They’ve come to me already, given their support. They’ll follow me in and I know that’s another part of what holds you back. I understand better than you might think, but let me ask you something. Did you really and truly *like* the women of the old world? Didn’t you get tired of being the reason everything was wrong, of carrying all the weight? It doesn’t have to be that way now. We can share it. All you have to do is teach us.”

Jeremy started to protest, but stopped and Angela insisted, “Please. I prefer blunt honesty to political correctness. It saves time.”

The Eagle grunted. So did he. “Most of us don’t think you should have to. Men are the protectors here and that’s the way it should have been all along. Might have been part of what was wrong before.”

“I agree.” She surprised them. “Most females would still want their old lives, but for some of us...the war unlocked prison doors. The women

who came out of those ugly cells are a new generation, searching for where we belong.”

Jeremy didn't betray himself this time, but she read it anyway. “I know. You don't think a woman, especially one who looks like me, can take the hard choices, constant training, and nasty battles, right?”

There were nods, some reluctant, some not, and Angela gestured. “That's why I'm here. I'm hoping to make a deal.”

“What sort of deal?” Chris asked warily. “We won't steal Adrian's thunder.”

“And I wouldn't take it if you did,” she confirmed. “If I fail the cage, I'll resign. If I pass, I get treated like any other Eagle.”

There was silence for a shocked moment, and a worried anger that she would have to talk to Marc about privately. “Before the war, we were all something else. Now, we're soldiers in Adrian's Army and I want that place as much as any of you.”

“It's about more than you, though,” Jeff spoke up and his neutral tone was something of a surprise to Zack. “If one of us hits you, we get banished and it won't matter if it's in the cage or during a workout.”

“That's a law for members. I'm an Eagle.”

“The camp only cares that you're female,” Zack pointed out snottily. “What happens if you draw Kenn's name for the cage on a level test? He

can't make any exception by Eagle rules, but by our laws he'll be banished."

"Not if I kick his ass."

There were disbelieving noises from many of the men. Kenn had taken down Doug.

Angela didn't support her words with boasting. When her silence caused the scorn to fade, she continued. "If I had...teammates, who were willing to teach me, I'd have nothing to fear from him or any other man. And that, the sheep would support completely."

Angela added another layer of pros before any of them could give a con. "If they know a woman wants this life, they'll let her have it because of Adrian's rules, but only if she's accepted."

"You've already got Adrian's support. You don't need the Eagles," a high-pitched voiced called out, causing attention to shift. "Just do what I do and keep your head down."

Angela found the man in a corner, alone, and ignored the witch whispering for her to let it go. "You don't get it, Ray. If I did like you, I wouldn't have his support, and honestly, why are you still here, when they don't want you either?"

The man's hands came up. "I want a place by his side, too. They have no right to deny me that!"

"They have every right. Your very presence in this tent tonight is a lie. You pretend not to be something that you are, so that you can keep being something you've been ashamed of your entire life. You hide from your team and from the camp.

Even around Adrian, you're too closed-off. With that kind of web around you, being hit on in the shower is the least of their worries. You have no trust with them and I won't live my new life that way. For me, it's all, *openly*, or nothing."

The Level One Eagle wanted to argue, but shifted for the door instead, muttering about female dogs under his breath.

Angela silently thanked Ray for his unknowing help. He might be Kevin's right hand now, but the man would never be a true leader here until he stopped running from who he was and what he wanted.

"I won't be treated like that and stay anyway. If I lose the cage match, I'll pull out."

There was another silence and Seth raised a brow, hiding his thoughts. *Damn, she's good.* "And what exactly do you mean by treated like one of the team? 'Cause sometimes, that'll be hard no matter how well you fight."

"Let Adrian make those calls. It'll be his choice then, like it should be anyway." She moved toward the flap, rotating her sore arm. It felt different with the stitches out. "You could even make it a semi-private match, so the camp doesn't see this first one, only the Eagles. That way, whoever might hit me won't get in trouble and I still get my chance to prove I belong in his army."

She cast a lingering glance at the rookie jacket still lying on the dirty floor and each man there felt an instant kinship with her because of it.

“I’m going to want that back.”

As she emerged into the chilly darkness, she found Adrian waiting.

“This is what you want?”

“Yes,” she stated firmly, feeling naked without the jacket. “You’ll play fair and not help me?”

“Yes.”

“Hell, maybe I’ll flunk out and be happy as the second doctor. Marc sure would be happier that way.”

“You think that’s what will happen?”

She shook her head at the worry in Adrian’s tone. “No. I think after this, you can relax, that whatever plans you’ve formed around me will be safe.”

Marc left the tent when she faded into the darkness, hurrying to catch up. He didn’t speak to Adrian and the leader knew another argument was coming.

Adrian motioned his own shadow after them, sure Marc would be too busy dealing and ducking blows to monitor her six, even though he was her guard right now. A woman like her deserved no less than a man’s full intensity.

8

Marc followed her at a distance, trying to get his emotions under control and he was surprised by who she approached.

“I may need you to help me cheat on the level test.”

Kenn snorted bitterly, not turning from the clipboard and inventory sheets she’d found him digging into. “Outta your fucking mind. Always knew you were.”

“It’s what Adrian wants.”

Kenn rolled his eyes. “Like I don’t know that! He made a big show of giving you the jacket, but real Eagles get theirs quietly. You’re a decoy or maybe bait.”

“So?”

“So why don’t you ask him? Or your lover boy over there, glaring from the corn? Either of them would do it.”

“Only you can give me this.”

There was a moment of thick silence as he studied her intently. “Why an Eagle, Angie?”

“Not for your place.”

“Then why?”

She didn’t answer, didn’t need to.

Kenn sighed. “I’m his second. I can’t help you betray him.”

“That’s only to the camp, if they found out. To the men, who know what Adrian wants, it’ll be viewed as support. FND.”

Kenn blinked. He hadn’t thought she could grasp the concept, let alone use it to her advantage like this.

“I can’t do it.”

“Because of Brady, you’ll let one of Adrian’s dreams die?”

Kenn hated it that her pull was so strong.

“This is part of what you signed up for as his right hand. You’ve always known that sharing power would come up, but I don’t want your place and neither does Marc or Neil. Give Adrian what he needs.”

Tonya’s voice flashed in his mind. *“In time, she’ll be above even Adrian.”*

If that was true, then the leader had it planned that way from very the beginning and it was much too late to change now.

Kenn’s shoulders slumped. “Cheat how?”

“Take a dive if it’s needed.”

Kenn gaped in disbelief. “You think I’m getting in the cage with you after everything that’s happened? You are nuts!”

Angela gestured toward the training tent. “They’ve promised me fair. There’s a chance I could draw your number from the hat.”

“I’ll refuse, even if he orders me, and so will everyone else. You’ll never get one of us to hit you.”

Drawing in a breath, she used her big gun, knowing it would succeed, but scared of the consequences. “Not even Zack?”

Kenn hesitated, thinking of his conversation where they’d joked about the trucker hitting her in front of Adrian. “Not unless I tell him to.”

Angela let him see her anger. If they all refused, she couldn't pass. "I need you to set this up for me!"

Kenn didn't want to answer. If he gave Zack the okay and he hurt her, all the problems with the Eagles would return. Not with Adrian, it was all his idea anyway, Kenn assumed. Angela could never have come up with this on her own. It was too good... And Zack breaking her nose would be almost as great as doing it himself. Tempting.

Impatient and scared, Angela's sharp voice snapped at his ego again. "Are you loyal to him, Kenn? Because I have my doubts and Adrian probably does too."

"You'll have to challenge or I'll have to tell him to volunteer when everyone else refuses," Kenn ground out, hating her. "A challenge will succeed every time. It's a serious insult not to accept it."

Angela surprised him again, this time with gratitude. "Thank you."

"For telling you the secret that will get these men to hit you? Crazy ass broad!"

Kenn climbed into the supply truck as Angela strode to the parking area, hoping it would be mostly deserted for the ugly scene that was coming. She hadn't told Marc she was taking the test and he was hot.

Wait until he hears your other news, the Witch warned.

Marc was on her heels now, not as her shadow, but as a verbal combatant that she was quickly tiring of sparring against. Why couldn't he understand and accept her choices? She faced him stiffly. This would be the last time she tried to get him to come around. It was tiresome and hurtful. She dropped the next hard truth without mercy.

"If I pass the cage match, I can go on the mission."

"No!"

"You don't get to tell me that."

His face twisted at the reminder. "Fine. Do what you want. You will anyway."

"Marc."

He stopped his departure, but didn't turn around and she begged, "Please."

Marc couldn't resist and found her only a step away, without a shadow that he could pick out in the darkness. "What?"

"I need to do this."

Her almost desperate tone snagged his attention and he studied her this time, seeing the truth. She was tired. And afraid.

"We're about to go to war. I'll be on the front lines. This is something I need to do now, so I'll know how then."

The depth of her fear had Marc reaching for her before he thought about it.

Aware of their audience even if he wasn't, Angela flinched.

Marc froze, wounded.

They stared at each other, feeling old frustrations, and underneath, loneliness. It was crushing, heartbreaking, and so strong she wasn't sure she could resist if he moved even an inch.

Marc sensed her weak state and retreated. "I need to know where we stand, Angie. Soon."

She agreed stiffly. "I'll let you know as soon as the mission is over."

"I'm coming along."

"Good. It'll be like old times."

There was a flash of joy in his countenance and then anger again. "What the hell is wrong with him? With you? It's toward the slavers!"

Angela pushed her resentment away. "I hope to get Max and Lenore to come with us. If I'm there, she might."

"Your life for theirs, is a bad trade."

"Who says I'm not coming back?" she asked coldly.

"You shouldn't even take that risk. *He* shouldn't take it."

"I want to go. I also want to be an Eagle."

"I've got that, loud and clear."

"Then what's the problem? Was everything on the trip here an act? Tell her what she wants to hear." Angela's voice became an eerie imitation of his. "*You would have made a good Marine.* Just smoke, right?"

Marc was getting angrier at having his words used against him. "I meant it, but you're reckless."

Look at the way you've handed yourself over to Adrian after only a few weeks."

"He's worthy of it," she stated defiantly.

Marc's control broke.

"You hope! You don't even know him yet. You're drunk on the power he's offering!"

Angela gasped in pain. "You think that?"

Marc was indifferent. "Does it matter? You've made your choice and you don't give a damn about anyone else, not really."

That blow hurt more than the first and Angela struck out, sure of his weak spot. "That sounds familiar. I wonder if it's your own guilt finally speaking up. Must suck to be so in love with someone that you couldn't give a shit if they're happy or not."

She leaned in. "Who are you and what have you done with *My Brady*? 'Cause he would never treat me this way."

Before Marc could think up a response, she spun from him and entered the rear of the garden area. Hurting, he trailed her. Was she right? Did he care if she was happy? A month ago, he would have said that was all that mattered to him, but—

"Whhoooooo...!"

The howl was nearby and they both stopped, sweeping the distance. Now a common noise in the night, Marc agreed that eliminating the nest was a good idea, he just didn't want her anywhere near the battle.

“Ask yourself why, Marc. And try honesty this time,” she instructed, clearly agitated.

Admiration was forced out of him. No, he hadn't been blowing smoke. She was one of the strongest females he'd ever known and any branch of the service would have been proud to have her.

It's... I'll die without her. I can't let her be hurt again.

9

“Whhhhoooooooooooo....”

Wwhhhooo!”

The second chilling howl was answered almost right away and Samantha froze in panicked fear. *The wolves!*

Pain flared in her scarred leg and she automatically clutched at the empty ghost before remembering where she was.

The garden truck was deserted except for her. A handful of guards outside were the only people still on this side of camp and fear overwhelmed Samantha. Not again.

She shoved herself up from the dirt with a gasp. The trailer door was open!

“Wwhhooooo...”

The call had an almost human cadence and Sam ran for the door, panicked. She lunged at the handle and jerked it down just as a dark shadow came through the last of the space.

The door hit the shadow and Samantha kicked instinctively, foot connecting with something

warm and hard. Discerning movement, she pulled her gun.

“Do not fire that weapon!”

Sam flinched at the shout, fingers tightening.

Wait. It talked. Not an animal.

She eased off the trigger and retreated as she examined the scene in horror.

Adrian was on the dirty semi floor, hands up in defense, and two people were peering in shock from the bottom of the door. Sam let go of the gun. She'd almost shot Adrian!

She collapsed, not crying, but sucking in a huge lungful of air.

Adrian waved the two Eagles in as he left. “Take care of her.”

Jeremy climbed into the truck with Neil behind him.

Sam cringed. “I didn't mean to hurt him!”

The Eagles exchanged uneasy glances.

“You didn't,” Jeremy stated, comforting while Neil observed. “You did surprise him, though, something none of us have been able to do.”

Distracted from her fear, Samantha's tone was a bit snotty. “Why do you try? Aren't you guys his loyal minions?”

Kneeling next to her, Jeremy regarded Neil, and got a curt gesture in response.

“Because we don't follow blindly. Some do, but not his main support. He has us, but only if he remains worthy.”

Sensing a moment for real questions, Samantha let hers out carefully. “But the secrets he keeps! How can a...liar be trustworthy?”

Jeremy hid a frown and it was Neil’s calm voice that gave Samantha another piece to Adrian’s puzzle.

“Because he would do anything for these people. He’s already killed for them, for their safety. What’s a lie compared to a life?”

Neil slowly picked up the gun by her foot and held it out. “He takes shattered people like you, Samantha, and puts them back together, heals them. He can give you what you’ve lost.”

Samantha holstered, wanting desperately to believe she had found true safety. “And the evil he lets walk free here?”

“Should he kill without proof? If he did that, this haven would rip itself apart,” Neil explained.

“But we know—”

“You *think* you know, and some of us agree, but neither of those is proof.”

“I hate this waiting!” she blurted out angrily.

“So do we. It’s something the Eagles struggle with, but it’s for the dream,” Jeremy stated.

“Adrian’s dream...”

“Yes,” Neil responded carefully. “He would give us the world that should have existed, if he can get enough help from people like you.”

Her slacks had been replaced by jeans over boots, but the sweater remained, giving her an appearance of office casual that fit well with her

promptness and attention to detail. Now keeping her hair in a ponytail while she labored, Neil thought she looked exactly like the mate of an Eagle should. From her slender, labor-roughened hands, to the sensuous curve of her lips, Samantha was full-grown woman.

Samantha's response held hope and fear in equal amounts. "I don't want to have to leave. I like it here."

"He won't let that happen," Neil soothed and both men knew they'd be there to help Adrian with it.

"You're one of us, and I mean more than a member." Jeremy glanced at Neil and saw that his team leader was unsure. "For personal reasons?"

Neil stared at him reluctantly. "Probably." The thought of her at their side for missions had just terrified him.

"Then you're unfit to make the call. Should I wait for one of the others?"

"What are you guys talking about?"

"He wants to recommend you to Adrian for the Eagles."

They discovered Angela in the open space, stained with the nerves and curtness all the lower level Eagles displayed right before the tests.

"And I agree. No woman should be oppressed because of a man's fears or jealousy."

She disappeared, but before the trio could say anything, Marc's face popped into the empty space wearing a rueful expression.

“That was aimed at me. As you were.”

He ducked out and they heard his mutter clearly.

“Damn. Now where the hell did she go?”

Sam and the two Eagles exchanged surprised glances and then burst out laughing, sending the last of her panicked fear out into the stalk-filled darkness.

10

“You’re upset.”

Angela smothered the shout that wanted to fly out of her mouth, but her gun was drawn and pointed at him before she could stop it.

Adrian was pleased with her reaction. He’d confirmed his assumptions about distance with Dog and that had been enlightening. Then he’d snuck up on Angela again, on purpose. She was ready for more and now, so was he.

“Things are unfair sometimes.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No!”

Adrian felt her need, responded. Marc had let him know she’d ditched her shadow, but not why. It wasn’t a stretch to guess that he hadn’t liked discovering that she was going on the mission.

“Want a lesson?”

“Yes, a real one!”

Adrian scanned her bright red scab, and then entered the training tent that they now had to themselves. “You can talk to me.”

When he removed his weapons, Angela did the same, certain there were guards on them. Marc might be out there somewhere, too, but right now, his profile wasn't welcome.

"I know that."

Adrian raised a brow expectantly.

"I'll handle it." Angela entered the hayroom to be hit with a sudden sense of worry. Adrian had taken out Neil so easily.

"I won't hurt you." She'd tensed a bit and he couldn't stop himself from comforting her.

"I know that, too."

"The hard way or the easy way?" Adrian asked. They'd been taking it slow, challenging small areas, but that was over now.

Angela paled, but didn't hesitate. "Hard. I want to be able to kick his ass anytime I feel like it."

Adrian didn't doubt who she was talking about. All of this mess was Kenn's fault. Steeling his heart, Adrian stepped forward. "I challenge you."

Angela immediately swung a roundhouse, sure he wasn't ready for it, and Adrian staggered at the blow... Then returned the favor.

It was only a sting on her cheek, but shocked sounds echoed from the dim cracks around them. Adrian hit a woman!

Angela wasn't shocked; she knew what she'd asked for, and she leaned into her next swing, telling him she could take more.

Adrian let her hit land and then delivered another slap, this one a bit harder.

She swayed, caught her balance.
“Again.”

Angela's hits became steadily harder, and each slap Adrian delivered was received with a pinched face and a healing heart. Before the war, she would have been on the ground already, begging not to be hit again.

Slap!

Adrian's blow knocked her down and Angela felt her rage spring to life as she picked herself up, blood dripping from her lip. How many times had Kenny done that to her? A hundred? A thousand? And she'd had to sit still and take it.

Her facade was ice as she advanced. Not anymore. Now, she got to fight! Her hit was full of fury, solid and well delivered, and Adrian staggered again.

Blood dripped from his nose, but his thoughts were still calm, safe.

“Again, and mean it this time, bitch!” he snarled, making his voice sound almost identical to Kenn's and she did, using the new skills she'd learned from Neil. Blood sprayed at the hit.

Three of the stunned men gaping through the cracks in the bales weren't sure who to protect as the tension grew thicker and the hits harder.

“Whore!”

The insult had Angela swinging again and Adrian grunting at the impact. Neil had done his job.

“Never get away! Mine!”

Angela's fury was firmly in control and even though Adrian was no longer hitting her, she couldn't stop, shiny tears of rage rolling down her red cheeks with every swing.

“Hate you! Fuck you! Pig!”

Adrian stayed as still as he could and felt bitterness grow heavy in his heart for the Marine. Such a piece of shit Kenn had been.

Angela stopped swinging, shoulder on fire. She rested her hands on her knees, getting her wind.

Adrian wiped his sleeve over his bloody nose, waiting, not sure if it had been enough.

“I'm not...either,” Angela panted.

He checked his wrist. “Another five?”

She moved toward him with fire burning in her depths.

Kyle had called Neil, Seth already there, and the three men now stood together. Patrolling the training area against witnesses, their unsure gazes occasionally slid to Marc, who had his stiff back to them, listening. What the hell was happening? Should they intervene? It looked like Adrian had provoked her with the challenge and was now letting her beat on him. If it had been a normal girl's slapping and pulling of hair, they wouldn't have been so worried, but her hits were sturdier than they had expected, drawing blood...not to

mention Adrian's return blows would be hard to explain.

“Is your fear gone?” Adrian asked, five minutes later.

Angela considered, shook her head in a violent spray of blood and sweat. Usually, these stains and pains belonged to the men of Safe Haven and she relished the feel of them while they were there. He hadn't told her what to do after their private lesson, but she already knew the camp wasn't ready to see her this way.

“Not completely. I still kept waiting for you to really hit me.”

“What I did was too much. It makes my heart hurt.”

“And mine, as well,” she agreed sympathetically.

Angela leaned in, so much that Adrian and those guarding thought she might hug him. Instead, she exhaled hundreds of brightly colored atoms that swirled softly in the air around them.

“Breathe them in.”

Adrian did it without hesitation, mouths almost close enough to touch if either of them were hit by a gust of wind, and he felt the magic instantly heal their injuries.

Hunger flashed up between them, sharp and dangerous.

A minute later, the tiny colored orbs began vanishing.

“The Eagles are debating turning around and pretending they didn’t see anything, now that they think we’re done.”

Her eyes flashed with amusement that he thought was a bit forced. She’d felt it this time, the future waiting for them. Adrian chuckled with her, but doubted Marc felt that way. “You did good, sorted through some of it.”

Refusing to let Marc’s chaotic thoughts distract her, Angela smoothed her hair down, adjusted her clothes. “Sometimes I can’t believe I didn’t kill him.”

When Adrian spoke, she had no doubt it was the truth.

“I’ll give it to you if it will help heal the damage he’s done.”

“It means a great deal to me that you would, but I don’t want him dead anymore.” She was unable to deny the attraction flying between them. “Not after all you’ve done for me and my son. That would hurt your dreams and I’d never do that.”

“*Our* dreams.”

He was putting her in a position of power, teaching her how to lead them, and she allowed her gratitude to show. “I owe you a debt.”

He used the moment to confront something he was uncertain about. “It’s nothing compared to what I owe you for not telling them who I was.”

Angela’s voice lowered, even though they were out of earshot. “When these people find out, you’ll lose everything.”

“I know,” he admitted miserably. “And I deserve whatever they give me, but until then, I’ll rebuild and teach them what the old world had forgotten.”

Angela ignored the voice wanting to know exactly where she fit into those plans. “You’re doing great with them, especially the women.”

Adrian concentrated, sending her his vision, and Angela was still a bit amazed to have this kind of connection with both him and Marc.

“Like the Amazons.” She picked up his mental image of an army of warrior women, with her, in full glory, leading them.

“Yes, in a place where the women are as dangerous as the men, America’s survival will never be in doubt.”

“Big dreams,” she commented, already busy searching. She felt the question coming and wanted to know the same thing.

“Is it possible? Can we do that?”

He waited impatiently while she searched the future and felt his heart leap when she nodded.

“Yes, it is. With the right pioneers, almost anything still is.”

11

Neil spotted the shadow moving his way through the empty trees around them, and grimaced. *I thought we settled this.*

He was on duty in the rear of camp and Becky had no business here. Using the skills he’d honed

during his time in Safe Haven, Neil ducked out of view and circled around, never losing sight of the darkly dressed female. He grabbed her arm as his other hand covered her mouth to stifle the expected yell.

“What the hell are you doing, Becky? I already told you not to track me anymore!”

She shook her head, mumbling against his hand, and Neil gently shoved her away. “I can’t give in to you, so stop it now!”

Samantha was shocked by her jealousy and she didn’t turn around, chest hurting from how much she wanted him.

Neil heard her sound and immediately felt guilty for all the times he’d led Becky on. “Wait.”

She kept moving and Neil caught her around the waist.

He pulled her into his arms.

“I’m sorry, Becky,” he whispered as she struggled. “Please don’t cry.”

Before Samantha could tell him she was trying not to hit him, he spun her around and kissed her, hard. Samantha responded as if she was drowning and he was the only way to breathe.

Neil let her deepen the kiss against his better judgment, unable to resist as her sweet tongue slid along his lip, begging entrance. Hot fire flooded him as their tongues touched and he held her by the hip and neck, lost.

He felt the hunger, the passion of a grown woman simmering and his heart responded even as

his mind registered her height, her smell; the feel of her body melted over his like it had always been there. This hot-blooded seductress wasn't his virginal Becky.

Neil slowly broke the kiss, hand reluctantly letting go of the firm cheek it was gripping.

His lids flew open at her mewling noise of protest. He knew that voice!

“Samantha?”

“Neil.” She was winded. “I’m here to give you relief.”

The muscle in his jaw twitched and her cheeks went pink. “I mean, I’m your relief!”

Neil remembered to breathe, very aware that he wasn't worried about who might have witnessed, only her reaction. And that he was incredibly hard. “I’m sorry.”

“It was a case of mistaken identity. No big deal.”

“You aren't mad?”

“Mad? No. Turned on? Hell, yes.”

Sam veered around him to take up her post in the darkness and Neil entered camp in a daze. How was he supposed to sleep after that?

12

“This is Safe Haven. We are an American refugee camp offering food, protection and medical care. Is anyone listening?”

Rick hit the button on the timer and took another long swig of his beer, knowing it would be

almost three full minutes before the radioman stopped broadcasting and rechecked the channels for messages. It was an easy rhythm to predict and he thought he had it down, was about to test his theory.

He picked up the short mike, remembering the tan sentry asking him why he wanted the portable CB. He'd said to listen, like everyone else, but knew Kyle hadn't believed him. He'd had the radio for two weeks now, not daring to make any calls until Adrian lifted the radio silence. Was it okay now that they were broadcasting again?

"Only one way to find out," he muttered, putting the distorter over the mike and keying the button.

"I've got one minute. Instructions?"

There was almost thirty seconds of silence, but Rick waited patiently, positive someone would take the radio to Cesar.

When the answer finally came, it was short.

"Orders are confirmed. Take him out."

Rick clicked the mike once, and then yanked the cord from his set and quickly unscrewed the box, pulling it apart. He dumped the last drops of his soda inside, shook it off and put it on the set with his tools. Anyone who came snooping while he was out of camp tomorrow would discover a system impossible of communication and dismiss him from their thoughts.

The distorter, he shoved into the hole already waiting under the corner of his sleeping bag and

patted it down until he was satisfied that the square he had cut in the bottom of the tent wasn't showing. He was careful when he broke the canvas down and put it up, sure the Eagles would notice the slits if he wasn't. It was the only clue to what he was doing, but it was a big one.

Rick stuffed thick gloves and a large burlap sack into his kit. While they were gathering supplies in the next town, he had a store to visit. Not all of the caged animals would be dead and those few that had survived would be hungry.

Chapter Fourteen
Twice Taken
Pitcairn Island

1

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The pounding was obnoxiously loud and intimidating.

“Open up!”

“We know you’re in there!”

Kendle jerked awake to find Luke standing near the cabin door with a gun in his hand. Where had that come from? She hadn’t noticed a single gun the whole time she’d—

“Luke Johnson! This is Sheriff Cole. You hearin’ me?”

Luke scowled, but didn’t answer. There were ten men out there, more than enough to rush him. Whatever had happened overnight, they’d come heavy and that meant someone was expected to leave with them.

“Last chance, and then we’re coming in!”

Kendle was dressing behind him and Luke asked worriedly, “Can you get to the hole-up on your own?”

“Yes.” They’d made enough trips in the tunnels for her to mostly know her way around.

“Go now, the rear window. Stay there until someone comes for you.”

Luke clicked the lock off the door, causing silence to fall among the muttering men outside.

“You’ll be on your own and they’ll know that.” He set the gun on the shelf by the door. “Take that, too.”

Kendle dressed faster and Luke rotated the knob slowly, buying her time to slip on shoes.

“What do they want?”

He let the door swing open, waving at her to stay quiet. “Me, out of their way.”

Kendle peered out the door and instantly felt dread sweep into her chest. The Sheriff and his friends were armed and there was a pair of gloating green orbs behind them that made her knees go weak. Whatever this was, Ethan was responsible.

She backed out of their view.

“Luke Johnson, you’re under arrest for—”

“Some trumped up charge so he can get my woman alone.” Luke threw an angry hand at the Kraft heir, not expecting his words to help, only buy her time to run. “You plan to take her in, too?”

The Sheriff moved his way, but stopped abruptly when Luke came down the stairs.

“No.”

Luke held out his hands. “Didn’t think so. Guess that Kraft money still works all right.”

“Coming from a murderer, that means nothing to me,” Cole sneered, finally letting his loathing of the pilot show. “And she made her choice.”

Realizing they were all in on whatever was happening, Luke snapped his mouth shut and prepared himself for their custody. He had a feeling there were a few things they would want to get straight with him.

The others crowded around as the Sheriff put Luke in cuffs; all but Ethan, who kept his attention on the cabin. As soon as they were in the jungle, he would return.

“Are you going to read him his rights?” the deputy asked slowly, not certain of the outcast’s guilt. He had clues that didn’t add up, but he knew better than to question the Mayor’s orders.

“He ain’t got none,” one of the other men stated.

Higgins dropped his head to keep the rest of the infected men from realizing how against this he was. He had been deputy for almost a year now and anticipated replacing Sheriff Cole. If he were careful, he’d still be alive when these evil fucks were part of the town landfill. For now, though, he had to shut up and play along, and he gave Luke a hard shove. “Get on the bike.”

It was a quiet pickup with little delay, but Kendle had done well in the time Luke bought for her. Before they were out of sight, she was lowering herself into the dark tunnel and pulling

the grassy cover over the hole. She didn't care much for being underground, but it was dry and she had more important things to worry about. Like how she was going to rescue Luke.

Thud!

Luke winced at the blow, not moving fast enough for Ethan, who was clearly impatient. Blood dripped down Luke's chin.

"Get on it!"

Luke swung his leg over the bike, settling in behind the deputy and Ethan warned as he mounted his own, "Don't forget what my father said."

The Sheriff glared rebelliously. "And don't forget what I told him. That's taking things too far."

Ethan brought his ride to life. "Personally, I don't get the point. It's like an extra layer of icing, but daddy wants it, so..."

The cop still hesitated and the other men muttered lowly. Disobeying the Mayor now was not a good idea.

Ethan's anger flashed out dangerously. "Should I do it myself?"

Sure that would be worse than not doing it at all, the Sheriff refused. "I'll handle it. Now get the hell out of here. Go...fill up."

Ethan's orbs flashed again, this time with a vivid glow that had Luke staring in recognition. Kendle was right. They were all sick.

“Drive slow.”

The playboy was out of sight seconds later and Luke swiveled to glare at the Sheriff in outrage. “You serve the devil!”

To his credit, the Sheriff flushed. “Yes, but not alone.”

The thickly built man advanced toward Luke with resigned, set steps and Luke braced for the blows he had expected earlier.

Instead of swinging, the man pulled his pocketknife and took careful aim. “Be still and I’ll make it quick. Fight and they’ll see how she scratched you all over to get away.”

Luke steeled himself as the knife neared his skin, but he swore there would be payment for it.

2

Kendle heard the single bike above her and felt panic threaten to freeze her in place. Would Ethan know about the hatch behind the water tank? Not wanting to take the chance, she stumbled forward with only the candle she’d been able to find, and the gun clutched tightly in her grip. She knew very well who was stalking her and terror was her companion below the ground.

Ethan stormed up the stairs to the cabin with a tight body and a light heart. Luke was in custody and would be hanged for three murders he didn’t commit. The other girls were being shipped out tonight, sent to Africa along with Jenna and Cole,

who would find that part out later. His father would be satisfied, the town would settle down, and he would have Kendle. Luke's fourth, undiscovered victim was in a shallow grave near his cabin and it would also be pawned off on the pilot if it were ever discovered. Things were going well.

Not bothering with manners, Ethan raised his foot and kicked the door open. He couldn't wait to sink his teeth into that pink skin.

“Honey, I'm home!”

His cheery voice echoed in the empty cabin in a way that told him instantly she wasn't here and his sickly face lit up with anticipation.

A treasure hunt on a pirate island. Oh, Goodie!

Where would she go? Jenna's? The hole-up? His quick mind flashed to spying on her and Luke as they tracked the tree maps. The couple didn't understand they were following opposite-codes on the trees and had gotten nowhere over the last five days. The Mayor hadn't liked it that they were getting their clues at all, though, and had ordered Luke's arrest last night. And she'd been here; he'd enjoyed her fear when Luke opened the door. She would do what he had told her to, and what would Luke choose?

Ethan's anticipation grew. He had only gotten to trace a couple of the tunnels while the pair slept, but one of the shored paths had led uphill, probably toward the hole-up. Another had led

toward town, and a third, toward the beach. There was no reason for her to go toward the shore or town, and wouldn't Luke have told her to go hide and wait?

Ethan's joy was ugly. He would use the bike to get ahead of her.

His stomach tightened as he jogged down the stairs. They would be alone in the dark together. Did it get any better than that?

3

Kendle was struggling to remember everything Luke had told her about the tunnels. He'd wanted her to go to the hole-up and she would, but first, she had to make a stop in town.

“Go right at the root that's shaped like a woman.” Luke sniggered at himself. “Her name's Mable.”

It was a quick flash that brought tears she refused to let fall. They would take him to one of the two cells she'd seen when they reported Mora's body on the beach... Kendle stepped over a huge root, ducking the large corner-web. Why had Mora been there? No one on this island liked the water much. Kendle had never viewed people near it. And that was a clue, wasn't it? Because if there were no witnesses, then a person would be free to do whatever they wanted, good or bad.

Wishing for her sweater to fight the chill of being underground, Kendle moved faster, shielding the thin candle flame with her hand.

There had been a lot of blood, but no tracks. Mora hadn't been dumped, but killed there. Maybe whatever was happening was connected to the ocean.

Kendle swallowed a groan at the thought of going near that salty nightmare alone.

"But I will," she vowed lowly. "Whatever it takes to figure this out."

Kendle flinched at the sudden shadow in her path and then realized it was her sign.

"Hey, Mable," she croaked cheerfully.

At this distance, she could make out the sound of a dirt bike moving. Good, Ethan would be searching the jungle for her, Sheriff Cole would have Luke safely in a town cell, and once there, she would help him escape. Then they would go together to the beach and find out what was going on.

4

Luke didn't wipe the blood away, letting it dry there instead for the townspeople to view. The shallow grooves would appear to be nail marks and add another layer of guilt to his charges. By viewing it now, when it was fresh, he might have a chance at a reasonable doubt with a jury if they intended to give him a trial. Which he doubted.

"Get in there!"

Cole shoved him into the first dusty cell, the second already occupied, and Luke stared at the sight of Jenna lying on the bunk.

“You locked up your own mother?” he asked incredulously.

Cole flushed darkly. “She’s safer here. Even you have to know that.”

“But, I don’t. We didn’t find anything on our hunts,” Luke probed and was rewarded with confirmation of the eyes he’d been feeling on them.

“Don’t matter. He doesn’t like you snooping.”

“Who?”

The Sheriff’s countenance tightened and he slammed the door shut with a loud clang. “You know.”

He rotated the key in the lock and tossed it to the deputy. “Watch them while I go check in.”

Luke waited for Jenna to say something when the deputy went outside with Cole, and he was unprepared for what came.

“My son’s got it, the infection. You’ll have to kill him, too.”

The door opening again halted Luke’s response. Clearly unhappy, Deputy Higgins walked in and Luke guessed he wasn’t okay with the things that were going on. Instead of trying to talk his way out, Luke gave the man a nod of understanding.

“It’s hard to do the right thing on Pitcairn. It always has been.”

The deputy regarded him, but didn’t answer and the former POW shrugged. “Just wondering what comes next for us.”

Higgins gestured to the gun case on the wall. “Waiting on the orders.”

Luke was surprised by the honesty. “Sounds like you’re not a fan of killing women.”

“I used to have a mother, too,” Higgins swore softly. “She taught me better.”

“Your ma was a fine lady.” Jenna’s voice was toneless despite the gentle words. “Kind, caring, and strong. This island don’t like that.”

“What do you mean?”

Unable to view her because of the wall, Luke shivered at Jenna’s eerie warning.

“The island will kill her if it can.”

That, Luke didn’t doubt. He’d observed the way the tides rolled in when Kendle neared the water, even when it wasn’t time, and he’d heard the angry roars from their cabin bed when he woke her from a nightmare about the shark.

Strange things were happening here and the townspeople weren’t responsible for all of them, Higgins was sure.

“Will you let her go? Please.”

“No. If he brings her here, she’ll die with you.”

“Thank you for the truth.”

The deputy snorted. “Sure. Anything else I can not do for you?”

Luke leaned against the wall by the window so he could peer outside. “I have some questions.”

Higgins settled into the chair behind the desk, uninfected brown eyes interested. “I’ve got

nothing but time to kill until the order comes down on you two.”

5

Kendle emerged from the tunnel after dark with her nerves on edge. More than once, she'd been sure there were footsteps other than hers, and a minute ago, she'd thought someone had tripped and fallen.

In a hurry, Kendle let her survival instincts take over. As soon as she cleared the cover, she ran.

Trying not to break off a clear path, she wove in and out of the shadowy vines for a long minute before climbing a tall tree. Its weak branches only let her go into the first layer of the canopy, but it was enough to give her cover as she waited to see who else came from the tunnel.

Inside the dark ground, Ethan peered up through the open hatch, mind whirling. She couldn't know for sure he was in here unless he came out. If he didn't, she would use this hatch again.

Wiping his face free of the dirt wall he'd stumbled into, the playboy kept moving toward the hole-up; sure that's where she would eventually go.

Kendle waited, able to see the open hatch from her vantage point, but with each minute that

crawled by, her worry for Luke grew. Had she imagined the noise? How did she know it was Ethan? Because she'd been able to feel the menace? It could have been anything in there and she didn't have time to wait and discover what ground-dwelling animal had spooked her. She had to get to Luke before they hung him.

Kendle climbed down and resumed her journey, staying in the jungle this time. She wasn't going back in that tunnel without Luke unless she absolutely had to.

Kendle realized she was a lot closer to her destination than she'd thought. The town lay in front of her, shops being lit. She ducked into the thick greenness to form her plan. To her delight, she picked out Luke's shadow through the jail window and sighed in relief. He was okay.

“Fire it up!”

The yell came from behind her and Kendle sent her body up the nearest tree in a mad rush. Leaves floated down, the weeds swaying heavily. She held her breath as the sentry and his torch bobbed in her direction. If he were observant, he would discover her. What should she do?

The sentry was an elderly man with arthritic hands and a permanent hump to his shoulders. He scanned the area and Kendle stiffened when he stared at the place where she'd been.

The old man had been an island resident for more than fifty years. He looked up.

Kendle froze, hoping maybe his sight was bad.

He gazed directly at her for a brief second of concern and shocked her with his raspy shout.

“All clear. Movin’ on.”

As he left, he dropped a bag that was obviously meant for her.

Confused, but not about to stare a gift horse in the mouth, Kendle climbed down and opened the bag to find what she least expected; a way to free Luke and end the madness.

Apparently, some of the residents here not only knew what was going on, they knew who the good guys were and wanted to help.

Kendle shouldered the heavy bag as she crept toward the jail. Great. They needed all the aid they could get against the Mayor and his evil son.

Sliding along the trees, she stopped in the shadows, listening for the right moment to let him know she was there.

“Kendle was right.”

She heard Luke mutter in anger.

“They’re infected.”

“Oh yes. The result of eating contaminated food, they think. They found a cruise ship that had a hold full of supplies

“While they were searching for buyers.”

That sent his mind to Kendle’s words when he’d found her in the jungle, barely alive. “*The ship’s gone...all dead.*” Was fate ironic enough for this illness to have come from her cruise-ship of horrors?

“So they’re slave traders. They had a load of girls from South America when they found the cruise ship. They brought it all with them to wait for the buyers, but they didn’t come.”

“Whatever happened to the world, took them too,” the deputy clarified.

“It was a war, nuclear probably, but it could have been chemical, too. Their sickness might be an effect from that.”

“Does it matter?”

Luke sighed. “No. If it destroys the nerves and brain cells until rage is all that’s left, where it came from means little. How do we stop it from spreading?”

“Don’t have contact. Blood, sex.”

Luke’s mind shot to Kendle and he almost gave it away when he glanced out the window and saw her standing in the shadows with a machine gun. He relaxed his instant tension and kept the conversation going. That wasn’t the pistol he’d given her. She hadn’t gone to the hole-up.

“What about all the women they couldn’t sell?”

“Oh, they’re selling. Some to men here, most to random people they meet on their trips.”

“Trips?” Luke stared at the deputy. “That’s the engines we’ve been hearing, and the strangers in the jungle.”

Higgins kept tabs on the window, sure Sheriff Cole would return soon to finish the job.

“And the tree markings, they’re a path for the buyers to get to the women?”

“Simple codes for the Mayor’s idiot henchmen. They keep getting lost when they bring the girls down.”

“From the estate?”

Like they’d have such dealings on their property, Higgins thought. “Ethan has a hole-up in a cave out by that rock wall his daddy bought for him. He keeps them there until we get a buyer...”

Luke’s gut twisted. “Or until he needs to hurt one of them to bring his rage under control.”

“Yes.”

Luke was burning to confirm his suspicion of why the man was telling him all this, but he forced himself to finish getting what he needed first. “How many are left up there?”

The Deputy’s voice was full of anger. “Enough to repopulate this shitty little island without any inbreeding.”

“You ready?” Kendle whispered as calmly as she could, angered at the sight of Luke’s injuries.

Luke didn’t lower his voice when he answered. “Thirty seconds.”

“You said you wouldn’t let her go. Will you let me?”

Higgins pushed his hat up. “I might be convinced to do that and more, Mr. Johnson. Especially if I suspect your intentions are to eliminate this island of some of the current plagues.”

Luke's regard was just as hard. "I do and the method is standing at the window."

"Tell her to stay down," Higgins stated, pulling his hat forward as if he'd been dozing the whole time. "Cole's coming."

Grateful they had an ally, Kendle pressed herself as flat against the wall as she could, melting into the thick leaves that surrounded the brick building. Staying in the darkest of the shadows, she listened to the new conversation with one ear, and the jungle-bound town around her with the other.

"I have to go find Ethan. The Mayor said for you to stay here," the Sheriff challenged hatefully. This little snot had been after his job long enough.

The deputy yawned tiredly. "Should I feed the prisoners?"

"No. Don't leave this room until I come." Cole wasn't taking any chances with the too-quiet soldier and he slammed the door to add effect to his order. If Luke escaped, Higgins would die before the Mayor's order came down.

"How long before he beats on people for release, too?" Luke asked, meaning the Sheriff.

"He won't. He's sworn to kill himself first and I mean to make sure he keeps that promise," Higgins informed him coolly, ignoring Jenna's moan from her cell. "Come on, have her slide it in the window and then get lost somewhere until this is over. If Ethan catches her, there won't be anything left."

Luke was putting the pieces together. This brave man had played the Mayor and his men for fools. As Higgins spun the key in the lock, Luke was trying to remember what he knew of the deputy. Very little, he realized. Public figurehead or not, Higgins was even more anti-social than himself.

Kendle handed the gun through the bars, waiting for the questions about where she'd gotten it, but when none came, she assumed Higgins was responsible. He'd known she would try to rescue Luke. From her reckless TV shows? Probably.

"You have to hole-up now for a day or two."

Kendle swallowed a protest, knowing he was right. He needed to be able to travel fast and not be hindered by someone who would be squeamish. She would want to spare even those who didn't deserve that kindness.

"I'll go to Jenna's."

"No!" Jenna's voice echoed from the next cell. "They stop there with girls sometimes, on the way through."

"The cabin?"

Higgins ruled it out this time. "Nowhere near that beach. We have buyers lined up."

"Moving stock?" Luke asked.

"Yeah, something like that."

"I'll go to the hole-up."

Neither man liked it, but unless she hid in the jungle, there wasn't much choice.

Luke felt her fear and his own rose up to match it. Something wasn't right.

"We'll pick somewhere—"

"Cole's here, shit! It has to be now, get ready!" Higgins ordered, drawing his weapon.

"Don't kill him!" Jenna cried.

"Hush now."

Kendle had started fading into the greenness. "The hole-up."

Luke's hands were already flying over the machine gun, mind getting ready. "I'll be there or Higgins will."

Kendle heard the door open and darted into the dark jungle. She kept moving fast, no longer worried about making too much noise as she ran for the hatch she'd left open. Luke was about to draw the attention of everyone on the island as he eliminated the infected men. She would be safe underground.

6

Ethan stilled, ears finally hearing what he'd been straining for. The tunnel had no other hatches that he'd found and he'd gone all the way to the hole-up before picking his place. He wanted to take her to the estate and his special room, but his limit had been reached. It would have to start right here.

His nerves blared out another sickly blast of pain along his limbs and he clenched his fists to keep from growling. He needed a release. The

hours of waiting, of hearing nothing that could be her, had weakened his control. And then there was a volley of gunfire that had lasted long enough to tell him something had gone wrong, but Ethan hadn't left the darkness. Even now, he could hear sporadic shots in the distance and understood Luke had gotten free. Nothing less would have his father's men pulling the trigger.

“Almost there... Almost there...”

Ethan leered in the pitch blackness. She was searching for comfort. How sweet. *I'll enjoy this one, I just know it!*

Kendle sensed the lurking monster at the last minute, the waves of evil anticipation thickening until her hair stood on end. Just as the candle would have revealed his glowing green orbs, she dropped it and fumbled for the gun.

The flame sputtered out as he lunged forward and swung a big fist.

Kendle dropped the gun, swaying to her knees.

His boot caught her in the stomach, driving the fight and everything else from her. She fell against the earthen wall where she collapsed in a heap.

“Kendle! Kendle! Kendle!”

Ethan screamed repeatedly as he rushed toward her unconscious form, the fire in his infected blood blazing with victory. He couldn't wait to taste her!

Chapter Fifteen
Leveled Playing
April 26th
Crescent Lake Refuge

1

“**T**his is your Level test, Eagles. It has seven parts. Cage matches will be called three minutes before they start, so listen for your name. Draw a number from the hat, and then go to the area with that number.”

Neil clearly loved being in charge and Angela was glad he was running things. It meant he wouldn't be the one in the cage with her. She didn't stand a chance against the trooper, who'd started her regular Kai lessons upon Adrian's approval.

Angela drew the firearms area first and it calmed her nerves to begin with something she was better than good at. She entered the training tent with a light heart despite the glares and mutters she endured. She loved guns and even the Eagles' unease couldn't ruin that feeling.

But Kenn could. He was the man in charge of this test and his thoughts met her across the tent.
Go away!

More surprised at the near panic than his silent communication, she said, “I belong here as much as you do.”

Her quiet words drew nods from Seth and his team, and Kenn flushed scarlet.

“Maybe more,” one of Seth’s men muttered.

Kenn snarled in surprise. “Fuck you, Jeff!”

Instead of the fight Angela expected, the Level Four man stared coolly.

“You’ll get your turn. We won’t leave you on the outs.”

Kenn’s hands clenched, but again, the response surprised the lone female in the warm tent.

“Too late for that, isn’t it?”

Jeff was now firmly on Angela’s side, like the rest of Seth’s team. “Yes. You get what you earn in this new world.”

The warning was impossible to miss, but her Marine only acted like it was a joke. Jeff had swung to Angela’s side in silence, and none of them knew what had swayed him.

“Remember that, when you draw my number for the cage match.”

Now Jeff was flushing, telling Angela he’d already lost to Kenn at least once, and she slid toward the targets, impatient. Why couldn’t they all grow up?

Jeff opened his mouth to keep the insults flying and Angela pulled her gun. She opened fire an instant later, silencing the fight.

The targets were set along the far wall, pinned to the triple-stacked hay bales and for a minute, there was only the muffled *thud, whack* of her shots landing.

Most of the Eagles in the tent had frozen, some going for their guns. When Angela lowered her weapon, they remembered how to breathe.

Her fingers flew over the hot metal, replacing the rounds fast in her annoyance, and those in her line of fire quickly cleared it as she got set for round two.

Lids shut this time, she pulled the trigger gently. None of those watching noticed the new arrivals to the tent.

The gun test had three parts; straight shooting, quick-fire shooting, and blindfolded shooting.

Angela removed the expended rounds, gaze going expectantly to the blindfold lying on the gun table and then to Kenn.

Kenn wanted to refuse, but her icy words sank into his humiliation.

“Do your duty or someone else will.”

It got his feet moving and the Eagles crowded around when he stepped behind her with the blindfold held out between both hands like a weapon.

Gun ready, Angela still felt uneasy when he carelessly wrapped it around her.

“On my mark.”

A sullen order, it eased the tension a bit.

“Go.”

Angela opened fire.

“She’s a natural born leader.”

Marc left the tent before the call, but the cheer behind them echoed loud and clear. “I know.”

He and Adrian had come from the trucks, both eager for the shooting tests. Observing was almost as good as participating. Some of these people were amazingly gifted.

Like Angie.

“It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“Yeah.”

Adrian felt Marc’s pain. After all those weeks alone, falling for her, the sight of strangers sharing these moments had to be torture. “You could be right there, by her side and welcome. There’s room here for everyone.”

Marc’s anger flared to life. “I’m not everyone. All I want is her.”

“Do you think being the center of your world and no one else’s is enough for a woman like that?” Adrian’s tone sharpened. “Wake up, grunt!”

He rotated toward the loud tent. “She already had a Marine who couldn’t support *her* wants and needs. I’d stay as far from that as I could get.”

Adrian ducked inside, thinking Marc had better wise up before it was too late. She wasn’t meant to be some guy’s perfect match and she was realizing it now. If Marc pushed too hard, she might let him go.

“Isn’t that what you want?” Adrian shoved aside the voice of inner desire. She wanted Marc, and Adrian planned to provide for her needs—all of them.

Angela couldn’t stop her fumble as she noticed Adrian enter the tent. She snapped her attention back to the test, but knew she’d blown any chance at the break-down record.

“Thirty-five, no record. Next time...”

“I’ll pay attention.”

Kenn was satisfied that she’d shown a weakness. “Pass. Next.”

“White to the cage.”

The loud call sent ice over the tent and Angela’s calm heartbeat into a frenzy of thumps. She went casually, trying not to appear as nervous as she felt. Hearing the words of the men already inside didn’t help.

“He won’t hit her either, bet on it.”

“Should have Kenn take his place.”

“Do that and he’ll be strung up.”

“He should be anyway!”

Angela stepped through the flap and all conversations ceased. They’d been lingering for her match. She’d expected that.

She schooled her face into the impassive mask she’d learned and joined those by the cage-battle that was finishing up. Other than the two men in the ring together, all attention was on her, and even those two were distracted by the sudden quiet.

Everything was about to change and all of them felt it.

Red bandana swaying temptingly from his belt, Adrian ducked through the flap a minute later, noting that she stood alone. The leader kept his distance. They were all waiting for him to prove his own words, one way or the other.

He strode toward the ring with a blank face. *Never let them know what you're really feeling*, was a rule he'd led by all his life.

"If you just came in, draw a name from the hat," Doug instructed as another large group of men filed in. Except for the two shifts on duty, all of the Eagles were here now. None of the camp was, but they'd find out. This many mouths wouldn't all stay shut.

Angela joined her team to get a number. Due to Kyle's men being so good, their level tests were given by Adrian, Doug, Neil, and Kenn.

Waiting to draw from the hat was nerve-racking. What if she got Kenn?

It was a common thought and the noise level remained low as they all tried to hear who would fight her.

Angela took a slip of paper quickly, and felt them all waiting for her response.

"Doug."

Surprised mutters filled the warm canvas and the big man stiffened as everyone stared at him. He hated being the center of attention.

Doug didn't take his eyes from the two men in the cage as they finished with a pair of brutal hits that sent blood splattering across the mat.

“Pass.”

Billy grinned at his victory as he helped Neil up, and they both stilled as Doug limped toward Adrian.

“Get someone else. I don't hit women.”

His words rang through the tent, bringing a shocked tension.

The apprehension thickened as Adrian said, “I need a man for FND.”

More awkward quiet, where normally there would have been dozens of responses.

“She is a rookie in my army. Will no man openly support this?”

He was prepared to do it himself and risk the herd viewing her injuries afterwards. There would be no magic allowed in the Cage and no pulling punches, either.

Catching the thought, Angela opened her mouth to issue her own, handpicked challenge.

“I'll do it.”

Zack's call brought instant mutters and protests from around the tent and few people noticed when Kenn slipped inside, unwilling to miss her first match. He settled in a far corner, away from Marc. Standing alone in his coat and guns, Marc's body language suggested he might kill Zack the instant he entered the ring.

Adrian ignored them, considering. Zack was following Kenn's orders, but the truck driver also had his own agenda. There was no love lost between them; this was as close to a fair fight as her first match could be...and she'd set it up on her own.

Adrian stared at the graying man. Zack's countenance was more eager than he liked, but there was no abandoning his plans now. "You will be exempt from our rules for this."

"It's a Level Test, nothing more or less," Zack answered calmly. He was prepared to accept the anger of the other Eagles when he broke her nose and sealed his place with Kenn once and for all. He was tired of sharing that place with Lee and Allan.

Adrian removed his dog tags and tossed them into the far corner of the 8x8 cage. He spoke to Angela as Zack took his place in front of the shiny metal. "Get my property and return it for a pass. Time starts now. You have ten minutes."

Angela unbuckled her gun belt and let it gently drop to the floor. She'd been swallowing butterflies all day, but now that the moment was here, she only felt cold all over.

"I'll try not to hurt him too badly. I know he has a shift later...babysitting."

Surprised chuckles floated through the crowded area. It was a punishment for the trucker refusing to do the gun class with her.

Angela kept her focus on Zack as she entered the bloody cage, noting the leer that was meant to frighten.

“I’ll try not to mess up that pretty face too much.”

Adrian had no doubt that Kenn’s man was trying to give the Marine what he wanted, (Angela out of the Eagles) but after their lesson last night, he wasn’t as worried as he might have been. Zack was an easy mark for someone who knew how to work him over mentally.

Angela ignored the insult-slinging men around the cage, moving in a circle to judge her opponent. “I’ll still be cuter than you, even with another fat lip.”

Zack scowled as the laughter rang out and Angela spotted his weakness because of it. He was easy to goad. She was female. Knowing how to use that to her advantage came naturally.

“So how does it feel to be right-hand man to someone with no power anymore?”

Angela’s words had the desired effect and Zack strode toward her angrily. His first wife had been like her, before the training years.

Understanding Zack had no intentions of taking a dive, Angela got set with the first sloppy stance she had learned from Marc, (the decoy) with her hands balled up and hips twisted.

Sneering, Zack made one mistake, discounting her, and it was enough. “Eagle, my ass!”

Angela let his fist get in the air and then slid into the second stance she'd learned from Marc; the nose-breaker.

Ducking under his swing, Angela brought her hand up with her ass behind it, remembering to brace her wrist like Neil had shown her and it cracked against Zack's face.

Thud!

The impact made her wrist scream in misery and then Zack was the one howling as he hit his knees. Blood rained down his shirt in ripples.

Angela fought the urge to help him as she darted by and retrieved the tags. She took her time returning. The trucker certainly wasn't about to challenge her progress. He was too busy bleeding and moaning.

All around the cage, there was silence as she faced them. "Want me or not, I belong here."

She dropped the tags into Adrian's hand.

"That's a pass." Adrian let his full pleasure flow into the surprised canvas. "You are now a Level One Eagle."

Angela felt relief enter her heart at the slow cheer that grew into a roar. It echoed through the tent.

Angela grinned wildly, high on her success. *I did it on my own!*

"I won't be there long," she warned, calming her breathing like she'd been shown. "Kyle's job keeps calling me and hanging up. I think it likes me."

The Eagles laughed, even Kenn unable to stop a snicker, and Angela wiped her bloody hand down her jeans.

She found Marc's indifferent countenance in the rear of the tent as Lee and Allan helped Zack to the medical tent, and she moved that way, cutting a path by Adrian. Hoping he was distracted by whatever Doug was saying, she reached out to snag the coveted bandana from his belt.

Adrian wanted to give it to her, but he'd promised to be fair and he took her wrist in an iron grip before she could get to it.

To be certain his men understood he would show no differences, he twisted Angela's hand a bit, enough to bring her to her knees. "Keep trying."

Angela laughed as he let go, very happy to be treated that way now. *Damn, I've changed!*

"You know it."

Jeremy made his way through the men, stopping at her side as she stood up. "I believe this is yours."

She slid the jacket on, missing Marc's quiet exit from the tent. "I would have missed this the most."

2

"He says you're to help me or I'm to kill you."

Maria paled. "No. Please. I can't."

Rick sighed in mock resignation, climbing into the dark semi while the Eagles were busy. "That's

what I told him, but you'll find out how wrong you are. I did."

The traitor shut the door and slid the lock home, eyes glittering. "There is no escape from Cesar. You knew that when he sent you here."

Maria understood then why he'd come and tried to run, but he was right. It was much too late. The guard on the area wouldn't be enough.

Rick grabbed the cook's arm, pulled her up against him, and his words stopped her call for help.

"You scream, I'll snap your neck," he growled, body hot and hard against her hip. His fingers wrapped around her throat and she stilled.

"Good girl."

Rick ground his mouth against hers and his harsh breathing filled her ears as he unsnapped his jeans and pushed her against the counter.

3

Hours after the camp had settled for the night, Angela met Adrian in the rear of the training tent. A large bonfire showed her the top Eagle teams celebrating their graduation. Like them, she had aced all of her tests, even scoring a record on the game she'd drawn, and had been invited to the private party.

"How does it feel?"

"Better than I'd hoped."

"But..."

Sensing now wasn't the time for doubts, she squared her shoulders. She was a Level One Eagle. She would act like it. "But nothing. What's first?"

Adrian led them to the waiting men and waved Jeremy forward. "First, is the real jacket."

The Eagle handed her a heavier replica of the one she was wearing over her jeans and red tank top, giving her a nod of respect. "Congratulations and thanks. You did what we've all wanted to since Zack rolled in."

Angela laughed as she examined her new coat. The differences between it and the other one quickly became clear. Made of sturdier materials, it had her initials and a US flag ironed on the inside pocket. On the back, was a fading Eagle.

"Next, the old one gets burned."

Adrian gestured at the fire and she quickly checked the pockets of her rookie jacket and went to the toasty flames. Feeling a bit sad, she tossed it into the fire. "Goodbye, old world."

The flames shot up around the cloth, turning green and they burned fast and furious until the jacket was gone.

Angela met Adrian's eye, aware of the surprised talk of the men around them. "That happen often?"

"Only Seth and Kyle."

"At least I'm in good company, right?"

"Yes. Now, we celebrate. Get a drink and relax."

Angela headed for the coolers, already feeling how welcome she was. Breaking Zack's nose had created a bond. They hadn't liked the truck driver even before they discovered he and Kenn were both on the opposite team.

Angela twisted the cap on the beer and scanned the small gathering. There were only three levels here. No Zack or Kenn, only the men who were closest to Adrian. Also, no Marc. Even though he'd passed his own test, he and Dog had Point over the small group of survivors that had been settled into the QZ not long after evening mess.

Angela joined Kyle in his place under the tree that the others were gathered around. Even during off-times, he was high speed, low drag.

"So, I hear you're the best. Will you be the...entertainment?"

Kyle understood she had heard stories about the parties after each level test. "Seth has that honor tonight."

He handed her the blunt that Jeremy tossed their way and Angela noticed that Neil and his XO were trying very hard to avoid looking at each other. *That's what happens when two wolves scent the same female*, Angela thought. *First, they circle and monitor, and then they try to stake a claim.*

She circled the tent, listening, mingling. Taking her own hit, she tossed the blunt to Daryl, nodding at his gesture of recognition of a good match-up. He was perched on the fence that ran the

length of this farm, half a dozen Eagles around, and she lingered near his group for the joke.

“I didn’t know how many it was gonna take to whip my ass, but I knew how many they was gonna use.”

The circle of men burst out laughing and Angela smiled. “Blue Collar Tour?”

Chris held the smoke in, making his voice sound harsh. “Here’s my sign.”

“Hey, I’m a redneck, too!” she snickered.

There was more laughter and Kyle’s XO raised a brow. “Your turn.”

She could feel them expecting something weak and predictable. They didn’t know her yet.

“Okay. There’s a 96 year old woman on the witness stand and the judge asks her if she has anything to say in her defense.”

Angela switched to an old woman’s shaky voice.

“I’d like to explain, your Honor.”

“What explanation could you possibly have for throwing your 94-year-old husband out of a 12th story window?”

A stern, very judgelike voice coming from her mouth, it was already pulling grins.

She switched back to that innocent old woman’s tone. “Well, you see I had come home from my church social and there was my Henry, in bed, making love to another woman! So, I just picked him up, and threw him out the window.”

Angela paused, sniffing innocently. “’Cause I figured, at 94, if he could fuck, he could fly.”

They exploded, Chris sliding from the fence to hit the dirt at her feet, and Angela made her way to the next group. There was no limit to the help these men would give her when she was through creating these bonds.

4

Even though it was so late, the happiness of the celebrating teams was loud. Kenn grimaced as it echoed again. He had just gotten off Point and—

“Got a minute there, Mr. Second in Command?”

Kenn grimaced at the voice. “Not really.”

Despite the feelings he had found for Tonya, Kenn had avoided her for most of the last week and he wasn’t in the mood for the jealousy-ridden tirade she was sure to deliver. He had yet to figure out if Tonya fit into his plans to earn back Adrian’s respect.

Instantly hurt and then mad, Tonya put out a black boot to trip him and Kenn fell awkwardly.

“To hell with you, then!”

She spun around and Kenn sat up, gawking. There was another pain in his ass. Too stubborn, too sexy, too determined...

Kenn stilled as his mind showed him a possible way out of his mess. Maybe he could honestly try again, instead of pretending.

“Wait up, Tonya! I’ll walk you to your tent.”

It was the first time he'd ever shown a public interest in her and she stopped, surprised. "Okay."

Kenn came to her side and shocked everyone in sight by placing a courteous hand on her arm. "Let's take our time. We have some things to talk about."

"That's a match made in hell, right there."

Samantha's comment had Adrian waving at the mess table he had covered in papers. "I agree. Sit?"

Samantha did, her cup refilled and steaming. "I hear Angie's test went well. The camp can't believe she did that to Zack."

"What about you, Samantha?" Adrian asked suddenly, eager to settle another of his leaders into place. "Any secret desires lurking?"

Samantha wasn't surprised by the person who came to mind. "Maybe, but I'll handle it in my own way."

The last of the party Eagles came from the shadows and headed into the main camp, and Adrian switched tactics. "Doug says the garden is growing. That's great."

"Yeah, we weren't sure if it would with all the settling the dirt does during travel times."

"We?"

"Jeremy's been helping out."

Ah, Adrian thought. That explained Neil and his right-hand man not talking to each other.

Knowing Jeremy, it was all to get Neil away from Becky.

“Good.”

Samantha had expected to deal with the accusations of playing games and she was surprised by his reaction. “Why is that good? You like your men distracted?”

“A bit of competition is healthy after all they do each day. Without something to shoot for, they’ll get weighed down in the misery and hardships.”

Another layer of that onion, Sam thought, remembering her observation upon first joining Safe Haven. “You’re so careful with them. It’s...”

“Hard to accept?”

“Yes.”

She lit a smoke. The former government hadn’t cared if its soldiers were happy or even healthy. *Just get the enemy in the crosshairs and blast away*, she thought. Flashes of the old world were haunting her tonight, and the MASH quote rolled in her mind like thunder.

“It had to change, Sam. It was destroying everything.”

“I know. I haven’t adjusted yet.”

“Not sleeping?”

“It’s been better this week. I’m staying busy.”

“That helps?”

“I’m also a vampire, so these third shifts fit well.”

They shared a laugh and Adrian held her gaze as familiar footsteps approached. “Are you glad to be here, Samantha?”

“Absolutely.”

“Tell me why.”

Neil saw them deep in conversation and pasted a politely bored expression on his face as he entered the truck for a mug. Not spotting the cook, he lingered, going over what to say. He had a problem with their mistaken encounter, only he wasn't sure how to bring it up...and what the hell were she and the boss talking about so intently? Did Adrian want her?

The dooming sensation was ugly.

As Neil came from the truck, Samantha was standing up to leave and he quickened his pace, already knowing the answer before he asked.

“Can I have a minute, Samantha?”

“Nope.” She didn't ease up on the curt tone she'd treated him to all day. He'd stopped by the garden area half a dozen times. “Don't have one.”

Neil's face fell, eyes going to Adrian as she left. Reading the amusement there, the trooper sighed. “I'm in her doghouse.”

“Maybe you should go find out why.”

“I've got a good idea already,” Neil said ruefully.

“It's a funny thing with females,” Adrian advised lowly. “They automatically put men into

two groups as soon as they meet. They're nice to the ones they classify as friends, but to the men they might want, anger and coldness are often signs of attraction."

Realizing the boss was trying to help, Neil considered those words. The moments Adrian had with the camp's women were few and far between, but Neil had no doubt the leader knew what he was talking about. He'd never met a more accurate judge of people. So far, Kenn was Adrian's only flaw, and even there, Neil thought maybe he'd had sensed it, too, and chosen to handle it if it became a problem.

"How do you deal with it?" Neil questioned, restless to go after her.

Adrian let out a sigh that was full of male patience worn to weary. "As best you can, but don't lie. They find that unforgivable."

Samantha wasn't sure what she was going to say, but she knew Neil would follow. Using a flash of competition designed to create more jealousy, Adrian was trying to give her what she needed and she was grateful.

"Hey, Sam, wait up!"

What I want, Samantha corrected herself, stopping in a dark part of the shadows. She didn't need any man now, thanks to Safe Haven's rules, but want Neil, she did. How much, was blindingly unexpected.

"Wait up! I think I'm pregnant."

Nervous laughter shot out of her. “I’m not the momma. Who else you lovin’?”

Samantha winced at the serious note under the joke.

“Officially, no one,” Neil stated as he stopped by her, taking Adrian’s words of honesty to heart.

She glared. “And unofficially?”

Neil sucked in a breath, wanting to give her what she needed...and wimped out.

“I’d rather not say.”

“Why?”

“Because I haven’t decided,” he admitted softly. “There’s someone else I’m drawn to, even when I don’t want to be.”

Samantha quickly tired of the game. “What do you want?”

He dropped his head. “I don’t know.”

“You in love with her?”

“No.”

The fast, sure answer surprised Samantha and she raised a brow. “Lust?”

The man hesitated, unsure of the right answer. “I guess.”

“What do you want, Neil?”

Her tone said she was losing patience.

His gaze dropped to her lips and Samantha snorted bitterly. “To figure out which one you like more, because you know you can’t have both.”

She turned away, muttering, “He wants to shop!”

“It’s not like that.”

Samantha rounded on him. “Then what’s the deal?”

He reddened. “It’s that...I didn’t even know it was you until it was over!”

Sam felt her pulse race. Neil wanted a kiss he knew was coming, did he? She stared at him, thinking despite the pain he had already caused, she’d chosen to play this role anyway. Was she crazy?

“Samantha,” Neil whispered. “Can I kiss you?”

Body lighting up from the sudden sexual tension flying between them, she shook her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

As she said it, she leaned toward him against her will, fingers itching to rip that hat off and play in his sexy brown curls.

“Just one. I’ll be quick.”

Samantha’s tongue darted over her lips nervously and Neil groaned as fire flooded him. “Please, Sammi!”

Her nod was short and Neil pressed his mouth to hers urgently, lost.

The guards turned their backs in satisfaction.

Under the passion was a feeling of completeness, and Samantha moaned into Neil’s mouth at the sensation, arms locking around his neck. *Mine!*

Neil couldn’t stop the male inside from lunging forward at the bolt of need and he snaked an arm

around her waist to tug her up against his hard body. Hand sliding to her hip, he deepened the kiss, tasting her.

Samantha trembled, grip tightening, and she let her fingers tangle in his soft hair.

Neil groaned at her almost rough touch and his hat slid unnoticed to the ground.

It was the warning crunch from his radio that brought them back to reality and Samantha shoved out of his arms. She retreated, hands clenched in tight fists. “Compare that to little Miss Virgin...and tell me if she still stands out in your mind.”

“Wait, can’t we—”

“No. Go away now, Neil. I’m on duty and you’re definitely a distraction!”

Chapter Sixteen
The Killing Fields

April 28th

100 Miles Southeast of Chadron, Nebraska

1

Shortly after morning mess was called, Angela ducked into the training tent, eager to get her workout in before they left. The wolf mission would be her first scheduled trip as a level Eagle and while she was looking forward to it, her nerves needed to be settled down.

Apparently, she wasn't the only one who felt that way and she joined the teammates who were already crowded around the gun table.

Kyle and Chris slid over to make room without pausing in the betting as Daryl and Billy put on blindfolds. Both of the highest levels were going on this mission and it was a comfort to spend these few minutes with them before all hell would break loose.

“On my mark...” Neil checked his wrist for the time. “Angie has winner. Go!”

Half an hour later, Angela pulled off the blindfold, grinning at Seth's surprised countenance. They had joined the lower levels

outside after she took the new rookie score on short shots, and she was enjoying the feeling of having a talent they didn't expect her to have.

“That’s another record, right?”

As the other men congratulated her, Seth said, “You also tied Kenn’s record for the fastest medium range bulls-eye set.”

Seth clapped her roughly on the arm and Angela leaned in, voice low, “We have an audience. Be friendly. She’s thinking about signing up.”

Seth had to study hard to discover the single red curl that didn't belong among the corn. He studied Angela with a horrified grimace. “Are you trying to sink the Eagles?”

Angela sniggered, allowing him the instinctual use of a hand to guide her around the muddy corner of the tent, but no more. “Not at all. Have you seen her shoot?”

Seth started to deny, but stopped, remembering a contest not long after he'd become a rookie. “Once. She did pretty well for a kid.”

“She’s a pre-woman who needs to be handled with care, lest she explode in front of the herd, and give away secrets that these people shouldn't find out yet.”

Seth heard the scold, but more, he understood it would protect Adrian. “If she’s one of us, that won't happen?”

Angela pretended to study his freckles more intently than she should be for friendship. “It’s not

all for that reason. I wouldn't mention it if I thought she'd be the usual disaster-in-waiting."

Her opinion already held weight with him and Seth gave her a charming gaze. "How far should this go? I don't want to get anyone pissed."

Angela smiled as if she might be interested and saw his pulse increase. "Not very far. It won't take much."

Neither can I, Seth thought. It had been a lifetime ago since he'd held a woman. "Okay. Want to work on a dance?"

Angela felt her own needs rise up at that and she agreed, but had to toss in a concession. "No touching. That *will* piss others off."

And it would, she realized with dismay. She might be an Eagle now, but even for something as simple as a dance in a friend's arm, she was still forbidden.

Some freedom, the Witch muttered and Angela sighed. One stage at a time.

Waiting for Neil, Becky studied the group of men who were joking and working out with the lone female among them, accepting her as one of the team. They understood Angela was more than a girlfriend or a cook, and they liked her for it—gave her respect.

Do I want that? Becky ignored the urge to itch her leg, thinking she definitely didn't want to be a doctor. She couldn't even stand to give someone a shot. She forced the discomfort away, trying to be

perfectly still. Did that mean she couldn't shoot anyone either?

The teenager's cheeks darkened as Angela and Seth began a dance that had them much too close together. *If anyone from the camp sees that, they'll think the pair are secretly dating*, Becky thought, and something in her gut twisted.

This time, the scowl came uncontrolled. What did she care? She was chasing Neil and Rick at the moment and frankly, Seth had always scared her a little. He'd never once talked to her outside of his duties.

Disturbed by the newest set of feelings, Becky slipped out of the restricted area with confusion and jealousy raging. Who could she talk to?

Someone else was also studying the dancing couple, and the hurt in that gaze would have been unmistakable had Angela or Seth noticed. Marc had witnessed her request, knew they were play-acting for something, and still, the jealousy was riding him in waves that kept sloshing higher.

Witnessing her flirt with the cop was painful no matter her intent and it drove home not only how different she was becoming, but also how manipulative. Adrian had given her a goal—get accepted as an Eagle no matter what—and she was following orders.

Marc left the area, easily avoiding the sulky teenage girl also leaving the scene. This mission was dangerous and Marc had steeled himself

against interfering again. It was a final test, not of her, but of his limits. He had witnessed her flirting with Seth to get something she wanted and that agony was fresh. He'd watched her get stabbed and that pain was slowly healing. Now, he was set to let her risk her life to kill some wolves and maybe get Max and Lenore to come with them.

Marc went to his tent to gather his gear. He had a feeling that a lot of things would be cleared up by the time they returned, but instead of relief, there was only dread.

2

Angela came from the bathroom camper to find Becky hovering nearby. She didn't speak as she zipped up her thick jacket and lit a smoke. The first steps had to be Becky's idea, or she'd never make it.

"Do you like Seth?"

Angela smiled at the childish question. "Sure. Who doesn't?"

"That's not what I mean!"

Angela took in the defensive stance, the mind braced for a confirmation. So that's where Becky fit... "No. He's not my type and I'm not his."

"Oh." Clearly not convinced, but unwilling to challenge, the girl stared at the ground.

"Walk with me while I get ready?" Angela offered.

Becky agreed right away, relaxing the smallest bit. "Okay."

Angela led the way to her tent and ducked inside without inviting the girl in. She verified her note to Charlie had been read, and emerged, duffle bag in hand.

The wolf would protect him while they were gone and when she came back, the coldness he'd treated her with since she'd come to Safe Haven would be over. He was full of a teenager's impatience and confusion, restless to help Adrian in the ways she was, even though he wasn't ready yet. She understood his needs, but he had no idea how much she'd gone through to get here and it was about time they acted like mother and son again, instead of two strangers in the same camp. She'd given him all the space she could stand.

“You're an Eagle today?”

“I'm always an Eagle.”

Angela motioned to the men loading gear into jeeps, and double tapped her wrist. She held up two fingers and knew by their grins and confusion that she'd gotten it wrong.

Her radio crackled with Kyle's patient voice. “You double tapped. Do it again.”

She ran through the lessons mentally. Two minutes, not twenty. One tap.

“You messed up?”

Angela repeated the motions, getting it right, and then seized Becky's surprise. “The signals are simple. Remembering what each one means; not so much.”

“Aren't you embarrassed?”

“A little, but so are they, when they make a mistake. No one knows this stuff anymore. We have to relearn it.”

“I’m thinking about joining up,” Becky revealed. Her face twisted. “Sign up, anyway. Probably be told I’m too young.”

“Not if I mentioned to Adrian that I think you belong on a team.”

“Why would you do that for me?” Becky stared intently. “We don’t even like each other.”

Angela was finally catching a flash of the nonsense adult this brave little girl would eventually become. It was too bad she was destined for Seth. Angela had sort of been eyeing the girl for Charlie or Matt.

Angela returned the honesty with surprise and a foundation for the future, when she would pick her own team. “Samantha says good things about you and I value her opinion.”

That shocked the girl into silence and Angela rotated toward the trucks as if they were done. She paused. “I didn’t say I would. Only that’s what it would take.”

Realizing Angela wanted something from her, Becky said, “I don’t know if it’s what I’ll be good at. I can’t promise not to embarrass you.”

Angela was convinced of the teenager’s sincerity and character. Her company, though...

“To be an Eagle, Becky, you’d have to give up Rick. They’ll never let you in while you play games with our enemy.”

3

Adrian was nervous as he watched the Eagles pack the vehicles, but none of them knew. “Code Raven’s a go.”

Kyle was expecting it after the last-minute switch of driving schedules, but he was unprepared for the anxiety in their leader’s tones.

Realizing how much Adrian was counting on this made Kyle determined to give it to him.

“Does Neil know?”

“No one does, officially. Many people suspect. Do the best you can. She insisted that both of them be there.”

Adrian hoped it went well, but was sure there would be trouble. The dreams, the feelings, were crowding his thoughts, making it hard to concentrate. He was putting all of them at risk to short-track her training.

“I’ll take care of it.”

Adrian knew when Angela entered the area by the way the mood of the guards around them picked up. “And her?”

“You know it.”

4

Angela joined the lone man smoking a cigar in front of the last jeep. She lingered nearby, lighting her own bad habit, and they both studied Rick as he walked by.

As grungy as ever, the man had the nerve to wave happily at Mitch as he reentered the more populated area. Where was his sentry?

She could feel other Eagles wondering the same thing. Had he been listening to the teams? Did it matter?

Maybe. She would have to talk to Adrian when they got home. In the meantime, who did she warn?

Angela spotted Zack. He was the highest-ranking Eagle not going and good at his job, but he hated her. They hadn't exchanged a single word since she'd broken his nose. Even now, his bandaged profile swung her way, grimaced as he verified everything was okay in this direction, and then moved on. Anything she told him would be ignored unless she made a scene. It would have to be Kenn.

"I don't trust him at all."

Surprised she was talking to him, Kenn grunted in reply, not sure if she meant Zack or Rick for a moment.

"He's bad news."

Her attention was on the traitor and Kenn remarked, "You're the second person to say that to me today."

Kenn didn't tell her Adrian had been the first. He'd made arrangements with Zack to have Rick under an extra guard while they were gone, but he had little faith in the truck driver since his timid Angie had drawn blood so easily.

“He’ll be under guard?”

“He has been all along, but as more time goes by without us catching him at something...”

“Yeah,” Angela’s gaze was stormy. “He’s slid right in with these people, been very careful.”

“Too careful.” Kenn’s voice matched hers...aware and displeased.

He glanced over at her, tone strangled. “Can’t you see anything?”

“Just darkness. *Some* people are wired that way.”

Kenn glowered at her. “You do that to me still?”

Easy, careful. “Sometimes.”

His displeasure grew, and the sentries nearby registered the change.

“*He* tell you to?” Meaning Adrian.

“No.”

“He know you can?”

“Yes.”

“Stay outta my head!”

Angela sighed, thinking he was about to learn the hard way that when Adrian wanted something, he got it. That was a lesson the Marine should already know by heart. “You make the real choice yet, Kenn?”

He flinched. It was tiny, but it was there and pleasing to her.

“I spent a lot of years in the bear cage. Knowing how he thinks kept me alive, wouldn’t you say?”

Kenn flushed guiltily and Angela studied him intently. “Are you still a threat?”

Kenn hated it that he couldn't ignore the power behind her demand. “Not to him.”

“To his dreams.”

Kenn's anger was replaced by frustration and worry. “Maybe.”

Angela ground out her butt with her boot. “If you kill the dreams, the man dies. You know that.”

Kenn kept his mouth shut. Of course, he knew.

“Find a way to make peace with all the changes.”

“I'm working on it!” Kenn snapped.

Angela followed her instincts. “Tonya would be a good mate if someone could...rehabilitate her.”

Kenn froze. It was the first time Angela had let on that she knew of his affair with the whore.

“I'm sure you've thought about it. She's much easier to control than I am, because she's so selfish.”

Angela had leaned in and Kenn found himself listening even though he didn't want to.

“She's also very determined, strong. If your loyalties became hers, imagine the respect you'd get for saving her.”

Kenn stayed silent and Angela explained, “Change takes time. People get hurt, but the results are worth it. Pick Adrian, and make everything else second. We all belong to him now; most of us know that. You should, too.”

Angela strode toward her Blazer, aware of Kenn gaping at her with a dumbfounded expression and she made sure her face wasn't upset. The biggest part of the fighting between her and Kenn was over now and this mission would settle the rest of their issues.

Make peace, save Tonya, pick Adrian. All things Kenn might think were possible if not for one obstacle. Brady was still earning his place and if things continued as they were, Marc would be second in command. Then, there was Angela getting stronger, becoming more like the other Eagles each day despite the crusty wound that had to hurt during workouts. It gave Kenn an unexpected source of pride to have the men say his ex was worthy. That was part of the final problem with him letting go.

He still wanted her. More so now than when they'd met, and that was the anger. Brady was his jealousy, but Kenn knew even if Angela had come alone, there wouldn't have been a second chance for them. Tonya often brought out his bitterness and now, his mind was full of confusion. How was he supposed to make peace with all of that?

"By priority," Kenn muttered. *Which one do I want more? Which one can I not live without?* Adrian was the immediate answer.

To keep his place, he'd have to sanction Angela and Brady being a couple and in power, like he'd foreseen when he found her.

Kenn was glad for the distraction when the other team members began climbing into the jeeps. Maybe somewhere in the future he could reach that point. Right now, he hadn't completely given up hope on driving her out of the Eagles. If she failed on this first turn out, there was hope.

They took three jeeps and two Blazers, Angela driving her own, and Adrian fought the urge to cancel the mission when his bad feeling grew stronger. He would go to the mess and surround himself with the warmth of his remaining herd instead.

He spotted Samantha's dismayed countenance also watching the convoy leave from her place atop the fire truck. They were learning how to use the bulky equipment and Adrian let his feet go that way. Samantha had been keeping tight company with Neil and Jeremy, and she would be tense while they were gone. He would lend a hand on the crew and distract them both from their worries for a bit.

5

“Is there a problem?”

The mission team had just crested a short hill and found themselves on a narrow, two-lane road that sloped downward. They'd only been traveling for an hour.

Angela glanced in the mirror at Neil's question. “They're arguing behind us.”

“That would be the usual for those two,” Neil stated, wishing he were there to support Kyle against the Marine. Kenn didn’t want her in the Eagles. He would loathe the very idea of her leading a team, let alone having to follow her orders.

“Uh-huh.”

Neil grinned at her suspicious tone. “What?”

“There’s something going on.”

Neil scanned the stalk-layered landscape instead of answering.

“That’s what I thought,” she snorted.

Angela kept track of the angry men in her rear view mirror as she followed the jeep ahead of them, aware of being protected in the center of their convoy.

Neil also monitored the men behind them, and when he and Angela recognized the motions of real anger, Marc told them to keep rolling.

“But if they’re fighting...”

Marc yawned. “Kenn’s driving. He won’t stop for that.” He pulled his hat down to block out the dim light. “When we hit Chadron now, it might be a different story.”

Realizing he was right, Neil relaxed a little and used the distraction technique that usually succeeded so well on rookies. “It’s time for a check-in with base and each other. You do it.”

Angela didn’t hesitate despite being the one driving. She had aced the radio courses so far.

“This is Liberty. Check in, by 7.”

To her relief and Marc's surprise, when Neil changed the channel, it was already lighting up.

"Independence, clear."

"Justice, all clear."

"Freedom, all clear."

"Caboose, clear."

"Copy, standby for a base check."

Neil switched them to another channel, one the camp stayed on regularly between broadcasts.

"This is Animal Control. Come in, Safe Haven."

"Gotchas loud and clear, Darlin'."

Angela rolled her eyes as the men with her expressed their disapproval at the unprofessional response from their radioman. He sounded drunker than usual.

"Everything is 5-by. Same?"

"Rogers that. Happy huntin'."

"Copy, out."

Angela hung up the mike, feeling pleased with herself, but it faded as she noticed the argument behind them had already resumed. Kenn's violent hand gestures and red face said he was beyond pissed.

"Kyle can take care of himself," Marc stated from the rear without glancing up from the maps he was scouring for possible future escape routes. "They have some things to sort out."

Neil and Angela were both concerned at his words.

"How do you know that?"

“Adrian remade the vehicle arrangements for this mission right before we left. He wanted them alone together.”

6

Before he could insist on seating arrangements, Kyle had stepped in front of him and Kenn knew his plans to prove Angela unworthy during this mission weren't going to succeed. He'd had the right words on his tongue, was ready to restart the old war with her, and then Kyle had appeared and said four words.

“Let's have a talk.”

It had gotten ugly fast, and now they were riding in tense silence, both too pissed to keep arguing.

Kyle lit a cheroot, blowing it his way in disrespect. Kenn had told him not to smoke the little cigars when they rode together.

Kenn fanned the cloud, putting the window down. “Asshole.”

“That's me,” Kyle agreed in surprise.

He was discovering that he actually had respect for this Kenn, the one who spoke his mind.

“Look,” Kyle pushed back into the battle, determined to win. “Pretend it's someone else in charge. Do it for Adrian.”

“No.”

Kyle sighed as they rolled by a weathered sign announcing the Antioch limits. It was going to be a

long ride to Chadron. He hoped things were going better for the boss.

7

Hisssss...

Adrian's hand jerked up and he leaned away from the burlap sack lying on his cot.

Hiss...

The snake sounded angry and Adrian quickly snagged the drawstring and gave it a sharp jerk. The bag shut tightly, drawing a louder noise as the sack rippled from the snake's angry movements.

Sitting with the other papers and kits, and half buried under other envelopes and boxes the Eagles had put here for him, the bag had given the impression of being harmless. With Kenn only gone for half a day, there was already no organization and it had allowed someone to slip in an attempt on his life.

Adrian sat down in the closest chair, thinking hard. Such a simple and smart attempt implied the person knew camp routines. It was also indicative of someone pissing on another man's property, an insult meant to wound mentally.

This attempt had been done to hurt him. Even if he didn't get bitten and die before Angie could get... While she was out of camp, her tent was unguarded!

Adrian shoved himself to his feet angrily, but took an extra minute to gain control of his emotions. He would have Jeff and Kevin handle

this. Those two were much more reliable than Zack.

He moved toward the training tent, glad Doug, at least, was still here to help maintain normal order, and he kept his pace calm and his face friendly. His mind however, was in a dark place. The next attempt would be bolder and try harder to kill him. His herd might be caught in the crossfire, and like any good shepherd, Adrian was working on a plan to spare them. They would be on the road for the next two days and the highest teams would be away the whole time. Plenty of opportunity for their mole to poke his head up again.

8

“You could sneak into his tent, be waiting when they come in.”

Becky didn't jump at the voice, she'd known Rick was nearby, but she flinched at the image of Neil returning to discover her in his bed.

“Yeah, I can imagine that working. There's nothing like being tossed naked from a man's tent.”

Rick's hands plunged into his pockets at the word naked and Becky grinned at him. “You've got something else, right?”

“If you were found together before he could throw you out, it wouldn't matter, would it?”

Becky wanted to swear that she'd never trap Neil that way, but couldn't. “Not to the sheep. He'd have to marry me, maybe.”

“That’s what you want, right?”

“Yes,” Becky answered quickly despite no longer being as positive.

“I know how you can make it happen. Without the naked parade.”

Becky recognized the careful control and almost desperate need. Rick was dangerous. Again, that delicious shiver had her reacting more boldly than she felt. “And in return?”

The traitor advanced, but didn’t take his hands from his pockets. “A small reward.”

Angela’s voice ran through her mind. *“To be an Eagle, Becky, you’d have to give up Rick. They’ll never let you in while you play games with the enemy.”*

“Are you the enemy, like she said?”

He nodded, knowing it wasn’t necessary to lie to the teenager. In fact, it was crucial that he didn’t.

“What do you want here?”

“Samantha.”

Becky’s stomach churned with jealousy. *That blonde bitch again!*

She struck back, hard. “I won’t be your toy. If I go to his bed, he’ll be my first.”

Rick shrugged. “Your choice, always.”

Foiled, the teen asked, “What kind of reward?”

Rick didn’t wait any longer to demonstrate.

Becky froze as he swept her up against his rugged body, suddenly terrified.

He hugged her.

Reluctantly, she allowed it. It was a much smaller price than she'd thought he would ask.

Rick knew the end of his time in Safe Haven was nearing, but that didn't mean he wouldn't return, or that there wouldn't be time for what he had planned for the young girl in his arms.

Always one to set up the next move, he let go and said, "Sorry. I get lonely."

Becky's heart melted, as he'd known it would.

"That's okay. I was expecting worse."

"I'd never hurt you."

"Promise?" she questioned.

He let the sarcasm loose. "*You know it.*"

Rick held out a small vial. "Half of this will put him in the mood. He'll take any woman in his bed, with or without her say-so. All of it will knock him out for about eight hours and make him feel like he's been drinking for a week."

Feeling much like a traitor herself, Becky slid the bottle into her pocket. "This is wrong."

"Yes."

She waited for Rick to give her the speech she would have heard from the Eagles. When it didn't come, she surprised them both by moving back into his arms for an intense clutch. "Thank you!"

Pushing his luck, Rick held her again, pretending she was a taller, fuller blonde, with a scar on her hip and fire in her touch.

Accompanied by steady rain, the Eagles drove straight through to Chadron. Thanks to half of their route going over roads they had already cleared for Safe Haven, they entered the city limits just twenty-five hours after leaving.

They'd stopped twice for driving changes, the others snoozing in the vehicles, and while the fighting between Kenn and Kyle never really stopped, it did pause when they took a short break in the rain.

Angela stayed by the vehicles during these moments, not wanting to hold them up, and she studied how the others handled the cramped conditions and horrible sights... Like when they'd rolled through Berea, Nebraska.

It had been five months since the war, and the runny corpses they'd all shied from in the beginning were mostly gone now. All that usually remained were graying skeletons in tattered bits of clothing. In Berea, however, the bodies had been fresh through their rain-soaked windows. Their convoy had driven by these reminders of human insanity with tense profiles and guns ready. It was clear that there had been a battle in this small town, but between whom? There were no signs of the government or the slavers, only residents of the town, and the Eagles swept the wet landscape harder after that.

They'd left the mystery behind and it wasn't until they made it to Max and Lenore's ranch, that Angela connected the pieces. "The wolves did it."

Marc raised a brow, but he got her drift an instant later. He kept his mouth shut, thinking that if the wolves were now south of Chadron, it didn't bode well for the mountain couple that Angela had hopes of rescuing. Chances were slim that Max and Lenore had lasted another month after they'd come through.

As the convoy rolled to a stop in front of the weathered ranch house, the rain stopped and Angela's upset voice told him the odds had shrunk to nothing.

"No life survives in there."

Her words weren't doubted, but Neil had a small team verify it anyway. The sooner they were out of this stalk-filled graveyard, the better.

"I need to go in."

Marc opened his mouth and Angela swung herself from the Blazer without waiting for his protest. "I'm not asking."

She slammed the door, and the remaining Eagles split off into two groups. Kenn stayed with Neil's men, patrolling their vehicles, and Kyle's team followed her inside.

How they had gotten Kenn to play along, she didn't know, but she was glad.

The smell of the corn was much worse than when she'd been here before, and Angela strode quickly through the reeking home toward the kitchen with the edge of her shirt over her nose. One of the doors in the long hall drew her interest

and heat spread up her face. That was where Marc had helped her conquer some of her fears.

Angela pushed away the memories and the disturbing version that wanted to change the players in that moment. *Now is not the time*, she warned herself. Sex and death were not supposed to mix!

Moving into the next room, Angela spotted the bodies in the bed, their exposed, purple skin covered in tiny teeth marks, and clenched her fists against the guilt. Blinking away tears, she kept walking. There was nothing she could do for them now.

Angela stepped through the curtains and grabbed the ornate Caller from the wall peg. She hadn't known the mountain woman very well, and Max, she hadn't even liked, but they had been full of life when she'd been here four weeks ago. It was impossible not to feel weighed down.

Why she took the wall ornament was only clear to Marc, who frowned at the thought of who might wield it.

The Eagles followed her outside and when Angela loaded herself into the Blazer's passenger seat, they exchanged relieved gestures, eager to be rolling again before the sun sank. The wolf den was only thirty minutes from here and as soon as it was destroyed, they could rejoin Safe Haven.

Lost in her guilt over Max and Lenore's terrible deaths, Angela didn't feel the waves of unease moving their way until it was too late.

One minute they were rolling steadily by row after row of molding cornstalks, the sickly, knee-high plants all they could discern in every direction of the Walgren Lake State Rec Area.

The next instant, a wall of death thundered from the corn and washed their convoy away.

Angela struggled to breathe, smothered between the two men as the Blazer rolled. They were hugging her tightly, trying to keep her away from the debris that was pounding dents into the reinforced steel.

Slam! Crack!

Another flip—this one beat them against the front seats and then each other.

CRACK!

The rear window was hit hard, sending spiraled fractures through it, but none of the black mud that had swallowed them.

Rip! Thud!

Even reinforced, the 4x4 was giving under the onslaught.

Smash!

They came to a sudden, jarring stop against something hard, and it flung them along the roof as the mud-wave parted to flow around them.

Angela wrenched her head up, gasping air into pain-filled lungs. "Hold on...not done."

Their grips tightened, feet bracing, and then the Blazer was hit in the side by something big and they were spun back into the chaotic mess.

The flash flood raced over the land in a roaring torrent. Leaving a trail of destruction that was nearly two miles long, the wall of mud carried the Blazer along brutally. Slowly losing power, it finally let them go deep in a cornfield, with muddy silt up to the tires.

At a shaky gesture from Angela to confirm it was over, the trio inside untangled themselves carefully.

“You okay?”

“You all right?”

They asked it at nearly the same time and Angela wiped blood from a scratch across her arm.

“Think so. Might be sick,” she informed them, swallowing a groan as she noticed how many other small cuts she had. If this kept up, she’d be a hideous hag by the time she got to Kyle’s level. “Can we get out?”

“Two minutes.”

She nodded at Marc’s words, and then held her head as it spun. “One...two...three...”

Marc grinned at the countdown and the two males examined their situation. He and Neil were also bleeding from numerous places, but none of them was serious injuries and being men, they didn’t worry about it now that they’d assured themselves of her safety.

“There’s light.” Neil pointed.

Marc slid toward the passenger window. “Good. That means we’re upright.”

The Blazer’s engine wasn’t running, denying power to the switches, and it took both of them to gently force the glass down.

Mud rolled into the Blazer in small rapids, leaving a limited vision of their surroundings. The battered vehicle was sunk partially down into the dark, dank mud, and all around them...were cornfields and little else.

“Help her with the gear and I’ll do a quick check,” Neil instructed, already sliding his thin torso through the mud-covered window.

Angela didn’t wait for Marc to help her from the slippery opening, moving smoothly out and then onto the roof before jumping clear of the mud path. It wasn’t that she didn’t want Marc to touch her. She just wanted to hold her own, and be treated like any other Eagle no matter what happened.

Marc knew and followed her silently. He’d been sure observing her on this mission would be hard, but he was beginning to suspect that it wasn’t because of anything she might do, only his reaction to it. He had himself under tight control right now, but later, when she was busy proving herself, might be another thing all together.

Neil waited, still fighting half an hour later to get his guts under control from their wild ride. Thanks to the extra supplies they'd brought, their injuries were a large number of scrapes and bruises from bouncing off of boxes and bags instead of sharp metal, but Neil had little doubt they'd be hurting from it later.

There was only static as the mud-splattered trio listened and Neil tried again, "This is Liberty. Come in Independence."

Angela halted Neil when he would have tried a third time, certain they'd been heard. The adrenalin was still pumping through her body, making it easier than usual to pick up Kenn's bad vibes.

"They hear us. Radio's sparking. This is the same street we were on when the mudslide swept us out. They're on foot now, too."

"We lost all five vehicles?" Neil was incredulous.

"Kenn thinks they'll have the Excursion when it dries out."

"Ours may work, too, in a few hours." Marc stated from the raised hood. "Needs more settling time."

"Tell them to meet us by that silo. It's high enough to be visible in every direction." Neil instructed.

Angela carefully tapped the message out in code, and then listened mentally to make sure

they'd gotten it. She planned to do as much of this as she could without help from the witch.

Neil surveyed Angela, thinking that even with mud in her hair and dried blood on her face, she was still so pretty it hurt...like Samantha, with dirt in her hair from gardening.

“You’ve got the basic foot formations down?”

Angela unslung the rifle she had acquired for passing the level tests. She ran a finger over the initials burned into the stock. “Yes, sir!”

Both men smiled, but Angela didn't. She veered to take Point without being told, Neil's thoughts full of giving her lead. No matter how well she did or how exact her copy was, it always brought surprise and amusement instead of respect or acceptance. Knowing they still didn't consider her an equal made Angela even more determined to be perfect and she reluctantly brought the witch forward to walk with her as the two males took her flank.

The formation for three people was a shifting diagonal, led by the Point man. The Eagles in the rear automatically adjusted the line as she walked, searching the empty stalks that surrounded them.

Marc was keeping track of the distant sun that would soon sink below the skyline and he was glad when she set a fast pace. They only had a few hours before dark and then they would be out here with no shelter and the wolves roaming freely.

The men kept up easily and Angela was surprised by her lack of fear despite their situation. That feeling of being right where she belonged was settling over her.

When she caught movement in the distance a bit later, she pointed. "There they are."

The double diagonal line of Eagles was much larger, appearing like soldier ants marching neatly to their own beats.

"You remember, I'm sure, what happened the last time we were here after dark."

Marc hunted through the shadows of late afternoon as his mind lingered on the note of excitement in her voice. Where was *his* Angie?

"Yeah. We'll have to get ready."

She gestured at the farm they were about to reach. "We can set up in there."

The barn was huge, faded red with a top window and narrow deck that was easily 40 feet across. The two front doors were open and Marc lit a smoke, thinking that ledge was where he wanted her when it all got crazy.

Angela went that way and Neil slowed down to be even with Marc. He made sure his voice was low enough so that she wouldn't overhear. "I want to give her lead of this mission. It's my call."

Marc's sudden flash of intuition was sharp. "You want it or Adrian does?"

Neil didn't flinch, expecting the accusation. "Both."

"When will you tell her?"

“She knows what we want. Probably has since before we left.”

Marc stiffened, tightening his control. She hadn't mentioned that part. “As long as she's safe, I'm on board.”

It was clear from the set profiles of Kenn and Kyle that their leadership transition hadn't gone as well. Marc observed as the rest of the tense, scraped-up men joined them in front of the barn. Would Kenn fall in line?

Neil was wondering the same thing, but didn't change the plan, and it took the Eagles only a few words to understand what he needed from them.

“Angela's been through here in the last month, knew the people we found. She'll tell us what to expect tonight.”

“It'll be easier to show you. It's behind the barn.” She sounded calm to her own ears, but inside, the nervousness had returned with Kenn's hard face.

Marc was surprised she had known they were so close to where their battle with the wolves had taken place. Only half a mile away, they might have been able to make their stand in the big red shelter if they'd known it was there.

Angela led the way at Neil's motion. Hearing nothing behind her but steps, she spun around. “Who has guard duty?”

Neil hid his surprise. He'd expected to have to remind her. “You pick it.”

Angela smothered the grin of power that wanted to fill her face. “Daryl and Jeremy. Password is mud.”

There were snickers at that, and disapproval from the more serious among them as the two chosen men took up positions around the barn.

Conscious of Kenn’s glares burning holes into her; Angela strode toward the corn, but didn’t try to lead them in a formation. Neil and Marc could handle that, but the rest of these men were as unsure as she was.

Watching them follow her rookie-lead with no protest, and then seeing Kenn’s shocked countenance, had Marc understanding the Marine was about to be taught a lesson by his fellow men. This mission would take more of the power from him and return it to the victim. Adrian was trying to give her a bit of justice and Marc was suddenly flooded with guilt and respect. He hadn’t been kind to the leader, but that man had been great with Angela. Instead of the abusive lifestyle they’d feared, the leader of Safe Haven was giving her the freedom to be whatever she wanted.

Aware of the day quickly fading, Angela kept them moving. The corn was up to their waist, growing even though it should be dead. To travel through it, to be touched by the slimy brown stalks, was a revolting feeling and there was little conversation. It had gotten a lot worse here since she and Marc had fought for their lives.

They found the ring of burned stalks less than fifteen minutes after leaving the barn. The charred circle and decaying animal skeletons were mostly untouched and Angela waited without saying anything, letting them recognize the spot for what it was—a killin' field.

“Questions?” Neil guided things, setting them up as Adrian would have done. He ignored Kenn’s scowl.

“There was a third person here, right?” Billy asked, studying the broken stalks.

Angela supplied the answer when Marc didn’t. “Yes. Max was the man in the bed.”

“You used gas for the fire?” Neil prompted, able to smell it still even after a month.

“Max did.”

“What drove them off?” Daryl wanted to know, sure from all the tracks that these three or four dozen carcasses hadn’t been the entire pack.

“His wife, Lenore, had the Caller; the thing I took from the wall before the slide.”

“She was the woman?”

“Yes. They were part giant, I think.”

A few quick scoffs faded at her next words.

“The wolves tracked us, ambushed us here. Max said they’d killed most of the survivors in this area.”

The Eagles exchanged pointed glances and Angela confirmed their thoughts. “They were sure the wolves planned each attack, like an army bent on destroying the enemy.”

It fit with what they had observed on their own and Angela instinctively built them up. “They’ve been unchallenged since the war. That changes tonight.”

She pointed at the center of the charred circle, where their used brass flashed dimly in the grudging sun. “Marc will show us the setup and we’ll get ready.”

Kenn was stunned as the Eagles crowded around Brady at her orders. He hated it that leadership was yet another thing she was good at, but his mind warred with his guilt at that thought. He could have helped her be this way.

Five minutes later, even Kenn had to admit it was a solid plan, except for one thing. “What’s the bait?”

The Marine’s question had the Eagles turning away from Marc’s glare.

“Blood.”

“Mostly noise,” Angela added quickly, recognizing the fight that was about to start. “They were drawn to our workout.”

“This time, they’ll find an army waiting,” Kyle stated intently.

Angela’s eyes were glowing vividly in the coming darkness. “Adrian’s Army.”

“Oorah!”

It was a chorus response, and again, it shocked Kenn. He’d tried to take charge earlier, the way she was now, but only Kyle’s words had gotten the

men moving after the slide. It was as if they were dead set on her being in charge. It was... *What Adrian wants*, Kenn realized. They were following orders.

“Wish you could, too,” Angela pushed.

Kenn flushed angrily. “I can. Just not yours!”

Angela shook her head when Neil would have confronted him. “Let’s get back and set it up.”

Angela went by the sullen Marine without any sign that his anger bothered her, and the others did the same.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Kenn brought up the rear. This wasn’t turning out at all like he’d planned.

12

Less than two hours later, it was purple and yellow dusk-layered skies above them. The men were in their places, and Marc and Angie were in the yard in front of the barn. They each took occasional shots at the battered soda cans they’d lined up, but it wasn’t distracting them from their perusal of the four-foot brown stalks around the yard and behind the barn. With their movements, the shallow cuts on their arms left drops and splashes of crimson. Blood and noise.

The wind gusted harder as full dark settled over the flat land and everything around them blew wildly in the chilling wind. “*Ooohhhh...*”

Angela didn't jump, but she wanted to. She exchanged a look with Marc as that feeling of Déjà vu flooded them. They'd been here before.

"The corn sounds different," she stated. "It's already later. Do you think they've chosen a different area?"

"No."

"How can you—"

"They're in the corn."

They both flinched at the loud crunch of double radios warning them of movement and Marc switched his off. He'd be close enough at all times, to listen to *her* radio.

"You ready?"

"You know it." Angela waited tensely, now sensing the animals in the rows across from them. She understood Marc's training had allowed him to sense them first, and she couldn't stop the almost desperate flare of longing to be that good without her magic. She been about to waste some of that searching and was glad she wouldn't have to now. She wanted that reserve waiting if things got too ugly.

"Here they come!"

The perimeter guard's call signaled the start and Angela began to swing the Caller in a wide circle. She brought it up in a deep arc that caught the wind as it gained speed.

"Whhhhooooooooo..."

The sound echoed, whining and seductive at the same time, and she swung it faster, instinctively knowing how to call them.

“Oooooohhhhhh...”

She let the last note die out slowly, almost able to feel the power inside begging for one more swing. She tucked it into her waist pouch instead.

“Wwwooooooohoooo!”

“Raaawhwhoooo!”

The animals were answering her call now and Marc motioned toward the barn. “Go.”

Angela reacted almost casually, expecting to be rushed. When the corn parted to her right, she drew and fired in a blur that impressed even Kenn. The big gray male that had been stalking her fell to the dirt.

The Eagles picked them off, providing cover for Marc and Angie as they ran toward the barn.

In full battle mode now, Marc fired, spun and aimed, fired. These were the scouts. The rest would be along shortly.

Angela dumped the used rounds smoothly, still moving, and she clicked the speed loader home as hungry predators gleamed at them from the darkness.

“Base, we have movement on the south perimeter. Ten, maybe fifteen animals.”

“Same here, base. Ten large targets, moving fast.”

Angela increased her pace, feeling the hair on her neck stand up as three large dogs emerged

from the shadows beyond the barn door. They would get there first, trapping her on the ground.

Angela spotted the ledge. *Trapped? Not me, not ever again!*

Angela darted straight for the snarling animals, noting thin bodies and desperate jaws that wanted to maul her. Right before she was in reach of their coming lunges, she jumped.

Her hands caught the ledge of the doorframe and she swung herself up and over the snapping wolves with a grunt at the pain from her shoulder.

Running the instant her feet hit the dirt and hay, she climbed the ladder to the loft three stairs at a time.

Angela was relieved to find Marc moving in through the window on the ledge as she hit the top.

“Base...”

There was a silence that had them all tensing.

“We see the pack line... Stand by!”

Angela motioned to Kyle and Kenn, who stood apart from the others. “Nice and easy. Get set.”

Kenn reacted slower for her than he would have for Adrian, but the fact that he did it at all was a good sign.

“Make that two pack-lines, base. Roughly fifty animals!”

“Make that eighty, base. They’re...everywhere.”

“Maybe we should get her out of—”

“Stop shooting until I give the call!”

That was Daryl, out in the field with the others who had suppressors to keep from scaring the animals away. Angela's chin settled into a line that many of them now recognized. Like Adrian, when she made up her mind, it wasn't likely to change.

Angela pushed the button on the radio. "We're set here. Mission is a go!"

"We have wolves in the barn."

The animals were slinking in through the open doors, dogs and wolves of all shades and sizes padding in to fight with each other and snap at the chickens hanging from a center beam. They were thin and lanky, with matted fur and wild eyes on the hunt.

"We'll try to do batches of twenty. Doors shut in a ten count," Angela informed them, finishing her reload. She hated killing and always would, but today, she would do her share. These threats to the future had to be eliminated.

The barn doors were rigged with ropes and they swung shut slowly at first, drawing little attention. It was the same when the doors finally slammed shut, the wolves too busy fighting over the meat and lunging at the ledge the Eagles were on.

Angela felt that nauseating, thrilling chill of a battle settling over her mind. "Open fire!"

It was awful, bloody work and very quick, with the Eagles being careful not to waste their shots. Blood splattered the floor and walls repeatedly.

The gunfire slowed and the Eagles reloaded without speaking. Billy was set to jump down and shove the doors open for the next set of animals that were sniffing and digging to get in. It would be dangerous—trying to get out of range as the new animals came in—and Angela gave the Eagles covering him a motion that said to guard well.

Kyle snapped off a smart, joking salute in response and she snorted, motioning at the ground. “Open us up.”

Billy dropped down and gave the unlocked doors a hard shove. He immediately spun for the ladder as a large group of snarling wolves and dogs streamed through the doors.

A small, fast shepherd-type dog darted in front of the others, lunging at Billy’s leg.

The Eagle felt it coming and threw himself into the air as the animal flew under him.

Billy hit the straw-covered floor and immediately jumped again, this time getting the ladder. He yanked himself out of reach, grinning hugely.

“Can you find a way to push it?” Angela asked Kenn. “He’s not going down there again.”

“We’ll block the edge with a ladder and use more pullers,” Kenn answered tonelessly. “But there’s no guarantee that rope will hold after a few times.”

“Understood.” She did a fast count of the snarling animals roaming the bloody barn floor. “That’s more than twenty. Let’s do it.”

13

Angela helped them take down the next two groups of predators and then moved toward the window. Kenn's ladder idea had worked perfectly. "Inside is yours..."

Kenn felt her question, her need, and gave a curt gesture. "I'll watch their six."

Satisfied that he would, she eased out the window as he gave the call to open fire. Things had changed again. The past was finally over for them.

Now standing on the ledge with Eagles on each side of her, Angela saw that the pack-lines the outer sentries had warned of, were about to arrive. Padding steadily through the moldy stalks, it was a huge number of predators now banded together to fight a common enemy. Man.

Angry at the injustice of the war's effects, Angela swept the scene and found a lone white wolf in the far yard where she and Marc had been earlier. It dwarfed most of the other animals padding through the zombie corn plants that refused to stay dead and her red orbs gleamed red in the light of their torches.

The wolf sniffed their blood spots as if it was memorizing their scents.

"That's the Alpha. Get her!" Angela ordered.

The Eagles on the ledge aimed, but the wolf darted under cover.

“Damn it!” Angela hit her button. “Get the white one! Perimeter, give us some sound!”

Gunshots echoed from the surrounding fields at her command, those on the outside using the noise of their guns to drive the pack toward the barn.

Angela waited with the others for the rest of the lines to come into sight. The doors below them swung open and a large group of filthy animals rushed in, drawn by the thick, coppery scent of blood.

Kenn’s voice, now happily in charge, rang out, “Twice more and those weak-ass doors won’t hold. Let more of ‘em in.”

Their radios crackled, “It’s coming your way again, base. Jeremy winged it. Look for red on white!”

“Copy that. Get set for part two.”

“We’re ready, base.”

Angela noticed Alex’s slightly panicked responses to her orders, and filed it away for later as gunpowder mixed unpleasantly with the other smells of the slaughter.

“One more time and we’re through in here,” Kenn called.

Angela pushed the button on her mike. “Copy. I’ll tell you when to shut them on this one.”

“Copy.”

She let her gun hang loosely and the men on the outside ledge with her did the same.

“What’s the count?”

“Over seventy bodies inside, a dozen here, plus perimeter shots,” Neil informed her, standing to the left and a bit behind. “Roughly half of what Kevin and Doug counted.”

Another big wave of growling dogs and wolves surged into the barn, followed by a crowd of bristling, bloody pups and Angela made the call. “Shut the doors! Perimeter men begin the walk-in. It’s a go!”

Angela surveyed the constantly shifting mass below, glad of the torches. She immediately found the glowing orbs of the white alpha, barely visible through the corn. Knowing what had to be done, she subtly distanced herself from the Eagles, distracting them with, “That’s too far for me. Can anyone make the shot?”

Marc and Neil both shook their heads as gunfire rang continuously from both the barn and the perimeter men.

“Not without my rifle,” Marc stated. “She’ll have to come closer.”

Time to do what I came here for, Angela thought. *Face one of my many fears.*

She tapped her vest for good luck and pulled the Caller from her kit. “I’ll need cover. Who’s got my six?”

Neil and Marc moved her way, both meaning to stop her, and Angela dropped the ten feet to the ground before they could.

She swung the Caller in a defensive flash of circles as two snarling pit bulls lunged for her right

away. Guns barked from the ledge and the former pets fell.

The sounds of the Caller wailed harmonically over the farm and spun into the corn. “Whhhwhoowooo...”

Radios crackled, “People are in the yard! I repeat! Eagles are in your line of fire!”

Angela heard two men drop behind her and she strode into the corn, the Caller vibrating in her grip.

“Oohh...”

“Whhhooooo!”

The Alpha’s howl overpowered the Caller as the wolf rose to her challenge from a hiding place in the stalks.

Angela threw her head back and let the woman inside answer. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

It rang in the air and she triggered her wrist blade as the white wolf came through the stalks, baring bloody teeth. *Bloody? One of my men are hurt.*

Fury spiraled through Angela in a lethal surge and she waved her blade, “Come on!”

The wolf snarled in answer and padded determinedly her way.

The pack was uneasy, confused and whining, and Kyle waved his Eagles to the ground to finish the battle as the last big group of animals was driven toward them by the perimeter sentries.

“Mind your lines!” he snapped and opened fire.

Angela heard Marc and Neil take aim on the running Alpha about to lunge, and she slid into their path, preventing a clear shot. *I issued this challenge and I'll answer it!*

“Duck!”

The animals were all pack-hunting, even the dogs, and she hit the ground as a furry shadow came at her from the side.

Gunfire told her Marc had gotten the foaming poodle and she rolled to her feet in time to meet the Alpha's jump, bracing her wrist to absorb the impact.

The wolf's teeth slid against her, hot and hungry, and Angela ripped upward brutally as it bit into her arm.

She and the wolf cried out together, one gasping, the other struggling. They hit the dirt hard and Angela rolled clear as the Alpha whimpered a last time and stilled.

Angela got to her feet without taking any of the hands there to help her up. Wiping the blood down her jeans, she slid the wrist blade into its holder and surveyed the yard. Her hands didn't shake as she pulled the .357 and reset it with full rounds.

In that moment, she wasn't his Angie and Marc's mind narrowed in on it. This bleeding woman was a fearless hunter, a natural killer and marksman. This fierce fighter was Adrian's and she belonged to Safe Haven. *His* Angie, the sweet, innocent girl he'd loved for so long, had been left

in that cabin in Versailles, along with her attacker's corpse.

"Brady!" Angela fired and hit the white wolf pup sneaking up on his rear.

Neil got the second white pup to Marc's left, marveling at how neat and cold Angela was. Not a shot missed as she stood with a leg over each side of her prey, Neil knew he wasn't the only one grinning in admiration and now thinking she fit perfectly with the Eagles. They were also wild when they were out on runs.

The pack was thinned, most of the remaining animals running toward the perimeter men who were in a tight net and the Eagles in the yard linked up to meet them. Careful not to trim each other in the crossfire, they came to a stop near where Angela still stood over the Alpha. She hadn't been attacked since killing it, telling everyone that these animals had accepted her leadership.

It was a powerful moment that she wasn't aware of, but the Eagles recognized. This woman would eventually be part of the chain of command. She was too good to be anywhere else.

"I think that's it." Her voice was full of the victory they were sharing. "Let's do a fast sweep to be sure."

She didn't have to tell them not to spare any of the injured animals they came across. After observing Kyle on the nun mission, she already knew they wouldn't.

Angela raised her chin as Kenn and Kyle fell in on either side of her for the sweep. “Let’s go.”

Ten minutes later, nothing moved but the Eagles and the blood-streaked stalks.

Chapter Seventeen

Timing is Everything

1

Standing by the revolting, blood-splattered barn doors, Angela took her time washing, not listening to the argument going on above her. Her mind was on how it felt to win, to have beaten the Alpha and won her pack. There wouldn't be a feeling to rival it, unless it was the moment she was finally able to conquer her fear and give herself to Marc.

“Yes, you will! Get them to ease off.”

“It won't succeed and not just with her. With any female.”

“Where were you now? She's like him.”

“No.”

“Yes!”

Wrapping a thick strip of gauze around her newest injury, Angela moved away from the doors, as the voices got louder. She was feeling restless and a bit frustrated. She should be hurting and probably feeling guilty, but...aroused? Again, the spilling of blood had her hormones swinging and Angela kept her profile away from the others as

much as she could, not sure if the males might be able to read it on her.

Marc kept his ears on the loft and the fight that was about to start, but his attention was on the lone female wandering the battle scene like something was missing. She reminded Marc a bit of his base commander. The big man hadn't come on missions often, but when he did, they had always ended with that dangerously good leader roaming the scene much like Angela was doing.

Marc's gut twisted. He'd never been able to discover what caused that reaction in his commander, and he doubted it would be any different with Angela. She had a wall up that he couldn't get through.

"It doesn't have to be this way, but I'm telling you right now, so listen," Kyle demanded. "This is what she wants, what Adrian needs, and you will not let your allies stand in the way!"

Kyle stormed out of the barn a few seconds later and drew the Eagles over to where Angela stood. "We're not done here. What's next?"

It took Angela a moment to realize he was talking to her. "Cleaning up, I suppose."

She scanned them. "Anyone have gloves?"

Half the men raised a pair and she fell into the role more easily this time. "Okay. You guys are carriers. We'll put it all in the barn and burn it."

“What about the ones that got away? They’ll come here and breed again,” Kenn asked tonelessly, joining the circle, but only a far edge.

“I could poison a few of the chickens, if you think they’ll eat it.”

Tone perfectly unsure, it eased his singed feathers enough to allow a note of real interest to finally enter his voice.

“You cook ‘em, we’ll scatter ‘em.”

Angela made a crude gesture. “Cookin’s woman’s work.” And was rewarded by scoffs, chuckles.

Kenn flushed. How many times had he said that to her?

Angela was gentler than he had any right to expect. “Leave it in the past.” She gestured at the barn. “Go get your meat ready and we’ll play doctor.”

There was an instant of silence when none of them knew what to say and they waited for Kenn’s reaction with bated breath.

The Marine stared, dumbfounded at the suggestive joke, and Angela rolled her eyes. “Men!”

That pulled an unwilling response from Kenn. “Women!”

Angela didn’t hesitate to give him another humility-delivering blow. “Sometimes, they do mix.”

Kenn hated her for being able to draw it from his lips, but resisting was impossible. He grimaced. “And do it well.”

It was as close to a compliment for her success as she would get and the others recognized the moment for what it was—a peace talk.

“And, next time?”

None of them were sure if Kenn would answer. When he finally did, it was like the end of a war.

“Maybe it will be easier or maybe it’ll be harder, but the job will get done.”

Satisfied, Angela allowed that deliriously addicting tone of command to fill her voice. “It’s time. Get them moving. Eagle Two has point.”

2

Kenn had them reunited with the two vehicles they still had and set up a mile away from the burning barn, an hour later. Everyone was glad to be out of the harsh wind and smells.

Wrist aching louder than the rest of her battered body, Angela let him keep Point. Now that she’d done what she came to, the need to lead was fading. Had Adrian known it would be that way? He’d been reluctant to let her come along, but that wave of anxiety he’d released as they rolled out... Adrian had been hoping she would have another success to help push the goals further, but had he foreseen this tightly knit group of men surrounding her with their protection?

She monitored her fellow survivors. Some were playing cards, letting out the occasional quiet groan or snigger. Two of them had kits open, tending minor wounds. A few were reading, something she found surprising not only for men, but for the times. It was something the camp rarely did. However, most of this crew were sitting quietly in a circle around the nicely crackling fire. Adrian had been certain they would support her or he wouldn't have let her come.

Her gaze skipped over Kenn, who was dozing against a tree stump, and went to the men on duty. Kyle and Seth were taking the first post and she spent a moment trying to memorize their pattern. It was a light patrol for such a dangerous area, but these two Eagles were lethal. Anyone they met in the shadows wouldn't stand a chance. Neil was also out there roaming somewhere, saying he needed to walk it all off, and she was comforted. The only thing better than that trio, was Marc.

She glanced at the vehicles, where a lone man smoked and studied her through the Blazer window. Marc hadn't spoken to her since the battle, but he wanted answers, she could feel that. She would tell him the truth, but he wouldn't like hearing she had loved it, wanted to go on every run.

Angela sighed. She was officially an Eagle, had helped complete a mission. He wouldn't be able to take much more before he split or gave in.

He has run out of things to teach, the Witch intoned, slapping her to their trip here.

Angela tensed against the pain that always came. Their two months alone together had become vague and blurry. There were times where she struggled to remember what it felt like to have his arms carrying her into the tent after her first kill. How it had felt to draw him close, like she'd done with her attacker...

Only one memory of their two thousand mile trek remained vivid, but even that was tainted. The delicious chill brought from recalling those stolen moments now sent her thoughts straight to Safe Haven's leader. What was that man doing at this moment? Wishing she'd reach out to him, let him in for a minute? Likely that and more, but she didn't. With the top men out of camp, Adrian would surround himself with those left. He wasn't alone.

Unwanted jealousy seared its way down Angela's throat and her grip in the damp dirt tightened. Clear-headed from the adrenaline letdown, she understood what was about to happen if she didn't make a change. Marc was going to leave and this bond she had with Adrian would grow. Nothing would stop it.

Give up your new dreams, the Witch stated. *That will.*

Angela gazed at the fire. Not even for Marc. There had to be a way to get him to accept her choices. Once he did, they could be together and

then her loneliness wouldn't keep trying to strengthen ties with Adrian. It wasn't what she wanted. He wasn't Brady.

Filled with sadness, Angela didn't notice how her mood affected the men around her. The jokes and laughter stopped, conversations trailed off, and the men on duty increased their sweeps. None of them connected it to the only woman among them, though, and the next hour passed slowly as she continued to examine the hard truths that she'd been avoiding.

Marc was able to feel her unrest. She wanted his support, his welcome and encouragement, and she understood that wasn't going to happen. It was hard not to go to her and give in, but he knew it would only last until the next time she put herself in danger or did something he didn't agree with. As long as Angie was an Eagle, there would always be a wall between them.

Can I live with that? Between the missions and lessons, she'll be mine.

Fighting alongside her today had been awful, but it had also been enlightening. The girl he'd known was gone and if he wanted a life with *this* Angie, he would have to do it her way.

Marc didn't take his attention off her, studying each expression, each gesture. There was a strength in her that he'd denied and the warrior inside was finally able to be heard.

Of course, you can. Any version of that bloody female will do. She had to be protected before. This is better. Now, you can love her.

3

Dozing by the fire three chilly hours before dawn, Angela stiffened suddenly. “There’s something wrong.”

Heads rotated her way, few of them asleep, and Marc immediately came from his solitary seat in the Blazer at their reactions.

“What is it?” Kyle asked, moving to her left as Marc came to her right.

“Something with the camp.”

The men around her nudged those who were still drowsing.

“It’s Adrian.”

Now the men began pulling on gear and following Kenn’s lead as he called for them to get rolling. None of them doubted her after the call they’d taken on the way here, a short, tapped out message that Angela didn’t know about yet.

“Is he okay?”

“Is it the slavers?”

Angela stretched out a cold hand and placed it on Marc’s wrist.

“Sorry,” she stated lowly and drew, hard.

Energy flooded her, sweet and warming, and her grip tightened as the images cleared. “Something happened during travel time. They had to stop in the middle of a road.”

“Where are they?” Kenn’s tone was loud and Marc frowned at him.

“Brakes went out, I think. He’s down in a ditch...”

“Tell me where!” Kenn demanded.

Marc snatched his hand out of her grip and took a step forward, still not satisfied with all the times he had spilled the Marine’s blood. “Why don’t you leave her alone? You think what she does is easy?”

“Why don’t you kiss my—”

“He’s okay. They all are. He had Kevin set up the tow rig and Zack roll out camp right there.”

Kenn groaned in frustration, breath streaming out in a rush. “Where at?”

Kyle finished unfolding the map from his kit. “Can you show me?”

The mobster’s calming tone had always sounded like Adrian’s to their ears and it stopped the fight.

Angela’s next words brought relief and more worry.

“He felt us. He says everything’s 5-by and to get our asses home.” She searched the map for a fast moment, narrowing it down. “There, near Grant.”

Kenn snatched the map from Kyle’s grip and stomped to the vehicles he hoped were now dry enough to get them home. “Put her behind the wheel and everyone get in a seat.”

Expecting worse, there was no complaint from the Eagles, even when Kenn climbed into the passenger side of her Blazer.

Angela was told more than once not to worry about being too rough behind the wheel as Kyle, Seth, and a mix of the three teams got inside to crowd behind Kenn. She understood the message clearly. *Get us home as fast as you can.*

Angela slid into the chilly driver's seat and fired up the engine. It was time to go home.

4

The ride home only took twenty hours this time, with one short break to change drivers and use a tree. They didn't have time for more. Adrian needed them.

As Billy got them moving again, Kenn swiveled around to glare at Angela from the front seat. "You've had your lead. Now do what you're told or you'll be in a tent with a guard."

Telling her, telling them all, he knew very well she was supposed to have a shadow. Because he hadn't said anything, didn't mean he hadn't noticed.

Angela yawned tiredly, not needing to view Marc's anger. "Whatever you need."

Not expecting her to cooperate, Kenn stared.

Kyle took over. "You'll be with me and I'll be busy. Stay on my hip."

"I will." Angela expected Kenn to have a problem with her being in the middle of things

upon their return, but the Marine only gave Billy a hard look that made the Eagle drive faster.

Seizing the opportunity to settle some things between them, Angela spoke to Marc without censoring her words. “Will you check on Charlie? I’d feel better if it was his dad and not just an Eagle.”

Waves of ice filled the Blazer and Marc gave her a quick nod, heart jumping. It was the first time she had acknowledged the boy’s true parentage in front of Kenn and the silence thickened as everyone waited for his reaction.

There wasn’t one. Kenn had himself under tight control. If he snapped now, it would be over Adrian and no one else. That sense of worry had only grown in the last hours and Kenn faced the window as Billy kept them moving steadily through the darkness.

Full of the need to steal this time with her, Marc shifted into the corner and gestured at the empty space along his side. “There’s room here.”

He was also testing this sudden truce, trying to figure out how far she meant to go, how far Kenn would let them go, and Angela allowed it. She was worried, but also sore and very tired. Connecting to Safe Haven from this distance was exhausting and with the extra space that would put her almost flush against Marc’s side, she could stretch out. “Thanks.”

Angela eased into the empty area and lowered herself carefully against his hip without groaning as she wanted to. His heat felt good.

Marc shifted again, making more room, and she sank against his side as if she belonged there.

“If Adrian’s okay, what’s the problem?” Marc led the conversation now, not trying to distract the others from her actions, but wanting them to come clean with her. If she were going to be one of them, she had to know the truth and the reason they had kept it from her no longer mattered.

“The truth.” Marc’s tone dared the mobster to lie.

“We took a call,” Kyle stated, glad to be revealing their deception before she found out from their thoughts. “Someone left a bag in Adrian’s tent. There was a pissed-off snake inside. He almost got bit.”

That had Angela sitting up. “Tell me everything.”

“That’s above her pay grade!” Kenn snapped, but it held little of his previous animosity.

Marc let out a sigh as she pinned Kyle with those steel-chipped baby-blues. It was too late to go back. He could only hope for the future, one that he still wanted, no matter which Angie it was or how upset she made him with her choices.

“Tell me. All of it!”

Kenn swiveled to glare at her, but said nothing.

“We were told to keep you out of the loop,” Kyle admitted.

Her voice was tight. “Because I’d be distracted?”

“Because you would have turned us around.”

“I don’t have that much authority...” She stopped, realizing that wasn’t true.

“He wanted this done and for you to handle it. As for the snake, you know as much as we do. No note, no tracks that Zack could pick up.”

“Rick?”

More than Kyle shook their heads.

“No. He was in the kids’ area and under heavy guard, still has multiple shadows,” Kenn added. “There’s no way he wasn’t monitored long enough to do it.”

Someone else, then. Did they have any other suspects? A snake. The vet came to mind, but there was no grudge there that she knew of. Tonya, maybe, but a snake? They were often dangerous to their handlers. That wouldn’t be her style.

“This might honestly be an accident,” Marc stated, easing his boots off. “We don’t know what happened yet.”

“Zack knows,” Daryl informed them bluntly. “And he’ll run his mouth. We have to get there and calm the lower levels down before the herd picks up on it.”

“It won’t matter if tonight was an accident or another attempt on Adrian’s life,” Kyle said worriedly. “The reactions will be the same.”

Angela was able to pull the images from their minds, and her stomach twisted. Adrian needed

them and they were still over a hundred miles away.

“Any threat to their sense of security will cause big problems. If the Eagles play this wrong and the herd finds out, they’ll stampede. Rioting didn’t end with the war.”

Billy’s words were resigned and that was where the group conversation stopped, each of them imagining the Safe Haven under those conditions.

Marc peered at her from under lowered lashes as they rolled by the corn, waiting for the pain pill to take effect and the energy rush to fade. When her lids finally began to droop, he quietly adjusted himself and then tugged on her arm.

Angela flinched, snapping awake to find Marc grinning.

“You were snoring.”

Her chin stiffened. “Was not.”

His smile widened. “Were too. Rattled the windows like a fart.”

Angela’s groggy chuckle was interrupted by a yawn and Marc indicated his chest. “I’ve got the bullets if you’ve got the balls.”

Her soft giggle drew attention and Kenn stared through the window as she slid into Brady’s arms and curled close. A deep shiver of hatred flashed, but it couldn’t compare to the need drawing him toward Safe Haven. Kenn turned his head, pretending it was some other couple.

Marc pulled her up onto his chest and held her, allowing his body to mold to hers. He was lonely and he'd missed her, but more than that, he had to remind her. Theirs was a bond that had lasted through tragic betrayal and even nuclear war. *And it would survive her new life, too*, he realized. Those few moments they would have between his waves of panic would be enough. Peace suddenly filled that dark space Marc had been nursing for weeks and he tightened his grip on her. Compared to what he'd had before, this would be more than enough.

Marc slid his hand up her hips. "I've missed you!"

Angela felt her heart clench at his urgent whisper. She'd just given Marc his son, though the ripples on it would be slow. Now, maybe she could give him something else he desired. "I've missed you too."

Her fingers tightened on his arm and Marc pushed harder. "You know I'm crazy about you, right? Even when you're risking your life."

His low voice still carried and Angela knew what Marc was hoping for. She wanted it too. They were about to find out if this new, controlled Kenn was for real, but more than that, they were about to go public with their feelings.

"These weeks have sucked without you."

The pain in her voice was too genuine to bear and Marc pinned her with his own agony. "Is it

over now or do we go back to the lies when we hit camp?”

Angela took a long minute to consider, the fear finally shouting, but she sensed only bitterness and resignation from Kenn. He would learn to live with things. He'd made his choice and it was the right one.

And what of you? the Witch questioned. *Would you now try to have both sides of the coin?*

It was a long moment for all of them, but it was agony for Marc and a struggle to keep waiting. He had never wanted anything the way he did her. That hadn't changed.

“I can't promise to always react the way you want, Angie, but I can try harder. And I can wait a little longer, if you're not ready.”

His willingness to sacrifice was the final swing and she gave him a slow smile. “It's over now. We can be ourselves.”

Needing to know she meant it, Marc leaned down.

Angela let him capture her lips in a gentle kiss that the others glanced away from. She was Brady's woman now.

Marc shifted again and Angela settled onto his hard chest with a sigh of pleasure that had him filling with happiness. “Night, honey. See you in a few hours.”

“Yes, you will,” she sent, snuggling tightly.

Marc knew she wouldn't linger once they arrived. Wanting a few more minutes with her, he

set the alarm on his wrist and let himself follow her into a light sleep.

When Seth began to hum lowly, the hotel ballad one of Adrian's favorites, all but a few of them dozed.

Kenn braced to be full of the old rage every time he regarded their reflection, but after Angela handling herself with the wolves, the fire wasn't there anymore. The woman he'd observed today was out of his reach, but his place by Adrian was waiting and it was that member of camp that he let himself obsess over.

Adrian had suspected someone might try something with so many high levels gone and they'd increased the shadows. With any luck, they would return to discover the traitor already in custody, or even better, dead. There was a small chance this latest mishap really was an accident, but Kyle didn't think so. Kenn knew that, and it was enough for him. The mobster's loyalty to Adrian's safety rivaled his own.

Seth kept humming until everyone but the driver was asleep and he met Billy's eyes in the mirror. "Keep it rolling and don't be afraid to wake one of us."

The guard gave a fierce grin. "I'm runnin' on full right now."

Seth shut his exhausted lids. "Good. You go straight to him as soon as you get out and stay with him until I relieve you. Even if someone else comes to take over, you stay until I get there."

“You know it. His six’ll be covered.” The Eagle’s tone was firm despite Seth not being his team leader.

Seth smothered the feelings of desperation and let his soft humming send him into a troubled sleep. Adrian was in danger and he had to be there if anything happened.

5

Shortly before they arrived, Marc’s wrist alarm woke everyone with an obnoxious rap song from the past and he swung an arm over to silence it.

Angie hadn’t shifted away during the ride, in fact, one of her legs was now wrapped around his, holding him in place and he hit the reset button. She was his. When they made it to camp, everyone would find out. No more hiding and being careful. Now, they could be what they were—in love.

Angela stretched against him, body stiff, and her small groan had eyes flying toward the cargo area. Her first thought was of the possible problems waiting for them and she ignored how good it felt to be in Marc’s arms, concentrating. What was going on in Safe Haven?

Angela was catching flashes of a fight and other Eagles rushing to break it up. The people blurred by, the herd sounding mostly normal, and her chest eased. There was another glimpse of Adrian standing beside the medical bed of someone she couldn’t identify, and she broke the contact.

“Everything okay?”

Angela glanced up impatiently at Kyle’s question. “It’s calmer now. How long before we’re there?”

“Twenty minutes or so.”

She didn’t smile. “Good!”

The longing in her tone echoed their own need to be there and when she let her head settle onto Marc’s chest, there was an easy quiet broken only by the sound of someone waking enough for a gear check.

It was always like this on overnight missions, but Marc knew in a few short minutes, these men... *These Eagles*, he amended, shifting beneath her to get a better grip as Billy hit bump after bump in his haste... These Eagles would be alert and moving, and he marveled over it a bit. The ability to doze and snap awake was something he’d learned in the Corps and it came naturally now. It was a survival skill he’d been glad Angie picked up quickly, too.

There wasn’t much she didn’t get, and it was okay for him to be honest with himself now, Marc realized. For the entire trip to Safe Haven, he’d thought of the witch inside her as being mostly in control, and therefore, responsible for her actions. He’d attributed her survival in Versailles to that power as well, and hadn’t fully allowed himself to accept her as a killer. After the wolves, that was impossible. She was his physical equal and in some areas, better than a match. This was the way

she might have been, had they been able to stay together.

“I think so, too.” Angela eased carefully up his chest to allow semi-private talking. “And I still want most of what we hoped for then, Brady. Except for the barefoot and pregnant part.”

Marc snickered obediently at her attempted joke. He had stopped viewing her that way when she challenged the Alpha. “We’ll make new dreams. Together.”

Angela flushed, voice lowering to a nearly indecipherable mutter. “I didn’t say never.”

Her tone deepened. “Somewhere down the road, being a mother again might come up and we’ll handle it.”

Marc tightened his grip, thinking he’d be ready. “Whatever makes you happy, Angie. I’ve tried hard to give you that, even here.”

“I haven’t made it easy, I know, but—”

“It’s your life to give.”

“Yes.”

There was a note of warning and he let out a resigned sigh. “I’ll handle it as best I can and when it’s too much—”

“You’ll split.”

This sigh was deeper, full of misery and joy. “It would take a lot to get me to do that now.”

“What if I get hurt again and use it for lessons?” she joked, motioning to her arm. Animal bites would be the next lesson and her injury would be the prop.

Knowing he had to be honest, Marc raised up on his forearms. “I’ll be pissed and worried, and you’ll remind me of this moment and I’ll ease up. Eventually, it’ll be easier.”

Angela let her bandaged hand gently brush the hair from his roughened cheek. A couple days stubble was so sexy on him. “For both of us.”

“And what about our son? Am I allowed to openly be his dad?”

Angela didn’t need to read minds to know how important her answer was to these men. “Soon.”

She felt his happiness dim and Angela leaned in, hand still on his cheek. “Will you be able to live with all the times I’ll hurt you? This won’t be easy.”

Vanilla floated over him in a thick wave and Marc steeled his heart against it, needing to make this choice, without any more influence than feeling her against him was already producing.

“I think so. I don’t like it, but I understand the herd...*Adrian*,” he amended with a bitter sneer. “They’re your priority now, but your worries over how the sheep will react won’t hold *me* back for long. That boy is me at that age and I can help him avoid our mistakes and have a happiness we’re missing.”

“I want that, Marc. As quick as we can clean up our mess, you’ll have your son openly.”

Not satisfied, but unable to fight what she was offering, he shifted suddenly, making her fall against him. He was full of a new anger, this one

bitter, and he made her prove it all by rolling them against the seat and claiming her lips.

Caught off guard and still full of the wolf battle, Angela moaned lowly at the feel of him, letting her worries go. They were together now. The rest would fall in line as it was meant to.

Billy snapped on the radio without covering his satisfaction. That conversation had sealed her place with these men. It was a close copy of the one each of them had anytime they began a relationship they were serious about. If the other person couldn't accept the structure, they wouldn't date them again. And after getting to know her for the last month, Billy was sure she would have done the same. Adrian would be pleased.

6

Before the beaten Blazer was in park, Kenn was out the door.

Zack gestured toward the training tent and the Marine quickly hurried that way. He was making sure that Adrian was okay before he did anything else.

Angela let Marc help her out, grunting at her cramping legs. "I'll be busy for a while. Catch you in the mess later?"

"Yes. Will you have John check that arm before you hit the rack?"

She grinned. "Yep."

Marc ran his thumb along her cheek, thinking he had expected to be considering which direction

to go when they arrived, not trying to find the best way to tell his son that he and Angie were now a legal couple. “Thank you.”

Angela gave him what he needed first, suspecting this was one of the few times she would be able to.

Marc lit up when she leaned toward him, and he swept her against his chest for a quick, passionate kiss that had those around them staring in surprised longing. It was official now and word spread immediately.

Angela drew back slowly, fighting the urge to hurry as Kyle and the rest of the team got their things from the cargo area. “I’ll see you later.”

Marc pressed another fast kiss to her lips, not wanting her to see how jealous he already was. “Yes, you will.”

Angela moved to Kyle’s side and Marc went to check on their son. After that, he would join his team and get his own report about what had been going on here while they were away.

It was rare for any complete team to be gone. One member almost always stayed behind so that they would know what had happened during their absence. When the mission team hit Safe Haven, the leaders hurried to get their updates.

Neil and Jeremy were the exceptions to this normal returning home pattern. They both thought the other would check in with their man and it was a surprise for them to split up at the parking area

and then meet again in front of Samantha's tent two minutes later.

Neil stared at his right-hand man for a long moment and Jeremy looked back evenly. After listening to Marc and Angie, their own needs had risen up to fill them with the urge to make a claim. Finally accepting that there was real competition for Samantha brought those happy flashes to an ugly halt.

“Neil.”

“Jeremy.”

Inside the tent, Samantha froze.

“It seems we're about to have a problem.”

“Our first fight.” Jeremy clenched his fists, tone only half-joking. “How cute.”

Neil wasn't about to keep playing these games. “I want her.”

“*Publicly?*” Jeremy questioned with a curl of his lips.

“Yes.”

“And what about Becky?”

Neil didn't flinch. “That's over. She knows.”

Jeremy regarded his team leader with pain. “So, that's it. You've made your choice.”

Neil grimaced. “They made it for me tonight, the same as they obviously did you. How could anyone listen to that and not hurt to be whole?”

“Loneliness is not love,” Jeremy accused, already certain it didn't matter anyway. They didn't get to pick, she did.

“What about your little trysts with Cynthia?” Neil fired back. “You spent last night in her tent. And, you think what you’re doing is better!”

Jeremy flushed. “That’s none of your business!”

“But, it is Samantha’s,” Neil responded sharply. “You think she’ll put up with that?”

“No, *I won’t.*”

Samantha came from her tent, cheeks an alarming shade of red. “And I won’t put up with this either.”

She faded angrily into the shadows, walking by the lower level men guarding the tent area. “When you two get done deciding who my new owner is, come by the vet area and let me know. I’ll be waiting with my gun.”

The two men exchanged rueful grins and Jeremy patted the vest he hadn’t taken off yet. “I’m covered.”

“We forgot to factor that in,” Neil remarked.

“Yeah. I guess she’ll let us know?”

“Not before we do some begging.”

Jeremy raised a brow. “Want to do it together?”

Neil started to say no, it would be too awkward, and then shrugged. “Might as well. It can’t get much worse than this.”

Jeremy winced, spinning around to give the camp his back. “Really? ‘Cause Becky just saw us and I think that’s Cynthia moving my way from the showers.”

Neil tensed. “Can we go back and hunt more wolves?”

7

“I’m telling you it was cut! We checked.”

“What was cut?”

The arguing sentries hadn’t heard Kyle’s team arrive and there were guns out in the next breath.

“Stand down.” Kyle’s arrival had them calming and holstering.

“Sorry. We’re ...”

“Jumpy,” the mobster finished.

“Someone’s trying to kill Adrian!” Kevin snarled in raw worry. “Zack may not have found any proof, but he’s an ass!”

At those words, Kyle moved closer, ignoring the frowns from Zack and his team. “Tell me.”

The unrest grew when Angela stayed on his right.

“The line we use to secure the vehicles when we shove them off the road was *cut*. We always make sure that rope is sturdy, but it snapped as we were hauling and almost took Adrian over the edge! Would have, if not for Ray. He pushed Adrian out of the way and got hit instead.”

Kyle filed the information, vaguely wondering if his public denial of the gay man could now be reversed. He would have to talk to Adrian. They’d been hoping for something like this. “That it?”

“Herd’s fine,” Kevin said, evening out his tone. He wasn’t sure why the high-level man was taking

the report from him when Zack was only feet away. “They don’t know. *Yet.*”

Kevin stressed the last word, shooting a quick glare at the truck driver.

“You’ve done fine,” Kyle stated. “We’ll cover it.”

Kyle spoke to Daryl and Chris, “Put fresh men out and take up a post on the perimeter. Continuous rounds. I’ll send some relief as soon as I can.”

“We can’t figure out how someone got into that area. I know we’re green, but damn it, there are almost twenty of us there at any given time!” Kevin complained, frustrated. He let out an angry sigh. “I’m gonna go talk to people again. I’ll be around.”

And that’s why Adrian has us monitoring you, Kyle thought. Kevin would be another determined shepherd to swell the ranks of leadership.

“It’s gonna be a long night, boys,” Kyle stated resignedly. “Someone tell the cook to roll out the coffee and make it strong.”

Angela followed his tense form into the shadows. What was it about that statement that made her so uneasy?

Despite wanting almost desperately to see for herself that Adrian was okay, Angela stayed by Kyle as he finished rounds of the perimeter guards. He had the habit of talking to the men before the boss—to be sure he had both sides before offering

advice to the leader—and she respected him for it. It made it easier to follow Kyle when he walked by the training tent without a glance.

“If you can scan the ground from your army’s point of view, you’re on top of things,” Kyle said. “And he can’t do it himself. We have to be his sight.”

Angela swept the unwelcoming darkness. “I’ll be listening, too.”

“Watch for the tones, the nervousness, and twitching hands. Adrian trusts us. We all have access to his tent. The traitor might be an Eagle.”

“Why not just ask her to look?” Lee’s voice was a low sneer of fear and anger. “If fact, why not ask her why she hasn’t already?”

Kyle let out an impatient sigh, noticing how Lee kept scanning her bandage, her scars. He might be one of Zack’s minions, but he didn’t like it that she’d been hurt. “Why don’t you get it over with instead of torturing yourself?”

Angela sensed what was coming and said, “No one’s on us right now. I’ve got the bullets if you’ve got the balls.”

It drew the same reaction from Zack’s teammate that it had from her.

Lee came closer, but only a single step. “I... I want to know if you can find my wife. Adrian said I could ask.”

“Yeah, a week ago, you coward,” Kyle accused lightly and Angela realized he and Lee had come to terms, weren’t enemies anymore.

“I... She was busy.”

Angela grinned. “I’ll have to touch you.”

Lee’s jaw twitched and he braced himself. “Okay.”

Angela snorted. “Damn, for Eagles, you guys are squeamish, like this is PMS or something.”

“I’m not a girl, I don’t get that!” Lee retorted nervously. “Can you tell me or not?”

Angela’s eyes took on that smoky, rolling blue they all associated with her magic now.

“Let’s find out.”

Lee was full of dread. He was snapping at her in his anxiety, blaming her, but it was the words he thought he would hear, and not loyalty to Zack and Kenn, that was causing it.

“And if I can give you none of what you need? Will it go back to the way it was?”

Angela’s demanding tone had Lee’s head snapping up. “You’re about to crush me and you worry for yourself!”

He revealed his fear without meaning to. “Just do it.”

“There are prices to deals like this, Eagle. Even you must know that,” Angela retorted. “You don’t get this service for free.”

Lee stiffened. “What do you want?”

“Protection.”

He waved an insulting hand. “You have a whole camp of men willing to die for that.”

“I want *you*.”

The words had a ring that Lee felt sink deep into his heart and echo. “What?”

“You, on my side.” Angela darted a fast hand out to capture his wrist in a tight grip. “Even if I tell you what you fear the most.”

Lee tried to resist, but it was the thought of his own agony that stopped him. He’d give anything to know for sure.

He gave a short nod, breath rushing out in hateful acceptance. “Just don’t you lie to me! I want...need the truth.”

Angela already had the witch searching and she jerked suddenly, grip tightening. Doors flew open and she spoke, “Omaha, after the war...”

“Her mom lives...lived there. She was visiting for the holiday.”

“She was moving there because you slapped her.” Angela’s voice was merciless. “She also filed for divorce when she left.”

Caught in his evasion, Lee tensed for her to act as anyone would and was surprised.

“She was guilty.”

He heard the question in her voice—*Do you want her still?*—and answered, “More than my life.”

“Lincoln,” Angela muttered, fighting to get an exact location. “She made it to Lincoln... Shot! She was shot!”

Kyle waved the others off as she gave Lee what he needed and pulled him into her corner.

“She’s on the Westside, where it’s flooding.”

Her lids popped open and Lee found himself talking with the witch directly.

Bring only your wife. The others she's with will not be allowed inside Safe Haven for their crimes against each other.

Lee nodded, unable to speak and Angela pulled the witch gently from view. She let go of Lee's wrist, fighting the wave of weariness. "Don't take Zack. He'll bring the others to spite me and they really don't belong here."

Lee wanted to argue, to say Adrian would want those people, and agreed instead. Those red orbs had been sure. Who was he to question such a power?

"Permission to grab a team and go?" Lee asked.

"Get it set and you guys can roll as soon as we return from McCook," Kyle replied.

Lee didn't like the idea of waiting, but knew going into a city like Lincoln would take gear and planning. He left with a last searching glance at Angela. It could be a trick to get him out of camp and make them look like fools, but he went to gather a team anyway. If there were a chance his Candy had survived, he would take it.

8

Kenn had headed straight for Adrian when they hit camp, along with Billy, who took over shadowing the leader. Once satisfied of Adrian's

well-being, Kenn went next to the one person he was worried might have tried something like this.

“No, I didn’t.”

Tonya’s voice was indignant, telling him she wasn’t lying.

“How would I know what to do? I barely drive.”

Kenn thought differently, but was still too pissed over the attempt on Adrian’s life to be sidetracked. “Swear it!”

Tonya’s voice rose a bit. “I’ve told you. If you can’t accept it, that’s your problem.”

Kenn’s profile tightened as if he wasn’t convinced “We’ll be through if you’re lying.”

“I didn’t do it and I don’t deserve this.” She raked him with a sharp glance. “Maybe we should change our plans for later.”

“Why? Guilty conscience?”

Fed up, Tonya delivered a nasty sneer. “Sure. I spend a lot of time biting the hand that feeds me. I’m that stupid. Jackass.”

Kenn let her leave in relief. He’d been hard on her, jerking her into the garden truck to interrogate her, but he had to be certain she didn’t do it. He couldn’t be sleeping with the enemy, especially not when he was trying so hard to earn back his place.

It would be rough, adjusting to Marc and Angela being together so soon after he’d threatened her death, but the old rage had left him the instant he pulled the trigger on Dean. He didn’t

like their relationship and never would, not to mention there was still a wall of bitterness about the whole Charlie affair, but he had his place as a top level man in Adrian's chain of command and that mattered more.

Tonya stormed through camp, making people shift out of her way long before she got to them and the guards tensed when someone finally stepped into her path.

“Let's have a drink.”

Tonya started to say yes, but veered around the reporter instead. “Catch me in the shower. He's got people on us now.”

Cynthia acted as if the redhead had been rude and entered the mess, causing interest to switch back to the better story—Marc and Angie.

They would be stopping near McCook, Nebraska for supplies and she and Tonya had signed up for the supply run. While Tonya provided a distraction, Cynthia planned to slip off for an hour and do some digging.

McCook was large enough to have records, maybe even old photos. The Eagles had already scouted the area and declared it abandoned, but more importantly, they'd said it was undamaged. Adrian and his men would clean out the basic supplies they needed and then members would be allowed in on personal runs. Maybe she would find what she had been digging for in every town they passed close enough for her to search. Busy getting

set to take her shift, Cynthia didn't see the extra shadow moving by or register Maria's absence.

Rick had slipped into the dark supply truck behind the mess while the Eagles were occupied with updating the returning teams.

Maria cringed into the corner, a mask of fear as his hands went to his...pocket?

Rick pulled out a small vial and slid it under a nearby potholder. "Top team of Eagles. Put it in their popcorn bags the next time he calls a two-day break."

Maria shook her head, but stopped the protest when he fingered the knife on his belt.

"No one will know."

"Ww-why?"

"So I can have some alone time with the boss," he said.

Sneaking out was getting harder and harder. He might only have one or two more night-time ventures left before he'd have to figure out a way to get his tent replaced. The ends were too frayed to keep lining up evenly enough to avoid notice.

He picked up the coffee mug she'd been filling for Adrian's tray and moved toward the door. He took a small sip of the hot pain. "The next time we take a two day break, Maria, or I'll tell Cesar you're a convert and he'll kill those two little boys. *Slowly.*"

“So, was it an accident?”

Now lurking in the shadows of the tents, Rick leaned in. The sex was over and it was this conversation, that he’d stayed for.

“No. Someone’s trying to take him out.”

The female snorted. “Like I’d know how to rig that up.”

“Yeah. Sorry, I was pissed.”

“But you remembered me suggesting we cut his brakes and send him over a cliff.”

“Yes.”

Tonya giggled patiently. “I think you need to be punished for that.”

Kenn’s shadow grabbed hers. “You know it.”

Rick grimaced in distaste, moving away. He wasn’t the only one plotting against Safe Haven’s fearless leader. Wouldn’t it be great if he could kill Adrian and frame his second in command for it? The camp would lynch the Marine without a second thought. It would be a two-fer!

Rick’s stride lengthened into a steady stalk as he prowled, dressed like an Eagle thanks to Mitch’s boy, Matt, needing a bottle that he couldn’t get on his own. Rick grinned wildly. Maybe he could find a way to involve Neil and make it a threesome.

10

“You can go now, if you want.”

Angela ignored the soreness invading her shoulders. “I’m good. Go about your business.”

Kyle snickered, moving toward the new Com truck. They'd been on rounds for hours, going over the wreck, securing things and getting updates. They had no idea who the traitor was, but they were sure they had one. Kevin had been right about the brake line being cut.

"I've got two more stops and then we'll call it good."

Angela followed without comment, still mentally searching the people walking around them. The camp was uneasy and the Eagles being so alert wasn't helping. If they had returned earlier, when more people were awake, there could have been trouble.

"What do you want?" Mitch growled at Kyle.

It caused Angela to stop and stare in surprise.

"You already know."

The slurring radioman let out a frustrated bellow. "Damn! He ain't been around here. Waved hello to me once from across the camp, though. Quick, arrest him."

Angela realized Kyle must have been the one to reprimand Mitch for having Rick in the Com truck when the quake hit.

"Stop it!" Kyle ordered sternly. "If you keep acting like you're on the other team, Mitch, you'll end up there."

Kyle left the drunk sputtering indignantly and Angela followed, frowning. Not at the cool treatment, but at the way Rick had been able to con the people here. They didn't have any real proof,

but who else could it be? The man had admitted he was a spy. Where else would they look when things went wrong?

At him and no one else, she realized. He could have someone else doing his dirty work. “Have there been any reports of him spending time with anyone? Does he have friends here?”

Kyle’s thoughts were along the same lines. “No one that we’re aware of, other than Becky. He does his shifts, eats and showers, and stays quiet.”

“Too quiet. And that’s suspicious.”

“Intentionally done to draw us away from his accomplice?”

“That feels right,” she stated angrily. “And it’s smart. He has to know we’re onto him. That’s why we can’t catch him. He isn’t the one doing it!”

Kyle’s pace quickened. “Let’s grab a cup of coffee and go over the duty sheets for the days we were gone. Maybe we’ll come up with something.”

An hour later, they were both tired of the background noise of emerging cicadas and of searching through the papers. Angela stood up with a groan. “I’m done. Dawn’s over the hill. I plan to be asleep before it gets here.”

Kyle swept the papers together. They weren’t any closer to an answer, but he was hopeful about the morning, when he would check the accident scene again in the dim light of day. Maybe he would find something the others had missed. “Goodnight.”

“Good morning, you mean.”

“That’s one of our rules. If we haven’t been asleep yet, the day doesn’t change.”

Angela snorted, thinking it might come in handy if she ever wanted to steal some personal time. “I’ll remember that.”

“You did real good,” Kyle handed out a bit of praise, feeling it was well deserved.

“So did Kenn.”

“He’ll adjust. I believe that now.”

“Me, too.”

Angela went toward her tent, feeling Marc’s eyes on her. It was unmistakable, especially now that his anger had been converted into happiness. “You coming, Brady?”

“What?” Marc hadn’t thought she’d known he was her shadow until dawn.

“I’m tired. Aren’t you?” Implying they would share a bed.

He hadn’t expected her to be this open and was relieved when she laughed. He wasn’t prepared for that yet. Hell, he wasn’t prepared for the gift she had given.

“Night, Marc.”

“Night, honey.”

Angela ducked into her own tent, leaving him to chuckle.

One day, it wouldn’t be a joke. They would share a life together and those images were the ones he fell asleep with a short time later. His happily-ever-after was waiting.

Chapter Eighteen
X Marks the Spot
May 1st
Swanson Rec. Area, Nebraska

1

“Your aim improved.”

Sam reloaded, but didn't answer and Neil understood she was still pissed. He and Jeremy had followed her after the wolf mission, hoping to apologize, but she'd refused to speak to either of them. She had finally called in Hilda and the other females to run block, so he and Jeremy had taken up places outside the shower camper. Hilda had gotten through to them both with only a single question (“*How's the boss?*”) and they'd left her alone.

Now, two days of traveling across the eerily deserted Swanson State Park had gone by and this was as close as Neil had gotten to Samantha.

“I'm nowhere near Zena, over there.”

Angela was at the range. As they watched, she stepped up confidently, fingers hovering, and then she drew and hit everything she aimed at.

“Show-off,” Samantha muttered good-naturedly.

Neil heard the loneliness behind it. “Sam...”

“No.”

“We’ll wait years if you make us.”

“You know why I can’t!” Samantha cried. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“You already know.” Neil was helpless against the truth. “You’re a fire burning in my blood. I want you, Sammi.”

Samantha opened her mouth and then snapped it shut. She couldn’t lie and tell him she didn’t feel the same, but she didn’t have to confirm it.

“You don’t know me.” Samantha moved around him.

“Sam.”

“No, Neil.”

She left him standing there with stiff shoulders and a red face. How much rejection was one man supposed to take?

Neil caught a glimpse of Marc moving toward the mess, happier than the trooper had ever seen, and his gut twisted. More. To get that, he could stand a little more.

But not like this, Neil thought, cleaning up for the next set of students. Samantha didn’t want an open relationship. What did she want?

Jeremy waited until she was out of Neil’s sight and then fell in step.

When he kept his mouth shut, Samantha let him stay, knowing there were things they needed to get straight. It was different with Neil, who would become more determined with every “no.”

He delighted in the game, the chase. Jeremy had tried to give Neil happiness and his own feelings had come as a surprise.

“I guess this backfired for you.”

Jeremy knew he was more like Samantha than Neil was, and therefore, a better match. He wore button-downs on his off day, unable to escape that sense of appearing professional to the public. He was quick to be a gentleman or break up an argument before it could get started. He tried to keep the peace and the camp rarely witnessed him bent out of shape. He also loved being an Eagle. He had been a sickly child, always weak and isolated from anything that might trigger an illness, but inside, he'd dreamed of being an explorer and he had gotten his wish. It was a big source of pride for Jeremy that he had come so far from that lonely little boy. He was now a man without an ounce of fat to spare and one of the few people in Safe Haven who was honestly grateful for the end of the world. It had given him a life he'd never dreamed of.

But it can't give me Samantha.

“Cynthia's suddenly warmer to me than she's ever been and the questions about what we do have stopped,” he finally answered. “Something good came of it.”

“Plus giving your team leader what he thinks he wants.”

“Neil knows what he wants now. We both do after listening to Marc and Angie.” Pain flashed across Jeremy’s face. “He’ll be good to you.”

“And if I don’t want him after all the trouble you’ve gone to?”

“If he had said love back there, would you have given him the same answer?”

She didn’t respond and Jeremy pushed harder. “I give it a month, maybe less.”

“For what?”

“For him to wear you down.”

Sam snorted, thinking of her tortured dream last night. She and Neil made violent, passionate love and at the moment of climax, Rick shot them both. “I mean it, Sam.”

“It’s more than your wants at stake here. I’d never endanger these people that way.”

Jeremy let her go on alone. What did her relationship with Neil have to do with endangering the camp? Did Neil know? Would he share her secret?

Jeremy found the trooper getting set to enjoy a bit of quiet before they left, fishing pole and a beer on the muddy bank. *He’s changed*, Jeremy thought, settling down next to him. The Neil he’d first trained with had been an uptight prig who always followed the rules. Having a beer was something he wouldn’t have done before.

“No luck?” Jeremy tried to start a conversation.

Neil glanced up coolly. “I could ask you the same thing.”

They stared at each other for a moment where a fight seemed inevitable and only a loud call from behind them interrupted the tension.

“Hold it higher. I can’t get it to stop squirting!”

Both men, and most of the camp, swiveled to find Kevin and his team helping Marc with the fire hose. They were currently using it to flood out the ant holes around them, getting practice and hopefully killing the larvae of the shoe-sized mutations.

“Anyone got a condom marked super-sized?” Jax joked from his place on top of the truck.

“Someone ask Doug,” Kenn called, shocking everyone in hearing distance into a fit of laughing.

Jeremy and Neil stared.

“Did that happen?”

“Yeah. Super-dick made a joke. It might be his first.”

“You think he’s okay now?”

“Yeah, I do” Neil began reeling in the line he expected to be stripped of the worms he’d dug up.

“And if he can do it, so can we.”

“Why won’t she let you claim her?”

Neil tensed. “Or maybe not, if you keep being so stupid.”

“I know she has a secret that would endanger these people.”

Neil wasn't sure about telling Jeremy, but being an Eagle came first and he quietly filled in his XO.

"And you can't tell anyone, not even the rest of the team," Neil ordered.

Jeremy was shocked. *Samantha's government!*

"Does it matter to you?" Neil demanded.

"Yes, it matters," Jeremy bristled. "We have to keep an eye on her. If these people find out, she'll be in danger..."

And that's why she can't become Neil's mate, he realized. If it came out, her secret wouldn't just hurt Neil. It would damage Adrian's dream.

"How do we fix that?"

"*You* don't." Adrian was right behind them. "She's had the worst trip here of any of these people and you two have spent the last weeks playing games. What about getting her accepted, instead of trying to claim a woman who doesn't want to belong to anyone?"

The harsh tones were unexpected, but well deserved and the two men slumped under the weight of Adrian's disapproval.

"Effective immediately, you will both stay away from her. When she needs a shadow, someone else will do it. The only time I want you two around her is during mess, classes, or if she comes to you." His voice hardened even further. "If you can't do that, stay here instead of escorting the supply mission."

Considering the cold shoulder they were getting from Samantha, there was no choice. They both agreed to stay away, but neither of them knew if they could honestly do it.

2

“I need you to talk to Tonya.”

Moving by the fire truck, Angela glanced up at Kenn in surprise. “Why?”

“Adrian wants it, said to ask you.”

Angela understood then. Adrian wanted to be sure Kenn wasn't abusing Tonya, and who better to know than his former victim?

“I'll do it before we leave.”

“Report to the boss, not me.”

Kenn stiffly returned to the hose they had wrapped in duct tape to stop the leak.

Angela could have assumed it was because he was scared of more transgressions being revealed, but she thought it was really about trust. Tonya was a snake that would strike a man if it suited her needs, so Kenn wouldn't have to do anything for her to say it was true.

That's why he's sending you, the Witch enlightened. We'll know if she lies.

Angela changed directions, heading for the small hooch the whore called home. Tonya was set up in the rear, under sparse trees that were chirping loudly with young cicadas. Angela knew from her time with Kenn that it was to cover the noises that he and Tonya made.

She tapped on the flap, ignoring the dozen or so members watching her in surprise.

“Come in.”

Tonya’s expression tightened when she saw the Eagle stepping through her flap. “What the hell do you want?”

Angela picked out the new clothes, jeans and a t-shirt with a flag on the front, the clean tent, and the strands of red scattered around the vinyl floor. Kenn had taken her advice. He was trying to reform Tonya.

“Well?” Tonya’s snarl was more misery than threat.

“Is this a chopping party?”

Tonya snapped another large chunk with the scissors and tossed it on the floor next to her chair. “I’m making your Marine happy, as I’m sure you know.” Tonya glared at her. “And I agreed to it, so go tell the *guardian* that I’m fine.”

Angela stared in surprise. Was Kenn sharing that much information?

“Why does the hair have to go?” Already knowing, Angela waited.

“He said I’m vain, about these.” Tonya snipped another clump, and a tear rolled down her unpainted cheek. “I guess he’s right.”

Angela instinctively knew not to say anything yet and the cicada song-filled tension thickened.

Tonya kept her nasty comments to herself, following Kenn’s orders. “*Get along with them or*

get away from me. If I can do it, after everything that's happened, this should be easy for you."

"Well?"

"I'd like a prescription."

Tonya stopped mid snip. "A what?"

Angela moved toward the broom in the corner. It still had a tag on it and she had taken offense at the unwelcome reminder of their old world. She ripped it off and crumbled it up. It joined the red hair on the floor.

"Right now, you're a drug dealer."

Curious as to how smart Tonya really was, Angela didn't add more.

"But if I'm a...pharmacist, the camp might go for it."

"They will go for it. Most of them come to you in secret now. If it weren't a backdoor transaction that reminded them of the past, they'd be willing. Especially the non-drinkers."

"Why would Adrian agree to this?" Tonya asked, confused. Had Kenn's attempts to get her accepted been approved?

"Because it solves problems, of course. Why does he do anything?"

There was silence for a minute and Tonya scanned the newest bandage Angela was sporting. That alone would earn any other member a free joint at least. *To those I don't have a vendetta against*, Tonya amended. And other than a sharp remark during her first day here, this tough female

hadn't bothered her, even though she knew about the affair with Kenn.

Tonya let out a deep sigh that Angela recognized. Whatever deal she and Kenn had made, Tonya was willing to do what it took to uphold her end of it.

"I'll drop something off later."

Tonya continued cutting her hair, tears replaced with fast-connecting thoughts and Angela didn't linger. The woman wasn't being abused. If anything, they might need to put a guard on her. Tonya was sharper than Adrian had given her credit for.

Maybe, Angela conceded. He had been able to keep the whore on ice for months.

Reaching the parking area, Angela slung her new rifle over her shoulder with a feeling of power that she knew was shared by the nine men coming through the vehicles around her. With Zack and Kevin's full teams on duty, plus the two rookie levels, she and Kyle's team were free to go hunting for supplies. By the time they returned, Lee would have a small crew of friends together and be on the way to Lincoln for his cheating wife.

Angela climbed into the Excursion without looking over at the bonfire. Brady was there, drinking and hanging out with his team, but his eyes hadn't left her since she'd come through the trees.

Kyle shut the driver's door and Angela followed his lead. She and Marc had already said

their goodbyes and she blushed at the memory of being in his arms, of kissing him in public. Different, was an understatement.

“Eagle Four, signing off.”

“Copy...”

The pause filled itself and Kyle shared a grin with her.

“He wanted to say be careful, but he knew Adrian wouldn’t like it.”

“Yeah, he didn’t enjoy being told what to call us on the air, either,” Angela agreed.

“You mean you’ll miss being little...*hick-up!*...little Darlin’?”

Angela snorted laughter at the match to Mitch’s voice. “No more than you’ll miss being *that Damn Italian!*”

There was another round of laughs at her words. Mitch and Kyle had a hate-hate relationship and it was often entertaining to witness them butt heads.

The other Eagles switched into check-mode around her, and Angela did the same as Kyle pulled them out of the light and into the hard darkness that always surrounded their lives now.

Kyle pushed the button on the mike. “Eagles by three.” He switched the channel and hit the button again. “Fifteen. Vests and guard, the new rotation. Billy has Point when we land, Daryl on Drag.”

Angela ran over it mentally as she got comfortable. They would arrive in fifteen minutes.

They were to wear their vests and run immediate patrols from the moment they arrived. They would be using the new formations they'd been practicing for the last two days, with her in the center, Billy in front, and Daryl in the rear. Neil and Seth were riding with Adrian, and their teams surrounded the convoy.

Angela lit a smoke and listened to the banter of the men around her. She was definitely learning and the benefits continued to please her, as well. She slipped an adoring hand over the shiny barrel of the new rifle that had her initials burnt into the stock. It was her reward for the wolf mission.

Kyle and Billy saw the motion and exchanged looks through the rear view mirror. When she fell into battle mode, she wasn't a woman, only an Eagle in Adrian's Army, and the feeling was better than any of them had dared to hope for when they'd found out Adrian planned to bring women in. Now, there was hope for that future.

3

Nothing moved around them.

The teams swept the dim buildings and shadowy streets of McCook continuously, but other than the cleared path through the middle of Norris Avenue, there was no sign anyone had been here recently. Guns already in hand, they rolled tensely by the block that still held a generous bandstand covered in shredded red tinsel and dark bulbs.

“Comin’ up now, boss,” Kyle sent, slowing down.

Adrian held up a hand as they came to the Amtrak hub, indicating a full stop of all vehicles. The size of a small warehouse, the brick walls of the train hub had been defaced with ugly slogans. The most disturbing was the dark red message: *Fresh Meat!* All of the windows were broken or missing, the huge antenna collapsed and hanging over one side of the tall roof, and debris covered the short set of stairs to the front door.

There’s food in there?

It was a common thought as everyone got out of their vehicles and fell into battle-mode. It was too quiet, not even crows circling, but the sense of being watched was clear.

“Anything?”

“Not yet... It’s darkness again.”

Adrian motioned them forward and Kyle led his team inside.

Neil and Seth stayed around their leader, and so did Angela, as per Kyle’s instructions before they left. Adrian didn’t usually go on runs. The herd liked having him in camp, but since the attempts on his life, Adrian had become determined to draw out their traitor and Kyle wanted him protected by someone who might be able to sense an attack coming.

“5-by, ground floor.” Kyle was tense as they cleared the first level, hating the alien environment around them. There wasn’t any debris blowing or

even wind whistling. The silence was disturbing and the team cleared the rest of the filthy rooms quickly.

“5-by ground floor, moving to the basement.”

The supplies they needed were on the bottom floors where the trains came in, and the teams went that way without any of the lowly muttered chatter that usually accompanied their runs for supplies. It felt bad here, to all of them, and they stayed alert, though the halls were empty. Nothing slammed, moved, twitched...except the Eagles, at their own noises.

“This feels hinky,” Daryl stated lowly as they swept the storage room they needed and took up sentry positions around the door.

“Yeah.” Kyle hit the button. “In and clear from ground, down.”

Outside, Adrian motioned again and Seth’s team hurried inside to clear the top floors. His fear went with them. It was something that never changed, the horrible feeling of waiting, hoping they returned when he sent them out.

Angela gave him an understanding smile as they entered with Neil’s team flanking them. She could feel his worry grow as they jogged down the stairs and joined Kyle’s team in the long room full of crates. She opened her mouth to give him comfort

Thump!

They all looked toward the third floor stair sign in concern. Seth's men were there now.

“Check in, Redbird,” Adrian radioed.

“Redbird clear,” Seth answered quickly. “Be careful of booby traps. Someone tried to make a stand here.”

Angela's mental alarms blared to life. “I don't think it's safe there...”

Adrian pushed the button on his mike. “Get down here, double-time.”

“Copy.”

Adrian went to Kyle, who now had his men prying open the shipping pallets. “Five minutes.”

Kyle motioned to a clipboard still hanging on the damp wall. “All full of cereal and water bottles. We're set for another month.”

Seth came through the hall with his team a minute later, closing the door to the third floor stairs. “There's a kitchen setup. Someone's living here.”

Adrian raised his voice a bit. “Maybe they'll come with us when we leave. We welcome all survivors.”

Message delivered to anyone who might be lurking, Adrian went to help Kyle's team pull the supplies that Safe Haven needed most.

Surrounded by two teams, Seth and Angela stood outside the door. Their lights were all trained on the only unsecured hall, the one they'd used to get down here, and they watched tensely.

Clang...clang!

Everyone flinched and those who didn't have their guns drawn did so now.

More noises came to them, footsteps and voices maybe, and Seth waved her toward the workers as Neil's Eagles tightened their line of defense.

"Stay with him," Seth ordered.

Seth waved his men forward as soon as Angela was out of sight. He wouldn't let the coming people get close to Adrian without knowing if there was a problem. This station only had one other exit—through the actual train tunnels that Seth thought were likely flooded by the thick smell of mildew down here. Right now, they were rats in a trap.

Seth's unease had Angela's grip tightening on her gun as she went to Adrian. She couldn't get a read on the survivors here and that was a bad sign. "We heard them, half a dozen at least. Sounds like they're coming this way."

"Will they talk to us?"

Mind flooding with fear, Angela pressed Adrian toward the rear of the room, where Kyle and his Eagles were now jerking the crates out in a rush. "It's all darkness."

Adrian recognized the danger and let her push him behind them, but when she would have gone back to stand at the door, he captured her wrist. "Stay with me."

She nodded at the order, not about to argue. She'd only wanted to make sure Seth and Neil

were all right before returning to defend him. “No worries. We’ll get you back to camp, safe and sound.”

Adrian loved her no-nonsense attitude when things began to roll. He grinned. “*You*, Angie. We’ll get you back to camp.”

She flushed, remembering her place.

And then Seth screamed.

It wasn’t a shout or warning yell, but a desperate cry of pain, and Angela shuddered.

“Grab him!”

“Get to the boss!”

“Open fire!”

Gunshots echoed through the building like thunder and Adrian was by Angela’s side when she darted out the protected doors and into the chaos.

“Get them down!”

Neil’s shout was ignored as Angela slid to her knees by the bloody redhead the Eagles were lined up in front of.

“Stabbed... Guttled my leg!” Seth gazed up at them in shock. “I only said hello...” he groaned, hands covered in blood.

Adrian helped her stem the flow with his bandana.

“It’s deep.”

“Pickaxe.” Adrian pointed to the bloody weapon that must have dislodged as they fell. He ducked under Seth’s arm to get a grip, mind shuddering at the man’s painful shout from the movement. He’d heard that sound too many times.

“Here they come,” Neil warned, feeling nothing but cold, hard anger.

Adrian scooped Seth up and over his shoulder as the unseen faces rounded the corner of the hall. He registered the blood running down his side, but didn’t feel the warmth as full survival-mode kicked in.

“Do not waste bullets!” Adrian ordered, backing them toward the room where Kyle’s men waited to surprise their attackers.

The line of Eagles followed him, making sure Angela was covered too, as she kept pace and tied the next bandage around Seth’s bloody leg.

The new arrivals came up the hall in a mad rush against the glare of the lights, clumsy, angry steps that bounced off the walls and sounded like a mob.

“On my mark,” Neil ordered, not interested in letting anyone into Safe Haven who would attack Seth.

Adrian didn’t correct him. The sense of wrong was too strong to ignore. He hadn’t found survivors, only more walking dead.

“Maybe we should—”

“Too late,” Angela stated grimly. The witch was whispering for her to open fire. These weren’t sheep.

“I get dibs!”

“Don’t hit the heads!”

“The woman! Get the woman!”

Bloodlust had already filled the mob and they charged with their weapons raised.

“Stand your ground, Eagles!”

Rusty weapons raised in hunger, the people slid to a stop, more at the command than at the sight of so many armed men. Their naked skin was covered with streaks of red war paint, their eyes black orbs under crimson layers that glared insanely.

Silence fell over the dusty station, the residents unsure of challenging the armed strangers despite the promise of fresh meat, and the pause gave the Eagles time to catch those important little details.

Jeremy caught the odor of decay as he stayed in front of Adrian and his stomach dipped as he placed the smell. It wasn't paint.

“What the hell are they?” Daniel asked, noting that every iris was solid black.

His horrified question broke the spell over the two groups.

Fresh Meat!

“Cannibals!” Angela snarled in revulsion. “All this food and they eat each other!”

Adrian spotted the gruesome decorations that proved her words; teeth, ears, fingers, some so small they could only be from a child. Hatred rose up in dizzying waves. *They've been hunting the refugees who've come through here...and they ate them.*

“Get them!”

The order came from a bald man wearing only crimson and a necklace of tiny bones, and the mob charged forward eagerly at the encouragement.

Adrian slid Seth's weight onto Angela's shoulders and the words fell like dust from his mouth as he drew. "Take them out."

4

When it was over, Adrian swept the scene with disgust. What was it about the human brain that led to this deterioration of basic right and wrong?

"All clear."

Adrian motioned them back to the mission and the Eagles began to carry boxes and crates of supplies out to the waiting semi. Adrian usually only took half of what they found, and then 10 percent of what was left for their reserves, but this time he had them empty the rooms.

Curious and needing something to keep herself from staring at the pile of bodies, Angela let herself ask him why. She hadn't shot any of them, but it didn't make it easier. "Is it a punishment? Taking everything?"

Around them, the laboring slowed a bit. She wasn't the only one who wanted to know, but she was the one he would give those answers to.

"No. I suspect they've been using the food to lure other survivors out of hiding. This will be one less stockpile for them to betray each other with." Adrian's gaze lingered on the dirty windows. "I'd

sweep this town with fire if we had the time. It's very unlikely people are living here still, these...animals are preying on refugees."

"Maybe Cesar will do it for you." Angela's voice wasn't even, but it did hold a possibility.

She felt his mind developing the plan that would ensure it happened and spoke to Seth before her guilt could begin crying. "You ready?"

Seth grimaced drunkenly, the morphine easing his pain. "No, but do it anyway, Ang."

She gave the required grin at the shortened name and stuck the red-hot iron against his skin.

The Eagles turned from his agony and their guilt over the most recent executions was eased. And Adrian had known it would be, Angela realized, hurrying to finish with the gaping hole in Seth's leg. That was why he hadn't ordered them to do this outside. The image of those animals would always come with Seth's screams and ease some of their nightmares.

Angela sighed, pushing the wound together. "Ready?"

"Stop...warning me!" Seth gasped. "It's like I'm training with someone's nervous grandmother."

Angela didn't stifle the tears as she shoved the iron against his leg.

5

"You'll be taking over Seth's morning post until he's back up on his leg."

Kyle's words sent a smile over Angela's face. They'd only been in camp for an hour. "No problem."

"Not for you," the mobster muttered, but moved around her before she could question.

"They don't like the idea of your life for mine or vice versa." Adrian had come out of the bathroom as Kyle entered. "How's Seth?"

Angela gestured toward the medical tent. "Better now. John's got it covered."

"Lots of antibiotics?"

"You know it."

They spent a quiet moment, each studying the area. There were dark skies, but the lights of Safe Haven were hope in the apocalyptic nightmare that surrounded them every minute.

Angela felt that golden power next to her stir.

"There isn't anything I won't do to keep them alive."

She shivered at his words. "Even sacrifice yourself."

"I..." He stopped, the words stuck.

Angela felt his terror. Their time was short now.

She flinched when their radios sparked.

"New arrivals at the QZ. Both doctors report."

Flanked by Adrian, she moved under the green canopy over the reception area a minute later and John gave her the lead without being told. He lit his pipe and settled nearby.

Angela scanned the small group of nine, lips tightening at the sight of their grungy leader. *Stick around. He's hinky.*

Adrian sent that with a single hand gesture and the Eagles on duty moved subtly closer.

Angela had stepped to the long table and taken the place beside John. “Welcome to Safe Haven. I’m Angie, one of two doctors you’ll visit during quarantine.”

The only man in the group scowled at her. “Doctors, quarantine. You government?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Angela asked, insulted. “Those bastards are gone. Safe Haven is an American red cross convoy offering shelter to survivors.”

“Oh. Okay.” The man’s tone lost some of the edge. “Well, I’m Ernie. Came from Omaha, travelin’ merchant, ya know? Picked up my women ‘round there.”

“You heard us in Omaha?” Angela asked, acting like his choice of words hadn’t bothered her and she was glad when the guards around her did the same. She needed another minute to pry in and then she’d know what he was guilty of.

“Sure did. Couldn’t answer ‘o ‘course, but I went where the signal was strongest.”

Angela studied his folds of extra flesh and then the thin frames of the scared women cowering near the filthy RV. She flicked her glance over the bruises and small wounds on them and returned to the smooth-skinned man before her. Ernie might

not be from Cesar's camp, but he was a slaver, just the same.

"How'd the girl get the black eye?"

The man flinched. "Not from me!"

Angela hated what had to happen, but she wasn't about to let this evil inside their den.

"You've lied to me twice. We have no room for you."

The Eagles were stunned. Kind, forgiving Angela had refused someone entry—herself. He had to be evil for her to do that.

"But, I didn't hit her! She fell down—"

"Running from you. You raped her anyway."

Angela moved toward the now crying women as Adrian, Neil and Doug surrounded the sputtering man. They spun him toward his RV with hard grips and menacing words.

When Ernie motioned at the females to follow, Angela stepped between them, hand sliding to her holster. "No."

"But them's my women!"

"Not anymore!" she shouted.

Even the rapist froze at her furious tone and Adrian observed it all in pride. Her righteous anger, when it came, was a sight to see.

"They are now members of this refugee camp and you are living on borrowed time!"

She motioned to Kyle, sure which Eagle handled these things when they came up.

"Tick...tock. It's all hands on a clock for you now, Ernie from Omaha." Her voice rang out in a

taunting cruelty very unlike the Angela they knew.

The doomed man paled and she turned her back to him as the Eagles sent him away. Clouds of dust rolled over the parking area.

When Kyle would have waited until Angela was out of sight, Adrian said, “No more hiding now. None of it.”

Kyle went to his nearby jeep with a matching feeling of satisfaction that he was confused by. Why did Angela’s sudden willingness to order someone killed give them all pride?

Angela took a minute to calm down and then studied the females. She hated the pathetic way they held themselves, as if resigned to taking whatever abuse their newest owners wanted to pass out. And at the same time, she knew them. Each one was her own kind and there was a deep sympathy in her tone when she welcomed them.

“This is Safe Haven refugee camp, ladies. We offer you aid and protection, and you have my word that the things you’ve suffered through will *never* happen here.”

Marc listened from the shadows, one of her numerous guards, and it was easy at that moment, for him to understand why she had been chosen for this. Adrian knew hidden talent, put it to work, and he had placed Angie perfectly. He’d also made sure everyone accepted it. There wasn’t an Eagle in camp who wouldn’t listen to her warnings now, and none of them voiced any protests when she

joined their workouts or showed up during one of their lessons for something she'd missed. She had won them over and the only thing that bothered Marc, was where it would lead.

“What’s he got planned for you?” Marc murmured, as she joked with the new arrivals. Around her for three minutes and even strangers felt her draw, were following...

Marc’s curious demeanor flipped to uneasy in an instant and it was a struggle to keep still. Maybe he was wrong. Angie wouldn’t want her own team of female Eagles... Would she?

6

Waiting until the camp was settled, Kyle and Neil made a short visit to the mess, where one off-duty Eagle was enjoying a too-private moment...with his boyfriend.

“Oh, man,” Neil complained as they caught sight of the cozy scene. “Do we really have to do this?”

“It’s what any other Eagle here would get.”

“But he’s not an Eagle, he’s—”

“Worthy and you know it. If not for him, Adrian would be dead. The only reason Ray isn’t, is because he weighs less and the branch he landed on held up. It’s time to let him in.”

Neil pushed his hat up. “Surprised to hear you say it.”

Kyle sighed, letting his own weakness and strength out in the same sentence. "I feel the same way, but I can admit I was wrong."

Neil didn't like the images that brought and nodded in resignation. "You lead and I'll follow."

Ray and Dale broke apart guiltily as the senior Eagles came around the corner of the mess, putting space between their bodies. Instantly expecting trouble, the two men were tense as Neil and Kyle got mugs and came toward the table they were sitting at.

"How's it going?" Kyle asked, sliding onto the bench across from them, Neil at his side.

"Fine," Dale stated defiantly. "What do you want with him?"

"How do you know it's him and not you?" Neil quipped sharply, still hating how he felt when he was around these two. He swept Ray's scrapes and bruises, the casted arm, and stitches. Why was he even on duty yet?

Dale's beady eyes narrowed. "It's always him. You ran me out, and now you're trying to get rid of him, too."

"No, they aren't," Ray spoke up. "Not these two."

"You're still having trouble with the others?" Kyle asked.

"One of them came by to thank him last night. They threw a pile of dogshit in his tent," Dale informed them angrily.

Kyle's mind flew straight to Allan, he'd been on dog duty last night, and Dale read the anger.

"You'll only make it worse. Leave it alone," Dale demanded.

"Don't tell him what to do. He gives the orders," Ray scolded Dale, not wanting his friend to get in trouble, but also feeling it like any of the others. He wouldn't have stayed so long where he wasn't wanted, but this pull!

"Fine!" Flushing, Dale pushed to his feet. "I'll leave. Enjoy your talk."

Neil and Kyle studied Ray as he stared at Dale, noting how familiar, how caring his gaze was. It made them uncomfortable, but for Kyle, who was in the process of changing his own thoughts, it was painful. The herd and Eagles had denied these two and others like them happiness. And for what? Because they were gay? Out of all the things they could be in this new world, how was liking men a threat?

"Is he okay?" Neil asked.

Ray flushed a bit, but didn't censor his words. "He's jealous."

Neil opened his mouth to defend his manhood, and was shocked by Kyle's chuckle.

"He's got little to worry about," Kyle joked.

Neil stared at Kyle as Ray snorted bitterly.

"I wouldn't exactly say that."

Again, Neil wanted to make it clear that he had no such urges and Kyle was fast to cut him off.

“Because of the time you spend with us, not because you’re hot for Neil, right?”

Ray blushed a dark red that had Neil snapping his mouth shut. *Damn Kyle for changing my mind!*

“He knows it’s more than that.”

“Because you’d go straight to keep your place now,” Kyle guessed and hit his mark.

“Yes!” Ray let his own emotions out. “I would have died for Adrian and that feeling was more than I can stand to lose.”

His voice dropped in shame. “There isn’t anything I won’t do.”

Kyle didn’t answer, making Neil feel the devotion. Sexuality was another of those things that Adrian would have to handle in time, but of all his men, Kyle was the only one already starting to sense how it might happen.

“It starts with you,” Kyle stated, sure Ray understood. “You’re the first, like she was. Everything that happens after, is on you.”

Ray was very aware and allowed a small smile to come to his lips. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Kyle refuted. “Tell me you’re sorry for all the heads I’ll be knockin’ over this.”

“I can’t do that. Some of those heads need to be knocked.”

“Like Zack and Allan,” Kyle offered and saw by the tightening of the man’s face that he was right.

“I won’t tell,” Ray swore. “Ever.”

“If they’ve done something wrong—” Neil started to protest, unable to deny that he was being influenced by Kyle’s choice.

“It won’t work that way,” Kyle cut him off.

“How then?”

Kyle studied Ray, noting the set jaw and the calm pound of his pulse under the bruised skin. “You tell him.”

Ray flushed again, but spoke the truth. “You have to let me do it on my own as much as you can.”

“We have been,” Neil stated, thinking of all the times he’d ignored Kenn’s extra hits and nasty words.

“Yeah, but I’m still alive and I’m not pretending with the Eagles anymore, like she said.” Ray slowly stood up. “I’m in love with Dale. You guys should know that. It’ll kill me to give him up...but I will.”

He entered his tent for another lonely night and there was an odd silence between Neil and Kyle. Before the war, homosexuality was a hot-button topic. After, it only mattered once they’d come here. Now, it was in their faces again, running drills with them and eating mess under the same canvas.

“I’ll support it because he saved Adrian,” Neil said. “But I don’t want to talk about... specifics, okay?”

Kyle grunted, thinking they would probably learn more about it than either of them wanted to

before it was all said and done. Getting gays accepted in the Eagles would make Angie's trials seem like nothing more than a bad dream and it would take much, much longer. Gays in Safe Haven had to be handled like the proverbial frog in the pot. They couldn't let the water come to a boil too fast or they would lose the chance that Ray was trying to turn into a future for those who came after him. They would all step carefully and hope.

Chapter Nineteen
Adrift in Hell

April 2nd
The Kraft Cave

1

Kendle knew she didn't want to wake up, but the nightmares drove her to it.

She'd started out with the shark pulling her down, and then corpses with holes in them held her while glowing green teeth bit her repeatedly. Struggling to make sense of it, she also fought to remain asleep, instinctively knowing that some parts of it were really happening.

It was the sound of her own screams that jerked her into brutal consciousness.

“Aahhh....”

Kendle snapped her mouth shut as Ethan drew back, her blood dripping from his chin. Violent pain assaulted her body and she let the tears roll down her cheeks. She was still alive.

Slap!

His blow rocked her into the stone wall, drawing blood from a rare place he hadn't damaged yet and Kendle's bladder let go. She cowered in fear as he charged forward to deliver her punishment and she welcomed the grayness

that swam over her vision. One or two more of those and she could be with the shark.

Ethan's teeth sank into her naked thigh and scraped a layer of skin, taking her scream and turning it into a piercing shriek that had him delivering the two required hits and more. She was at his mercy now and he had none.

Kendle had lost all sense of time. Unlike her ordeal on the ocean, when she'd been able to mark the passing days, this time her world consisted of the tormenting nightmares in the darkness and excruciating brightness of the pain when she was awake. During those moments, she struggled to get to the soupy grayness that lie between both worlds, but always missed it.

Ethan's entire face was bloodshot. He hadn't slept much in the entire time he'd had her, too worried about extracting his pound of flesh, literally, before Luke found them. The gunshots had continued for two days and that meant only one thing. Her soldier had escaped and Ethan was determined that when he found the body, it would be unrecognizable.

He jabbed her harder, trying to jerk her awake again. Like with the others, it was getting harder and harder to do, even though he'd stopped spilling so much blood at one time, right after he dragged her from the tunnel. She was weakening.

If Luke doesn't hurry, he won't find me alive, Kendle thought, careful to keep Ethan from knowing his last jab into her cheek had pulled her

from the watery blackness. She knew he was scared of Luke, but—

“AAAhhhh!”

Ethan’s teeth sank deeper than he meant them to and her blood, sweet and warm, flew down his throat. Moaning in ecstasy, he let her bash her own head against the wall and black out again.

2

He isn’t coming.

I know.

Kendle had accepted it.

Luke had given her up for dead. She would stay here until Ethan finally bit too far and hit a vein or she pushed him into accidentally killing her. That last one gave her a small measure of hope that it would all be over soon and she swam through the darkness more determinedly. The shark in here with her no longer held any power, and when it snagged her wrist, she let it pull her under the comforting water where Ethan couldn’t follow.

Did you know they think you can’t die?

Kendle followed the salty voice as it spoke, not spotting its owner and not wanting to.

The townspeople thought it was a miracle you survived, at first. When they found out about the rest, the stories started.

Kendle saw the outline of a humanlike creature under the deepest rock on the ocean floor, but her

mind couldn't wrap around its size. How could a person fit under a rock?

We came to view you ourselves, the form under the stone told her. And we have found the rumors to be true!

“He’s killing me even as I dream this.”

Do you wish to die, child? the form asked in thick curiosity.

Kendle hesitated. “I want the pain to end.”

Then you do wish to die, for all life is about pain.

“But he’s eating me!” she shouted. “How can I survive that?”

There was no choice for the others. They had to let the blood spill. A creature such as you does not.

Kendle didn't trust the form under the rock but asked, “How?”

A trade.

The voice was greedy now and Kendle sensed right then that the father of all lies, in whom she previously hadn't believed, might be the miniscule shadow under the stone.

“My soul is useless,” she haggled. “Impure.”

But your blood is not.

The rock shifted.

Share with us willingly and we will rise to slay your tormentor. You shall be freed!

Kendle cringed at the open evil in that tone and was horrified to find her mind wanting to say yes. Instead, she forced herself to wake up by doing the

one thing she knew was guaranteed to make Ethan keep going until she was. She screamed for Luke.

It became a pattern of new agony, enduring as much of Ethan's torment as she could and then sinking down into the depths to be tempted with powers she had never dreamed of. Real or not, she was sure she would die as soon as the choice was made and the part of her soul that had kept her alive so far, stubbornly refused to give up.

3

Ethan's illness was getting worse. Even with the workouts that he was giving Kendle, the rage was overwhelming. He hadn't left the hiding place since bringing her here and his state of deterioration wasn't much better than hers. In seven days, he'd become weak enough to feel dizzy when enjoying his treasure and he'd come to the conclusion that he needed to go out for supplies. He was trying to keep her alive, make her last, and he was hungry all the time because of it. The others had gone fast, but with Kendle, he'd gotten his money's worth.

Ethan didn't want to leave her, but besides the supplies, he needed to know what had happened. If Luke was dead, like he should be by now, then Ethan would be free to go home and stock up before rejoining her in a final session of blood and death. If he wasn't, then leaving her unguarded was likely to lose him custody of the spoils. So he

made sure that if the soldier showed up in his absence, he wouldn't be able to take her away.

Kendle scowled at the shark as it pulled her upward this time, making her return. The voice under the stone had been telling her of a group of survivors in her homeland and of how much they needed her. It had been offering to help her get there and Kendle had been close to agreeing.

“AAaaaaahhhhhh!”

The pain was so severe that she hit the grayness head-on and floated there in limbo until she could breathe again. He had her chained, complete with a padlock. He'd left her here to die this way. Will collapsing, when the voice under the stone called to her, she took a quick fin down into the blackness and began fighting her own greedy nature as the devil tempted her.

4

Satisfied she wasn't going anywhere; Ethan spent an hour observing the jungle around the door and saw nothing but normal island life. Swaying—Luke hadn't even found this cave!—Ethan hit the button and let himself out.

The second the door opened, Luke was there.

Ethan flew into the small cave and Luke followed him inside with the certainty that the blood the sick playboy was covered in was Kendle's.

Luke didn't ask where she was, didn't speak at all as he slid his knife out and he moved toward the rotting monster trying to pick himself up off the floor. After so long, and Ethan about to skulk away, Luke was sure she was dead and he was determined that her killer would soon follow...after he'd been caused some pain.

Ethan grunted in agony at the knife, but didn't fight as Luke sliced him deeply behind the ankles. It was over now, and the pilot had lost. There was no way she would live through everything he had done to her.

Stopping any chance Ethan had of fleeing with the injury, Luke got set. He was going to enjoy th—
“Ugg!”

A gurgling moan from the rear of the cave froze him in his tracks.

“Kendle?”

Ethan's horrible laughter cackled out. ”You waited! You waited and she was alive the whole time!”

Awful guilt flooded Luke and he punched Ethan with a powerful swipe that knocked him out. Luke kicked him in the ribs, nodded at the crack against his boot and then he rushed toward that awful choking sound.

“Kendle?”

The noise grew louder, more desperate, and he rushed into the darkness with his knife tightly in his grip.

Kendle tried to scream at the sight of the bloody knife coming toward her, turning purple, and Luke dropped the weapon in horror. He hit his knees beside her an instant later, already searching for the key.

Kendle's blackened eyes had long since swollen shut, allowing only small glimpses of her cell. She cowered away as far as she could, choking on the chain that was cutting into her neck.

Luke ran to Ethan's crumpled body, sure that's where the key was. He found it on a rope around the bloody man's throat and ripped it free. He delivered another harsh blow to Ethan's ribs and felt another crack. *Bastard!*

Kendle was gasping from her place in the corner, wild, and Luke didn't try to calm her down, not sure she would last through it with the tiny bit of air she was getting. He grabbed her under one arm, holding her bleeding body tightly while plunging the key into the lock.

"GGgrrraaaaaaaaaa!"

Kendle's scream seemed to echo in the cave forever as the collar fell off.

Luke held her while she thrashed in pain and panic. "Jenna!"

The crazy woman stopped behind him. "My God!"

"Tie him up!"

Jenna stomped angrily toward Ethan's unconscious form as Luke staggered to his feet.

Afraid to let go, Luke swung Kendle into his arms and carried her fighting, bloody body out into the sun.

Too busy struggling to keep them upright, he didn't detect Ethan's glowing green eyes pop open with a jerk as Jenna finished and followed.

Do we have a deal?

Kendle was drifting along the bottom of the murky floor, held to the stone by a single finger of the shadowy form.

I have offered everything you want.

"But not what I need." Kendle's heart was bleeding with the losses she had suffered. "Let me die."

Finally tiring of her determination, the form let loose of her, but followed as she rose to the surface, once again guided by the shark. The form was a snake, and a man, and a beast with three faces that continued to tempt her.

I will remake your beauty until you are beyond compare. I will lay cities at your feet and men will weep in longing at the mere mention of your name.

Kendle let herself float to the top, weakening under the onslaught. She wanted that and this devil knew.

I will let your lover's life continue past its due time.

Kendle winced, but kept going. Not even for Luke. The thing she wanted most, no one and no

thing, could give her. Dawn was dead. Her twin could never be returned.

5

Kendle's body shivered uncontrollably as she slid deeper into shock and Luke found his hands being shoved away.

"Get me a fire goin'."

Jenna knew he needed to be kept busy and gave him easy instructions that took his stare off the gruesome scene, but she knew it was a moment he would never forget, even if the woman lived, which Jenna doubted. She'd never treated someone with so many wounds.

Kendle thrashed under her hands, crying out, and Luke forced himself to hold her down so Jenna could clean and then smear gel over the bites. She came to abruptly as they were cleaning her wounds and she immediately scrambled to get away.

"Stop!"

Jenna's harshly female voice got through to Kendle where Luke's manly tones wouldn't have and she stared at them in shock.

"Kendle?"

She swung to Luke, cringing in terror. "Eth-Eth-Ethan!"

It came out as a piercing shriek that had Luke moving into the cave with determined steps. *This is why the sick bastard isn't dead yet*, he thought grimly. *She needs to watch it happen.*

Luke grabbed the still man by the arm, blinded by his fury, and he grunted in sharp pain as Ethan's knife blade sank into his shoulder.

Luke ducked, avoiding a second swing meant to render him unconscious, and threw his own knife.

“Ugg!”

It stuck in Ethan's gut and Luke resisted the urge to finish him off. He dragged the moaning man out to where Jenna had Kendle mostly cornered against the wall and was trying to calm her down.

At the sight of Ethan, Kendle began to scream again.

Luke swung, knocking the unbound killer to the dirt at her feet, causing her shrieks to be cut-off by surprise.

Luke used a vicious boot to the ribs to shove the man away from her, deftly retrieving his knife with a fast jerk that sent Ethan's mouth open in agony.

Kendle watched without blinking as Luke gave Ethan what she hadn't been able to. Blood flew from the playboy's face, spraying the rock wall and she stared at it. That was Ethan's blood. Luke was killing Ethan.

Jenna wisely moved when Kendle stood up, wobbling weakly on bloody legs. “Stop!”

Luke made sure Ethan was no danger. He was prepared to take him into the jungle and finish it

out of her sight and he was surprised again when she held her hand out.

Luke gave her the bloody knife without speaking, worried when she immediately delivered a nasty swipe down Ethan's arm that jerked him from the blackness to the sound of his own screams.

Kendle grinned evilly, justice flooding her devastated heart. "More!"

"Whatever it takes, Darlin'."

She was flashing forward before he finished speaking, letting the blade dig and then twist into the side of Ethan's nose. Blood splashed down his chest as he knocked himself to the ground to get away.

Kendle followed him forward, blade flashing relentlessly while Luke held the screaming man in place.

Scared by their behavior, Jenna slowly retreated, leaving the supplies. If they wanted her later, she would come, but not without a weapon of her own. *These Americans are crazy!*

Kendle kept going even after she had accidentally sliced too deep into Ethan's neck and gave him release. Her arms and naked body were covered in his blood and it was only as Luke witnessed those glowing green eyes fade to death that he considered the infection. Kendle had been exposed, presumably violated. She would catch the rage illness and he would have to lock her up to

keep her from doing this to someone who didn't deserve it.

As if she caught the thought, Kendle stepped aside and threw up.

She wobbled violently, knife falling from her gory hand as she slid to her knees. She stared up at him with a shocked survivor's expression. "I'd like to go home now, please."

Luke didn't move fast enough to startle her, but he didn't hesitate either, coming to her side with a hurt-filled smile. He had no doubt of which home she spoke. "As soon as you say you can, I'll find us a way."

Her lashes fluttered, and Luke caught her as she fell over. He laid her down long enough to finish bandaging her wounds and get the blanket from his bedroll. He cut a hole in it for her and after sliding it over her, gathered her gently into his arms and headed for the well-used dirt bike that was still parked nearby. It would be slow going with her in his arms, and he had no idea how to help her. He also wasn't sure if the doctor in town would treat her or shoot them both on sight, but he flew toward town as fast he could. There was no other choice.

6

"Will she live?"

Kendle swam reluctantly toward the grayness, unable to remember what was there and scared to try. The voice below the stone was silent, but she

felt him lurking, waiting for her to discover the latest horror and come rushing in. She didn't feel anything that hadn't been there already as she pushed through the gray and she was extremely careful to not let on that she'd woken.

“Maybe. Her wounds are healing at an incredible rate and there's no sign of the infection.”

“And your theory on that?”

“I'll share later, if she lives.”

Kendle jerked at a sudden bright light and felt someone come to her side.

“Kendle?”

Sure the sound of Luke's voice was a trick, she squeezed her lids shut. “I'm sorry, Ethan. Please, I'm sorry!”

Luke growled his rage, spinning from the room and the doctor took his place.

“He's dead. You're in town. That was Luke.”

Given the information she needed most, Kendle slipped into the darkness.

The next time she woke, it was to find a man in the chair by her side. She struggled to control her breathing and couldn't stop from begging again when he stood up.

“I'll try harder, please don't!”

“Son of a bitch!”

The doctor hurried to comfort her as Luke left the small room again. “Ethan's dead.”

Kendle was trying to remember what had happened. She'd already placed the voice of the doctor, but that growl! That angry sound couldn't have been Luke.

"You sure?"

Harriet used a rough hand to check Kendle's skin for a fever. "You had too much of his blood on you for him to be anything else."

Kendle flinched, more from the touch than the words, and flashes of Ethan's torture hit her hard. She shuddered, gagging.

The woman had the basin in hand, and slid into position with a quickness born of repetition. "Try to stop yourself from thinking about it if you can and I'll give you something to calm those guts."

Kendle shakily took the towel as the woman went to dispose of the mess. She felt so... *Deformed*, Kendle supplied forcefully, making herself glance down at what would now be her body.

The sight of it stunned her.

There were teeth marks on nearly every inch of her skin and she was suddenly grateful for the IV in her arm that she was sure contained a painkiller. She was stitched in half a dozen places on her arms and hands; the tips of two fingers covered in thick bandages that she knew hid missing fingertips.

"He liked to bite," she whispered, tears falling onto the numerous scrapes and puncture marks. She would never be the same.

"Luke wants to come in."

“No!” Kendle shouted. “Go away!”

Kendle’s ugly shout struck Luke through the chest even though he’d been warned to expect it, and the doctor’s chubby face was sympathetic as she left the room.

“Go sit with her now. Don’t push, but don’t let her push you, either.”

Luke asked himself if he was strong enough to help her through this recovery, the likes of which her first trauma couldn’t even compare to, and found the answer to be easy. He entered the room and shut the door with a firm hand.

Kendle watched him settle into the hard rocker next to the softly flickering fire, fighting the need to cover herself.

Luke stared, his guilt sparking the tension. “We have to talk.”

“No, we don’t. It’s over.”

Luke steeled himself for what had to come next. “I want you to come back to the cabin, let me help you like before.”

Kendle had never been so hurt and she couldn’t agree, wouldn’t ever trust again. “No.”

“Okay. I’ll stay here until she throws me out, but I’m not leaving.”

Kendle felt the tears roll down her cheeks and wiped them away angrily. “You should go.”

“I love you, Kendle. Nothing’s changed for me.”

It was the wrong thing to say.

”Well, everything’s changed for me!” she shouted hoarsely, tears falling harder. “I’m a broken toy now. Who the hell would play with something that belonged to a dog?”

“I would.”

Kendle snarled in grief and hurt, and Luke had to go to her, unable to stand her agony. “How can I help you?”

She trembled, so full of bitterness she couldn’t stop lashing out. “Go away!”

He ignored the doctor’s warning about pushing her, sitting down on the bed. Even done slowly, she cringed against the wall in a pathetic attempt at escape.

Luke slowly slid to the top of the bed and leaned against the wall, not touching her, but making it so she’d have to crawl over him to get away. He remembered his own horrors and how hard he’d fought to be left to his despair. Weak or not, he wouldn’t let her sink any deeper into her own mental hell without trying to show her a little light.

“The cabin, Kendle, our garden. It’s waiting, too.”

Kendle cried harder and Luke fought the urge to give her the space she was begging for. He held out a hand. “Please, I still need you!”

Flashes of Ethan’s death came again, but this time they were fighting for space with the memories of the life she had been sharing with Luke. Fishing holes. Hole-ups. Dark tunnels and

nightmarish demons. Love and laughter, life at its best. Blood and pain, hell at its worst.

Luke's grin, the one reserved only for her, broke through her trance and she gazed at him with more life than he'd glimpsed so far.

"He's dead. We killed him."

Luke's voice turned into that harsh growl she hadn't been able to place. "Deserved worse than he got!"

Kendle concentrated on recapturing the strength of their love. When she had it securely in her thoughts, she forced herself to keep going. "The others?"

"Already gone. The Mayor got wise to Higgins and sent a flunkey to get the girls out early. We missed the boat by enough time to see it fading into the sunset with the Mayor onboard."

Again, the rage in his voice triggered her reaction and Kendle shivered. It wasn't the Luke she knew and it didn't match that memory.

"Kendle, it's gonna be okay. Whatever it takes, I'll be here for you."

She pulled up the image again, letting it grow to vivid clarity. Deep inside, one desperate need was flaring out, becoming undeniable.

I am Kendle Roberts.

He is Luke Johnson.

We loved each other...

"Go slow, okay?"

Luke smiled in relief, showing a small part of what she needed and Kendle felt the final layer of

her shock crack as that wave of need crested in her shattered heart. Ethan was dead and she wasn't.

Her dreams came to mind, the evil voice floating to the top of her stunned brain.

Did you know they think you can't die?

She shuddered at the knowledge that she could be brought to the brink enough times to wish it weren't so. Ethan had invaded every part of her. She would never be the same.

But maybe I can go on, she thought, concentrating on Luke's gentle face and the powerful demands of her heart. Maybe I can stop burning after a while and smolder until the pain recedes. If I can get that far, this time I won't stop with recovering. I won't rest until I get home!

Chapter Twenty

Third Time's a Charm

May 7th

Cedar Bluff State Park

1

Angela's knuckles were white from her grip on the ambulance dashboard, but she didn't ask Marc to slow down on the slick, curvy road. They might be too late already.

"Wouldn't he have sent for John if it was serious?" Marc asked quietly, aware of how worried she was. The message had come in as they sat down to morning mess together and she'd been a bundle of live nerves since.

Angela didn't respond. Marc was trying to calm her, but that wouldn't happen until she knew Adrian was okay, and she found herself wishing for Kyle and her team. They were in the medical tent, being tested for a mysterious illness that had left them incapacitated. John was trying to figure it out while Kevin and the rookies kept order.

Neil's team had been with the clearing crew this morning, supposed to be the relief for Kyle's team that had never made it out of camp last night for their a.m. sentry duty over the tow trucks. Seth's mental call had come while she was busy

deflecting people from the QZ. He'd told her to bring rope, water, duct tape, and a lot of other things, but the one that put fear into her heart was this ambulance. *My team wasn't the only target*, she thought. Another attempt had been made on Adrian's life. Had it been successful?

The ambulance slid through a narrow curve, and then found purchase on the muddy, crumbling pavement. Angela tightened her seatbelt. She wanted to search, just a quick glance to settle her heart, but resisted the impulse. If it was as bad as it felt, she might need every bit of strength that she had.

"There they are," Marc said, pointing.

A small group of tow trucks and tense men came into view through the drizzle. The guards waved him through and Marc flicked the headlights in response.

Angela was out first, black bag clutched tightly under her rain slicker. Marc joined the group of men for an update, but Angela hurried by them, searching for Adrian.

Neil fell in step to lead the way and she shivered at the feel of his fear. "Kyle and his team were all found in camp, unconscious."

Neil made a motion to let the others know, but his expression held little relief.

"It's Adrian?" she asked.

"The truck went over the edge, along with a car we were moving," Neil told her through his concern. "We're pretty sure we can pull them up

now that we've got more rope, but not until we push the car off of them."

"Why didn't you..." Angela froze on the embankment, stunned.

The drop was easily thirty feet and she could barely see the tow truck. Upside down, it was mostly hidden by a cracked and muddy wagon that was still attached by a thick chain. The partially crushed cab of the tow truck was near the edge of another gulch and Angela couldn't determine how far down that one went. Being wedged against the stump of a thick tree was the only thing stopping the vehicles from going over.

"Shit," she swore. The tree was leaning out, jagged cracks branching out from the point of impact. How long would that hold?

"We'll have to yank them out fast," Marc calculated as he joined them at the edge.

"I need to get down there."

Neil thought to respond, but waited. Adrian had made it clear that either she or Marc would take charge.

"Not until we get them anchored," Marc denied. "That tree could go anytime. Even shifting might trigger the slide."

Angela accepted Marc's decision. She didn't want to be in charge. She wanted Adrian.

"Have you heard anything from him?" she asked Neil.

"Right after. Nothing for half an hour or so. He said every time we yelled, the vehicle moved. I

figure he heard the ambulance and knows you're here." Neil was glad to be able to say that and even more relieved that she hadn't tried to fight for control. Adrian was in danger. There wasn't time for it.

Marc joined the waiting group, motioning for Neil to be Angela's shadow, and he waved the other men over, cringing inwardly at the crudeness of his two-minute plan. So many things could go wrong.

"The line goes behind the motor, the side that's exposed, and then around the tow attachment. We'll anchor it to those two trees up there," he instructed, pointing. "If they can come through the rear window, we'll leave it all. If not, we'll unhook the wagon and push it off. Even if the ground goes by ten feet, the truck will stay. Dangling probably, but it'll be there."

There were doubts all the way around, but everyone held them inside. To voice their fears might cause something bad to happen.

They got to work immediately, and five minutes later, Angela and the rest of them held their breath as two slowly moving men neared the truck.

Marc watched them begin attaching the ropes, wishing it were him and Kenn doing this hands-on labor, and then grimaced at the thought.

The tree didn't move as Alex and Daniel, the two lightest men here, wrapped the rope around it. Marc felt a little better about his next order.

“Get her set.” He looked at Angie, lips tightening. “Don't yell or do anything to cause vibrations. You'll be anchored, but your line could be snagged if the hill goes, so don't fight if we yank on you. We can see things from here that you won't be able to. You'll have a second rope for messages. No yelling.”

“You already told me that,” she muttered, being still as Doug and Neil prepared her harness and lines. “Can you lower blankets and water or should I take them now?”

“Neither. Get them stable enough to roll and you can treat them in the ambulance.”

Angela lifted her arms to allow the two worried males to secure her anchor and felt the tension grow when Neil gave the okay.

Two minutes later, she was starting her descent.

The ground was slick and treacherous. Twice, she lost her footing and slid, caught herself with trembling muscles. Mud gushed under her boots and up her legs as she sank, and she tried to move faster so it didn't have time to suck her under.

The men above muttered worriedly as she sped up, understanding if the hillside collapsed, it was likely that she would be caught and smashed by the sliding vehicles.

Everyone was relieved when she finally reached the cab of the truck and knelt down.

“Try not to touch anything.”

That drowsy voice cautioning her sent waves of relief into Angela’s heart and she carefully pulled on the door handle.

“It’s anchored now,” she answered, slowly inching the dented door open. Sliding easily despite the mud, she pushed it open and peered inside.

“Welcome,” Adrian greeted her calmly, trying to smile as blood dripped from his nose onto his brow. Pale blue eyes stared at her from the cuts, blood, and scrapes.

Both men were still in their seat belts, faces dark from being upside down so long. She had assumed it was Kenn with him when they’d arrived and didn’t spot the Marine, but Angela wasn’t sure why Marc thought it would upset her. As long as he wasn’t dead...

“Angela.”

It was exactly the right tone and she knelt, opening her bag.

“Kenn first,” Adrian ordered.

She stared past him at the unconscious man. Shallow breathing, lids fluttering, a soft moan. Not dead, but definitely hurt. “We can’t get to the other side yet. There’s a car in the way.”

“The wagon?”

Angela quickly felt what she could reach of him, checking for broken bones. “Yes. Is your vision blurred?”

“And then some. You found Kyle?”

“Yes, they’re with John. Do you feel like anything’s broken?”

“No.” Adrian answered as she dug through her bag. “How long have we been like this?”

“Almost an hour. Are you allergic to anything?”

“No. What’s the plan?”

Angela wiped his bare arm with an alcohol pad. “Marc wants you stable so they can do a snatch and grab. The truck is anchored now and he’s getting everything set for the pull-out. Be still, this will sting.”

Adrian grabbed her wrist before she could inject him. “Have Brady stay with us, him and Neil.”

His words were a hard command that she had no intention of disobeying. “I’ll handle it.”

Adrian didn’t flinch as the medicine flew through his system, stinging and burning.

Angela began to wipe his face, instinctively knowing he wouldn’t want to appear too injured in front of the men.

“Will I pass out?”

She carefully wrapped a bandage around his head. Stitches needed there for sure. “No, but you won’t have much control. He said fast. If you’re

not feeling it, you can't react. If there's something internal, well, you still have to come out."

"You'll be close."

It wasn't a question, but she answered it anyway, his fear making her loyalty ring out.

"Count on it. You'll come out of this alive and so will your right hand."

2

Fifteen minutes later, Adrian was out and Angela shared her concerns for his protection with Neil as he got her set to go back down. She would only be away from Adrian for a few minutes to tend to Kenn, but that was long enough for someone to finish him off.

"My life for his."

Comforted by Neil's response, she headed back down.

Marc watched wordlessly from the top as guards swept the rainy shadows.

Wiping wet strands from her face, Angela slowly crawled into the muddy, bloody truck. Kenn didn't stir as she checked him out, breathing rougher than she had hoped for. When he shivered, she tried to hurry.

He came around as she was binding his broken ribs, chattering teeth giving him away.

"Good morning, sleepy," she joked, pulling the wrap tighter.

"This is your chance."

“You’re still needed.” She pulled harder and he moaned.

“Sorry. It has to be tight so that nothing gets punctured when we pull you out.”

Kenn felt her cold touch on his hand and tried to squeeze her fingers, but couldn’t be sure if he had. “You should hate me enough to do it any...”

His voice broke as his ribs flared to life with red-hot pain in waves. The fire increased and he moaned.

“Yes, I should,” Angela agreed coolly, hoping to distract him. He didn’t need to know how worried she was.

Kenn felt his arm begin stinging and almost right away, his pain began to recede. Very quickly, all the other noises and miseries were gone, reduced to nothing but the sound of Angela’s voice and the beckoning grayness.

“Go to sleep now, grunt. When you wake up, you’ll be in camp, where you belong.”

They were slower, more careful bringing Kenn up and everyone was elated when nothing went wrong.

Adrian was waiting at the top instead of in the ambulance. Obviously medicated, Angela was impressed with his stamina. He was allowing Doug to keep a big hand on him, but his speech didn’t slur and his steps were steady as Marc continued to run Point over the scene. When he finally went to

the ambulance, following Kenn's stretcher, Neil's team kept Adrian in a tight circle of protection.

Adrian spent a moment in low conversation with Seth and then made a motion. "Let's go home."

Angela noticed the tone and veered to Marc, keeping her voice low. "Can you come back and investigate this site after we've got them in camp? I don't want anyone else behind the wheel."

"You know it." Marc was worried, but not panicked as some of Adrian's men were. The boss looked fine to him.

She started to climb in the ambulance and then turned, suddenly feeling that familiar chill of trouble in her gut. "Why didn't I get called on the radio?"

"I assume to keep the herd from knowing," Marc answered. He hated the lies the Eagles told, even to the camp members.

"None of them work."

Jeremy's voice from the perimeter had them both swiveling.

"We tried every one of them when it happened. They're all dead."

"Like he was supposed to be," Angela muttered, climbing into the ambulance. "Get us to Safe Haven, fast. Something's happening there."

Marc didn't like the sound of that and headed for the driver's seat.

Marc knew she was right about the trouble as soon as Kevin came into view. Waiting outside the tape, the Level Two Eagle went straight to Adrian as he left the ambulance under heavy guard.

“We’re having trouble and I can’t get ahold of it. Posts are short, *people* not being guarded.”

“Fires, fights?”

“Yeah.” Kevin scanned Kenn’s sheet-covered body that was being brought out on a stretcher. “Zack blew his top when he found out Kenn’s dead.”

“He’s not,” Angela stated, directing the stretcher to John. “Might feel like he is when he wakes up, though.”

Kevin surprised them with a tight smile. “Good. Maybe that’ll cool things down. They were turning out tents for proof a few minutes ago and accusing members. I sent my team, but we’re not enough to quell it.”

As they ducked under the tape, Angela was nearly overwhelmed by the difference in the atmosphere of Safe Haven. Even after the earthquake, when they had all been thrown into shock, orders were followed and posts were covered. Now, the waves of fear and unrest rolled over the dim camp like thunder and the golden bubble that usually greeted them was gone.

“Zack, Lee, Allan.” Angela picked up the worst vibes easily. “They’re at the mess. A dozen camp members, too.”

“Kenn’s boys,” Kevin confirmed.

“They think he’s dead,” Angela reminded the men around her. “Be careful.”

Furious, Adrian didn’t tell her it was the other way around. He walked faster and uneasy Eagles fell in behind them without being called.

Roughly a dozen men made up the small mob, standing with their hands balled or guns already in their grips. They had Seth’s weary Eagles cornered at the mess table where they’d just settled down for a meal.

“Who did it?” Lee demanded, leaning on the splintery table.

“Are you covering for Marc?” Zack interjected, wanting the spotlight. “Did he kill him?”

Angela tensed at the words, at the dangerous scene in front of her. *This is bad.*

All around the mess, camp members were staring at the scene in the same way and Angela realized they were viewing this as Adrian’s failure for trusting Marc over Kenn. From all appearances, the work Adrian had done to bring these people together had been completely destroyed. *How can he fix this? Can I help or will I make it worse?*

“Back off or blood is gonna flow, Jeff!” Seth growled. “I won’t take this.”

Seth’s team was tired, worried, and in no mood to put up with undue shit, even from a teammate.

“You’re gonna tell us!” Allan shouted. “Who was it?”

“Who runs this camp?”

A furious bellow cut through it all, making the mob spin.

Frank, one of Zack’s men, raised his gun instinctively and Angela beat Neil to the place between it and Adrian.

Recognizing them, Frank lowered the weapon and Adrian moved around his guards as if it hadn’t happened.

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

His tone was almost casual now, deadly in its peacefulness, and Zack tried to backpedal. “We thought you—”

“You call this thinking?”

Zack flushed and his supporters tried to fade away, only to be the ones now cornered as Seth’s team quickly stood up and blocked their retreat.

“We heard you were near dead and Kenn already was!” Zack tried to defend.

“Do dead men talk?” Kenn limped under the mess canopy, supported by Alex.

Adrian’s voice carried in the loud silence that followed.

“Is this how you would react? Like panicked animals?” His tone went up in tone and down with the weight of his disappointment, his frustration with them. “These are our friends, our family. How dare you!”

Zack and the ashamed people cringed at Adrian's anger and he surveyed the group, fighting with himself over the choices that now had to be made. Despite their flaws, he still needed Kenn's boys.

"Clean up *my* camp. Each one of you who took part. Fix what you broke, apologize to everyone you upset or pissed off. And strip those Eagle jackets. You're suspended until the moral board votes."

There was dead silence for a minute.

Angela felt them considering a take-over and was glad when each man, Zack included, immediately decided to suffer their punishment instead. They were smart enough to know they couldn't do what Adrian could. Intelligence was part of why he'd chosen them.

Needing to be sure everyone understood this wouldn't be tolerated, Adrian delivered a final threat.

"Get out of line before I'm ready to take you back and you'll pack your shit and get out."

There was a sudden flurry of activity as the men hurried to do what they were told and the air filled with short, painful conversations.

Adrian perched stiffly on the corner of his center table, appearing angry to the rest, but Angela didn't think that was true anymore. It felt like he was hurting. From his injuries or their near betrayal, she wasn't sure.

Unlike Kenn, who was proud that people were falling apart at the mere thought of him not being around. She glanced at the Marine. “Should you be here?”

“No choice.” Kenn kept his profile aimed toward Adrian, revealing none of the pain he was still feeling through John’s shot. “He needed me.”

Angela stiffened at the ring of truth, past ghosts crying. “He would have gotten them under control.”

“As fast and as painless?” Kenn insisted.

Angela sighed. “No, probably not.”

“User error?” Kenn asked his boss.

“Yes. Tell them we did something wrong. None of us were tow drivers before the war and we’re learning from our mistakes.”

Neil had joined Seth’s Eagles and Angela tensed as a small group of “rioters” approached the table. Neither Kenn nor Adrian reacted and she tried to follow their lead.

Neil held both hands out. “I did it! Arrest me.”

There was a round of snickers at the contempt-laced tone and Zack flushed.

“We’re sorry, you know? Got carried away.”

Seth studied him for a minute, and then shrugged. “Hell, I understand what drove you. We need them.” Seth wasn’t sure that was true of Kenn, but knew better than to say so. “Someone forgot to lock down the tow bar and the weight snapped the rope. It all happened too fast for us to do anything.”

Zack muttered another apology before quickly leaving and Cynthia came over now that the chaos seemed to be finished.

“Can I get an interview?”

Seth didn't hesitate, beaming at the reporter in surprised pleasure. “We'll be in your new newspaper?”

Cynthia preened under the longing tone and squeezed in across from him without waiting to be invited. “That depends on your story. Tell it from the beginning.”

Angela recognized Adrian's subtle hand in that and stopped herself from protesting. He'd been expecting this reaction from his people and Seth had known, helped him cover it before it became a problem. Who was she to be giving advice to a man that smart?

I only knew to set it up because of your warnings. Don't doubt your place with me, with them.

Angela followed his eyes around, noting that other than Zack and the suspended men, the Eagles had returned to their posts and duties, leaving her as Adrian's open guard.

In their minds, you saved my life...again. Without being able to hear and bringing the rope, that whole hillside would have gone over and taken us with it. They understand you're meant to be in this spot now.

Angela dropped her lids to keep anyone from seeing her pleasure, her pride, at his silent words. “So, we’re here for a while?”

Adrian recognized her use of distraction to stop the spark. “We leave in the morning as scheduled. To do anything different would cause more unrest. We’re back to using apocalypse roads for a while.”

“And you’ll go out with them again, if we don’t find the clues this time?” Angela asked. “Keep putting your own life at risk.”

“You saw what it came to and how fast,” Adrian explained. “They aren’t ready.”

“Our time is about up for getting them ready,” Angela pointed out, ignoring Kenn’s disapproval at her advice. “The slavers are coming soon, and this time they’ll have us all or die trying.”

“They’re already here, picking the right moment,” Angela stated quietly. “I can *feel* their hatred.”

Adrian nodded, hand resting lightly on his gun. “Let them come. After all the hell they’ve caused, *my* army can’t wait to make them pay.”

“And when the camp finds out?”

“It will be too late for them to run. They’ll have no choice, but to stand and fight.”

Adrian waited for her to protest what might have been a mass murder, but Angela couldn’t. A future without Adrian would be as dark. Without society, these families would be picked off, one by one, until America *was* nothing but a graveyard.

Better to make a stand together and die trying, than to perish alone in cowardice.

Satisfied that she was on the same page, Adrian asked Kenn, “You good for fifteen and a slow round?”

“Drugs are workin’ now, Boss,” Kenn answered cheerfully. “Probably okay for twice that.”

“Stubborn-assed men,” Angela muttered.

Kenn motioned at her, carefully. “Yeah, like *we’re* the only ones.”

Angela gaped, surprised.

Adrian realized their easy banter was having a calming effect already and gestured at Angela. “Come along?”

“You know it,” she agreed right away. The invite made it easier, but she would have trailed him anyway. Adrian’s attacker was still at large and catching them had become a priority.

4

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember anything after starting my shift,” Daryl said.

Kyle’s head weighed so much it took a real effort to lift and look over at his teammate. “Same here. None of us do.”

Chosen to be the guards on the cleared area, all of them had gone on duty at three a.m., but never made it out of camp.

“I remember packing for the trip because we were set to be there all morning, but it’s like

swimming through the fog. I'm missing details." Morgan was green.

"I knew something was wrong and tried to go report it, but I felt so bad! I couldn't find my set." Billy remembered not to groan when his stomach cramped, but couldn't stop the grimace.

Kyle snorted, tan skin much paler than any of them were used to. "At least they found you guys in your tents. I thought a shower would help. God knows how long the cold water was beating on me."

"What was it?" Greg asked carefully.

"Yeah, do we have something?" Billy questioned. "I don't feel so funny now, just like I have a hangover."

"You were drugged." Adrian entered the second medical tent, followed by Kenn and Angela.

Angela immediately became a doctor again and started to check them over, even though John had already declared them out of danger. They were her teammates.

"We have some questions," Adrian started.

"I'm sorry, boss," Kyle declared in frustration. "None of us remember."

"We need to know where each of you were before going on duty," Kenn stated.

His bandages and wary glances at people going by outside allowed them to answer. Clearly, they'd missed some action.

"The mess."

“Bonfire... Mess before that.”

“Same here.”

“We always hit the mess first and then spend a couple hours by the bonfire before we go out on third shift duty,” Daryl stated and couldn’t stop a flinch as pain shot through his brain. *No more talking. Okay.*

Adrian gestured to Kenn, who opened his notebook with fingers that weren’t quite steady.

“Hilda on second, until midnight. Maria on third shift. Assistants were Mike and Timmy on second and Cynthia on third.”

“None of them are the type,” Angela said. “Or that smart, frankly. Whoever it was, they did this as a test to determine if it would succeed or even be noticed.”

“*They*, is exactly right,” Adrian informed them. “One person doesn’t do all this on their own. We’re searching for at least two moles, maybe even three.”

“Then maybe it’s time we dug them out,” Marc stated as he ducked into the tent. He wasn’t surprised by all the shaking heads.

“How about a new plan, then?” Marc asked bitterly. “Because this one isn’t working.”

“But, it’s your plan, grunt,” Adrian exposed.

“It’s too dangerous now.” Marc met his eye, finally allowed to admit how much behind-the-scenes labor he’d been doing. “None of it went the way we needed it to.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Adrian corrected, enjoying Kenn’s reactions of shock and then realization.

Marc raised a brow. “You thought this would happen?”

“Your plan was good, but a bit simple,” Adrian explained. “It didn’t account for the reactions of the camp.”

“Because they’ve never been my priority,” Marc muttered, recognizing the dooming flaw.

“You tried to keep them out of it, but you also didn’t count on Angela’s reactions. Now, we’ll do it my way.”

“Can’t be any worse than mine,” Marc gave in with bitterness they all felt.

“Sometimes fate throws in a wild card,” Kenn remarked.

They all stared at Angela and she flushed. “That’s one of the nicer things I’ve been called.”

The tension broke with their laughter and Marc ducked out to go over the scene. He’d just wanted to be sure she was okay first. Some of the glares he had been getting upon their arrival hadn’t boded well.

Angela, not finished with her checkup, looked to Adrian.

“We’ll wait,” Adrian said, keeping Kenn still for another minute. Those broken ribs hurt, Adrian knew. None of the times he’d suffered that particular injury had been fun.

“You guys will be cleared in a few hours,” Angela told her team a few minutes later.

“Bet you’re glad you had new arrivals to handle, huh?” Lee joked, starting to feel better with each bottle of water he kept down.

She laughed, thinking Lee was a firm supporter now, and his wife, a hairdresser with bright pink stripes, was a nice addition to her growing list of possible female Eagles. They’d come in alone, and settled into the QZ while she was on duty. She’d been about to scratch the scrappy woman from her list for being a cheater when Lee had apologized for the slap. Listening from the shadows, when Candy started crying, asking him to forgive her, Angela had reconsidered. If they were willing to let it go, so could she.

“You bet your sweet cojones.”

That drew more sniggers and she issued instructions without waiting for Adrian to okay it. His wants were clear enough to her right now, since she was listening to his mind, too.

“For evening mess, tell John you guys need something to help you eat. It’ll control the rocking and we’ll watch for reactions when you show up in perfect condition.”

“What was it?”

“We’re not sure yet. Some type of party drug most likely.” Angela gestured toward the tray near the rear of the tent. “You’ll get another blood test before you leave and a few more over the next

couple days. Show up every 12 hours and we won't have to hunt you down and siphon it."

"We'll be around."

Angela was surprised when Adrian turned to her. "Next?"

Kenn frowned, notebook still in hand. He got it all without being told, but he didn't like it.

"Double the sentries...talk to the men on the mess trucks and get a list of everyone who got supplies; including the cooks and assistants...it all needs to be checked for tampering?"

"Yes. I doubt we'll find anything, but it has to be gone over anyway. Whoever did this knew the routines." Adrian gestured at the notebook. "Can you two take care of that?"

One scowling, the other pleasantly surprised, Kenn and Angela nodded and Adrian continued toward his next stop.

The tension was suddenly thick again and Angela shrugged. "It's only because you're hurt. He wants me to be sure you don't overdo it. You have serious injuries."

Kenn relaxed a little and she gestured to his notebook. "Let's get on this and get you back in a cot with a sandwich, a beer, and a pill."

Kenn grinned, chest aching. "Best plan I've heard today."

Around them, Kyle and his team observed the switch in power without comment.

An hour later, they were gathered for lunch mess, all but Marc, who had gone back to examine the scene, and Kenn, who was now in the medical tent resting.

“What’s she doing?”

Adrian glanced up at Neil’s question.

Instead of eating, Sam was currently rooting through a box of papers and folders, and had the table in front of her covered with them.

“Searching for proof,” Adrian answered.

“She knows who it is?”

“She has a suspect list, same as us.”

“Should we get hers?”

Neil’s voice was eager, but Adrian shook his head. “I already have it. She asked me for schedules for the last month for Rick, Maria, Tony, Mitch, and Zack.”

“Only one there I’d worry about.”

“Rick.”

“He’s on our list, too.”

“Should we help her search?”

“No.”

“No.”

Adrian and Angela shared a smile at the overlapping answers.

“Tell him why.”

Angela didn’t hesitate. “They have a history. No one can make him more nervous than Samantha can.”

“Very good. Kyle and his team are coming now. Keep talking to me and *watch*.”

Nothing. Not a flicker that didn't match what it should and all of them were disappointed. Rick had been among the welcoming rush and they could find no fault with him, even when he spotted Samantha pouring over folders from a box marked 'past schedules'. He hadn't tensed, not staring in worry, and when she'd looked straight at him, he had given her only a casual nod and hadn't glanced her way again.

“Yeah, model citizen. He's thinking about presidential assassinations right now,” Angela exclaimed in horror.

“Thinking about next time?” Adrian asked, stopping Neil and Kenn from moving that way with a shake of his hand.

“Yeah. He's our guy,” Angela confirmed, searching for anything in Rick's mind that they could use as proof. Usually, she couldn't get in the suspected traitor's thoughts, but he was wide open right now and she dug deeper.

“We have to catch him,” Neil stated.

“We lost some, Boss.” Alex stated lowly. He'd been waiting for Neil to tell Adrian and received a glare from the trooper instead. *Oops*.

“Who?” Adrian demanded.

“The women from Omaha. Lee's wife tried to hold them, but she said they wanted to be with

Ernie. That he had the sense to hide when the slavers came.”

Normally, there would have been crushing loss, but this time, everyone at the table felt Adrian’s anger.

Neil saw Samantha stand up and come toward their table. Would she call it publicly? He’d stand behind her.

Sam handed a single folder to Adrian before returning to her seat, leaving Neil disappointed until he spotted Rick guiltily slipping out of the mess while everyone’s attention was on the center table.

Adrian sat back down and the conversations slowly resumed.

Sam left the folders and papers spread across the table without a second thought, following Rick as the camp stared in curious suspicion.

“Go on if you want,” Adrian told Neil.

When the trooper did, Angela looked to Adrian. “She’s sure.”

“Yes.” He slid the folder toward them, revealing Samantha’s note.

He has to be in contact with them by now. Better channel monitoring—search his tent and check for a radio on channels 24 or 83. Those are slaver standards. And stop Mitch from spending time with him! No access to anything, but especially whiskey, so he can’t bribe our radioman. Herd him now.

“Checking his tent will have to wait,” Jeremy stated, coming up behind them to read the short note. “His was one of a dozen burned during the trouble over Kenn. He just got a new one.”

“Convenient.”

“Yes, but it won’t matter,” Adrian stated with a soft menace that they rarely heard. “Our final battle with his master is coming soon. After that, the need to be careful with him vanishes.”

6

“I’ll tell you again, Ms. Quest. I won’t give you any details about his condition and as you can see, he’s resting and I’m busy.”

“Are you hiding something, Doctor? It was a simple question.”

“Please take your accusations and rudeness and get out of here.”

Marc threw his body in front of the flap as the reporter came out of the medical tent. They collided, and he grabbed her arms to keep her from falling.

Marc jerked her up against his chest, playing it as if they were about to fall. Her flowery perfume struck him in the throat, preventing the words he’d wanted to say and she twisted in his tight grip.

“Watch where...” She fell silent as she realized who was holding her. The feel of his hard body was enough to halt her power of speech.

Cynthia had a thing for spying on him and Marc had noticed.

Taking a chance, he kept her close for a moment longer, making full, intense contact. Maybe the reporter could be convinced to switch sides.

Cynthia stared into those sexy eyes without a real thought, too absorbed in the feelings. She'd been observing Marc here and there, but she'd thought Adrian was the only one who held such magnetic appeal. With his feathered black hair and smooth, gypsy-tinted skin, Marc was as sexy as Adrian. His best feature, after those amazing blue eyes, was his lips. Full and sexy, they promised pleasure—the kind that took its time and hung around for a while. Women had been trying in vain to snag his attention since they'd arrived, but it was clear that only Angela would do.

Marc slowly moved the woman back from the instinctive lean-in she was doing and enjoyed her blush.

“You okay?”

His hands fell away from her hot skin and Cynthia shook her head. “Yes.”

Marc smiled at her, stealing her breath again as he used the charm usually reserved for Angie. “Didn't mean to startle you, Cyn.”

His voice was a low octave of chills over her spine. “I'm fine.”

Marc leaned in to deliver the final blow. “Better than that, I'd say.”

A dark stain ran up her cheeks as her rate of breathing increased.

“Maybe I’ll run into you again sometime.”

Cynthia didn’t answer, couldn’t talk through the lump in her throat.

Marc left her with a satisfied smirk. Now, she would be distracted and that would give Adrian a little more time to get her under real control.

He ducked into the Bengay-smelling tent to find John chuckling in admiration.

“Very nicely done,” John admired.

“Just doing my part.” Marc responded to the doctor’s low words, thinking the man was exhausted. He was so pale that the white sheets next to him seemed darker.

Marc frowned as he glanced around the nearly empty tent. He’d been expecting to discover Kenn and Adrian here, along with Angela and Anne, but there was only Kenn, who had stopped snoring in favor of listening.

“The reporter wanted to know about Kyle’s team, but she moved on to Kenn pretty fast.”

“She’s connected the two,” Marc commented.
Where is everyone?

“As have others.” John said as he finished writing.

“Is it right?” Marc asked suddenly, unaware that he was going to. “Lying, manipulating, all this undercover shit?”

Peeling off his gloves, John was tired. “I wish I could say no, but if you had been here two hours ago, I don’t think you would ask that.”

“Neil said it was tense,” Marc commented.

John snorted. “Tents burnt, fights, searches being conducted by Kenn’s allies, levels of Eagles confronting each other. It was more than tense.”

Marc was surprised. “I didn’t see any sign of that.”

“Kenn went out there, even though that man has three broken ribs and a concussion.” John gave him a pointed look. “People thought Kenn was dead.”

Marc understood he had been accused in his absence. “Guess that means I’ll need a new canvas. Zack stirred ‘em up?”

“Yes. They’ve been suspended from the Eagles.”

“And order was restored.”

“Yes. If people knew it was an attempted mass-murder, the peace and security here would be gone.”

“And I would lose them.”

Adrian entered the tent, closing the flap, and Angela took up a place outside in the shadows with the other guards after a fast scan of the tent that verified there was no danger.

“And I’ll do *anything*, say *anything* to keep that from happening.”

Marc shrugged, not hesitating to voice his concerns now. “I just don’t know that it’s right.”

To his surprise, the leader laughed.

“What’s funny about that?” Marc demanded.

“Right and wrong doesn’t matter anymore, grunt,” Adrian explained. “Only our survival does.”

Marc conceded the point. If things had been that bad here, that fast, it proved how unready these people were to be on their own.

“Anything found?” Adrian asked.

“A shovel and some prints that were too tracked over to make a mold of,” Marc answered. “We’re almost out of time.”

“I know. I feel it, too.”

“Three attempts in two weeks,” Marc stated in concern. “They’ll come for her themselves now, since their mole hasn’t been successful.”

“We’re as ready as we can be. And so is she, for the time we’ve had.”

“When they come, Angie will expose what she is to protect these people,” Marc replied angrily. “I hope you’ve got that covered.”

Adrian ignored the bitterness. “The Eagles are on board. She’s worked hard and the women here already regard her as a champion for them.”

“That’s not enough of them,” Marc stated. “They might still turn on her.”

“Yes...”

“You have to stop that from happening!” Marc ordered fiercely. “After all she’s already done for you, you owe her more!”

Adrian was scowling. “Don’t you think I know that? The herd needs more time that we don’t have.”

“Then you have to keep her from using her magic in front of them, even if the slavers attack us.”

“That won’t happen,” John stated. “Even I know it. The best you can do is to take the fight away from here so she doesn’t have to hold back.”

Adrian and Marc had a long moment of silent admiration.

“We lure them away.”

“Yes. And what will do that?” Adrian already knew, but needed Marc to say it.

“Angie,” Marc admitted reluctantly. “If she doesn’t leave, they won’t follow at all.”

“Yes,” Adrian sighed. “Dope it out according to the setup you gave me.”

The order to do it was short and awful, and Marc forced himself to pretend it was someone else’s love about to be used as bait. “I’ll have a final battle plan ready and in your tent before dawn.”

On a cot behind them, Kenn listened in shock.

Brady can have the XO slot anytime he wants it!

Kenn hadn’t known those two were doing deep-level work already and it was another of those life-changing moments to realize that Marc

had been doing his job all along and hadn't once tried to take credit for it.

I have now officially lost it all, Kenn thought.

You never had to lose, the demon inside refuted harshly. *You were just keeping the seat warm.*

7

Early the next morning Safe Haven rolled out of Cedar Bluff with the annoying cries of mating cicadas ringing in their ears.

A few short hours later, the slavers rolled in and even the invading insects fell quiet.

They had been traveling for nearly a week, using the cleared roads to catch up, and they'd made great time thanks to Rick's messages.

Cesar shook the dirt from the baggie and scanned the letter inside quickly.

Headed to Georgia. They plan to use the caves. Made 3 attempts, all failed. Bitch keeps saving him! I can't do it from here—up to you now. Will listen at midnight for the next week.

Cesar scanned to the men now taking over the muddy, but cleared area. The fighters here were more than 300 strong, all seasoned killers.

Cesar brandished his deformed fist. "In three days, we have supplies and whores!"

There was a resounding cheer from the Mexicans. The last three towns had been empty upon arrival.

Cesar strode toward the center of the clumsily unrolling camp, eager to examine more of Adrian's methods from the clues left behind. There had been problems among his men without fresh females to enjoy, but he had broken into his own harem and handed out the ones with no sign of pregnancy. It had calmed his men down and made him popular again, but it had also sent a hotter fury into Cesar's heart. *When my girls cry in pain, I am to be the cause of it! Safe Haven will pay for every scream I have missed.*

Chapter Twenty-One
Tic, Tock...Hands on a Clock
May 10th
Near Hays, Kansas

1

“I’m telling you, that is too much weight,” Angela argued in annoyance. “Unload half of it and we’ll add a box or two to each vehicle that’s left.”

“What the hell do you know about it?” Zack sneered hatefully.

He and the others from the mini-riot had been taken back into the Eagles after just two days, but they were now Level Ones again and had to work their way up. Zack wasn’t adjusting well to being the same rank as her.

Angela shrugged, scanning the churning, debris-filled river. “I’m smart enough to know that if the pontoon’s sinking, you don’t send the truck across anyway.”

Zack went scarlet and waved an angry hand at the rest of the convoy that had already reached the other side and started up the hill. “We’re falling behind. We’ll get split up!”

Angela flashed those flecks of steel they were all familiar with now.

“What’s worse? We show up an hour late with the water, or go now and lose a reserve truck because you can’t stand to do what I say?”

They glared at each other for a long moment and then Zack dropped his eyes. “Losin’ water. We’re low.”

“Is there a problem?” Kyle asked from behind her.

“Not anymore.” Angela grinned sweetly. “Will you help us unload a little weight? The pontoon keeps going below the waterline with just the weight of the front tires.”

“Sure. Good thing you saw it,” Kyle praised. “That’s the last of our reserves after mess tonight.”

They both witnessed Zack stiffen and Angela hid a smirk of her own. “Back it up, Allan, and let the cars go on. We’ll just be a little out-of-order for the check-in.”

Allan was relieved, despite being on Zack’s team. He hadn’t wanted to go out on that merciless river; had been sure he would have to jump and maybe even be drowned.

Allan glanced at Angela as she hung on the side to stay out of the way while Kyle directed the traffic around them. “Thanks. You...okay and all?” He swept her various scars in a quick glance.

It was another sign that she was making progress with the rest of Zack’s team and Angela smiled. “I’m 5-by. What about you?”

Allan grimaced at the choppy waves of the Smoky Hill River that were sloshing onto the

pontoon. He hated water. “Right now, I need a drink.”

Angela pulled a beautiful silver flask from her pocket and tossed it onto the empty seat next to him. “Make sure I get that back.”

“I will.” Allan was surprised she would share the gift with him after the coldness a few of Zack’s team had still been stubbornly treating her to. “If I don’t, Lee will rack my knees for me.”

Angela laughed. “You’re probably right. He’s a big fan now.”

“He should be,” Allan answered gravely. “You’ve given him his heart and...I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you,” she answered easily, mentally moving his name to her side of the board. “Change takes time.”

“I guess she don’t have to work,” Zack complained as he came by the driver’s window with a large box.

“Lay off!” Allan snapped.

Zack gaped in surprise and Allan finished declaring his loyalty.

“You were wrong. We all were, so lay off.”

Zack stomped away and Angela delivered another sweet smile. “Thank you.”

Allan shrugged, uncomfortable at the kindness he didn’t feel he deserved from her. “He might have gotten me killed.”

Angela’s thoughts were along the same line and she hopped down, catching Kyle’s motion.

“It’s probably light enough now. Ease the wheels out and I’ll let you know.”

The truck rolled across the pontoon bridge with no further problems and Angela resumed her post as the other vehicles continued. The last four jeeps were full of Eagles and when Neil stopped for her, she climbed inside without protesting that there were still cars left. If the trucks had made it, so would the rest.

Angela felt them ease onto the floating pontoons, uncomfortable with the way the floating road sank and then accepted the weight. She tried not to stare into the river.

They were across a minute later and the last two jeeps of men quickly ran to collect their equipment.

They were up and loaded with routine precision and then all four vehicles were rushing to fall in behind their convoy of light in the barren wilderness.

“I hate these damn hills,” Angela muttered as the convoy slowed again for another sharp curve. The road was two lanes, cleared only an hour before, and it wound upward at an awkward angle. Complete with steep drop-offs on both sides, after Adrian’s accident it was a cruel reminder of how things could go wrong without warning.

Neil flipped the radio off, tiring of the female ballads she had put in. “Yeah. We’ll be out of them in another day or two.”

Angela narrowed her lids against the lightning, not anticipating the storm that was coming with it. Samantha had warned Adrian and he'd taken them to higher ground. Day after tomorrow, they would be in the clear from a slaver attack during the bad weather, but until then?

Angela shut her lids. Breathing becoming shallow, it was the only sign of magic and Neil hoped she'd fallen asleep. He couldn't stop from glancing over to check on her every few minutes, though, uneasy and not sure why.

2

Angela still hadn't moved when they finally stopped for the night and Neil killed the engine. "We're here."

"I'll catch up."

Not expecting a response from his lowly spoken words, he jumped. Her tone was...disconnected, and when the dome flashed on, her eyes were much too big.

Neil got out and shut the door quickly, instinct warning him not to disturb the power behind those empty sockets.

"Who's her shadow?" Neil called.

"I am." Seth was already near her door despite his limp and he motioned Neil on. "I'll handle it."

Seth opened the door with caution, able to feel the hum of the witch hidden within her.

"Is everything okay?" he asked lightly, using his hand to reach in and cover the glare.

“We look.”

There was an eerie double timbre to her voice and Seth put the window down before quietly closing the door. “Take your time. I’ll deflect.”

There was no answer and Seth scanned for people coming her way.

Everyone was busy hurrying to get set before the heavier rain came, and he tapped out a short message, aware that this was over his head.

Angela blinked when the dome came on again and she took the bottle of water that was handed to her, but didn’t open it.

Adrian slid into the driver’s seat and shut the door. “When?”

“Tomorrow or the day after,” she answered immediately. “In these trees, on this road.”

“Kyle checked in,” Adrian said. “They have spies on us, two groups.”

“One in front, one in rear?”

“Two in front, covering the two main roads east. To run, we’d have to go south from here or be pinned in by the Interstate, and that’s where he expects to trap us with the main group.”

“How will it happen?”

“Is that the question you really want to ask?”

Flashing to her first day at Safe Haven, Angela sighed at the bittersweet memory. “No. I’d like to stay with you for the whole thing, no matter the risk or ugliness.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s my duty to help you kill him.”

“And we will do that,” he swore, face twisting with a hatred she’d never thought to see from him. “My life or his. Only one of us will walk away.”

3

“...still using our old sites.”

Samantha stopped, staring at the two men as they strode by.

“Makes us all feel wrong, but we’re not sure why.”

Sam climbed out of the passenger seat of Hilda’s minivan and shut the door, noticing, but not returning Neil’s friendly glance.

Using our old sites.

“You okay?”

The words jarred her concentration and Samantha realized Neil had joined her. “What?”

“I asked if you were—”

“I heard someone say the slavers are using our old campsites,” she interrupted, mind full of those beautiful webs of connection.

“It’s bothering all of us. I’m sure it’s meant to.”

Sam’s unease grew.

Using our old sites.

She’d heard that before. Where? Sam picked the thought back up, moving slowly toward the bathrooms, and Neil stayed with her, sensing she was onto something.

“What would they gain? An already cleared area? Leftover supplies?” she muttered. “We don’t leave anything, and sure, it’s easier than traveling over the jammed streets but...they have to be getting more or they would take our cleared roads and try to ambush...”

“To do that, they’d have to know where we are!” She spun to Neil with fury. “I know how he’s doing it. Someone has to go search our last site.”

Sam swung toward the last place she’d seen Adrian.

Neil grabbed her arm. “I’ll do it. Tell me.”

Sam let her discovery out in a fast, low rush of words. “Check where his tent was, dig if you have to. He’s leaving them messages.”

“How do you know that?”

“One of the refugees from Trinidad said that was how they were beaten. One of their people was leaving messages in baggies at their camping spots.”

Neil’s mind slammed it into place and he spun wildly, picking a team. “Jeremy, Daryl, Jeff, Kevin, find replacements and mount up now. Recon.”

He ignored their surprise, speaking to Samantha, “Tell Adrian and then Angela. Let them know where we’ve gone.”

Samantha stared at him apprehensively, wanting to say things and Neil felt the moment for what it was. “When this is done.”

She flushed, nodding.

Worried, Samantha stared until the jeep was out of sight.

Rick ducked further into the shadows as Sam stepped by, heart beating furiously. All of his attempts had failed. He'd caused damage, but not the chaos he'd been hoping for. Neil had even escaped Kenn's pain with the early morning switch so he could cover Kyle's team. None of it had gone like it was supposed to and now that they knew, Rick couldn't even go to his tent for the gun. He would have to sneak out to Cesar, empty-handed.

The traitor frowned. *Do I have to go to the slaver? I've done everything I could to take out the leadership here. They're too strong.*

Not that Cesar would care for his excuses. If he ran to the Mexican now, he wouldn't view another dawn.

Rick's thoughts flipped to Samantha. Could he leave without her?

No.

Rick winced at the increase of guards flooding the area. He would lay low, follow. He wasn't done with her yet. Maria had been a poor substitute.

What about the cook? he asked himself. *Do I need to get her out of here?*

Rick pulled off his grimy black bandana. They might be quick to come hunting if they didn't have

a distraction. And who better to punish than traitor number two?

4

Leveled out and covered with trees, it was cool and shady in the field where Safe Haven made camp.

Dinner was a damp and muddy, but comfortable affair and Adrian listened to his people. There was little time left for enjoyment now and it didn't matter if they traveled for another day or let it happen right here.

He stood up, drawing their attention. "Everybody ready for travel in the morning?"

There were half-hearted responses and Adrian smiled. "My feeling, too. How about we start our break now?"

The cheers were huge and he held up his hand, pretended to stumble. "I can take a hint."

He motioned at the corner, where two Eagles were sweeping the damp trees. "Kyle and Angela have point. Set us up."

Adrian took his seat and resumed eating, pleased that the call had only drawn a little interest. Even the Eagles were going about lunch as if it didn't matter. *Good*. He'd run out of time to get her ready. These men would have to teach her the rest as they went.

Kyle and Angela had the camp set up in decent time, the team leader mostly guiding her. The

effects of the drug had faded quickly, allowing the top men to support Adrian's claims of coincidence. The camp thought they'd gotten food poisoning. That was a common ailment when new supplies came in.

"You understand how it has to be?" Kyle queried.

"Yes," she answered. "Don't rush them, but use your approval to encourage the results you need."

Angela hadn't questioned Adrian's lessons, but when the witch muttered lowly, she couldn't help but notice the demon inside was right about her observations. Adrian had been doing it a lot. Training lessons and even simple workout moments always seemed to become leadership sessions. He was training her differently than the others. This wasn't just catch-up.

5

Short hours before dawn, Neil rolled in and each guard who saw him knew there was trouble.

Neil took the baggie straight to Adrian, expression a grim mask of loathing.

When the boss gave an order he hadn't heard before, Neil called his team over and filled them in with a simple action. He let them read the letter he had found buried under Rick's tent space.

Where are you? The time is now! They'll be on Interstate 183 for the next two days, near Hays.

Maria has enough powder left to dose the entire camp for a meal. They'll be out for 6 hours. We'll use it as soon as we hear from you.

Neil leading, the group of men moved silently toward the tent area and Adrian held his guilt in place, letting them do their duty. The fact that Maria was a woman wouldn't matter now. She would soon be another body on the side of man's roads and nothing more.

As Neil and half his team stormed to the men's side, the other half moving for the women's, Adrian also strode that way to start singing. The herd would be told Maria was being banished and escorted out. Only he and Neil's team would know otherwise. As for Rick, there wasn't a need for a trial. Once the camp read the letter, that shifty traitor would be killed on sight. His justice would come from the people he had betrayed.

"There's a call for you, Boss."

Kyle's voice told him everything he needed to know and Adrian changed directions after motioning for Kyle to get Kenn on things. The Marine would have to pick a tune to sing in his place. Another crisis had sounded.

Still lurking in the shadows, Rick snickered softly. He also knew who had finally made contact.

6

"Rick's gone."

Adrian had known it, felt it, before each of the guards reported. He wasn't surprised, only worried. Traitors had a keen sense of self-preservation. Likely, they'd tipped him off by sending Neil back. Returning to their old sites was something they didn't normally do.

"Keep the watch on double and put an extra man on Samantha."

Jeremy's expression said he would handle it and Adrian let it go. He and Neil could fight that out later.

"What about the camp?"

"Tell them he was banished, too." *We have bigger problems*, he thought, zipping his jacket against the chill.

The only one to frown at the lie was the one none of them had noticed.

Marc waited until the senior men left and came from the darkness. "I know who you are...who you were."

Adrian spun to find Marc standing by the supply truck. Filled with dread (he wasn't sure Marc was a convert, even though he and Angie were a legal couple now) Adrian only raised a brow. Would this be the moment it came out? There was no worse time for it.

Marc studied Adrian without mercy, Dog at his heels. "When they find out..."

Adrian chose to act as if Marc was one of his all the way. "You'll help her hold them together and finish what I've started."

Marc grimaced resentfully. “I thought it was like that.” He wearily swept the half a dozen shadows working hard behind the cover of darkness. He had only a little sympathy for Adrian’s worry. Despite the show of confidence by divulging the truth, they weren’t friends. In fact, Marc secretly loathed the leader for making the Eagles more important to Angie than him.

Adrian read it, the time for truth fully here, and the leader lit a smoke as he leaned against the tailgate. “Tell me something, Brady. What did you expect to happen when you guys got here?”

Marc didn’t hesitate to give the same honesty. “I thought he’d hit her in front of me and I’d kill him. After that, we’d leave together, with our son.”

Adrian didn’t point out the obvious flaws. Again, Marc hadn’t accounted for the reactions of the camp or Angela, and they both knew it. The failures he wanted to expose were not the cause of his anger. Would Marc do it anyway? He’d lose her if he did.

“I know that, too.” Marc didn’t glance away from Adrian’s guilty expression. “I don’t need mental powers to read your mind right now. If I tell these people, Safe Haven falls tonight, instead of tomorrow when Cesar comes.”

Not correcting him, Adrian asked, “Do you have so little faith in your own plans?”

Marc’s face twisted cruelly. “I have that little faith in *you*. All these lies and manipulations! And for what? So you can have a flock of sheep.” Marc

kept his voice low even though he wanted to shout. “These people would be fine on their own. They don’t need you or this place.”

“If you believe that, then you’ve been lying and manipulating them as well, to get her.”

“I’ve never made any secret of how I feel.”

Understanding the man wouldn’t be talked out of it, Adrian tried surprising him instead. “If your hatred of me is that strong after being here these weeks, then maybe you should go wake Hilda and the others now. They’ll get the board together for a vote or a trial.”

Adrian didn’t bother with the warnings about Angie’s reaction. Marc already knew what would happen.

“Why?”

Adrian gave him an incredulous snort. “You’re kidding, right?”

“These people worship you. The truth could have come out at any time.”

“Not with these results.”

“Yes. You underestimate them.”

Adrian knew Marc hadn’t been here for the unrest, but he was quickly growing annoyed with the man’s lack of understanding. “Do you know that I saved your life, grunt?”

That hard tone was impossible for Marc to ignore. He’d lived too much of his life by it. “What?”

“They thought *you* were the traitor.”

Marc slammed that into place with a loud click, explaining the curtness when he'd been the one to arrive driving the ambulance. "Why the hell would they think that?" he demanded angrily. "I've never given them any reason!"

"But you have," Adrian explained tonelessly. "You've bucked the setup here from day one. They've tolerated it because of her."

"It was never openly."

"No. You've kept your head down and played it well." Adrian crushed his butt under his boot. "But, they know a fake when they see one."

Marc snorted. "They missed you."

Adrian blazed with scorn. "I believe in everything we do! I'm not on a power trip. I never have been." He surveyed the very faint glow in the distance behind them, voice tinged with not only pride, but also the weight of it. "They need me."

"They need to care for themselves," Marc protested, unable to hold onto his anger. Neil had been right when he'd said the need to repay the debt would come after he and Angie became a legal couple. Even now, it was telling him things had to be this way.

"That is a slow process. I'm pushing them as hard as they'll take."

Distracted, Marc returned to their plan. "What if you get them ready to fight? We can dig in here."

"Come morning, that's exactly what will happen."

Marc lit a smoke with steady hands. “Morning? Why not now?”

Adrian’s heart thudded. “Look at them, Brady. Use that sharp military mind that can discern so much, and tell me how many of my people would grab their shit and take off for parts unknown before you finished talking.”

Marc did, taking his time. He spotted a large number of people still at the bonfire, all sporting their first gun. Five new members had graduated today. Tent lights were still on and the soft murmur of voices floated. They weren’t asleep.

“They’re scared,” Marc muttered, surprised. He hadn’t felt it through his own new layers of happiness and heavy discovery.

“Look deeper,” Adrian instructed, chest easing a bit as Angela appeared in the darkness behind her man. “See *where* they are, too.”

Marc noticed it as soon as it was pointed out. “They’re grouped around the supplies, the ones we put out in case there’s an attack that pins them down.”

“Yes. They feel danger in the air the same as the Eagles do. And like my men, they’re making their choices to stay and fight or run for their lives.”

Marc stared at him in shock. The camp knew, and yet they trusted him enough to pretend they didn’t. Adrian only had the illusion of control! What did that mean?

Nothing, Marc realized. All leadership was an illusion. Wrapped around a tyrant, that image would eventually shatter on its own. In Adrian's case, it was a mirage of complete confidence coating a fanatical patriot.

Is that so bad, Brady? We've been led by worse.

Marc blowing out a worried breath, but he refused to let her influence his choice either.

"I'm not here for that. I'm on duty." She came from the shadows, sweeping Adrian the way the Eagles did.

Marc grimaced at the subtle warning that he was to be protected, not fought against. "Until Seth's leg is stronger?"

"And even after. Sometimes, I can hear things they can't."

"I think the camp should be told everything. You, your *father*, the slavers attacking—all of it."

"Go on."

Marc frowned at Adrian's calm answer. "What's the catch?"

"There isn't one. I've always known it would come out and I have no intentions of running, from either group of survivors."

Marc stared in disbelief. "They'll kill you for it."

I won't let that happen!

Adrian ignored Angela's silent words. "Yes."

There was thick tension as Marc considered that. He'd thought maybe Adrian would have him

removed or send Angela to try to change his mind. He hadn't expected Adrian to own up to being the son of the man who'd caused the war.

Marc scanned the people again and Adrian waited, giving him time to accept what Angela, and the others who knew, already had. This was the only way.

"But it was your own men who caused the problems..." And that was why Zack was an Eagle, Marc realized. *Keep your enemies closer.*

"Yes. What would have happened if Zack hadn't been one of mine?"

"A real riot."

"Yes."

He understood the reasoning, but it was the sight of his son that finally sent that truth into Marc's heart. Matt and Charlie were on third shift duty in the mess, keeping the coffee flowing. He was calmly leading the other boy through what was expected of them, and happy.

After their day together, their secret viewing of the past, those feelings Marc had tried to keep down had grown instead. He loved that boy, but Charlie was only alive and happy because of Adrian's manipulations. If not for being found by Safe Haven, would his son be dead right now?

And what about the rest of these people that he wanted to take the blinders from? How many of them would also be dead right now or slaves? *Most*, Marc answered his silent question reluctantly. He wanted to expose the lies, but when

these people found out, they'd hang Adrian and run. All that happiness would be gone, for all of them. Just to ease his conscience. The scales weren't even when he weighed them and Marc let go of his need to have Adrian out of control.

“So, how do we get them to fight?”

Adrian let out the breath he'd been holding. “You, Marc. You'll get them to fight while we lure the main group out.”

Marc's dismayed gaze went straight to Angela.

“Yes, I'm going.”

Marc steeled his heart against the panic. He'd vainly hoped she wouldn't leave Charlie here to go play this role. “What's first?”

Adrian didn't quite dare to smile, lest he push the man into changing his mind. “I'll tell you exactly how to make them work for you.”

“What if the slavers attack this camp instead of following?”

Adrian's answer was grim. “Then get my people to the trucks and send 'em out. At least they'll have their lives and their freedom. It's more than most victims of this war have ended up with.”

Pushing away his own needs, Adrian motioned toward the empty training tent. “You guys should steal a little time alone.”

While you can, he thought. Come tomorrow night, all of them would either be free or dead. Cesar's call had been short and cruel, demanding the witch and camp be surrendered. When Adrian

hadn't agreed, the slaver had stopped responding. The attack was expected any time after dawn.

Marc turned to ask if Angela wanted to take Adrian's suggestion and found her already moving that way. "I need a workout."

Marc's heart thumped in worry and desire, and he followed her to the hayroom, distracted from his fears of tomorrow.

Angela had her own terrors and she was grateful to Adrian for recognizing her need. He knew a few hours alone with Marc would help her steel her resolve.

She thought about calling Charlie and making it a family moment, but he would know what they were planning as soon as he witnessed their grim faces. Let the boy have a last peaceful night with Matt and Dog before the world flipped on him again.

Emotions now brewing tightly, she hung her gun belt on a peg. "Kai?"

Marc gave her a warning look, unable to keep from glancing over her battle-scars. "Only the moves."

"Agreed."

Her tone was so formal that it drew a snort from Marc. "Relax, will ya?"

Angela frowned deeply, stiffening with fear. "Not sure if I can. All I see is darkness."

Marc understood that was bad, but didn't know what to say that would ease the panic lurking in her voice. He did know how to give her brief peace

from it, though, and he grimaced as he realized Adrian had, too. There seemed to be no end to the man's manipulations.

"I wish you'd try to see it from a different view."

Not wanting to argue, Marc sighed in surrender. "Yes, dear."

Angela laughed in surprise, aware of him sweeping her for clues as to who she was now. He was studying her, as if he was working a mystery. "How about we smoke one and play some cards? If you find us some mutated spiders, it'll be like old times."

Marc let out a noise of amusement and felt his bitterness fade. Set up by Adrian or not, he wanted this bonding time with her more than he wanted to stand his ground.

"How about we curl up in a corner with my bedroll and a joint, and wait for all Hell's Day together?"

Angela's body lit up at the thought of lying next to him and stealing the occasional kiss. "Deal."

Minutes later, that's exactly where they were.

Chapter Twenty-Two
All Hells' Day

1

“It’s almost time.”

They hadn’t slept much, just dozed and enjoyed their last few quiet hours together. “I know.”

“You’re still going.”

Angela didn’t answer. He already knew. Instead, she snuggled into his warm safety and felt his arms tighten around her waist. “I love you.”

Marc felt the terrors rise and pushed them away the only way he could. He rolled Angela against the wall and slanted his lips over hers.

She answered his desperation with a wild clutch of his broad shoulders, tilting her lips up.
My Brady!

Adrian paused in the flap, feeling the waves of panicked passion flowing from the hayroom. He turned toward camp. *At least she’s in good hands*, he thought, and swallowed the pain that came with it. He’d promised her happiness here and her relationship with Marc had a place in that.

Adrian's stomach tightened. If they survived the slavers, he would get to witness Marc and Angela fall deeper in love. Being an unselfish leader who put his people first had some serious downsides and this one he wasn't sure he would be able to take much of.

For now, he would try to be content that all the plans he'd made around her were safe. Everything was finally in place to create the world they'd been denied and all that stood in his way was one large group of Mexican guerillas.

Dawn was still an hour away as Adrian slid into the mess to join Neil and Doug. He put a single sheet of paper onto the table between them.

We're going to war, Neil thought. A quiet excitement filled him, along with many questions, as he tilted the paper for Doug to view. He kept his mouth shut, though, aware of a third party lingering behind Adrian who was near enough to listen.

Doug, Adrian's most overlooked man, kept quiet. He'd been waiting for this, sure their leader would strike out before the slavers struck this camp.

"We'll reach the mountains within 10 weeks, even if we only travel half that time and we need to handle something before we settle in for the winter."

His tone was flat and Neil understood it was time to do what he had wanted to when Angie and Marc first came.

Cynthia edged closer.

Neil flashed a warning glower and she stopped, but didn't take the hint to go away. "Are they that near?"

Adrian was sure the rest of the camp would soon know, too. The reporter was very average in her white top and tan slacks, but he understood she was dangerous when she smelled a story. That was why she wouldn't be here for the battle.

"Yes. Soon we'll all get a cozy winter of relaxation together," Adrian said sarcastically. He spoke to Doug and Neil, "We'll leave right before lunch and we'll need 3-4 days' worth of supplies. Get on it."

Doug and Neil left, and Adrian tried not to jump as Angela appeared at his side, pushing a hot cup of tea into his hands. She was getting better and he tried not to let her feel his sadness or his jealousy at the happiness in her step.

Angela nodded politely at Cynthia, who she still considered a stranger, and then dug mercilessly into the reporter's mind. Rick and Maria were lessons Angela would never forget and she was now searching all of them at every contact. It was exhausting.

The wind gusted as she and Adrian locked eyes. "Be at the mess in an hour."

She hated the bloody images filling his mind, the fact that she was condoning it, and she leaned in, keeping her voice low. "I know we have to do

something, but why does doing the right thing feel so wrong?"

He shook his head at the near mirror of Marc's concern. "Never said we were doing the right thing. That wouldn't succeed anyway. These guys don't play by the rules. We're going out to do the one thing we can. Kill them or die trying."

They continued on in silence, both aware of their follower.

She wants to go along.

Adrian didn't respond to Angela's thought. He knew and was counting on it, but for now, he left the reporter hanging.

"You think they'll follow us?" Angela asked.

"I do." Adrian gave her the truth. "Because you're going."

Angela was pale, but determined. "So, we're the bait. What happens when he runs with the line?"

"We yank the bastard up and cut his head off."

"Can I bother you for a minute?" Cynthia asked.

Angela felt Adrian's satisfaction, and had to turn away from the fake annoyed glance he gave the reporter.

"Are you leaving?" Cynthia asked as soon as Angela left.

Adrian did a quick sweep. Clear...for now.

"We have some business to handle. Care to tag along? It'll be dangerous," he warned, thinking it

would be more than she could resist. After all, what was a reporter without danger to write about?

Cynthia was surprised at the offer. She was ignored by them, so long as she pulled her shifts at babysitting and mess duty.

“What should I bring?” she asked, pretending his hard expression didn't make her feel like an outsider.

“An overnight kit and your gun. Be at the mess in half an hour.”

Her shoulders had slumped at his words. “I don't have a gun anymore. I feel very safe here.”

The words pleased Adrian, but he forced out a sigh of frustration, always playing the role he'd been born for. “Can you fire one?”

She shrugged, flushing as she remembered trying to bluff him down at their first meeting, with a weapon she had found. “Just pull the trigger?”

“There are two men getting the shooting class ready. Tell them I said to give you a crash course and your own weapon.”

“But won't they get mad? I'm—”

“Do you want to go or not?” Adrian barked, having to force it past the coldness sloshing into his heart.

“I'll be there.” Cynthia headed for the class area. If the men got upset because she wasn't scheduled, she would deal with it. There was no way she would miss this chance to be in the field again. She had heard enough to believe that Adrian was about to do something the sheep would either

love him or loathe him for, and she would tell them everything.

Adrian did a sweep, seeing Angela had taken Charlie to the self-defense area for a fast lesson and few words of explanation. He thought there might be a problem with the teen, but there was only a quick hug. Adrian was comforted even more when Dog came from the high grass and sat down at the boy's heels.

The wolf's golden orbs were calm as he met Adrian eye across the distance.

The herd will be here.

Adrian grinned. *You need a mate. It would be amazing to have all the camp's workers come from your bloodline.*

Dog sniffed the air curiously, but his tone in Adrian's mind wasn't interested.

With those common mutts? I'd have my breed die out before polluting it that way.

So, even animals were bigots. Who knew? Adrian shuffled his surprise to the rear of his mind.

He went to his tent and the two men now waiting there, not responding to the people trying to catch his attention to ask questions. With him and Angela leaving, and a lot of supplies going with them, the slavers wouldn't be the only ones to think they were jumping ship. It was all a part of the plan... Marc's plan.

“I added a bit to your trap. Kyle and his men will be behind the razor wire,” Adrian stated as he entered the tent.

Marc instantly felt a little better. The Level Seven Eagles were deadly and all of them liked Angela, liked the thought of having their own magic. They would protect her.

Even after all that had happened, it never crossed his mind that she would be one of those actually involved in the battle.

“What else do you need?” Marc asked as Adrian sat down.

“A way for Kyle and his men to view the mess meeting that starts in half an hour. I don't want the camp or the slavers to see them. We need everyone to think we're less than two dozen people, choosing to run. Line up the trucks to block. For every four men who carry supplies in, only one or two will come out.”

Kenn was relaxing in the corner, feeling better, too. Kyle and his team had been on numerous missions and done well, from catching mutations for John's tests, to the executions of evil in the towns they passed through. They would handle this.

Catching the thought, Adrian hoped Kenn would keep quiet about the things the Eagles had done, but didn't tell him to. Maybe it would be better if the camp had a day or two to think about it anyway, and he left it to fate.

These Eagles were about to be exposed to the people they had been lying to, and Adrian hoped their success would help the camp accept the cover-up. He had warned these men from the beginning that the people they protected might turn on them when they finally found out the lengths the Eagles were going to in order to ensure that safety. They had all said they understood, but Adrian knew they hadn't, not then. They did now, though, had taken care of those few who had been banished, and it would make them determined not to make any mistakes.

Marc, who already had his pen and notebook out for the instructions he knew were coming, began writing.

“We'll be on the coded setup, so you'll be able to keep track of us all day, I think, and some of the night,” Adrian said. “You two have to get this camp ready to defend itself. Do it quick and openly. You'll have a few hours before we leave. Be inventive. Make a strong show and encourage them to take us instead. They're aware something's going on by now and they're watching, deciding. It'll make our little caravan an easy target in comparison.”

His instructions to Kenn were simple. “You're in charge and everyone knows that. They'll listen to you, if you're careful with your words and always put them first. If we're not able to come back, get these people moving towards those mountains and make your stand there, not out here

in the open. If we're not there in a week, there are notebooks inside my mattress that you'll need. I expect you to keep working on my dreams."

Kenn nodded, pleased and scared.

"Damn." Adrian blew out a sigh. "I wish I could take you guys."

"You sound like you're not coming back," Marc stated stiffly, only Angie's reaction keeping him onboard with this suicide run. She wanted him here to defend their son and he couldn't deny her need.

"It's a good plan, one of the best I've ever used," Adrian informed them coldly. "If we do it right, it's the slavers who won't return."

2

"Everyone here?"

They were all gathered in the mess, sitting and standing around one picnic table in the middle as the rain fell softly. All of them were aware that they were about to engage the enemy and the mood was somber. Some of the familiar faces under this canvas might not return.

"The slavers are here. Mitch took a call."

Neil pushed the button on the tape player and Angela paled at the evil coming out in waves from the speakers. It was the first time she'd heard them.

"You listen, and maybe I won't kill all your Eagles. You will deliver food, water, and women

two nights from now or we will come in and take them.”

“And if we do this, do we have your word that you'll go away and leave us alone?”

Some of those listening frowned at Adrian's words, his willingness to deal, but most of them understood he was trying to avoid more bloodshed.

The slaver's voice held no warmth, though he chuckled like he was amused.

“No, Señor. We will stay by you and maybe settle with you when you reach the mountains. To seal the deal, you will send us the witch with the supplies. You have had the advantage for a long time, but now she will use her magic for us!”

There was static and a lot of noise in the background. Bikes, gunshots, voices, dogs barking and the occasional female scream. It was menacing and those listening were proud of the steel in Adrian's answer.

“We will give you nothing, but coffins to bury your dead in!”

There was a pause and then the accented voice came. They could hear the wariness.

“It is the woman that makes you fight. She is very strong, but is one witch worth all your lives? I know you will think on it and we will talk again. For now, no one leaves, or we will kill them.”

Neil put the tape away.

“He has something planned for us.” Angela guessed. “Something ugly.”

“I think so, too. He says we have two days, but he won't stick to it.” Adrian swept his army. “Some of this camp will panic. Things will be said and reacted to as each situation deserves and it will feel real, because most of it will be. He'll be tempted to take them, but Kenn and Marc will have enough open force ready by the time we go that they'll come after what they'll estimate as better odds of success. We won't be helpless victims, though, and there are more of us going than what anyone will know. We'll lure them away and eliminate them.”

There was agreement and no questions.

Zack lit a smoke, very glad to have been invited on the mission. He was busy trying to earn his place back. “We'll ambush them and the threat will be gone. Sounds like a good plan to me.”

Adrian grimaced a little at the flippant tone, but said nothing. They would understand how serious the killing was once it started. He waited as Neil unrolled a map.

Men's fingers held the ends and Adrian made sure nothing blocked the view of the camera hanging above them as he gave them the basics.

“We can do it anywhere trees line both sides of the road, but the farther from here the better. If things go wrong, Safe Haven will need those hours to run. If that happens, they'll go to Stone Mountain.”

The men noted many things marked on the map, like where the slavers were, and all of them hated that it was so close. Less than five miles.

Adrian pointed to a spot on the detailed paper. “We'll set up fast here, here, and here, and get out of sight. When they get to the middle, we open fire from here and here, and pick them off.”

Adrian glanced around. “I mean to kill every one of them or die trying. Stay here if you can't say the same.”

Kenn took out his pen and notebook. In a couple of minutes, he had sketched an outline of not only where their site stood now, but some of the surrounding area as well. Everyone was impressed with how quick and yet detailed it was and as he slid the book to Marc, Kenn was aware of it.

Mind racing with the ideas he had been thinking on, Marc tuned everyone out and began drawing defenses. It took longer and it wasn't as neat as Kenn's, but it was easy to see that he knew what he was doing as the picture changed. It was also obvious that the two Marines had labored together on this kind of thing before, Kenn's eraser moving parts of the camp to more secure areas while Marc showed them what to do with the suddenly empty space.

Ten minutes later, the picture was completely different and Adrian placed his final touch on the plans.

“It's great. Put some cover on the sharp shooters in those semis, a gray tarp will work if they don't move too much, but put vests under it. If they take fire, they're out in the open. Bring the armored vehicles up to close the gap.” Adrian grinned. “Damn, that's good. You guys could last for weeks right here if you had to.”

“When do we leave?” Kyle asked through Adrian's earpiece.

“One hour. We'll meet at my semi. This is the important part gentlemen. Deflecting members out of the loading area is key here. The slavers are watching and we can't have them see even one wave from a member to Kyle and his men,” Adrian warned. “The element of surprise will give us the advantage and maybe decrease the number of men he follows us with. If there are 40 men going, he might take his whole army. If there are 20, he'll take half his group and leave the rest to keep our people here. He'll know he can travel faster and he'll pick out half his hard-asses, thinking that outnumbering us five to one will be enough. What he'll really be doing is handing us victory.”

Neil and Jeremy left the tent together, not speaking. They headed for the camp, easily picking Samantha from the crowd of scared people. She was the one worried about their safety too, not just her own.

They sat on either side of her, not saying anything that would be overheard, but letting her

know she would be in their thoughts. It was clear that she would have to make a choice when they came back...if they came back.

Samantha stifled a sob at the thought and clutched both their hands in a tight grip.

3

At ten a.m. they were loading Adrian's truck with stacks of boxes, bags and crates, each person's tent on top of the semi. In all the organized chaos, Adrian found their secret well protected.

The camp probably would have found out about Kyle if not for Neil and Marc getting them involved, playing the tape for a few, having very serious, private talks with some. It worked out in their favor that the slavers had made contact. Adrian wasn't sure why they had, it wasn't their usual MO, but he thought maybe they assumed Angela had known they were about to attack.

Adrian did another sweep. There were fuel and water trucks being lined up and semis being circled around Safe Haven. The sentries had been tripled. Everyone was carrying a weapon, even the women, and machine guns were being set up. Snipers were taking up strategic places, men and women rushed children and elderly to large tents in the center of the camp that had caved in, shrinking the area by almost half.

Vests were in the windows, people wearing them openly, and Adrian stepped over to talk to John, who had come to see them off.

He noticed all their vehicles and tents were sporting shiny new American flags. Adrian narrowed in and saw they were also on shirts, hats, jackets, buttons and jewelry and his heart was warmed a little at this show of spirit. Marc and Neil had gotten the plan to enough of the troublemakers that nearly everyone knew they were about to try to eliminate the slavers. *Perfect.*

Adrian turned to John, who appeared tired. “Eventually Kenn and Marc will come to you about quarantining the women and children who will be coming if things go well. I'd like you to tell them it's already taken care of. You have to wait until the last minute to set it up, though, or disguise it and have it ready so the slavers don't know we're planning to return.”

John nodded. He hadn't gone to the meeting, but he knew what was happening and he approved.

“These 'slaves' will each need a volunteer to stay with them from the moment they get here, until they're settled in. Try to get women who've lost young children and maybe fate will do the rest. Figure on twenty of each, but I doubt we'll do that well.”

“I'll cover it.” John was just glad to play an active role for a change.

Adrian waved Kevin over. “John has some things he's going to need help with. I'd like you to take care of whatever he needs.”

The Level Three Eagle stepped to the older man's side. “You're the boss.”

Adrian was frowning as he walked toward the fully-loaded semi, letting his worry show a bit to make it more convincing. He had a strong feeling that Cesar's own eyes were on Safe Haven right now. What would he think?

Most of the camp was around the parking area, but everyone's view was blocked by semis, U-Haul trucks and even a livestock trailer that Chris had put two cows, two sheep, and two dogs into. People wanted to talk, and Adrian purposely ignored them, sure Cesar was currently making his own hard choices.

Adrian climbed into the driver's seat, taking the picnic basket from Angela, and she scrambled up into the seat like she couldn't wait to go.

Adrian was pleased. Everything gave the impression that he and his allies were fleeing, while the weaker people were preparing to defend their very lives.

Perfect.

Chapter Twenty-Three
All Hells' Night
The Slaver Camp

1

Jennifer froze as the tent flap opened.

Cesar had been out observing Safe Haven since the call came from their spies that something was happening and the younger Mexican now moving her way wasn't supposed to be in here.

José grinned eagerly at her pale face, but surprised her by going to a dim, filthy corner. He burrowed into the pile of garbage and after a minute, all the terrified girl could detect was the tip of his gun.

“Va a ser mío cuando él está muerto,” José growled softly in warning. “Go to sleep.”

You will be mine when he is dead.

Curled protectively around her enlarged stomach, Jennifer immediately pretended to do that, not sure that she wanted him to kill Cesar. As bad as the leader was, his cousin might be even worse. Cesar wanted babies. José wanted blood.

It was a long hour for Jennifer, faced with choices that no 14-year-old should have to make. Her life with Cesar was indescribable, but if José

took over, he wouldn't want any of the leader's bastards around would he?

Determined to keep her unborn child alive, Jennifer made the hardest choice. She would help Cesar, save him from José's attempts to take control of these men. And maybe the evil man would spare her after the baby came.

"Get half the men ready, rápido. We're going after them."

Jennifer tensed at Cesar's voice outside the flap, eyes flying to his would-be assassin, and she trembled. Maybe they would kill her by accident. Anything could happen here.

"Tell them to keep track. We leave in fifteen minutes." Cesar threw the flap open.

Jennifer jerked, giving herself away.

"Get up!"

Jennifer scrambled to her swollen feet, noting how his possessive glare scanned her round stomach to confirm it was safe.

Cesar delivered a slap that sent her back to the floor of the tent.

"The flap waz open. Who has been in here?"

Jennifer opened her mouth, not sure if she would be alive a minute from now. "Your cousin."

Cesar slid his knife out of his belt.

"He didn't touch me!" Jennifer shouted, scrambling away. "Nothing happened!"

Cesar already knew that. If José had taken what was his, he would have killed her afterward.

"What did he want?"

Her gaze slid pointedly to the corner. “You.”

Cesar felt the warning, instinct kicking in, and he flung the blade as he turned.

“Whore!” José shouted.

Jennifer threw herself out of the way as José stumbled to his feet, bloody knife hilt protruding from his chest.

The slaver fired as he fell forward, bullet slamming through everything it hit.

Cesar delivered a nasty kick that sent the blade the rest of the way into José’s chest, and the younger man let out an awful gasp. His hands clutched desperately at the knife as he fell against the side of the tent, leaving a bloody smear.

Cesar stared at the girl, realizing she had saved his life. His fist clenched at the sight of the bullet hole in the tent near her head. José had shot at her, instead of him!

Not nearly immune enough, Jennifer slid to her knees, shaking uncontrollably. She’d made a hard choice, and now someone was dead because of it. Tears ran down her cheeks.

“Get that out of here,” Cesar called to the men who had come running.

“What about her?” Gravari asked.

The slaver hadn’t looked away from the crying teenager, and now he grunted, letting his gold tooth glint in the dimness. “She will be put into the trailers tonight and protected.”

Cesar studied the smooth-skinned man who’d come in first. Pre-chosen to be his next right hand,

Gravari was a tough, loyal recruiter who had been fighting for the power that José had scorned. “If someone touches her while I am gone, *you* will pay for it.”

The man lifted his gun in answer.

Satisfied, Cesar waited for them to drag out José’s body before gesturing at his pregnant slave.

“You are okay?”

Jennifer nodded, wiping away her tears. The slaver liked them pouring from her and she dried up as best she could, so as not to encourage him to take her before he took Safe Haven.

“You will clean this up.”

She immediately began to do as she had been told and the Mexican stared at her. He’d been expecting his impatient cousin to try soon. Finding Maria’s body had been hard on José, especially since she had been his wife.

Cesar grinned cruelly. It had been his duty to provide for her when José was captured by the Americans. He’d done that and a bit more.

And what of this shivering Americana carrying his next born? She’d saved his life, maybe. He owed her one and the evil man knew how to repay her kindness. When the baby came, he would let her keep it for a while, to get attached. And then he would give it to someone else to love.

Cesar emerged into the gritty light and motioned for Gravari to have the men load up.

They obeyed with none of the usual fighting. His men had witnessed José going in, had allowed it.

His eyes glittered dangerously as he read them and the mood. Was that disappointment?

“No se puede matar al diablo! You cannot kill the Devil!” he shouted violently. “I dare you to try!”

They shrunk from him, believing the rumors now that their leader was invincible, and when he stormed toward his golden car, they followed.

2

Swallowing the awful feeling of abandoning his flock, Adrian moved his small convoy fast and hoped the men in the rear would be enough. Those soldiers would bear most of the weight of the battle—of killing and springing the trap.

In the rear, the Eagles were surrounded by deadly weapons and they knew how to use them. Machine guns, grenades and launchers, and razor wire so thin it could hardly be discerned and so sharp it could take off a hand or slit a throat was coiled harmlessly nearby. They knew they wouldn't have a lot of time and the teams prepared as much of it as they could while traveling. While they worked, they ate their lunch from baskets and coolers like everyone else in the small convoy, each aware it may be their last meal.

“By 8, Eagle,” Kenn’s voice came through the radio.

Adrian pushed the button on the mike without speaking and then flipped to channel 64.

“Eagle,” Adrian said into the mike.

“A very large group of heavily armed men just left, rolling toward Safe Haven, with *The Man* in the lead. Roughly thirty vehicles and a hundred men. By 6 and 2.”

Alarmed, everyone listening wondered what Adrian would do.

Adrian switched to channel 38 and pushed the button on the mike. “Check in every half hour.”

“Copy Eagle, out. 9 miss 4 by 3.”

Adrian hung up the mike, and switched to channel 15.

“How do you keep that straight?” Angela asked, trying to distract herself.

Adrian lit a smoke, leaning on the gas a little. “Practice and then it's like military time. Once you learn the secret, you have it, and your mind automatically does the work.”

She didn't answer, trying to ignore the voice that was demanding to know why Adrian wasn't going back to help defend their people. She noticed the increase in speed. “You're sure he wants us enough to pass up the camp?”

“Yes, because it's only temporary. Once he has us, he'll come for them. He's sure our people will negotiate if I'm a hostage.”

“They would,” she said, thinking of Kenn.

“It's another reason why we have to be successful.”

“And if you're wrong?” she challenged suddenly, unable to help it. “If he attacks them?”

“Then, I'll have made a terrible error in judgment and if I'm not executed for it, I'll probably put my gun in my mouth and pull the trigger.”

Angela was shocked into silence by his answer and her lids shut as images of the White House and Milton's suicide flashed. His father had paid that way. Would Adrian? She shivered, waiting in tense silence for Kenn to radio and say Safe Haven was under attack.

Five long minutes later, the radio crackled and then popped loudly as lightning flashed violently in the distance.

“The enemy is going past. Repeat, they are going by. Watch your ass,” Kenn warned. “They're moving fast.”

“Roger that. 7 by 1.”

Adrian switched to channel 7, and Angela breathed a sigh of relief. Respect for Adrian doubled, and the few doubts she had left vanished. Adrian would take care of things and it would all turn out the way it was supposed to.

3

They traveled steadily for the next five hours and made it about fifteen miles from camp before the weather broke. The dim sky darkened as sheets

of rain covered everything and the humidity rose instead of going down.

Angela shivered as Adrian increased the A/C, the cool air rushing over her sweaty skin. They had been forced to drop to 30 mph, but it was clear that Adrian wasn't stopping unless he had to. He was careful, though, not to go anywhere those behind him would have trouble traversing. They had a decent view, but the storm was just getting started.

The radio crackled with the thunder, making them jump, and they waited for someone to speak.

“Grid 12, E-8. Enemy is now approaching E-8, still moving fast, 45 steady,” their lookout called.

Adrian pushed the button on the mike, let go and switched to the very first channel they had used. It lit up right away.

“That's only about five miles behind us,” Angela said, using their map.

“By 9 plus 5.” Adrian switched to channel 86 and hit the truck's intercom button. “You men settled in?”

“As ready as we can be, considering we're bouncing,” Kyle answered.

“Good. The weather's getting worse. We may have to take shelter and that'll mean setting up wherever we land,” Adrian warned.

“Copy that. How far behind?” Kyle asked.

“Only five miles, going faster than us.”

“Roger that. We'll hang on. Let's keep that distance.”

Adrian controlled his need to panic, knowing it was likely to get them all killed if he didn't stick to his guns, and pushed the rig up to 50 mph. "Maybe I can buy us a little time."

He pushed the button on the mike. "Channel eighty three."

Angela frowned as he switched. That was the slaver channel.

"...on Interstate 70. I'm having trouble keeping up," a slaver called to his boss.

"Ir más rápido!" *Go faster!*

The transmission was full of static and odd drumming noises and Adrian gave Angela quick instructions.

"Have Neil call me on this channel, tell me he thinks he spotted someone following us and we should take shelter in Glendale and get ready to fight. It wouldn't hurt for Doug to tell him that he's imagining things, and that we can't stop."

Angela realized Cesar would tell his men to withdraw if he knew they were about to make camp—to surround them.

4

The slavers were still talking, figuring out how best to attack, and then in a pause, a very American voice cut through the accents.

"Eagle? Come in, Eagle?"

Adrian waited a second and then pushed the button on the mike. "What the hell are you doing on their channel? Get off!"

“I’ve had a fire and fell behind,” Neil stated.
“This is the only channel I can broadcast on.”

“Do you need a ride?” Adrian asked.

“No, but maybe we should stay and get ready when we hit Glendale,” Neil sent back. “I’m going to blackout after this. I think I saw someone following us.”

“You did not. You’re jumping at storm shadows,” Doug interrupted in the background.

The static clicked and Adrian pushed the button on the mike. “We’ll wait for you in Glendale. The rain’s getting worse. We’ll have a minute to pick you up then find a place.”

“Copy. Out until 10.”

Adrian switched to channel 10. “Perfect. 7 by 4.”

They went through four channel changes that Angela couldn’t keep track of and she smoked one stale cigarette after the other, listening, hoping.

The rain fell harder, slowing them down further and the wind rocked them along the sunken lanes of Interstate 70. The road was amazingly clear of traffic, but it was slowly becoming a pond as the torrents continued. Hail pinged off roofs and hoods as the lightning cracked, striking a structure in the distance.

Crack!

Flames burst outward and immediately began to fight the driving rain for survival. Thunder rolled above the small convoy, loud and echoing as

if in warning, and all of them wondered how things were going in Safe Haven.

5

The news of Rick's escape had worried everyone except for a single sullen teenager, but now that the slavers were coming, the traitor had been forgotten.

Becky had been sneaking out to their usual meeting places, hoping he would be there, but he hadn't shown. Until this morning, Rick's name had been on everyone's lips and Becky hated them for it. They didn't know him like she did. They all called him evil and a killer, but she didn't feel that way. He'd told them who he was, told her—

“Psst...”

Becky spun to the find the object of her thoughts in the shadows behind the barn. Only his shaking head kept her from throwing herself into his arms.

“Careful.”

The teenager took a subtle glance around, but as usual, she was being ignored by everyone while they hurried to defend the camp. It was almost as if she didn't exist.

Rick stayed still as Becky moved toward the showers and darted into the underbrush instead. He scanned the area. Any observers?

No.

“Come on.”

Becky followed him away from the chaos, loving the nervous chills in her stomach. *He returned for me!*

As soon as he thought it was safe, Rick opened his arms. Like he'd hoped, she didn't hesitate and neither did he.

Instead of the intense hug she wanted, Becky found her lips against his, her chest crushed tightly to him. She thought to resist, but he eased his grip then and she responded to the feel of him against her female body. He was hard in all the places that she was soft.

Rick was now debating changing his plans. He could take her along. No one knew where she was and with everything going on, she wouldn't be missed for hours.

"I have to know why you didn't tell them."

Shy under his gaze, Becky blushed, tone low. "I like you, more than them."

Rick swept her up and this time, gave her the gentle welcome she'd been longing for. He held her until she began to let her fingers play in his hair and Rick kept himself still even when she shifted against him restlessly. He hadn't meant to encourage her, only get some information, but the sight of her welcoming young face had been too much to resist.

"Will you...kiss me again?"

His wolf-like leer was quickly hidden. "Anytime you want!"

She laughed, a fresh, innocent peal of delight that had him dropping his mouth to hers. He couldn't take her away from Safe Haven just yet, but he could steal her virginity right out from under Neil's nose, and he would. Then he'd kill her.

6

By dusk, the convoy was still more than ten miles from Glendale and Adrian thought it was ironic that they weren't even going to make it to the place the slavers thought they would be. He waited for the check-in to decide what to do, but when the call came, it didn't ease his mind. The slavers were only eight miles behind and Adrian hit the button as the violent lightning flashed.

"We need a sturdy, easy to defend shelter, gentlemen."

"We did a map-check a few minutes ago," Kyle responded immediately. "We spotted a YMCA and a rest stop."

"The rest stop is brick and small. No fires and no sneaking in," Zack stated from the truck behind them.

Adrian hit the button. "The rest stop. Secure it and get set up right away. We won't have much time."

"Copy, out."

There was no question, no hesitation and Angela felt a little better about the plan changing so rapidly. "How long will we have?"

“An hour, maybe,” Adrian answered, following the signs for the rest area through the driving rain. “More like forty-five minutes.”

“To set it all up in this weather?”

Adrian slowed as the building came up on their right. “This weather is what will make it work. They won't be able to see anything until they're trapped.”

He pulled the Semi over and found his one prayer answered. There were cicada-covered trees everywhere.

The rain had settled down a bit, but the wind was still gusting as Adrian unlocked the rear doors using the button Kenn had installed weeks ago for this very moment.

“Ready?” he asked, the men around them already out and moving supplies, disappearing into the landscape.

Angela pulled on her dark hood, kit over her arm. “You know it.”

They both rushed from the cool truck and into the cold rain, taking shelter under the small awning over the brick building's double glass doors. Doug and Neil, and a few others were already there and they entered inside with guns drawn.

The doors were unlocked and the men secured the one large room in seconds and then began carrying things into the Ellsworth County rest stop.

Adrian waved the closest man over for guard duty. “You stay down and out of the way,” he

spoke to Angela. “When it starts, I’d like you to pass out ammo and anything else we need.”

“That’s it?” Cynthia asked disappointedly, tape recorder on in her pocket.

Thinking of last night’s violent dream, where not one or even two perfectly made shots had been enough to save Angela, Adrian left. “For now.”

7

The fifteen men in the rear of the rig were out the minute the lock clicked. They took their share of the boxes and disappeared into the landscape. They were careful to show each other the traps as the storm picked up again and the sky started looking like the ten minutes or so before full dark.

Adrian and a few of the men labored outside, hiding their vehicles, after making sure their tracks continued out of sight. The others were inside and the sound of drilling echoed out the open doors, rolled past Adrian, across the street and up into the heavily wooded area. It almost drowned out the hordes of cicadas roosting in the trees.

The noise didn’t last five minutes and then there were three new holes, all filled in with red handkerchiefs. Even from only a few feet away, it was hard to tell they were there. Two of the three holes viewed into the tall stalls that made the long entrance to the bathrooms, one on each side of the rest stop. Anyone taking shelter there would be in for a nasty surprise.

Thick wooden boards were nailed over the two front windows, leaving a three-inch gap at the bottom to shoot from and vests were nailed loosely over these windows so the men inside would have some cover.

Adrian stared at the roof, where two men now waited, hidden behind the decorative chimney and a camouflaged shield of vests. He was satisfied when he couldn't pick them out.

The leader went to his semi, pulling himself nimbly up without noticing how soaked he was, but he did think that annoying, high-pitched song of the bugs was louder. He pushed the button on the mike. "Location for Eagle by 6."

Adrian switched to 36 and waited, worried when there was no answer. He didn't call again, though, sure they were lying low and too close to the slavers to call.

He climbed down slowly and was about to shut the door when the lightning flashed and the radio sparked.

"They're in Black Wolf now, moving fast."

Adrian scrambled for the mike. "Roger, by 5, 3 and 9."

He flipped to the right channel and pushed the button on the mike. "We're in the Ellsworth Rest Stop. Break off and get ahead. Join Kyle."

"Roger, out."

Relief was in Jeremy's voice, but there was excitement, too and Adrian was glad to hear it. The scouting team wanted to be here for the battle, but

they would be careful not to be spotted and ruin the plan.

Adrian hit the button on his chest, using the new coded short-wave setup that the slavers wouldn't be able to pick up until they were less than half a mile away.

“We've got five minutes.”

“Copy.”

Adrian stepped under the awning, frowning at the sudden feeling of doom that flew over him. Had he forgotten something?

He turned toward Angela, finding her through the glass. She hadn't taken up a place under the windows, but her orbs were glowing and her gun was in hand. *Good.*

“Get under cover. They're three minutes out.”

He saw his secret terror mirrored before she took up a prime spot at one of the windows.

Outside, the cicadas fell silent.

8

The building was pitch-black when the faint sounds of engines echoed through the storm.

Adrian knew he didn't have to tell Kyle to get set and he took his place near the door with a few others, rifle in one hand, radio in the other.

“They're here,” Angela warned and the first broken lights flashed off the trees and across the wet pavement.

“They'll be slow when they pass us, but it's dark. They won't notice anything wrong unless we

move.” Adrian’s words were comforting and they all held perfectly still as streams of light lit up the parking area and the sidewalk, and then the room. They stared at the front doors as the wet vehicles rolled by.

Angela let out a cold sigh as that hard shield of battle fell into place. “Now! He just saw your truck. Kill them now!”

Adrian pushed the button on his mike, sure fate was standing still to observe this moment. “It’s a go!”

The Eagles waited in the mud and rain as the army rolled toward them in the windy darkness, peering from behind the trees, picnic tables and grills.

Kyle was cool and calm, ready. It helped that he was a natural, too, and he was raising his arm to throw even as the walkie-talkie crackled, “It’s a go!”

He took aim on the gold Corvette and threw.

Outside the rest stop, for one last instant, there was only the storm. Then hell split open and swallowed them as the Eagles unleashed their fire and brimstone.

Kyle’s aim was perfect, but the wind gusted, sending wet branches flying into his path. The grenade was deflected and it fell to the grass before bouncing onto the pavement.

The gold Corvette rolled, unknowing, over it.

Seconds later it exploded under a red truck and fire ripped through the cab as it rose off the ground and fell hard, metal splintering. The three men inside were killed instantly.

The Ford behind it crashed into the fiery wreckage a second later.

The slavers began slamming on their brakes and plowing into each other to avoid the flaming mess and the dull thud of steel hitting steel echoed. Burning metal trapped men and their screams went unheeded as more grenades flew.

Cars exploded in sheets of burning debris behind the first wreck, cutting off that route of escape. More fire exploded in front of them, still aimed at the gold convertible, and the slavers panicked. Realizing they'd been led into a trap, they rear-ended each other, swerving and causing pileups, and most of the two lanes were completely blocked less than 30 seconds into the battle.

Armed men now abandoned their blocked-in cars, hurrying for the cover of the trees as gunfire echoed. Cesar began screaming orders into the mike that it was an ambush, to keep driving, but large groups of Mexicans fled to either side of the road.

More grenades shot through the wet air as a volley of gunshots rang out and four cars with men still inside were destroyed. Some killed, most were trapped with the flames coming their way.

Kyle flashed his light, signaling his men to fall back, and the Eagles retreated behind the ambush

site as the first of the fleeing slavers reached the wired trees.

Men streamed into the cover of nature, and the noise of the cicadas suddenly exploded through the storm as a large group hit the first trap at almost the same time.

Blood flew in thick splatters as men lost hands, had their throats slit and their stomachs sliced open. Bloody rain began soaking into the ground and screams of horror filled the battlefield. These sounds grew when the hungry bugs above them began coming down for a drink.

Not realizing that was where the noises of agony were coming from, more men ran toward death as grenades continued to explode, herding them.

Adrian and Marc had estimated that their trap would kill or critically wound half of the slavers and they were almost right. Thirty-five men were killed in the mad rush, another eight would likely bleed to death, and the fiery mess on the road took more than twenty. Roughly sixty men had run into the trees and the remaining killers now scattered toward the rest area where Adrian and his men were waiting. The rest were eaten alive.

A dozen guerillas made it past the guns on the roof and in the windows, fleeing into the brick bathroom stalls, and another ten ran behind those tall walls, all scanning vainly for help as the Eagles picked them off.

At Adrian's nod, the men inside the rest stop shoved their guns through the holes and let loose. Again caught off guard, only one Mexican made it out of the stalls alive, dashing to join the six who waited beneath the only trees on that side that were together enough to provide any real protection. They stared longingly at the cars in the street, many of them still running, the doors open wide. Two of them suddenly darted for these magic carpets and were picked off like ducks at a carnival, triggering a rush of cicadas that swarmed over their exposed flesh like acid.

Cesar was alone. Forced into the parking lot by grenades, he furiously swept Adrian's rig and then the rear of the brick building they were taking shelter in. The Americans may have surprised him, but that didn't mean he was beaten!

Ignoring the screams of his men, Cesar grabbed a recklessly fleeing form in a sombrero.

The man struggled and Cesar slid his knife to the guerilla's throat.

"I am your leader. You will do as I tell you!"

Gravari gave a shaky nod, recognizing him.

Cesar shoved him toward Adrian's semi. "Get it going! Run them down!"

"But the other—"

"Do it now! Run them down!" the slaver screamed, knife rising. He started to say something else, but stopped in shock at an explosion that rippled into the thunder. What the hell was that?

Gunshots, explosions and screams were still coming from the picnic area, the land mines cutting men in half and then the eighteen Eagles advanced, guns belching justice. This was the most dangerous part, the line moving in to clear out the survivors, and not all of these brave men were with Kyle when he finally reached the pavement.

Inside the rest stop, alarm bells sounded in Angela's mind.

“He's coming!” she warned.

Adrian heard his rig roar to life and flung open the bullet-splintered doors of the rest stop.

“Neil, get the long crate!” he shouted, running toward the parking area to find his semi reaching the end of the concrete parking lot.

They dragged the crate to the middle of the road, above the abandoned Corvette, and pried it open with Adrian giving fast instructions.

“Slide that in there and turn it,” he told them, grunting as he struggled to set up the tripod in the wind gusts. “Set it here. Good. Now, make a hole!”

Adrian hit the trigger and held on as the Gatling gun roared to life. Trees and mud blew apart as he struggled to aim, sending up swarms of bugs, and Neil rushed to help Adrian hold the powerful gun steady.

The semi hurried towards them, grinding gears as it picked up speed. The bullets traced a path of

destruction up the road and finally began to plunge into the rig.

The windshield shattered as Adrian tilted the gun up and the driver swerved too late. Blood sprayed across the cracked glass.

Now out of control, the truck continued its run and the Eagles dove out of the way as it smashed into the big gun, hit Cesar's Corvette and jack-knifed.

Squealing and scraping, the truck crashed violently into the piles of burning wreckage and then burst into a huge orange fireball that raced over the scene like a heat wave.

Adrian's Eagles screamed in triumph...and then in warning.

“Look out!”

Standing outside the rest stop doors, Angela felt someone behind her and realized at the last minute she wasn't picking up anything but blackness from their thoughts.

Fear shoved into her brain and she followed her training, drawing as she spun.

“If I cannot have you, bruja, neither will they!”

“Kill him!” Adrian shouted, unable to get a clear shot with Angela in his line of fire.

Bang!

“No!”

Bang!

Cesar pulled the trigger with an elated sneer of happiness.

The bullet slammed into Angela's chest, knocking her backward as she fired. She saw it plunge into his stomach as she hit the mud, and realized he would get a second shot.

Bang!

Bang!

Cesar's face twisted and the pistol fell from his grip. Around them, the cicadas fell silent.

Cynthia lowered her new gun as the evil man sank to his knees, blood streaming from his wounds. She had still been inside, forgotten in the chaos. Her bullet had gotten him from the rear, while Adrian hit him from the front.

I'm one of them now. The reporter didn't stop the surprised tears as Cesar's body fell forward and smacked onto the concrete.

End of Book 2

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Notes from the author

Hello Blurry Reader!

Once again, I didn't want to cut it where I did. However, there are still 100+ pages of aftermath and there just wasn't room for them here. I hope you liked this edition of *Life After War*. The next book takes us toward Arkansas, where Adrian's personal mystery begins to unravel.

Did you know you can leave me a comment on Facebook? I honestly read them! I love hearing from readers. You ladies and gentlemen are to me, what the Eagles are to Adrian—*Everything*.

And by the way, thanks. About half way through this book, I was nervous. The story wasn't flowing right, the ending was in choppy segments, and the bad reviews on book one's editing were dragging me into the fiery depths of hell. By page 800, I was overwhelmed, wondering how I'd get it all in 'book' form. At the point that I pasted the ending into the file, I had 185,000 words, 990 pages, and *Writer's Shake*.

Let me tell you a little about the Shakes. It's not an official illness, but it should be. It's when you stare at the words without a clue as to how to wrangle them into submission. You're exhausted, more drained than even after the best orgasm of your life, and yet, there's this whole other mountain to

climb. But it's a labor of love and you struggle to your feet, swaying, reaching out for support from the one source that's kept you going so far—your readers.

They respond with a kindness you never really thought would happen, shoving your dreams into vivid clarity. They love your work! They've fallen into a passionate affair with your world and they yearn for more. They email you and leave wonderful comments on your website. They tell people about you, send pictures of themselves wearing Safe Haven dog tags, and in the midst of your dreams coming true, you realize that you're shaking.

Why? Because you still haven't managed to climb that other mountain and all those delightful people are now waiting...and waiting...and waiting. The longer it takes to get to the top, the harder you shake. By the summit, your gut is one big Prevacid and no one in your household will even walk by the door where you're working for fear of being decapitated. The pizza delivery boy knows your card # by heart and all you can think about is how nice it was to be asleep a lifetime ago.

The Shakes are unpleasant. Non-writers often assume authors spend a few hours a day writing and the rest goofing off. It's only that cushy when your last name is infamous and I am nowhere near that. This stress is one small downside of my new life, never worked harder on anything, never been more proud. That driving force, those shakes,

pushed me into a place where I can stand in safety, knowing the final result is one I'm honored to share.

Adrian's Eagles was finished for me, on All Fool's Day, 2012. I heard the door shut when Cynthia pulled that trigger and I shut it gently, but I didn't bother with the lock. We'll be returning to Safe Haven and its magic...only next time, I'll have the memory of this feeling to lean on when I shake.

I love you guys, I hope you know that. If the world really does end, we'll start our own Haven! Lol. Thank you for your purchase, and for gifting me with your time.

It's been *my honor*,
Angie

On a more personal note, I would also like to thank the great people who beta-read for me, hosted me on their sites and blogs, and offered their services to me. It was an honor to work with those Eagles.

Have you explored [my website](#) yet? Here are just some of the fun features:

- Readers can now vote in the Safe Haven Mandatory Camp Votes
- Readers can help pick book covers
- Listen to a Safe Haven CB call
- Read deleted scenes from each book
- Browse the modern merchandise

- Download free chapters
- Read raw, unpublished works
- Apply to be a Beta Reader
- Order paperbacks
- Signup and join my lists and networks
- Enjoy the free weekly LAW Wednesday blog posts

You can also contact me and leave comments for myself and everyone else to view. Please stop by. Everyone is welcome.

Eagle Teams

Level Seven

Kyle, Chris, Daryl, Billy, Shawn, Morgan,
Theo, Crone, Denny, Angela (Level One)

Level Six

Neil, Jeremy, Daniel, Greg, Wade, Ben,
Steven, Jim, Jake

Level Four

Zack, Lee, Allan, Frank, Donald, Ozzie,
Brandon, Pete, Simon

Level Four

Seth, Jeff, Rusty, Jack, Ryan, Bruce, Tommy,
Joey, Robert

Level Two

Kevin, Ray, Alex, Dexter, Logan, Scott,
Francis, Whitney, Josh

Level One

Marc, Jax, Paul, Quinn, Shane, Dwayne,
George, Howard, Bobby

Rookies

Tucker, Anderson *A number of camp
members are also under consideration.

Deleted Scene

“What’s going on?”

Seth shrugged at her question. “We’re not sure. Kenn hasn’t checked in.”

Angela immediately sent the witch out to search. When she stopped, so did Seth, saying, “We need to—”

“It’s all right.” Adrian came through the fog and the man retreated.

“They’re hiding in a cornfield off a highway. Bikes, gunshots...screams.”

The witch’s voice sounded ominous in the thick fog and Adrian’s hand slid to his gun for comfort.

“They’re coming this way.”

“Can you send a message? Tell him there’s a distraction coming, to dig in.”

She shut her lids as Adrian gave Seth instructions. The guard was gone an instant later.

“The slavers found their vehicles, but with all the darkness and fog they can’t find...”

Adrian frowned, waiting.

“They’re too close, too loud. Kenn’s pinned down.”

“It’s a go, Boss.”

Adrian pushed the button on the mike in response to the radio call. “Now.”

Seconds later, there was a shrieking whistle and a dull thud as a rocket launched, barreling east. It exploded over the dark landscape and a shower of purple stars lit up behind the fog like a magic show.

“Another. Two more after that, thirty seconds apart.”

The shriek came again, whistling though the night before filling the sky in gold and blue showers of light.

“They’ve changed directions. The Eagles are circling around.”

“Tell them to meet us on the road.”

Fireworks exploded again, drawing more people, and Rick crouched lower as he pushed the button on the mike.

“It’s a trick. You’ll know what I mean if you’re hunting hard enough for the rat in the corn.”

There was a double click in response.

Rick quickly put the channel to where it had been and got out of the unmanned Com truck. He faded into the fog a second later.

The traitor had heard Angela’s words while roaming under the cover of the weather, and when the teenager running the radio stepped away for a better view of the fireworks, Rick had seized the chance to help the slavers.

He now entered the shower camper, nodding to a guard who was already using one of the stalls. He needed Cesar to hurry up before he blew his

own cover with Neil's murder. A few more times of having to witness him and Samantha together might be enough to send him into a rage that would only end in blood.

“What's going on out there?” Morgan asked.

Rick pulled off his shirt. “Fireworks to the east. No alarm sounded yet.”

The Eagle continued his shower and Rick was careful to have a casual conversation that would be remembered later and provide an uncontested alibi.

Character Profiles

Cesar Castro Diaz

Age: 43

Eyes: Black

Height: 5'10"

Weight: 195 lbs.

Birthday: 1/4/70

Gold Front Tooth, Kinked, black curls, two missing fingers on left hand.

Before war: Infamous Mexican Guerilla Captain

After war: Leader of an invading army.

Quote: *"I will have the witch! Nothing will stop me when I come for her!"*

Cesar was raised by one of Mexico's most ruthless men. Bred to be a warrior in his father's army, he is a hardened man who labored his way up the ranks through violence and manipulation. The number of Americans he is rumored to have killed before the war is over two hundred. A month after the war, it was a thousand.

Right after the Apocalypse, Cesar took a large group of men to the US border to rescue friends and family in Arizona and New Mexico detention centers. When he encountered no resistance, he seized the opportunity, invading. The vile man intends to keep anyone from rebuilding and hopes to seed the country with as many bastards as he can, leaving America an occupied land.

Samantha Moore

Age: 28

Height: 5'7"

Weight: 125 lbs.

12/24/84

Seattle EPA worker, Doesn't fear death, only pain, Craves morphine after doing self-surgery, Had a pass to a bunker for saving the President's life

Quote: "There's a storm coming."

FBI Notes

Marker identified. Subject can predict weather with a 98% accuracy rate. Has been used twice. Should be kept close enough to be useful. No termination orders are expected unless an anti-government attitude develops.

Strengths

Will do whatever she has to, no matter how ugly it gets.

Incredibly strong.

Weaknesses

Too forgiving. She often ignores flaws that most people wouldn't.

Had so little contact with the outside world that she always feels like an outcast.

Kenn Harrison

Age: 36

Height: 6'1"

Weight: 240lbs

5/30/76

Decorated Marine, Wide shoulders, Short tempered, Party clown, Beefy hands.

So why wasn't Kenn banished for his abuse of Angela before the war?

Because of Adrian's rules, he can't be. He has to do something while in Safe Haven and Adrian tried very hard to remind him of all he's risking.

In book 4, Adrian's Eagles, Kenn snaps, grabbing Angela by the throat in front of not only a tent of Eagles, but also Adrian. You'd think that would be the end of it, but Kenn is once again saved by fate.

Interrupted by Mother Nature, Kenn's next action earns him a pass and a possible way to earn his place back.

If he can let Angela go...and sanction her as an Eagle...and Marc's legal mate. It's a lot to ask and may not have been possible without the attempts on Adrian's life—attempts that Kenn suspected Tonya of.

Kendle Roberts

Age: 26

Height: 5'6

Weight: 120lbs

5/20/86

Very reddish skin, Grayish Blue Eyes, Short Black Spikes.

FBI Notes

DNA Marker confirmed. Due to public view, careful termination is being considered. Location: California, Beverly Hills.

Backstory

Kendle was an actress before the war came, as were her parents. Star of Survival Challenge, the reality artist wasn't afraid of anything. Before, when she was supported by her crew, and her father's endless money. After the War, Kendle is alone, everything familiar gone. Adrift on the ocean, and then held captive by Ethan Kraft, the survivalist discovered terror and it was life-changing. She's no longer sure who she is.

Upon meeting Luke, she regained some of her self-confidence, but it's clear she'll never be who she once was. Before the war, Kendle's only goal was to be noticed for being as good as her parents. Now, only survival matters. Because of Ethan Kraft and the mysterious illness now circling the island, she may not get the chance to recover. Even

though she somehow wasn't infected, the rest of the island, including Luke, is in grave danger.

Marcus Brady

Age: 35

Height: 6'

Weight: 225 lbs.

12/13/77

Broad shoulders, Loner/slightly bitter, Full, pouty lips.

Quote: "It's okay to be scared, but you have to think, too."

Strengths

There are few problems he can't handle if given the time or materials.

Once his loyalty is given, it is unshakable.

Weaknesses

Knows how to be a team player, but his misery often makes him a loner.

Beyond having another chance with Angie and his son, Marc has no other goals, no vision for his future.

FBI notes

DNA marker is inconclusive. Subject shows no signs of mental abilities; however, termination has been recommended due to above average strategy skills. Considered Dangerous.

Location: New Mexico—Contact case manager for map.

Adrian Mitchel

Age: 48

Hair: Blond

Eyes: Blue

Height: 6'

Weight: 230 lbs.

Birthday: 7/4/64

Holsters on both hips, Sun streaked brows, Goatee. Adrian has never known love beyond his bond with his mother. He instinctively knows how to be in a relationship, but has never felt the need to try. Until now. From the instant their eyes met, he knew Angela as a kindred and the attraction has only grown. He tries hard not to let it show, though, because the feelings he has for Marc's woman are a surprise to him, as well.

Adrian's bonding with Angela is both sweet and brutal. Through total freedom and trust, he shows her a life she has never dreamed of, a way of living that fulfils her need to atone as much as her sense of duty. He made her more than she's ever been and their time together will not be easy to forget. Adrian wants to fight for her, but knows she needs to figure it out for herself and lets her.

Determined to do the right thing, Adrian concentrates on getting his people toward Arkansas, where a dangerous personal reunion waits for him. Have the choices he's made cost him a son? Even Angela can't be sure.

Rebecca Ann Kelly

Age: 15

Height: 5'4'

Weight: 115lbs

Green eyes, Cute, flirty, Dimples, Set on being Neil's mate, Likes danger, thrills, Shoots well for only being 15.

Becky is just starting to explore her femininity and the hormones encourage her reckless streak. She's not a bad kid, but her lack of direction makes her dangerous to herself.

That's where Rick came in. He can sense it, that few months before she's a woman, and he knows Neil can, too. Rick likes her, who wouldn't? But he wants her only because the state trooper does.

So what does the future hold for Miss Kelly?

Danger and more angst until she grows up, though, that road may be rough. Becky isn't sure of her place in Safe Haven. Before the War, she was a cheerleader, popular and flirty, much sought-after. Now, she's another survivor and she isn't old enough yet to know how miraculous that is just by itself. I hope she only needs time to grow up, but I'm worried for her...Rick is one of fate's wildcards.

Richard T. Boone

Age: 35

Height: 6'1

Weight: 190lb

6/1/77

Shifty green eyes, Always has dirty fingernails

Quote: "I gave him this camp for our freedom."

Backstory

Raised as a ward of the state, Rick never knew his parents. Eighteen years in an orphanage turned him into a solitary creature with cruel tendencies. Was he abused there? I think that's a safe assumption.

At nineteen, he was fired from a local store for theft and at twenty, committed his first felony. The car he stole was never found. Neither was the bank's money and he wasn't convicted.

At twenty-three, Rick was picked up for flashing young girls from his car, but again, the system failed. Just a year later, he tried to rape a teenager in the theater he worked at. She was hurt in the process and he finally went to jail.

When the war came, he was serving eight years and laboring as a prison janitor due to good behavior. Rick opened the cell doors of the prison, allowing the other dangerous inmates freedom. When Cesar arrived to free his family, Rick was rewarded with slavery instead of death. Rick is the

only white male Cesar and his slaves have left
alive.

Tonya Lynn Murphy

Age: 28

Height: 5'7

Weight: 135lb

1/7/85

Green Eyes, Loves short, red dresses, Topless dancer on the Nevada Strip, Save Haven Refugee Camp Whore.

Quote: “Maybe we can find out who he really is while everyone’s distracted by Barbie and her wolfman.”

Strengths

She can adapt to almost anything.

She's more aware of herself than most women, not afraid to go after what she wants.

Weaknesses

Selfish. Almost to the point of being dangerous.

Uses people to get what she wants.

FBI Notes

The FBI has no file for Tonya Lynn Murphy. Local NV records show a statistical arrest record, indicative of early childhood abuse and poverty.

Todd O'Neil

Age: 28

Height: 6'

Eyes: Green

Weight: 175 lb.

Birthday: 12/15/84

Before the war: Arizona State Trooper.

After the war: Level Four Eagle in Adrian's Army.

Quote: "I'm more Adrian's than I ever was my mother's."

Backstory

Unlike most of the others at Safe Haven, Neil had a decent childhood. His mom was a prostitute who died in the jailhouse during the birth. His father, a sheriff, did a good job raising his unexpected offspring.

Neil followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a cop and then an Arizona State Trooper, but he has always worried about how much like his mother he is. It makes him very straight-laced.

When the war came, he and his dad tried to defend the jail. Neil was the only one to survive. He found Kyle a week later, rescuing the mobster from a car accident, and the unlikely pair became fast friends. Neil has never let his hair down and refuses to go anywhere without his Trooper's hat. Everyone assumes to be his. It belonged to his father, and he

wears it to honor a hero who fell in the line of duty.

Jeremy

Level Five Eagle
XO of his Team

Not much is known about Jeremy, by readers, members, or the Eagles. Even I only have a vague, shadowy picture from the first four books.

He worked in an office, he had extra money lying around, and he knows how to manipulate things...like Adrian.

I suspect there's a lot more to him. (I honestly thought Billy, the pony-tailed blond Eagle on Kyle's team, would play this role.). I also assumed it was all a setup to get Neil and Samantha together. As soon as I started writing it, I found out how quickly he fell for her. Maybe he was on the rebound from the death of a mate who looked like Sam... I think that's very likely.

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