

ANGELA  
WHITE



THE  
CHANGE

The Bachelor Battles Trilogy

# **The Change**

A Novel by Angela White

New edition 2017 © Angela White

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Prologue

# Recovery Zone 12

Southern Ohio  
494 AW (2507)

1

“**T**here they are!”

Hiding in the charred, hollow trunk of a lightning-struck tree, the two thin fugitives froze as riders crested the adjacent hill. If they were caught, the teenage boy would be added to the yearly roundup. His father, wanted for crimes against their rulers, wouldn't be taken back alive.

In an apocalyptic landscape framed by early summer, the single road into town became obscured with dust from the three dozen horses. On these foaming animals were some of the most intimidating defenders the Network employed. The cold banner, a glaring red arrow outlined in black, was held high in warning of who they represented. Behind the riders was a line of bound men and boys on strong leashes. Forced to run or die, the slaves were barely getting enough air.

Heavy hooves and harsh coughs echoed to the town ahead of them, where the single sentry called a late warning.

“Network riders! Network riders!”

As the horses cleared the trees to enter the farmland, locals laboring there were showered with dust. They winced at the cruel treatment of their crops and of the enslaved males, but they didn't interfere. The citizens of New America had learned not to challenge their rulers. The price was usually more than they could pay.

Shaking with fear and impotent anger, the two fugitives in the hollowed trunk watched from the concealment of the trees. They couldn't challenge the riders, but the father kept a scarred hand on the boy's thin shoulder to prevent him from trying anyway. The emotions of youth didn't always allow for logic and the man wasn't going to risk his last son in a futile battle they couldn't win. However, he would risk both their lives in a fight for freedom with different players and different odds. This was the beginning of that plan.

“Network riders! The Ring is coming!”

Inside the three-street town, shutters began slamming. Doors locked as young boys cowered behind defenseless, pink-eyed women. In some of the salvaged homes and barely surviving shops, terrified males were hurriedly shoved into clever slots behind wall panels to keep them from being taken. This was the yearly roundup, a month early.

As the riders advanced, their leader, Rankin, waved the crew into a defensive formation. Always sent on these runs, the team had earned the nickname because of the circle they made over

Network lands each year to collect slaves. They were also called demons. That whispered insult was well earned. All of the women were ruthless. Their leader worked directly for the Network—both in the pristine dome and here in the deadly wastelands. In her matted red hair was a braid for each male that she'd broken. They covered her back in thick, dusty proof of her brutality.

The riders formed a V as they reached the town, weapons ready in case the females here chose to fight for their slaves. The Ring had a list of specific males to bring in, but Rankin would also take any appealing targets they ran across—to account for the percentage who didn't survive the trip. Rankin always made her quota.

“These slaves will be surrendered immediately, by order of the Network. It's roundup time!” Rankin began calling names from the list, pointing at homes. Most of the women here owed a son in payment for a debt or fine, but a few were also being punished for their lack of financial support to Network causes.

Rankin's riders went to the residences and dragged the males out, not letting goodbyes be said or pleas be voiced. Few of the mothers fought, but those who did were cut down. It was against the law to refuse an order of surrender. The penalty was immediate death.

Screams and wails of grief began to echo across the tiny town.

While the riders gathered the newest lot of slaves, the males already on leashes dropped to their knees, grateful for the break. Fathers comforted sons and exhausted men bound bleeding foot wounds with what remained of their shirts, but those were the luckier ones. Some of them didn't move at all, but they weren't cut loose. Rankin would still receive a half credit for each of their mangled bodies.

“Runners!” One of the hulking defenders shouted, pointing. “We have runners!”

To the west, a small group of guys had made it through the tall crops. They were almost at the edge of the thick trees, where the first two fugitives were still hiding.

“Dogs!”

The huge black and brown hounds padded forward at Rankin's shout. Canines had suffered the same biological changes as humans, making them larger, angrier. Their eyes flamed when triggered, breath becoming noxious. Some of them could even snort fire and they would attack any target, no matter how big or small. Menacing, the fire hounds ran at the rear of the slaves to keep them from escaping—unless there were runners.

Spotting the fleeing men, the hounds gave chase without being ordered to do so. They'd been bred for this purpose.

Fresh screams echoed through the area as the large dogs quickly caught up to the slaves. Those who stopped, the dogs escorted with slobbery



nudges and growls. The men who kept fleeing or tried to fight, the dogs ate. Rankin's updated roundup system had been designed to keep their animal escort fed without the extra weight of carrying nourishment for the trip. Their rulers had embraced it eagerly.

"That's all of them from town," Lena, second in command, told Rankin. Nearby, four of the sentries were binding crying boys to leashes as the townswomen reluctantly brought them out.

"We require one more male!" Rankin demanded loudly. "Give us a gift and we won't torch your homes." Rankin scanned the shacks. Last year she hadn't asked for a bonus from this town. It was their turn to pay homage to her mercy.

When no one came forward, she growled. "I can smell them, you know! If I have to come in and sniff around, I'll kill every one of you and still take your males!"

A door was snatched open across the street, revealing a stern lady with huge arms. She shoved two trembling boys onto the dirt walk. "Took me a minute to catch them."

Other townswomen scowled at the orphanage keeper, but Rankin reacted happily. "Two! Very nice."

Rankin made the motion for her riders and dogs to hurry, not sure what was delaying things with the few runners. "Thank you for your cooperation. May you all have a Network day."

“Same to you,” came the muttered, expected reply.

It was a dismissal. The women who had been waiting for it left Rankin’s sight. Those hiding guys in cramped, mousey slots tried to remember how to breathe.

“Next?” Rankin demanded.

“The next location is...” Lena scanned their sheets. “Hey, a blond. That’s a double credit!”

Rankin snatched the papers, annoyed at not getting the exact answer she had requested.

“Daniel: blond, paid for, priority.” Rankin kept reading, unease growing. “Owner provided address for pickup. Approach location with caution.”

Rankin recognized the address and the name. “Pruetts!”

Her riders sat up straighter, scanning the town. Pruettts meant blood.

“Not here, you idiots!” Rankin snapped. “They have the boy. Get ready while we wait for the dogs.”

“Do we fight them?” one of her newer riders asked quietly. “We have the same boss.”

“We’ll eliminate them if we need to,” Rankin answered in mock confidence. She ignored the instinct that demanded she mark the boy’s name off as dead and flee. “They’re bounty hunters. We’re killers.”

Her crew snickered in agreement, reminded that they alone of the Network employees had

permission to kill. Even the legendary Pruett family didn't have that authority automatically.

The shabby street had become deserted around the waiting pink-eyed troops. Peppering the shops that lined the empty street were lists of items that people were forbidden to have (radios topped every one), prices that were to be charged, and Wanted posters that covered entire front walls. One in particular, a tall male with blond hair and a scar over his hand, was shown more than the other escaped males. Simon was the current leader of the rebels who had been trying to oust their rulers. There were also advertisements for the Bachelor Battles on these walls of death. Each laminated photo featured a bloody, victorious female clutching a terrified man as her prize.

Near the edge of this oppressed town, a thin blond boy barreled from a slimy home put together with toothpaste and fishing wire. He slipped painfully down muddy rocks that were the hovel's stairs.

"They know where to search, boy!" his mother shouted cruelly from the makeshift home. "Pruett hunters can't save you!"

Heart pounding, Daniel ran awkwardly through the piles of rubble that edged the road, then detoured into the thorn trees that bordered the adjacent property. The poison branches reached for him, but he ducked in perfect time to their swipes and made it through untouched.

Weapons clanged over grunts as Daniel neared an opening in the trees and burst into the front yard. The four black-cloaked people there were working on a fighting routine, moving in tandem with beautiful knife slashes, spins, and leaps. Their long, black cloaks flared out together in a stunning, unintended visual effect.

“Candy!”

The sweaty family stopped and lowered their weapons, staring at Daniel with sympathy as more screams sounded from town. The Ring was moving again. The bounty hunters could hear the heavy hooves and chilling cries of individual slaves. Rankin had finished.

“You know the law!” Candy’s mother, tall and thin, answered the boy fearfully. “We can’t hide you.”

Daniel ran to the other child, his friend, in terror. “Help me!”

“Get out of here!” Candy yelled, shoving him toward the tree line. The little girl was in shock. “Don’t let them spot you!”

“My family sold me!”

“Sold?” Candy repeated in horror, young mind spinning into a hazy rage. It was their worst fear.

“We have company,” Candy’s father stated softly from her mother’s side.

Sentries were reaching their driveway. The thorn trees lining it were poisonous and carnivorous, with vivid red and green coloring.

Thick limbs reached hungrily for the excited riders, but they weren't noticed.

Candy scanned the homestead, already knowing there was no place she could hide him. Her home was a white dome buried mostly in the ground. There were sheds and a storage building, and two heavy-duty mopars for traveling the apocalyptic lands. The Pruett's were better off than most, but none of it could save Daniel.

"Mother?" Candy asked for help in that one word, dazed with the pain. *They sold him!*

Candy's mother winced, but didn't answer.

"I'll be alone now," Daniel moaned brokenly, shaking. "They'll hurt me!"

"You're mine!" Candy growled, hugging him in useless comfort. "I will find you!"

"Promise me!" Daniel demanded, panicking.

Candy kissed him softly, stealing his first taste. There was no doubt that she would lose everything else. Her eyes were red when she pulled back, sent into the first stage of the disease early. "On my life, Daniel. I will come for you!"

"There he is! Release that male," Rankin ordered arrogantly from her horse. "His family has transferred ownership to the Network."

"You can't keep him, Candy," her mother warned shakily. "You know that. You can only die and kill the rest of us with the attempt."

Candy's anger became more pronounced as her mother tried to force them apart. Both kids struggled wildly.

The thorn trees tried harder to reach the observing riders, drawn by the emotions.

Tiring of the drama, Rankin kicked her horse forward to drop a leash around Daniel's neck. When he reached up to take it off, she grabbed his wrists and tied them to the waiting straps on the rawhide tether.

"No! Candy!"

Candy raked her new claws down her mother's arm to get free. She ran after Daniel.

Rankin spun around and punched the girl in her shoulder. The defender didn't like kids.

Holding her aching arm, Candy determinedly rose, glowering with teary red orbs. "He's mine!"

Angel, Candy's cousin, rushed to help. The two girls fell into their training, spinning and slashing the air with their knives.

Spooked, Rankin's horse reared up and almost unseated her.

Trying to calm the huge mount, Rankin got too close to the hungry thorn trees and a branch slipped eagerly around her neck.

Fighting to keep from being punctured or thrown, Rankin snatched the knife from her belt. She sliced through the thorn going for her throat. Then she used her fist to snap off the branch.

"Only Pruetts would have these...things!" Rankin sneered, flushed as she manhandled her huge horse into submission.

Her riders smirked, but when Rankin told them to advance, they obediently surrounded the small family while Rankin retrieved the end of the leash.

Candy's mother wrapped her up tighter this time and the family slave, Candy's father, grabbed Angel.

"If you weren't so useful tracking down trash, I'd slit all your throats!" Rankin waved at her riders to proceed, viciously yanking Daniel's rope to make him stumble and fall.

"Help him, mother!" Candy shouted, fighting to get free. "Help *me!*"

"You can't take over this family if you're dead," her mother sadly insisted, holding her with iron strength. "Pruetts never openly oppose the Network."

Candy realized she wasn't going to get help from her parent and the full change of Rage Walker's disease spiraled through her small body. Her muscles swelled, ripping her clothes. Her black hair shot out and down. Her claws extended and her black pupils became crimson flames as she attacked her mother.

The thorn branches in the driveway withdrew to their proper places in shocked disapproval.

"Help! Candy!"

Candy spun from her mother's bloody face as the riders left with Daniel being pulled along behind Rankin. She took off running, executing an amazing snatch and jump to grab her fallen

weapon and clear half the distance. Knife ready, she leapt again.

Rankin sensed it coming and shifted to kick the child in the head with the bottom of her boot.

Candy dropped to the ground in a heavy pile of pain, puking. The other signs of the disease faded, but her eyes remained crimson. They ran red with tears.

Candy's mother and father hurried toward them as Rankin glared down without compassion. "He belongs to the Network now. If you want him, come fight for him in the games." Rankin gave Candy's mother a knowing sneer as the couple reached them. "Don't wait too long. You're a changeling now, stage one, and Pruetts burn out fast."

Staggering to her feet through the misery, Candy wiped her mouth and snarled, "Pruetts will send you all to hell!"

Startled at the words from a child, Rankin kicked up dust to coat the family as she turned toward the driveway. "Heaven and hell don't exist. There's only been the Network for four hundred years."

"That is going to change!" Candy vowed, glaring. "Someday, I'll take the power from them, the same way they've taken something that I love! I won't stop until you're all gone!"

Her family gasped at the open defiance, expecting harsh retribution.



Rankin snorted, but didn't stop. On a slow day, she might have executed them all for such blasphemy, but she was busy and even a burnt-out Pruett with her slave and whelps was dangerous. It would interrupt the roundup and their rulers wouldn't tolerate that. Another time, however... Rankin dragged Daniel through the gate, indifferent to his pleas as she mentally added this family to her death list. If she got this chance later, she would certainly take it.

Candy hissed at her mother as Daniel was torn from her life. She didn't speak, but her expression screamed with furious betrayal.

Candy's mother lowered her chin in shame, causing the four ugly gashes on her cheek to resume dripping blood over her neck and chest. "No."

The icy façade she would become known for settled over Candy in a sheet that would never completely thaw. She turned from her mother without providing the expected forgiveness. She wasn't capable of it.

Back on the road now, the thundering hooves and screams of the roundup echoed hauntingly.

"I will come for you!" Candy promised, staring at Daniel, who was already struggling to keep up and breathe through the dust. "*All* of you."

The two fugitives in the trees eased from their hiding place a few minutes later and trudged toward the town. The group of males they had traveled with had been slaughtered by snakes last week while the man and his son were scouting for water. The wilderness was rough.

“Come on. We have to talk to the orphanage keeper.”

Baker understood that leaving him here was a kindness, but he still felt abandoned. Why couldn't his father love him as much as he loved the missing brother?

Simon knew well his child's torment, but he had to get to the borderlands and locate a safe zone for his people. He couldn't do that with a son along. He would have to blend, to act as if he was a slave running errands. At other times, he would have to be able to make a fast escape. The boy would be lost in one of the struggles and Simon was tired of sacrificing his sons to the cause. He knew the Pruetts and he knew this town. The boy would survive here.

Simon fingered the small tattoo on his neck. They had protected him once. Now, they would do the same for his last surviving child while he tried to detect a way to rescue the captives.

Simon stared at the thorn trees in the distance that lined the Pruett property. With their help, he might even be able to save the world.

**Eight Years Later...**

Chapter One

# Nothing Ever Changes

March 1<sup>st</sup>

1

“Hello! Welcome to the first interview segment for this week’s episode of...the Bachelor Battles!”

The ticketless crowd of citizens that were gathered around the dome responded wildly to the start of the most popular game. Cameras atop giant screens rotated to show adoring outside viewers in all directions who were beating on each other, spilling drinks, kissing. Tonight’s party in New Network City would be massive.

“We are talking by comlink with Candice Pruett as she arrives at the gates of our fair city. Already famous for legendary bounty hunting successes, the Pruett family is worth a whopping seven hundred million UDs! Wadda ya say, folks? Let’s make her welcome!”

The audiences cheered passionately as an average looking teenager flashed onto the enormous view screens. Sunken black eyes lined in deep shadows only hinted at the pain that she, like all other females, spent every minute battling. Dressed in a high-collared black cloak, the girl’s

harsh, eager grin and deadly stance marked her as anything but ordinary.

“Tell us, Candy. Why did you sign up for the Bachelor Battles at such a young age? As most of our viewers know, Games contestants are usually in search of a breeding pass or a slave. So Candy, why are *you* here?”

Silence...

“Miss Pruett?”

The reporter cleared her throat and a low mutter came over the speakers, “*Did we lose her?*”

“Hello? Miss Pruett, are you there?”

“Don’t ever. Do that. Again.”

Softly spoken, the words rolled over the audience in menacing waves.

“Um.” Not expecting it, the surprised reporter stumbled. “Do what, Hun?”

“Call me *Candy*.” Click!

“Hello?” The speaker faded to another mutter that the microphone wasn’t meant to pick up.

“*Pull me off this one.*”

Pause...

“*Why? I’ll tell you why! She’s that Pruett changeling, the one the Network fined a million UDs for hurting a relative when she was twelve! That whole family is ruthless, and I’ve already paid my dues! Pull me off this one. I don’t have a death wish.*”

*“Welcome to New Network City, Candice Pruett,”* an annoying computer voice echoed from the security monitor. *“Please enjoy the scent of roses that we have genetically rescued from the ashes of our past.”*

Candice ducked the sprayer as she was finally waved through the gates, but her all-terrain vehicle wasn't as lucky. The front was coated.

Entry to the dome that housed the games was a series of checkpoints with ever-increasing security, due to rebels who regularly snuck into the city to create havoc. The first station, where Candice had hung up on the reporter, had sported large guns and stern, muscled sentries.

Candice drove slowly, taking in the sights while trying to ignore the smells. Thousands of people lived in the protection of this city. Thousands more came in each day for work, trade, or entertainment. It made for an awful combination of odors that she had forgotten about.

“Should have taken the spray,” Candice mused.

New Network City was all around her now, vastly different from the green, lush valleys of Ohio. Gilded dirt paths among apocalypse rubble couldn't compare to the Pruett family homestead and Candice was wise enough to recognize that and be grateful. The debris left from the war had been removed or hidden by nature in most places, but not here. This city belonged to the eastern half

of the council and they wanted these constant reminders of the tragic past. It kept everyone in fear.

Thanks to the apocalypse, the country had split into three sections. Directly in the middle was an unknown area called the Borderlands, where the Wild West had returned in a new version of hell. The sides of New America were each controlled by a division of the Network, though the west coast outpost was as foreign to most as those mysterious borderlands in the center. People from the west preferred to stay there, but it was hard to imagine them attempting the month-long horseback trek anyway, considering the odds of death. Few places beyond this city were safe, and that was also deliberate.

Life, liberty, and happiness were myths in this new world. Ruled by a well-protected council of ten secretive, vicious women who stayed isolated from the rest of society in their fortified dome, almost everyone had been beaten into submission. New American citizens existed in terror and anger, secretly loathing the leaders who used blood as a distraction from morality. Even while fighting a disease that was sending humanity into extinction, nothing ever changed. It still only took bread and circuses. With those, you could even steal a person's sons.

Discerning a clear stretch before the next sentry station, Candice clicked the recorder in her hand, staring at her destination without fear or the

nervousness that she had expected. Unless everything went perfectly, she would die in that shiny dome. In case that happened, she had chosen to leave an audible recording of the things that she knew to be true. Candice had been working on it since leaving the Pruett homestead. She considered it her will.

“The first known cases of the disease are from a small pirate island in the south. Their entire population was decimated by a mysterious illness that transformed the residents into lunatics with a taste for blood. It was called Rage Walkers disease when it migrated to America and no female was immune. Cursed with painful needs and a streak of violence, humankind could have been wiped out right then, but the disease hadn’t finished mutating. Forty years later, rather than continuing to drive the person quickly into insanity, the disease slowed. It became common for someone to suffer with it for decades instead of months. For a while, it became like other incurable illnesses in our history—avoided and ignored. But the post-apocalyptic birthrates didn’t rise from that horrible number of 5% male, and then another, more dangerous pattern began to emerge. The Rage Walker children were also violent. Three years after the first one entered kindergarten, there was a decree in place for all infected kids to be homeschooled to protect the rest. When it was ascertained that victims were surviving with the



awful disease from puberty until death, our rulers took drastic measures.

“Understanding their population was becoming too aggressive, the Network began forcing citizens to swear loyalty and work for them, to build the dome for them. And they kept the games rolling. Only now, it was all convicted women in the matches as the children grew up and the Network had to do something with them.”

Revealing a bit of her strength to discourage possible assassins right now, Candice controlled the heavy mopar with one hand and the recorder with the other, putting her illegal version of history into the machine. Her grandmother had done the same, passing the chore to Candice. A public death for conspiracy would come swiftly if any of it were unearthed. History was taught by Network teachers, where details were lacking and the truth was rare.

“By 200AW, a good portion of the Eastern lands had been cleared and returned to use, providing homes and farms that the Network controlled. As their power grew, it became almost impossible to get a breeding pass, and the impotent fury of childless citizens may have driven the Network’s next choice. They began to allow innocent women to enter the games. If they won, they would have their choice of prizes. If they lost, it was one less violent person on the streets...and it was incredibly *popular*. Everyone was tired of

living in the dark and the games were vivid, brutal, attention-keeping entertainment.

“When the first noncriminal female won, she asked for what all of the population wanted—a mate, a family—and from that moment, our rulers seized an opportunity. They already owned most of the males on New American soil and charged outrageous prices for the purchase or use of one. When that bloody winner asked for a mate, the Network changed the rules, making the prize a *man*. After that, our government could pass any law they wanted.”

The next checkpoint appeared in the distance.

Candice slowed the mopar to add more to the recording. Someone had to keep an honest record of their history or it would all be lost under the Network’s mountain of lies.

“The riots of 230AW were really all about the men. We were told it was over food, but the disease was still changing women, making them angrier, vicious. Our rulers, safe in their dome-covered complex, sweetened the deal. They gave pure bachelors at special times and even held games with all twins as a double reward. They had to keep the peace, to keep their control. They changed the prizes, the rules, the arenas and the lighting, blinding us with swirling violence as they took sons from nearly every family in the first annual roundup. Confident in their control through the ugliness that offered a small hope to the females; what they were really doing was culling

the female population while adding to their male stocks.

“By 300AW, the Network had complete control, reinventing many of our old terrors to get the rebels in line after sporadic attempts to free their fellow enslaved males. Always worried about women joining these few brave men, the Network cut off direct communication between the cities, and censored everything that was broadcast. It became illegal to own a radio and the only media reports that people saw were scripted.” Candice scanned the tall, flashing buildings around her mopar with an intense dislike that was hidden by her hood. She already hated it here. “Now, five centuries after the fall of men, after the apocalypse that destroyed all societies across the planet, the games are on every wall screen, in every home across Network lands. We kill each other, living and dying for the chance, for the mere possibility, of an end to this pain. We are no more civilized than the barbaric men who came before us.” She sighed heavily. “In fact, we may even be worse.”

Candice put the recorder away, controlling her emotions as the checkpoint loomed. The council bought or stole sons and their citizens killed each other to get them back. The cycle had no end in sight. It was sickening to think that they hadn't learned anything from the nuclear war, that only a handful of rebels had the courage to keep resisting.

Candice was one of the rare citizens who loathed their rulers. Some days, it was a struggle to

pretend otherwise. Candice had become skilled at hiding her true reflections, at controlling her violent emotions. That was as necessary for survival as breathing. Thanks to the apocalypse and then the Network, everyone was cursed for the atrocities that had been allowed, committed. Until humans were gone from the planet, women would have control and men would be what they shed their blood to possess. There was no cure for this disease, merely moments of calm between the slaughters. Achieving a stage of the illness that allowed some measure of control was all that had kept society from disintegrating again. Over the years, four stages of the disease had emerged. Candice was in stage two.

Around the checkpoint, bored troops stood up straighter. Some of the two dozen defenders recognized the markings on the mopar. The others responded to the wariness of their superiors and began scanning for rebels.

Candice waited at the final gate for the suspicious sentry to check her identification, spotting a rare, live interview happening on the stairs of the Justice Building nearby. Candice had been in there on several occasions to bear witness for her family, but she didn't like the cold, gray marble or the pretentious gold accents. In her mind, such a richly designed monument had no place among the rubble still left from the end of the world.

“Is there any news on RW? Has it mutated again?”

A rarely glimpsed member of the Network Council stood before a small group of reporters, wearing a fur robe with the hood up. Behind her pale skin was a line of intimidating guards who worked as Games security in the complex. Called defenders, in their downtime they provided personal protection for the wealthier citizens and of course, for the council.

Surprised that a bat was out of the cave, Candice lingered as long as she could, storing details.

“As you know, Rage Walkers disease has finally stopped killing the host, but it inflicts them with so much torment that they wish for death!” Tall, with a wide nose, Riana spoke in clipped bursts of indignation. “Many women do kill themselves to be free of the pain! It hurts on the inside, burning and stabbing, jabbing at our control until only blood can pacify it. That’s not an improvement. We need a *cure*.”

A front row reporter leaned in, dangling multicolored braids over her notepad. “Scientists still claim that a mate can ease the symptoms, but birth numbers don’t appear promising for that option. Does the Network plan to use illegal breeding programs to try increasing the male population?”

“It won’t be illegal, my dear.” Riana’s smile was charming, but her painted eyes glinted with

cold warning. “If we agree that it could help us recover from the terrible tragedy of our history, the council will clear those programs. There is no conspiracy.”

Another reporter picked up the questioning as Candice was waved through the gate with a slightly threatening stare that she ignored. Pruetts were always treated that way. They encouraged it.

“Council Woman Riana, can you tell us if the disease will mutate again?”

“No one knows,” Riana answered gravely. “Scientists refuse to guess if things might get better or worse. That worries everyone. You can’t blame them, considering that the annual population report has just revealed male births to be at less than 7%. The Network understands that it is time to increase our efforts.”

Candice refused to let her thoughts show as she drove by the interview. She also refused to ogle the reporters. The last thing she needed was to be recognized before officially checking in. Their rulers wouldn’t like her stealing airtime, but her family was always a popular fluff story with the media because they brought in so many fugitives. The public tallies made the Network appear as if they were keeping crime controlled, which was ridiculous. The Network caused most of the crime and arranged the rest of it personally. Their subjects just tried to survive.

*Or bring them down,* Candice corrected, discerning a shadow on the next building that

didn't belong there. Assassins were also common in New Network City, though none had been successful in her lifetime. That one wouldn't be either. The red of his shirt was a bad mix with the bright sky and the tan walls below him. When he was discovered, he would be executed or put into one of the games as an example to the public. That punishment was something that had kept rebel males fighting since the slavery law was announced. If those in charge were genuinely trying to protect the population by enslaving the men, then why keep killing them? The males could have been incarcerated and set up as donors. Instead, the Network had declared pregnancy illegal without a breeding pass, further cutting the number of possible male births. To the rebels, it appeared as if their rulers were helping to wipe them out.

Reaching the dome, Candice pulled into the tall garage to leave her vehicle for the week that she would be here. Her family, who was on the way, would take it with them when they left. If Candice did manage to walk out of this nightmare, she and her prize would take the train to Ohio.

The parking garage was immense, but the damp, concrete walls sent Candice's thoughts to the gossip she'd overheard on her last train ride. Where was this water coming from? The lands around New Network City spent most of the year parched, and the small river she had crossed to get into the city was too far away to provide moisture

in this garage. Rumors had speculated on an ocean border, but the wall around this area prevented anyone from confirming it. No one protested, however. The wall was for their protection from the savage world.

The sentries on the garage whispered and murmured, staring as Candice gave them her identification card.

The girl who handed it back didn't look at her. "Go on through."

She had little to fear, but Candice didn't say so. She had a family reputation to uphold.

All around the dome, women and their leashed slaves went about their tidy lives of shopping Network stores, trading Network credits, and using Network brothels. Those cheery red buildings lined one full block of the dingy, tan apartments that boxed-in the dome. Sentry stations were scattered around this ten-mile area, except for the stretch behind the complex. No one was allowed there, but rumor said it was where new slaves were brought in. Encasing the wealthy, surreal town that sat right outside the dome, were dozens of billboards and gigantic signs that advertised males for rent, rules of the city, and of course, entertainment. Vulture Run and Bachelor Battles were the two most popular of the bloody shows. Scenes from episodes flashed continuously on the giant advertisements.

As if it were perfectly normal to be holding another person on a tether, these junkies chatted



and argued while their male slaves stood docilely behind them. To Candice, the collared males and painted women were part of a nightmare that she only saw while awake. In her dreams, this awful indifference didn't exist. While she was here, she would try to determine if she could make that the reality for everyone.

Candice walked calmly up the glittery main stairs, not glancing around when howls of hounds and then screams rang out. If the rebels wanted to stand a real chance against the Network, assassins like that wouldn't do it. With the security here, it would take hundreds of fighters, not a few solo missions.

*"Welcome to the New Network City Dome,"* a voice came through a nearby speaker as Candice entered the warm building. *"Players must register for their game upon arrival. Please drop your card into any of the eight convenient slot boxes."*

Already hating that simpering computer, Candice did as instructed.

*"Please report to the main stage by 5:30 sharp. Those not signed in at the Block will be disbarred from this episode and fined. Remember, no battling until the official start at sunrise."*

The barriers locked with an audible click, and for Candice, there was no renouncing her choice. Not that she would have anyway. There was a short pause, and then an airy chime came as the gate on the center of the five arched entrances slid

open to admit her to the games section of the dome.

Following the neatly lettered signs, Candice quickly reached the big gateway to the Block, where the personal interviews took place. She was required to introduce herself.

She entered the lavish waiting area with black eyes despite the pink glints and growls that came her way upon recognition. Instead of getting angry or rising to the bait of the other contestants, she grinned.

The growls doubled.

These females didn't want to be here, but they were driven by the disease. Candice, on the other hand, was eager to pay someone back for her torment and it showed. She was *allowed* to kill while here. The freedom was indescribable.

Candice took a spot along the wall to study the competition while waiting for her name to be called. This area was full of defenders to keep players from fighting before the cameras could catch every drop of blood. Candice evaluated them with the contestants. Depending on the outcome, the information could come in handy. Candice had made it a habit to gather knowledge since changing, and it had helped her to master some of the rage. She had already made it further into the disease than many females who flipped so young, but her family still couldn't believe that she had signed up for something as deadly as the Bachelor Battles. So what if the thing she wanted, *needed*

the most, could only be found here? What she was doing was crazy, her mother had said, maybe even suicidal. She would be extremely lucky to come out alive.

Candice honestly couldn't wait for it to start.

“Welcome back to this week's episode!” the announcer blared through the speakers. “If you are just tuning in, we've been learning about the players as they take their mandatory stroll of the Block. Are ya ready for the next contestant?”

The large crowd cheered wildly as the red curtains on the stage opened. The wall screens in the waiting area showed jeweled stars made of gold flashing in barter for supplies, weapons, rooms, and slaves. Visitors and residents, most employed by the council, shoved through the rowdy crowd in tight, tan pants and flowing leather tunics adorned by worn weapon belts and scarred skin. The silver and black jumpers of the defenders were a vivid contrast as they tried to keep control over the sprawling audience.

The Block, a protruding stage in the direct center of the complex, held viewers on three sides and prizes in a small, shielded pen on the fourth. There were thousands of faces crammed into this arena, enthusiastically betting on who would die first. Candice suddenly loved them all. They were her kind.

“We're at contestant number seven, who has just arrived... Let's meet Candice Pruett!”

The crowd cheered again as her image appeared on the gigantic screen above the lavish stage.

Candice padded forward, ignoring the roaring noise and glare of the flashing lights. It had been long, bloody years, but she was finally here. That relief allowed her to step into view with the confidence of her career. She wasn't a little kid anymore. She was a full-grown changeling with the fury of almost a decade to drive her. Their rulers had no idea what they had done by allowing her to sign up at all, but they would learn. When you stole something from a Pruett, there was a price to be paid. The longer the wait for payment, the harsher the penalty became, and forgiveness was not an option. Neither was mercy.

## Chapter Two

# The Block

### 1

**S**creaming fans in the center of the vast Network complex shoved forward to get a better view as Candice emerged onto the main stage—far below the shiny cages where she would battle for her prize. Set up like a honeycomb, they called this part The Block and she stepped forward to walk it.

“At almost twenty, this intimidating bounty hunter resides in the recovery zone of southern Ohio...” The announcer took a breath and continued to read the profile. “Carrying a criminal record for excessive force, she was fined over one million UD\$ for injury to a family member. This brutal changeling has no mercy. Her rank at the start of this week’s competition is fifth.”

There were hundreds of faces around the main stage and then thousands more behind and above those. The arena-like rafters rising to the sky gave an impression of being endless.

“A top-rated hunter, Miss Pruett excels in fifteen types of weaponry. Her crew is also one of the few permitted to carry firearms. However, as you know, guns are illegal at these games for everyone.”

Pulling on the shield she had developed over hard nights of waiting, Candice circled the stage. She hated being on display.

“This isn’t the first time Candice Pruett has been in the dome, folks. At fourteen she was caught trying to enter this very game and sent home!”

Troops around the bachelors aimed their weapons at the crowd as hungry women slapped and clawed to reach them. Candice used the distraction to scan those prizes, finding a familiar profile. *Daniel!*

A snarling woman with red eyes shoved through the cards and lunged for the bachelors.

She was hammered into a bloody pile with the butts of multiple guns.

Daniel cringed away from them all in fear.

Candice saw his ankle chain then. A fast examination revealed all the males were bound at hands and feet with cuffs. If there w a stampede, they would be defenseless.

Sweeping the audience, Candice picked out pink eyes littering the stands as women tried to sneak closer to the prizes. The crowd was betting and arguing, lovers were embracing, vendors were roaming the churning mass, but each changeling repeatedly scanned the small group of enslaved males. The women watched the bachelors as much as the stage, sniffing and wiping drool. Why would the Network put men in danger this way?

Hoping to settle the crowd herself, Candice let her eyes change to light pink—a new strength that had come with Stage Two of the disease. She held a tiny bit more control over herself now.

“Wow!” the announcer broke through Candice’s mental spin. “She has the Network patch on her wrist, which means she won the time trials in Adelpia and received half a million UDs! Bet we’ll see a lot more of her.”

Snapped back into her walk of the Block, Candice hid a sneer. The reporter had no idea how right she was. Candice had come to win and she would stoop to any level. After forcing the information from her mother, Candice had chosen an old technique that she hadn’t witnessed a contestant use during her lifetime.

She walked toward those deceptively safe red curtains, tugging a string to let her cloak fall to the floor. Under it, she wore a laced outfit of thin, black strips that left her backside gloriously bare from ears to thighs. Most players displayed their weapons at this point, trying to prove their level of threat to earn those much-needed ratings, draping themselves with killing tools to flaunt their power. Candice had chosen to achieve the same results, using only her battered body.

There was silence for three full seconds, allowing the cameras to zoom in on her badges of honor. She had been shot, stabbed, bitten, broken, and beaten for years. Candice was covered in proof that Pruetts were hard to kill.

“That might boost her rantings enough to start the competition with both food and medical credits!” The announcer gushed. “Will you check out those scars! Oh! And nice tattoos!”

The aroused crowd cheered wildly as Candice rotated, revealing more thin black strips that spider-webbed over her tanned body. She appeared almost nude except for the pale scars that gleamed like deadly jewels and the detailed ink that circled her taut skin like a snake.

Pausing near the microphone, Candice grinned at the now betting, laughing, chatting audience. “Never bet against a Pruett. You’ll lose your ass.”

The crowd roared laughter and agreement. Her family had a reputation they’d spread through Network lands by being good at what they did.

Candice bent over to retrieve her cloak, giving a view of her rear end that sent the noise to new levels and caused the bachelors to shove forward against their own protection. The Network wanted their guys to act willing for the cameras, but Candice knew they were drugged, tortured, and brainwashed. She was using it and earning points from the audience at the same time. She had interrupted the boring introductions, made it fun. They would be generous with their votes.

Candice slid the cloak into place over her tattooed, battle-scarred body, letting her eyes flash into the dangerous shade of pink changelings were known for. It was a warning. When their irises phased into red, it was usually too late.



Now the main story, Candice was sure she had bumped her rank. It was embarrassing, but she had handled it flawlessly...except, she couldn't glance away from the bachelors who had obviously been wound up before the show. They were shouting, standing against the troops in a rare display of courage that drew the women around them like sizzling blood.

Candice was suddenly in too much pain to use the rage. She'd waited almost a decade, fearing every night that he was being hurt and she'd been right. His face was harder now, still as pale, and it appeared that his nose had been broken, but she couldn't be positive. It was Daniel, though—from the full lips to that pointed jawline.

Candice fastened her cloak and retreated, trying to recover her emotionless façade.

She registered a presence waiting in the curtains as she stepped through.

Something sharp went around her throat.

*Not flawless.*

Cries of delight spilled through the arena as the viewers realized there was an assassination attempt happening. Fresh squads flooded the stands in brutal control. The people pushing to get a better view were hit, hurt, killed.

“That’s my patch!” A sweaty woman snarled in Candice’s ear, blade pressing into her throat. “You stole it! I need that money!”

Candice struggled to breathe, to think around the rage. “Not anymore.” Opposite hand shoving

up to break the hold, Candice snapped the wrist around her neck with a vicious twist. As they spun, she brought her elbow in from the other direction and slammed it into her attacker's unprotected throat. The crunch was grotesque.

The would-be assassin began to suffocate, sliding to her knees.

Candice kicked her in the chin, snapping the assassin's head back and knocking her onto her back.

"Please...don't..."

Candice took two fast steps and stomped again.

Blood sprayed from the woman's mouth, speckling the floor. She stopped breathing a few seconds later.

Candice spun, searching for the next threat and all the while, the audience studied her every move.

Taking tight breaths, she pulled the rage in, but it went slowly, reluctantly.

"As you know, that's illegal!" the announcer reminded everyone, happy to have the excitement on her shift. "Players are not supposed to attack until the official chime at sunrise. Candice will not be fined for defense."

Eyes flickering pink and red, Candice waved the twitchy, neutered medic over. "Send it to my parents."

With a cool nod to the camera, she exited the stage as the announcer began to repeat it in brutal detail.

Candice ignored the heart screaming not to leave Daniel there. By morning, she would be one of the main contestants to beat, to ambush. *Good.* The sooner they attacked and she killed them, the sooner she would have what she came for.

“What a terrific start to this week’s show! Okay, our next contestant is...the Ex-Defender! Fresh from losing fugitives in the deserts of Nebraska, this former guard seeks to make amends by donating her prize to the breeding program if she wins. Baker, the dangerous rebel male who escaped under her watch, is still missing. It has lowered the Ex-Defender’s rank to seventh...”

## 2

Candice took her id card from the scanner as she left the backstage area, noting the first golden star on the top of it. She grunted in satisfaction, ignoring the disappointed troops that had to have been bribed to allow her assassin’s attack. Less than two hours in the city, with half of it spent checking in, and she’d already earned her first star, her first protector. *Nice.* Coming from an employee gate, the sentry fell in step with a menace Candice admired. All defenders wore the same black and silver jumper with a red Games arrow over the right shoulder and a wide belt with an array of tools meant to cause harm—tools they enjoyed using. Defenders were former winners

who were too old to keep fighting, but too driven by the disease to get completely out of the action.

As Candice walked, she swept her competition. The Network ran an episode of this show every week, featuring ten brutal females who fought to the death. The single woman remaining at the end won a slot on the Block, meaning her choice of the prizes. Candice grinned, fiercely.

The others in the hall flinched.

There were five current contestants in the long corridor, marked by their wary postures. Candice evaluated, searching for flaws. She found them—from an awkward step that could be tripped for a quick deathblow, to a hair vanity that could be exploited.

She grinned again, more confidently, and they recoiled further. Apparently, they hadn't found the same weaknesses in her.

The passage was decorated in red and black walls covered with photos. Each of them displayed a bloody and battered female with a wild, victorious profile. Candice tried not to linger on the one who was familiar. So far, no one knew her for anything more than rounding up New American garbage. They'd forgotten the other Pruett who had come to these games two decades ago and left with a prize.

Candice took in her surroundings with the attention to detail she was known for. She'd been on the family crew for more years than her mother had reported to the Network, as had her cousin, but

this was only the second time she'd been in the dome. She wanted to remember every detail.

Powered by massive generators, the annoying hum was a constant sound that kept this complex bathed in flickering yellow light. Most of the surrounding populations still made do with homemade candles and Candice loathed the hum for what it represented. The drafty halls she now walked were neat and free of apocalypse debris, one of the few places to be so. In contrast, this city still had entire blocks crumbling into centuries-old decay. In those dark alleys and shadowy graveyards, rebellion lurked.

The complex, covered with a clear dome, stood as a gleaming beacon in the distance meant to entrap. The streets further out were lightless paths through hell for those forced to live there, but their rulers were apathetic at best about the condition of their subjects. In here, they were protected from the misery they caused. The Network had built that lavish palace of apartments outside, providing shelter for important employees and visiting persons of value. They knew how to pamper those they needed, but the average citizens... There were always lines at the few stores, often stretching out of sight and the two churches allowed to operate in the city limits had front lawns hidden in the tents of widows and orphaned girls. Cats, along with rats, were nonexistent. The people were thin, jumpy from being under control of cameras and public executions. Anyone suspected of being in

league with the rebels was shown no mercy. Candice had passed these signs on her way into the city with no change in expression, but her heart had hardened.

Candice found her room easily, but before she could open the door, the guard did it and then vanished inside to verify there were no assassins waiting. Candice scanned the hall. Her attention was quickly absorbed by the room across the neatly tiled floor. Several naked males wearing collars were servicing a woman in scarlet robes. They were feeding her, brushing her hair, singing softly. Bruises didn't mar their skin and their flesh didn't hang from their bones, but they were still slaves. This was proven when the player shoved one of them against the bedpost and ran her claws down his bare chest.

Blood welled, drawing a frown from Candice. The prizes went through harsh training that was supposed to turn them into harmless mates. She'd been around these captives her entire life and yet, she didn't understand how they could refuse to fight for their freedom.

"Would you like one of them for an hour, Pruett?" the woman across the hall offered arrogantly. "They're well trained, even the newest."

Candice listened to the male grunt in pain, vision going pale pink. Hoping to confirm the blonde's identity, Candice said, "I'll have my own to abuse shortly."

“That’s *my* title, Pruett,” the Bombshell stated flatly. “You’ll win death.”

“Death is what we’ve come here for,” Candice stated harshly. “This episode has *your* name on it.”

“Not Me. I want the job of head defender and I’ll kill as many of you as I need to in order to have it,” the woman informed Candice, standing. “The job will ensure that I’m obeyed and feared, two things I require in all my subjects. Once I make Boss, then I’ll get on the ruling council. I won’t be just the Blonde Bombshell for long.”

“All lies. You came here hoping someone might be able to help you end your agony,” Candice called the bluff. “I *can* do that for you.

The bombshell glowered.

Candice stared at the beauty. Her name wasn’t unearned. The woman had delicate cheekbones set under thin, hard skin that had clearly had a better life than most. Platinum hair hung to her hips in neatly brushed strands that glinted.

“There are easier ways to die,” the Bombshell hissed dangerously.

“Care to step out and learn one you may not know yet?” Candice asked cheerfully. The woman was trying to be menacing, but Candice was a bounty hunter. Words didn’t frighten her. Hardly anything did.

“Come dawn, Pruett,” the Bombshell chuckled scornfully in response. “Come the dawn.”

Another sound of pain came from the male that was trapped and Candice felt her nails begin to grow into nasty claws. She didn't like that.

The Bombshell knew and hurt her slave again, goading.

“Dawn came early,” Candice stated mockingly, now letting the Bombshell wind her up. She enjoyed these moments. Her muscles began to swell, preparing. “Unless you're scared of a Pruett whelp...”

The Bombshell growled lowly at the direct challenge, the male she had trapped forgotten. She advanced.

Candice took up a fighting stance. Goading a Pruett didn't work. They never backed down.

At that moment, the guard came out of Candice's flat. She recognized the tension for what it was and hurriedly stepped between them in firm denial. “You'll both be disqualified.”

Candice inspected the Bombshell, who had also paused. “Dawn, then?”

“On my life, Pruett!” the Bombshell tossed out, not sounding as controlled now.

Candice smirked as she entered her room. “Remember those words.”

Before shutting the door, Candice did another solid sweep of the hall, noting the barriers and cameras, the people moving by. She marked the exits and the sense that she was being observed from multiple angles. Candice was in danger every second, in the cage or not. For her, the drive, the



agony of the disease, was as potent, but it wasn't why she'd come. She had hoped that would give her an advantage, along with her profession.

As Candice stored more information, like no windows in these halls either, only walls and sentries, she realized it didn't matter anymore. During the solitary trip she'd insisted on to get to New Network City, Candice had worried about not being good enough, about surviving somehow even if she lost, but she didn't want that now. If she couldn't go home with her prize, she'd rather be dead.

Candice's room was just that—a flat with a couch, wall screen, kitchen, and washroom, all of it an ugly green. It held scurrying shadows and questionable smells, but Candice pushed it aside with her usual attitude of 'whatever it takes'. She had spent the night in worse during runs, and at least this den would stay stocked with whatever she needed as long as she won each match.

Candice pushed the volume button on the wall screen as she went to the tiny wash area, wincing at the reporter's loud, scratchy voice as it blared from the Network equipment.

“The Blonde Bombshell legally changed her name from Cassandra Rowe after winning her first episode at eighteen years old. So far, she has survived five of the sixteen shows the Network offers. It is rumored that she's shooting for the job of Head Defender. Ironically enough, the former

owner of that title is one of the contestants that the Bombshell will play against in this episode.

“In other news, a family of rebel sympathizers was stoned in front of the Justice building yesterday. Found guilty of helping Baker evade custody, they will also forfeit all land, accounts, and assets. Baker, the dangerous rebel male, is still on the loose.”

After a quick stop and wash, Candice hit the couch, vaguely aware of the reporter still talking. It had been a rough, cold ride on the mopar to get here. She was beat.

“In a long expected move, the Council voted today to unanimously outlaw renting to those infected with leprosy. Commonly called Desert Glowers, those inflicted with the disease have already been banned from most public places. Many towns already have such a law, and now, New Network City will also be protected. Please be a good citizen and report those who do not belong here.”

Candice took out a bandolier with rows of blades and spikes, and began filling the empty belt around her hips. She hadn't wanted her rivals to see her weapons during the introductions, but at dawn the chime would ring and the battling would start. She needed to be ready.

After her belt was full, Candice refilled the bandolier from a pouch in her cloak and then placed it into a more conveniently reached pocket.

“Now, a clip of last month’s Bachelor Battles highlights. Roll it, Phyllis.”

The screen changed to the rusty bridge Candice had crossed upon arriving. On stilts to avoid spring flooding, the bridge had swayed and shuddered as she rolled over—much like it was doing on the screen.

Candice leaned against the buggy couch as she studied the two women who were battling the rocking bridge as much as they were each other. She recognized the musclebound blonde right away. The Bombshell, her hall mate, was the reigning champion and the first contestant in more than two centuries to claim a mate and then sign up to defend her crown. Candice had heard another rumor that the Bombshell was doing this one as a bounty for the Network, who wanted their former defender out of the way. The Bombshell was one of the nine players that Candice would fight, maybe as soon as dawn.

The champion on the screen used her elbow to land a vicious hit to the taller female’s nose, causing her opponent to go careening off the bridge and vanish under the icy sludge below. The Bombshell screamed in triumph. Cassandra wasn’t very intimidating at all—just those emotionless eyes and that was worrisome. It was like staring into a mirror. Out of the contestants that Candice had researched, two were real competition—the Bombshell and the Ex-Defender. Candice stretched, feeling the drive behind her every action

for the last years. It didn't matter. Soon, she would have her prize or an end to this pain, and she planned to enjoy the blood along the way.

Candice took a small box with a pair of oddly shaped glasses from her cloak, stowing the container. She put them on, changing her view to infrared. There was one more thing she wanted to gather information on before she slept.

Candice peered through the tinted window behind her, acutely aware of the bars over it. In the pitch black shadows behind the dome, there was a building she'd never seen before, that couldn't be viewed from the other three angles. Using the zoom feature on the glasses revealed a whip being used on slaves in chains as they carried in boxes from what appeared to be a boat dock.

Candice quickly pulled the glasses off and shoved them onto her belt, shooting discreet glances at the camera in the corner. Her pink irises, she hid.

“Now for an update from the Vulture Run Nursery!” the announcer yelled. “The predators are still protecting the son of a rebel traitor who was added to the game as a punishment last year. The child seems to be doing well, unlike the criminals trying to survive in the Undead Fields. That small group lost two more overnight and the odds are high for all of the in-game convicts to be dead by morning...”

Candice was jarred from ugly reflections by a beep from her wrist communicator. She hit the button to read the message from her cousin.

*Be there soon.*

Candice stretched out on the tattered couch without sending a reply. She didn't want her family here, but they weren't safer at home while she was in the games. Assassins could show up anywhere.

Candice pulled her knife, tugged her thick cloak over herself, and curled up with the blade resting against her cheek. The Pruett family crest—a rose winding around a dagger—was comforting against her skin.

As she drowsed, rain began to drum on the rubber roof of the complex. Candice realized the dome must be open. She hadn't heard it and that concerned her a bit. How much technology did the Network have?

*Enough to have built a wall around the entire country to fence us in, without most citizens ever realizing,* she answered herself. The rest of the world was rumored to be worse off than New America, but Candice wondered if that was true. After using some of the technology their rulers hoarded for their own use, she wasn't convinced that anyone should still be struggling to recuperate from the apocalypse. The Network had a lot of explaining to do. To have a chance at those answers, she just had to kill more of her fellow women.

Upon recalling Daniel's scars, his fear, Candice didn't think that would be hard. This rage had to go somewhere.

Chapter Three  
**Luck of the Draw**

1

“Welcome to Round One of the Bachelor Battles!”

There was a pause for the crowd to settle down. It was clear that this game was a favorite. Standing on a platform that had slid out of the wall, Candice studied the screen where live shots of the contestants were featured in small blocks around the edges. The center of the monitor displayed the cage and packed stands of restless people waiting for the fighting to begin.

“While the numbers come up, let’s go over some of the basic rules,” the announcer skillfully distracted the crowd. “As you know, ten contestants will fight to the death for their choice of the prizes. Attacks and battles are forbidden in the halls or private rooms. Everywhere else is fair game, and as usual, anyone can kill a contestant, including friends, family, and outsourced labor. A single tour of the bachelor cells will be provided to each player, with light sampling allowed.”

The crowd roared laughter, forcing the announcer to wait for them to quiet to continue. Candice was listening from her flat, as were the

others who'd signed up for this suicide. Games like the one she was now in were running simultaneously throughout the complex. Some women signed up to outrun the hounds or to fight the walking dead, but it was the battles against other changelings that held the post-apocalyptic audiences spellbound. Outside these walls was a different struggle, not controlled or neatly regulated. It was one they couldn't bet on or enjoy. Out there, people were killing each other for their sons and the council did nothing to help. In fact, families who fell out of favor with their rulers were denied access to their credits so they would have to sell their male children to survive.

“Our Luck of the Draw fighter will face three contestants in a row for the first round of matches. Viewers will vote on the challengers each morning. If our Luck of the Draw winner is defeated, the Network will pick a replacement. No other battles are held during this time, but attacks and assassination attempts are encouraged.”

In the corner of her flat, another platform rose from the floor and a dial slid out of the grungy green wall. *“Please step onto the scanner and remain motionless,”* the computer ordered.

Candice did as instructed and saw herself flash onto one of those small blocks lining the outer edges of the wall screen. It wasn't unreasonable to think people might underestimate her because of her size. She was shorter than most of the contestants and her profile was a slightly chubby



frame that implied she spent her free time on the couch enjoying these shows instead of training for them. It was a lie, of course. The heaviness came from the disease, an effect that the vain Network females never admitted to. It gave women a fuller, rounder figure that the socialites loathed. As for the small size, if they saw Candice like her family did daily, thick arms straining while blood dripped unnoticed, they might take more care. She was glad the media hadn't shown any of those images. Surprise was another advantage she employed on bounty runs and it was definitely necessary here.

“The contestants are now being evaluated by a Network computer specifically designed to determine which of our players has the best chance to win. Sending them against three fighters in a row is meant to take away the edge of the fittest over those who've had less training.”

The center of the screen flashed to a dial that began spinning between the names of this week's players. Candice didn't experience anything as the blue light went over her body in slow revolutions. On the wall screen, numbers and stats began to pop up. The figures were familiar. When her name had been announced last month, Candice's mother had dug into the computer and pulled the models. They'd discovered what the estimates would be and made sure she fit. There wouldn't be any luck involved if they had done it right. She would be chosen and not spend the next two days waiting.

She wanted to be on the offensive and when you were a Pruett, there were ways.

*“Thank you. Please step off,”* the computer stated.

Candice did and watched herself disappear from the screen. The results would take a few minutes to come in. She studied the half dozen contestants that were still being scanned. This was the time when the world placed their bets and made their predictions. It was also when players usually sized each other up according to what they had read and noticed, but for Candice, it was time to pass impatiently. She'd done her homework before coming.

“We will have our Luck of the Draw fighter in a moment, but before that, here's a reminder on the protection that our contestants can earn from their matches. Stars are given for each kill, for high popularity, and by council decision. Each star will gain the contestant one defender in the halls and private rooms, and a fresh cache of weapons, food, and medical credits. Stars cannot be lost, but during Round Two, they can be given away to protect someone else, such as visiting family.”

There was a pause where Candice's nerves started to get the best of her. She wanted this to be over and the fighting to begin. Her vision flickered to pink at the thought.

“And the results are ready! We'll hit the button here, and okay, we'll have the name when the dial stops. Let's watch the screen now...”

The audience waited as impatiently as the players did. The mob of spectators outside the complex was made up of those who couldn't afford a ticket and they were loud enough to be picked up by the Network speakers as the announcer called the name, "Candice M. Pruett!"

*"You have been scheduled for a match in one hour. Please report to the main arena on time."* The voice came from the console in her flat.

At the same time, the announcer filled in the listening viewers. "Our Luck of the Draw contestant is Candice Pruett! Will this vicious bounty hunter survive the first three matches? The computer thinks so. Wadda ya say, folks? Wanna place a bet or two?"

Candice waited to see who she would kill in the first match, thinking of the harsh training that she'd done with her current lover to get here. When she'd met him, Baker hadn't been a convict, but he had been a tool she'd used to improve her chances of surviving.

"And the first contestant our bounty hunting changeling will play against is...Diva, Queen of the Bronx Club! This street fighter likes to use her bare hands and has a passion for singing. She has been known to hum while bashing in her opponent's--"

Candice flipped the screen off. *Finally!*

“Cage Match One!”

Candice didn't arrive early and expose her impatience for this moment. She was already suffering like an animal that had been boxed up too long and gone insane from it. That couldn't be known.

Candice walked down the fenced area with even steps, coldness settling into her chest at the sight of the Diva. The Bronx woman was enormous. She wondered if that had also been rigged. If so, it wouldn't matter. She wasn't going to lose to this slave trading gang leader.

The arched cage was a small steel dome with a bar between the players that slid down as Candice entered. The bars held deep scratches from claws and the floor mat was forever stained with specks of blood. The sides of the 12'x12' fighting area were fenced, as much to keep contestants in as the crowd out. It was also lined with tiny, durable cameras for those zoomed shots that the masses craved.

Candice let no expression give away her thoughts as the hulking female in front of her cracked knuckles and leered. Nicked and scratched, the big woman's scars were numerous but light, telling Candice the Diva was good at ending the fight before her opponent could get close enough to deliver a serious injury. Dressed in white shorts and a half top that accented the size of her, it was clear the woman was a brawler, but Candice was a killer.

She stepped forward eagerly. “You want out?” Candice goaded, testing limits.

“I’m more than you can chew, little girl,” the Diva sneered.

Candice grinned, positive it would anger her opponent. The entire arena streamed with vivid flashes of brilliant blue light meant to make the battle harder, more entertaining. The sound of the audience screaming was overwhelming as the match began.

Candice didn’t wince at the roar when the bell came and she didn’t move when the Diva charged. What she did was get set, mentally running through the best reaction in an instant. As the Diva reached her, Candice ducked, leaning forward to drive her palm into the woman’s large nose.

*Crunch!*

Blood splashed over Candice as she gave the final killing shove to silence the howls of agony spewing from the woman’s mouth.

The Diva dropped to the mat with a damp, meaty thud.

Candice mentally added her gang to an already long list of enemies.

There was silence at the swift execution.

“Match to Pruett!”

More silence...and then chaos. Cheers and shouts erupted, contestants and viewers screaming in disbelief. These were the city residents and favorites of the ruling council. They lived for the shows and the blood, and they only cared for the

favors their masters doled out to keep a wealthy following. *Useless*, Candice thought. She especially despised those who modeled for the Network or acted in their promo clips. Starlets had no place in this new world, except as bones under Pruett boots.

“Next?” she asked the cameras with an arrogant lilt.

Shaking the Diva’s blood from her short, black spikes, Candice exited the cage without a thought for the lumbering giant she’d defeated. Diva had been a replacement contestant for the assassin Candice had killed after her stroll on the Block. The gang-banger had been dead before her name was chosen.

Candice grinned, letting the shouts and jeers drive back the need to spill more blood. As she walked up the fenced cage length, ignoring those pleading on the other side for mercy for their family member, she felt the tingle of being glared at in hatred. It was so strong that she spun around to discover which contestant it was.

The Bombshell was cloaked in vivid scarlet, standing with two weaker females on the balcony above the cage. Long lashes framed cold, golden eyes and hand-arched brows added to the sense of menace. The Bombshell waved.

Candice gave her the finger.

Candice was in the protection of her two guards as soon she entered the hall, tucking the double starred id card into a bloody pocket. She

disliked the Bombshell immensely for playing these games so willingly. Why anyone would want to work for such brutal masters? Only the heartless were loyal to the Network. Candice suspected the Bombshell would fit the job. *Maybe I need to kill her to save the lives she'll take during her reign.* Candice couldn't spare the concentration to examine ulterior motives further than that.

### 3

“Next, we have Candice Marie Pruett, that brutal changeling from Ohio whose family fills their credits by bounty hunting for the Network, as well as for independent clients. Her antics last night at the opening ceremony definitely stirred up those lonely bachelors. Tell us, sweetheart, why the stunt? Are babies so important to you?”

The reporter was a snarky little twit with sarcastic green eyes. Candice smiled coolly, returning the sentiment. “Not really, no. You understand right, after being denied a breeding pass because of your height?”

The reporter flushed scarlet.

Candice waited. She had made a bitter enemy with her perfect guess. Without a breeding pass, the only way to get a male was to steal one. The reporter had obviously chosen to keep her career and forgo a family. The reporters were supposed to be unshakable, but Candice had never witnessed anyone try. She was determined to prove them all

liars and stooges. This game would be played on as many of her terms as she could get away with.

“Moving on...umm, your ratings went through the roof, up to number three, and there’s a picture of your rear on every morning paper. How does that make you feel?”

Prepared for the attack—it wasn’t so much an interview as it was a stabbing to detect weakness—Candice shrugged. “Loved.”

She smirked when the reporter made a curt motion for the cue card change.

“Um... What about the woman you brutally killed? Even though it was before the official start of the episode, do you think it was fair of the council to draft the Diva as a replacement contestant?”

“It was great. I came for the fights.” Candice leaned in. “You wouldn’t wanna have a go, would you?”

The reporter flinched out of reach as if Candice had slapped her perfectly made-up face.

Candice chuckled. “Guess not.”

“Back to you, Dana.” The reporter recovered quicker this time, but the shaking of her toga as she made a cut motion gave her away to Candice and the watching world.

The camera light went to red and the woman hastily exited the lavish set, not sparing Candice another glance.

Candice doubted that reporter would be the one to interview her after she won her next match. She



was still smirking as she retrieved the ID card. Not then, and probably not even after she'd won it all.

#### 4

“Cage match two!”

Candice was impassive to her opponent's hissed threats as they met at the dividing bar in the center. That misshapen nose and crooked chin said the Karate Teen's training to get this far hadn't been easy. As the girl came through the fenced area, she had performed an impressive set of kicks and jumps that had pleased the crowd and shown Candice where she would be unprotected. Candice expected to take a hit or two, but the karate girl would go down hard. Cool and calm, Candice got set. *She is in the way of what I came here for. She will move!*

Candice took the Karate Teen off guard from the ring of the bell, twisting as if to grab the mercy rope above them. The girl was in the air for a nasty kick when Candice spun around, clawed hands reaching out.

Karate girl struggled against the iron grip that Candice took on her throat and thigh, but Candice slammed her down on a bent knee as hard as she could.

*Crack!*

Karate Teen went limp, head lolling.

Candice let the body slide to the mat as she stood.

“Match to Pruett!”

The rage was a red haze over her sight, wanting more. Candice growled in fury as she saw the menacing blonde in the balcony again. *She* would be a real fight... “More!”

Candice hadn’t meant to offer a challenge, but she roared in anger when the Bombshell walked away. Her disinterested attitude was enraging.

Candice struggled to control it, to keep from flipping in front of the whole world. When she glanced down, the dead girl’s profile blurred, features becoming her own.

“*You killed me,*” the Candice ghost accused. “*Thank you.*”

“My honor!” Candice responded hotly. Emotions overwhelmed her. The cheering was so loud! Her skull thumped painfully as she grabbed her id and shoved her way into the quiet of the hall. She escaped the noise and the bloodlust of the crowd, but not the guilt. Candice had prepared for everything. The death attempts, the schedule meant to weaken, to distract. She had even hardened herself enough to ignore *him*. What she hadn’t counted on was the shame.

Candice’s guards hung back, unsure of her mood. Perhaps they understood, but it was unlikely. She didn’t feel bad for killing. She felt bad for enjoying it so much, for being so *good* at it.

## 5

In Candice's dreams, the real world didn't exist. Nuclear war hadn't happened. Men hadn't been enslaved for their own protection. There hadn't been centuries of fighting for control of them or for survival of the disease that was ravaging their population. In her dreams, there was no shortage of men. There was no need for a global list that women were placed on at birth for a mate from the lottery, and certainly no cause for Network programs where baby-hungry women fought to the death. She had always known which way she would go, but Candice still longed for an end to it all.

Her dreams flashed through deadly lessons and attacks being perfected until they were razor sharp, all shadowed by a completeness that she had never appreciated until it was gone and replaced by this...this *hunger*.

*"I will come for you!"*

*He trembled, only a boy (my boy!) at his parent's mercy. My grip tightened. He was being sold. I couldn't stop it.*

*At eleven, Daniel was pale, slender from not getting enough to eat, and his weak arms and legs weren't shaped quite right. It was the reason his family had kept him beyond the usual age of eight and the reason we'd had these years together. Now, they were over. I was about to be desolate.*

*"I will find you!"*

*Daniel's blue eyes were full of panic that I couldn't ease.*

*"You promise?"*

*I pressed my lips to his, tasting my new fury, his tears. "On my life, Daniel!"*

Candice jerked upright on the buggy couch.

Daniel had been taken a long time ago, a childhood friend and companion sold into slavery. Now she was here, in the very game for his papers. He would be hers again in a week if she were strong enough, if she could win.

## 6

### The Network

"Why didn't you tell the council a Pruett was in the lineup?"

The two members were alone, with the microphones off.

"I assumed they would read the sheets, like I do," came the calm reply. The leader didn't like being questioned, but patience was required right now.

"What if she wins?" Terry asked as they lingered by the glass windows. "The others sent me to find out."

"Tell them plans are in place," the ranking council member answered. They had all observed the match together while the most nervous of the council gathered the courage to speak.

“I hope it’s good,” Terry insisted. “Because *she* is.”

“She’s a Pruett,” the leader responded dryly. “Did you expect less?”

“Yes, frankly, I did.”

There was silence for a minute as the two rulers studied the chaos on the screens that rimmed the windows. Two sisters, rebel sympathizers, were being burned in front of the Justice building. The noise outside the dome was almost as loud as that of the crowd still celebrating the last match. Death, in person or on the screens, was captivating to changelings. The council had been using that fact since they’d taken control.

“The others want answers,” Terry pushed, growing adamant. “I have to tell them something. No one likes her being here.”

“Tell the Bombshell to hire help if it eases their panic,” the leader offered tolerantly.

“We need Rankin. The Bombshell isn’t good enough for this one.”

“Rankin is busy. But the reporters aren’t.”

“Those spineless scabs—”

“Are under our control, are they not?” the leader interrupted stonily, tiring of the questions. The rest of the council might interfere if they actually knew what those carefully laid plans were. They would be told details only as they needed to know them.

“Mostly,” Terry replied, calming. “I’ll dig into it. What about the rebels and the leadership

meeting? The deadline from the UN? How can we get all of that to go our way?"

The ranking council member gave a grin that Candice would have recognized for the violent warning it held. "Plans are in place."

Terry didn't argue further, recognizing the line of patience at the repeated answer.

The leader remained at the windows, mind racing as Terry left. With the big meeting coming up, anything could happen. The east and west coast got together once every fifty years. The next generation of leaders was supposed to be chosen in two months, but the east had a surprise for her sisters in the west. Sharing control over this wild land was no longer an option.

"What did the boss say?" Riana fell in step as Terry left the council meeting room. "Did you make it clear how upset the rest of us are?"

Terry kept walking, getting them out of earshot of the door. "Plans are in place."

Riana snorted, but kept her voice to a low mutter. "That's what we always hear."

"Yeah."

The women took the private elevator to the top level, where all ten members had a large suite stocked with everything they could think of. The squeaky floors warned security of their arrival, keeping them quiet. These guards reported directly to the boss. No one spoke in front of them.

Riana led her lover into their apartment and flipped off the recording section of the security system. Now free to speak, she held out a comforting hand. “We have to make plans for our future.”

Terry let Riana embrace her, knowing they needed to whisper. It was possible the boss was watching them on the cameras. Those couldn't be shut off.

“We need to hire someone.”

Riana tensed against Terry's perfectly coil hair. “It's time?”

“I believe so. It'll take months to set up.”

“Do you want me to handle that?”

Terry shook her head, letting go. “I want you to behave and follow the rules.”

Riana smiled submissively, body lighting up. “Can I offer you a service?”

Terry chuckled. She began unbuttoning her robe. “Make it quick. I want to be back in the control room before our evening updates on the power meeting.”

Riana dropped to her knees and moved closer over the plush blue carpet. “Have you ever been to one?”

“I provided security there, before I began fighting for a higher place. It's a month of non-stop booze, slaves, and food. I must have gained twenty pounds.”

“Well, you sure look good now.” Riana got to work.

Terry leaned her head back, enjoying the attention, but her mind was in other places. She needed to find someone more ruthless than their boss, but the only name that kept coming to mind was Candice Pruett. Anyone else would die in the attempt or give them up upon capture. The Pruett's were legendary for getting a job done, but more importantly, they could be hired anonymously. All it took was a token that Terry didn't have. Pruett's gave a favor for a favor, but Terry didn't have anything they needed. She would have to find a way to push Candice's family into a corner without her boss knowing.

“Easy...careful...” Her claws shot out, digging into Riana's shoulder as fire flew along her nerve endings. “Stay low... Go slow...”

Riana was used to Terry using their physical moments for planning. She didn't mind. Terry had gotten them this far. Riana couldn't imagine trusting anyone as much. They were soulmates.



Chapter Four

# The Games We Play

1

Candice's next interview was at dawn on day two, with a man this time. He was one of the rare former prizes who had earned good favor with their rulers and been given the honor of being a reporter. Candice had observed a few of them during her trips to New Network City and thought their gentle clothing and painted faces made them too feminine to draw the fire of changelings.

“So tell us, Candice. What's it like to know you may be dead before the dawn?”

His tenor immediately woke the flames. Clearly, she'd been wrong to think him safe.

“Thrilling.” Candice leaned forward, curious as to what his reaction would be. “How about you?”

“Me?” the man asked, confused.

Candice sniffed the air, vision phasing into pink. “How does it feel to know I can spill your blood before they can save you?”

She put a hand out...

He scrambled from the chair so fast he tripped and went sprawling at her feet. His big shoulders flexed as he shoved himself up.

Candice let her fingers trail along his arm as she followed him. He was bigger, stronger, but he froze under her touch, trembling in fear.

Need crackled.

The audience held their breath as she leaned in and the sentries rushed their way.

“You smell like chocolate.” Candice flashed red orbs that she had to pull in before she did lose control. “I *like* chocolate.”

He paled more under the makeup, but knew not to run. If he had done that, she might have really snapped. He did smell good.

Candice stepped away and gave him a sharp gesture that he couldn't mistake. *Get lost!*

He was gone a second later.

She rotated toward the cameras in the high corner. “When do we fight?”

The audience roared.

She'd gone through their supposedly indifferent reporters so far and enjoyed every minute of it. She walked fearlessly into the crowd as a small cheer rang out.

Candice grinned at them.

They laughed, and then retreated.

She went toward the other end of the Block, where the actual view was distant but made vivid by giant screens set into the walls. There were defenders scattered over the stands and in the corners were medico slaves who used to be bachelors. These males had been sent away by their new owners or actually hurt a woman. Killing

a male was illegal now, even for the Network, so they'd come up with the solution of making them doctors—after removing the section of their bodies that made them hunted. They also took the tongues of some or cut their ankles so they couldn't try to escape again. The Network denied such brutal tactics, but the pale man in front of Candice *limped* towards a hand calling for attention.

She saw the heavy-duty suture kit on his hip, then the protective gloves, and wondered which of the animal game this shift had come from. Their boots were dotted in crimson. The sight of a brown feather clinging to one of their pant legs gave her the answer. They'd been in Vulture Run. Another weekly game, the winding path through a vulture nursery was no easy task, especially when there was only bare hands to survive on. The prize for making it the full five miles was a pardon for whatever crime the person had committed. The game was popular because it had only had a dozen winners in a century.

Candice scanned the stage, but stayed alert. She had no protection while viewing the matches, making an ambush likely. She had planned to be a target though, and it was good that she had. Candice had no sooner settled onto a hard seat than another blade slid around her throat.

Breaking the wrist as she had last night, Candice flung her attacker over the benches in front of them, following with a neat roll that had her assailant sprawling and Candice on her feet.

“We have a fight in the stands! It’s that Pruett again!”

Made strong by trekking the apocalyptic wilderness for criminals, her thick leg delivered a kick hard enough to break ribs as her boot connected. Candice quickly slammed her other foot down onto the broken wrist, crushing it.

“Aahh!”

The knife went sliding across the floor.

Candice leaned down to deliver the deathblow, but she had to dodge a flying shard meant to sink into her neck. *She has a partner!*

Candice spun again, snatching the smaller woman into a tight grip that only eased when she sagged, unconscious in Candice’s thick arms.

“Stop! Don’t!” An older female, the girl’s mother, pleaded.

Candice answered the only way she could. She broke the Indian’s neck and let the body fall to the benches.

“No!” the mother shrieked in agony, the sound piercing.

She and Candice threw their knives at the same time.

A blade sank deep into Candice’s shoulder, sending an unwelcome rush of heat into her arm as blood ran.

Candice’s blade was stuck in her attacker’s throat.

Candice didn’t stare at the stunned face as the mother fell. Nor did she pull the knife from her

arm, choosing instead to stride to an unstained bench and sit down.

A medico warily came her way.

In the corner, Candice heard the scanner whirling a third star on her id card. She grinned.

Those still watching cheered loudly and kept their distance.

## 2

“Cage Match Three!”

The round was called right as Candice came through the gate. Candice held herself under tight control as she evaluated her opponent. The woman was lean, dangerous. Muscles rippled like a cat as the dark-skinned woman flexed for the crowd. Candice placed her as the contestant from the jungles of southern Georgia. On a belt around the woman’s thick waist was a studded club. Candice also noted the pointed edge of her boot, which probably contained a blade.

The bar slid down.

Candice didn’t react as the jungle woman drew the spiked club and stalked toward her. Candice preferred a more hands-on type of killing, as Georgia was about to learn. Candice had always been good at hiding her emotions, her reactions, until the last possible second. The thick club was inches from her skull before Candice ducked and slammed her hardened fist into the woman’s

abdomen with a vicious upward twist that snapped something inside.

Georgia grunted, spiked club falling from her grip and into Candice's eager fingers.

She hit Georgia with it, caving in her skull.

Blood and gore splashed from the spikes as Candice ripped the club free, sending her into the rage that she still couldn't always control. Candice began to swing repeatedly.

"Match to Pruett!"

Snapped from her lust, Candice was prepared for both the rush of fury and the guilt this time as the crowd went wild. She grinned, giving the audience what they'd begun to look for.

Candice was almost halfway through the contestants now. The luck of the draw had been with her, sending her against each new challenger first until she defeated three or failed once. Now, the public would vote on the next matches, or maybe the Network would rig them. From Candice's bloody view, it was hard to see a difference.

### 3

"Now, our Luck of the Draw winner will take a tour of the prizes!"

Deafening screams emanated from the hall speakers as the watching world waited for Candice to step into the male apartments. Glaring flat black and still covered in gore, she opened the door.

The Den Mother on duty stared in concern.

Candice sneered at her beehive of blue hair as the door shut, leaving the reporters to watch the screens like everyone else. They weren't allowed in. Their rulers didn't want the prizes to have a voice of any kind, and especially not one in the media.

"You have one hour."

Wearing the usual uniform, the tall, blue bun of hair gave the Den Mother an alien appearance. Candice could tell the live-in guard cared for her charges from the way she hovered, but it obviously wasn't enough to keep them from being hurt. The first cell Candice passed held two bloody prizes who refused to look at her for fear of triggering a new attack. Candice wondered how much the den mother had taken to rent them. It happened at every game, but that didn't mean the sight of it wasn't souring Candice against the Network even more. She glared at the lady.

"Sampling is allowed," the den mother responded quietly.

The bachelor cells were nice, luxurious even, but still cells, and without chemical enhancers, the group of nine captives barely noticed Candice was there. This was her tour of the prizes. She was free to sample them if she so desired, but Candice was repulsed. *I've run over happier animals on the road.*

Daniel was in the fourth cell.

Candice couldn't prevent the pause in her step when she reached him. Curled onto his side, that thin profile was one she'd envisioned every night for years.

It was hard to move on, but she did. The other bachelors, she couldn't remember much about afterwards. She'd only paused at a couple of other cells for appearance, hoping she hadn't already marked her mate for kidnapping or worse. Taking something the favorite contestant loved was a common tactic. Her mother and Angelica would be shielding her father against it.

Candice marched toward the exit with the same black glare she'd entered with. They wouldn't know for sure which one she wanted, but Candice did. She had told herself repeatedly that her current lover bore no resemblance to Daniel, that she hadn't chosen along that line. Now, Candice was forced to admit it wasn't true. Their similarities were in the golden flashes scattered around the tips of Baker's short, black hair and in the exact same curve of their jaws. Had she studied her lover in profile and pretended it was Daniel? Candice didn't want to think herself capable of that type of cruelty, but she couldn't be positive. After all, she was here, playing one of the Network's bloodiest games. She had told the reporter she came for the fights, and that was the impression she sent to those watching, but it hurt her to leave Daniel in the cell. It also sent relief into her heart to confirm visually that he was one of the prizes.



Daniel remembered to breathe once she was gone, but he knew he was on her list. He'd felt it. She was terrifying.

Before she'd arrived, Daniel had listened to the muffled cries of the rented males, sorry for them, but grateful that it wasn't himself begging to be spared. Even free men were treated this way, often earning their living in the brothels or breeding programs.

*Freedom.*

Daniel shuddered. He wanted no part of that. He desired a loving owner to take him away from here, away from Rankin. Using her authority as boss defender, Rankin tormented the bachelors. Beyond cruel, she was Daniel's nightmare. He was dreading tonight, when she would return from her latest mission in the west. The best future he could hope for was to be won and removed from her reach.

*But not by that one!* He had observed Candice during her first match and then hurried to his cot in fear. That one was not a bit loving. She was nothing like the girl he sometimes dreamed about. It used to be every night, but for the last year, it had only been when he was in fear of Rankin's coming visit. Well trained, Daniel hoped to use his skills on a female who was gentler. He had little hopes it wouldn't be a changeling—who else could

survive this world? But he also wished for a bit of compassion.

Daniel's reflections flashed back to Candice, to the woman who had paused at his cell. She terrified him with her very presence. He would get no sympathy from her. He knew it and couldn't stop trembling. Daniel had been in this complex for a long time and didn't remember his life before. He'd been told he'd had a fever that erased his memory. He'd had to accept it. Even when he kept having the dreams of a childhood friend, he had believed the story. Now, though, he had begun to wonder. Over the years, Rankin had let too much slip. Daniel suspected there was more to his being here. He wasn't even trained for the outside world—something no one knew. His education was in sensuality and that added another layer of worry. If he were taken home by someone, she would have to train him...except, he had this sense that being here was just for show. The Network didn't want him free and Daniel believed he knew why. It was because of his kids. He hadn't learned what the scientists discovered. He had never been allowed contact with his two children, but he'd been pulled from both the renting and the breeding program right after they were born. For the fourteen months after that, he'd been left alone except for Rankin's visits.

Daniel shuddered again. At some point, Rankin would push him too far and he would kill her. She'd broken him in upon arriving at the complex.

Daniel remembered it clearly. There was no one he hated more. To be free of her hold was a dream that ran second only to being allowed information on his children. Behind those two, the anguish that rode him the hardest was the need to know how he'd come to be here. *Didn't anyone ever love me?*

"The Pruett wants you." Jason came in and sat on the cot next to Daniel. Also a prize, Jason had the next cell over—on Rankin's orders. He was her favorite. "She can get you to the rebels," he reminded.

"It's not my war," Daniel answered quickly. "I'm not trained to fight."

Jason scowled. "You're a man. It is your fight. If we can't warn Baker that the Network knows his safe zone location, none of us will ever be free."

Daniel thought of Rankin overhearing them and the fear rose. "I'm a twenty-year-old bachelor with excellent relief skills and no memory of any life before being sold." He repeated the litany out of the need to comfort himself. "Calm and unaggressive, I have been trained to be the perfect, harmless mate, and now hope for a loving owner to take me home."

"Then leave the Pruett for someone else!" Jason insisted angrily. "She doesn't know love. None of them do. They're killers and the rebels need them more than you." He bent down and shook Daniel by his shirt. "What's wrong with you?"

Daniel wrenched out of his hold, heart aching. “I watched those women, and I felt afraid. I wanted to be back in these drafty cells, Jason. I can’t be a hero. I’m a coward.”

Jason left in disgust.

Daniel got up as his ankle chain unlocked. He lurked by the door of his cell in fear and confusion.

A bit later, the gate opened again and his nightmare strode through.

Rankin laughed when she saw him, instantly thinking he was up because he was waiting for her.

Ignoring the protesting Den Mother, Rankin stripped her weapons, eyes phasing. “I missed you, too!” she gushed cruelly.

Daniel cringed pathetically into the corner of his cell as Rankin laughed again and grabbed a syringe from the tray.

“He won’t do it.” Jason joined the other bachelors in the narrow bathroom, ignoring smells of nightly bodily functions. “He’s terrified.”

With the water and fans running, they could whisper without being overheard by the microphones. They just had to appear as though they were doing other things so the Network didn’t believe they were colluding for nefarious reasons. Jason snorted mentally. That was exactly how it was phrased in their training—colluding for nefarious reasons. *As if we’re the threat!*

Jason pushed away his ugly thoughts, aware of the six men waiting for his decision as they brushed their teeth and applied lotions to old scars so the game show makeup would go on smoother. Their masters insisted all men look their best in public and on camera.

A thin cry of pain from the cells caused the mood to intensify. Another bachelor was being abused. The sound was one they either heard, or made, every day of their lives in this complex.

The men glanced at Jason and each other in misery and anger that was only revealed in tightening grips on brushes and loudly snapped caps on skin cream tubes.

“We have to do something!”

“We will.”

“Jason will think of something.”

Their faith was heartening and stressful at the same time. Jason had been chosen as their leader shortly after he'd been witnessed fighting Rankin instead of submitting. He'd lost that battle, of course, and learned to never do it again, but the story had spread among her victims and followed him for years. Rankin was the most hated defender the Network employed. All men were terrified of her, so anyone who resisted her was a hero.

Jason turned on the faucet to start his nightly list, mentally infuriated by the constant reminders of their status as slaves. The bathroom walls were literally covered in colorful declarations of

ownership, turning the entire area into a physical manifesto of horror for those living in it.

*Males are **not** permitted to loiter in washrooms.*

*Males must perform ALL daily hygiene functions or loss of meals will be affected.*

*No **singing** around **women**!*

*Men are enslaved for their protection. Owners are **safety**. Love and obey without question.*

Jason stopped reading. He had them memorized, as did all bachelors. Breaking those rules held stiff penalties that no one wanted to pay, but what they were doing right now—whispering about helping the rebel males—was punishable by death. The Network told the world they didn't kill males, but the men here all knew of bachelors who had disappeared for refusing to obey. With no public oversight, it was easy for their owners to accomplish, but Jason doubted those men had been killed. He believed they had been put into public service on the train.

Jason shuddered, a reaction the Network encouraged in men. Train males had it worse than breeders or bachelors. Thanks to Rankin's obsession with him, Jason knew more about the real world than the other males here did. Even if they managed a miracle and escaped the dome, they still didn't stand a chance of getting to the zone, let alone to arrive in time to warn Baker.

They'd agreed to trick a player into taking them so they would have protection, but Jason remembered his life outside this complex. Even legally owned males were in constant danger. They didn't need just any escort. They needed someone everyone else feared. "We'll try again after Rankin finishes her visit with Daniel. He might agree by the time she's done."

The others paled as harsh screams echoed overtop their washroom noises. Rankin was back.

Visible shudders went through the men. All of them, including Jason, were glad they hadn't been picked to welcome her home. Those were the worst times to service the head defender.

"What about the other Pruett? The younger one?"

Jason shrugged at the muttered question. "Maybe. One of us will have to sneak out and run into her."

"You could do it." The man next to him stared at Jason's scars. "Say you need a medical visit."

Jason considered it. The acid wounds on the back of his legs were still fresh enough to hurt when he bent down. A refill on the pain medications would be good and he might get lucky and be able to slip off while the tech retrieved the pills. "I'll need a cover for why I left sick bay."

Daniel's screams grew louder.

Jason sighed. "Never mind. I've got it."

The others realized he would use Rankin as his excuse, but they didn't protest even though it

meant he would have to service her. The Network knew where the big rebel hideout was located. They had to warn the men there or their only chance to end slavery would die in the borderlands without anyone of them ever firing a shot against the enemy they all loathed.

## 5

Not scheduled for anything until the voting results came in the morning, Candice reluctantly chose to spend time with Angelica and her parents in their spacious rooms. The complex was immense. In these stone and strong glass walls, thousands of lives were affected daily. From the shows and Network jobs, to the renting and breeding programs, this compound was a city inside a city.

Thanks to her cousin, Candice had no trouble detecting their apartment. She pulled the candy cane down with a tolerant sigh. If Angelica's parents weren't more careful than to let her keep running with Candice, she'd have them here in a year or two. Eighteen months younger, Angelica had a fire, an edge burning, that even Candice didn't. She doubted her little cousin would rent a male when she blew her top. Angelica would come here and hunt her own.

Her parents both jumped as Candice entered the room. Her guards, first sweeping the three people waiting, leaned against the walls outside.



Bruce and Mary wore their best cloaks and boots, nothing else showing. Candice admired their aloofness as they waited for her to speak. The traditional braids, one for each year of adulthood, hung in shiny black waves around her mother's scarred profile, providing a halo-like glow. The gouges on her cheeks, by comparison, should have been on a demon's face and Candice had put them there.

Angelica smirked from the couch in front of the big screen, telling Candice nothing had changed for her despite the harshness of the fighting so far. Candice appreciated it. Angelica's parents and older sister were on a call in the Borderlands or they would have been here too. That side of the Pruett family was even harder than this one was.

“Hey, Candy.”

Angelica was the only one brave enough to call her that, but even she was careful about it. Angelica was also a changeling. She understood the endless urge to spill blood. It made women dangerous, changing them into people that even their families didn't know. Due to the lack of male births, the female body craved a mate. It was driven to continue the species. There was no other way to stop the rages, the awful hatred of those who'd caused future generations to be so cursed. It came with puberty and left with death. The years between were agony. To be called by the name you had used before the disease hit was to be reminded

of relief, of wonderful times when there was no burning under the skin and no blood behind your lids. It hurt, and changelings often lashed out violently at the sound of it. It had the same effect on Candice as the rest, but she also had a stronger reason to loathe the nickname. It never failed to remind her of what had been stolen.

“Angel.” She returned the jab.

Angelica frowned, clenching her fingers into tight fists that, with her short, black spikes, made her appear capable of more than human concerns—as did Candice. Nearly all families resembled each other now. Genetics were limited, making slaves with blond or red hair worth more. They were often prizes in these games. *Like Daniel.*

“That went well. The crowd likes you.”

Candice raised a brow. “You think?”

Angelica was a bit shorter than her cousin, but she was a lot lighter. Candice promised herself that she would try to strengthen Angelica’s body. If she meant to enter the Games, she would need more weight to throw around. Candice had waited the extra time for Daniel to be a part of the prizes, but her cousin wouldn’t need to do that.

“Sure.” Angelica ignored the sarcasm. “It didn’t hurt that you have a great butt.”

That made Candice laugh, but her father turned a harsh glare on the teenagers.

He was ignored.

“I was nervous before, but you’ve got a solid chance.”

Bruce grew purple from wanting to silence her, but he held it in, knowing that would make Candice unhappy. She liked it when Angelica expressed herself openly. No one else would. Even her parents, during the row about Candice signing up, had been careful. Because she'd *changed*.

“Mom. Dad.”

She had known they would come, but they hadn't been confident of her welcome, she could tell. Her mother had obviously witnessed the performances on the wall screen. She hovered in the kitchen area, leery. Her blue cloak trembled delicately as she observed her daughter's every move.

Her father was braver, forcing himself to give the customary hug. Candice stood still, allowing it so that her mother would know it was okay to be so close.

When Mary finally worked up the courage to touch Candice with light, trembling fingers on her wrist, Candice remembered then, that she did *love* her mother...

Candice smiled, patted the hand with her own.

Mary gave a hesitant smile in return as Candice finished the contemplation. *Sometimes*. She was always furious anyway, but to see Mary daily, this sparkless vision of her own future, was something that Candice vehemently denied.

“It's not too late to—” Mary stopped as Candice tensed.

Candice turned away before her rage could frighten her mother further. She had only lost control once, but Mary had never forgotten it. “When the complex gates sealed shut, withdrawing ceased to be an option,” Candice corrected harshly. “You know that better than most, since this is where my father came from!”

Everyone flinched at the accusation.

An awkward silence fell.

Candice loathed her mother’s weakness, partly because she envied the happiness, the peace. Mary was still the shorthaired, muscular parent that Candice had been in awe of as a young child, and those were still her black eyes, but the rest of those features—the smiles, the kindness—belonged to a stranger. Mary had still been burning while Candice grew up and it had been ugly. Now that she had her own fire, Candice could have forgiven, but she had expected her mother to help save Daniel, and she hadn’t. That was the real source of their problems, of Candice’s hatred.

“What’s next?” Angelica broke the tension.

Candice waved at the silent screen. One of her competitors, wearing a traditional martial arts uniform, was being interviewed. “More of that.”

“The...cage again.”

Her mother’s voice shrank into itself. It was as if all the fear and anxiety Candice should have been suffering was her mother’s burden to carry. Mary had been amazing on the computers, but once again, she was now spineless. Candice

sighed, not calm, but far from panicked. “I should go now.”

Mary nodded at once, lips quivering from biting back more words that would anger her daughter.

Candice scanned her father’s naturally pale face. “You’ll have to be on guard. There may be attacks.”

“I know firsthand what you’ve sentenced us to!”

His harsh words were shocking, but before Candice could consider a reply, his tenor became urgent with worry.

“Be careful!”

He was across the room a second later, leaving Candice a bit stunned at his display of emotions, but not so much that she didn’t see the calculating glowers following her as she stepped into the hall. The sharks were already circling. Her family wouldn’t have any protection, not here or at home, until she made it to the next round.

The entrance across from her parent’s apartment was dark, ominous. Candice could feel sharp attention on both her and the teenager. Candice did what any loving Pruett family member would have. She motioned Angelica into the hall to stand watch and firmly shut the door. Angelica was more lethal than she appeared. She should be. They had been training together for a long time, before Angelica had even been sturdy enough to hold a rail. Her little cousin would follow her

example, Candice was positive of it. The Network also had something that Angelica needed more than her own life and this was the only place to get it.

Chapter Five  
**Deadly Living**

1

**R**eady to be alone with her thoughts, Candice marched ahead of her guards. She was happy to find darkness under the door to her room when they arrived. She'd left the light *on* for this reason. Someone was inside, waiting for her.

Candice swung the gate to her flat open and immediately ducked, rolling in. She kicked the door shut, throwing the room into darkness as something powerful sailed over. Her vision went to pink as she adjusted and reacted.

*Plink!*

Candice registered the suppressed shot in surprise as it hit the concrete wall. Guns were one of the few weapons contestants were forbidden to use. Candice hadn't brought hers. Improvising, she snatched the first thing her fingers landed on, tossing the object to the right to draw fire. Then she lunged at the flash point.

The next shot missed by inches as Candice slammed into a heavy body and found a throat with her clawed hands. The gun rotated against her chest.

Candice jerked the assassin over and into the stove, knocking dishes to the floor. She instinctively grabbed one of the heavy pots as the woman sprang up, eyes glowing red.

Lunging, Candice swung the pot against her skull, causing the assassin to drop to the floor with an awful moan that said the fight was over. Instead of retreating, Candice used the attack for an outlet and hammered the body mercilessly with the pot she'd used to make her meal. She didn't stop even when the door was finally kicked open and light flooded the bloody scene.

“Halt there!”

Candice hammered the corpse a few more times.

“Hands up!”

Candice grunted, dropping the gory pot onto the body. “Send it to my parents.”

The sentries recognized Candice under the blood. Behind them, two lucky reporters walking by shoved into the entrance to snap pictures.

“Hey, Candice! Are you worried about your family being kidnapped now that they're here?”

“Hey, Candy!”

Pain snapped part of Candice's control. “Don't. Do. That! You get one warning.”

A smirking guard slammed the door shut as the assassin's blood pooled thickly at her feet.

The dead woman was another of the contestants who hadn't wanted to confront Candice in the ring, but she'd failed to understand that in



the cage, players had rules to follow. Out here, Candice was guided by one instinct—survival—and she excelled at it.

The next attempt to eliminate her came as Candice slept; through the vents and making so much noise she had no choice but to let the guards in. It counted if a player died in an assassination attempt, but if they were caught doing it in an illegal area, a replacement contestant was drafted. Not wanting to give the impression they were shirking their duty (or maybe not paid-off this time), the sentries got to handle the woman. Candice would rather they had let her kill the assassin so that she would have been one fight closer to Daniel's freedom, but she said nothing as they clubbed the woman unconscious and dragged her bloody body down the hall. They were all on the Network's dime here and Candice was painfully aware of what was being held over her head. She could only hope that they weren't.

## 2

Candice's early morning nerves tightened another notch as the voting percentage on the screen went up for the Ex-Defender and the Bombshell, but not for herself. The crowd had had enough of her. They wanted someone different spilling blood, but Candice already hated the wait.

“We’re about to get the results of your votes, folks, and good morning to you!” the announcer blared cheerily. “It’s warm here in New Network City, almost 65° to start spring off right. And our first name for match one is...the Korean Killer!”

Candice’s nerves loosened a bit, thinking the Korean would be a decent fight for her day.

“She’ll be facing Mutt Girl!”

Candice sighed, stepping over hastily mopped floors to grab a quick meal while she waited to hear the second match. The first one would be held a couple of hours from now, but the second wouldn’t be until this evening. It was scheduled to please the working crowds who gathered around their screens while they ate dinner.

“And for the second match...the Ex-Defender!”

Candice’s nerves went to taut. If she wasn’t chosen, she had no idea what she would do. She really wouldn’t mind a crack at the defender.

“The former guard’s challenger is...the bounty hunting Pruett!”

Candice grunted in relief. She didn’t mind being a tool to get rid of the former employee. It was one of the benefits.

“This should be a highlight fight, folks. Known for being merciless, both of these second match females are extremely good at what they do. Neither of them has indicated a preference among the bachelors, but both have had their tour, as I’m sure you know.”

Trying not be upset at the unfairness of it—the Defender hadn't won a match yet and shouldn't have been given a tour—Candice wondered briefly if the lady had noticed Daniel and now wanted him. That concern sealed the deal for Candice. The Defender wasn't going to walk out of that cage. Her battered body would be dragged.

### 3

Candice didn't want to observe the match between Mutt Girl and the Korean Killer. She already knew the ugly chick wasn't coming from the cage alive. Too wound up to rest like she should have been doing, Candice wandered the halls that she had access to and found herself on the aquatic floor. All of these games involved surviving in water. She chose the one labeled with a shark fin.

The stands for this game were empty. Candice understood why as soon as she saw the bloody waves. A survivor wasn't coming from that water, merely parts of a body.

The churning red liquid rose up to reveal a fin. Large and black-tipped, those jagged edges told Candice that this was an apocalypse shark. She stifled a shudder. The chemicals from the apocalypse were mostly gone now, except in isolated places. The toxins had drained from the land and gone into the oceans to create awful mutations.

Candice studied the shark as it sped toward a floating chunk of debris with laser-like movements, noting how the fin operated as a rudder to allow it a sharp turn that the dangerous predators hadn't been capable of before. Apocalypse sharks were stronger, bigger, and liked the taste of people. The days of swimming in open water were long over.

Candice exited the room as the cleaning crew came in with a steel chain and a harpoon that had a large needle attached to the end. Once they knocked the shark out, it would be guided along a watery tunnel under this floor and put back into the aquarium.

Curious as to the other specimens, Candice strode to the attraction that drew people from across the country twice a year for birthing displays. Unlike humans and land animals, there was no shortage of males in the water populations. The oceans and rivers had flourished with aquatic life. Most of it was bloodthirsty.

The aquarium was off limits to the public except for the birthing ceremonies, giving Candice the pavilion to herself. Designed in 3'x3' cubes that magnified the view, each partitioned pane held something that both fascinated and repulsed her.

The first was a seahorse pen. Candice watched the tiny lifeforms tear apart a fallen sprite with teeth half the size of their curved skulls. The water flushed, and she went to the next window.

Inside were half a dozen crabs, the big kind with long claws and remorseless features. They were trundling on the bottom, no longer able to come out of the water and survive. To make up for that, their pinchers now contained lethal poison that delivered a type of wasting sickness. One of their victims, a carp with gills over a flushed tail, was hovering in the corner. It shrank up as she watched and Candice quickly moved on.

Behind her, a gate opened. This area wasn't completely deserted. She could hear the occasional voice and step, and stayed alert as she peered into the third window.

*Squeak!*

Candice chuckled. The octopus had lunged forward and latched onto the glass. Big and yellow, it was like the pictures in their schoolbooks, except that it had ten extending arms searching for the prey it had sensed.

"They're one of the few animals that can see through the distortion of the glass." The Bombshell now stood a bit behind Candice.

Candice rotated to meet her opponent with eyes that immediately flashed to pink. It would be the single warning.

Kassandra held up a hand. "Wait."

The hesitation to battle threw Candice off, giving the Bombshell a chance to speak.

"We're much alike, you know?" she stated, leaning against the wall so she wasn't blocking the exit. "We both stand on the graves of others."

“Those under my boots deserve to be there,” Candice replied stiffly, surprised the woman wanted to talk.

“Ah, that infamous Pruett moral line. Have you crossed it here, whelp?” Cassandra asked. “Have you taken an innocent life yet?”

The question was unexpected. Candice flashed through her easy kills, but didn’t respond.

“See, Pruett? You came to win and have already shoved your family honor into the dirt to do it. Don’t come at me from a tower. You’re down here now.”

“Why do you hate Pruetts?” Candice asked suddenly. “I don’t have you on the family list.”

“It’s not about your family, whelp,” Cassandra revealed calmly. “It’s you and your cousin. Neither of you should be here.”

“Why is that?” Candice asked, distantly wondering if other players had conversed this way before going on to shred each other like she and Cassandra were probably going to do.

“Because it’ll get you both killed.”

Candice wanted to laugh, but the woman had the gaze of someone set to give up information and the bounty hunter remained impassive, waiting.

“Your parents may be protected, but your cousin isn’t. The bounty on her just went to triple the norm.”

Candice stared for a moment, trying to read that icy façade. She couldn’t think of many reasons the Bombshell would warn her. Sighing, Candice

walked through the exit without commenting. Angelica was in trouble. That was a priority.

The Bombshell watched Candice leave. A sense of gloating came, but all she could do was make sure her steps weren't hurried. The more Candice appeared to care, the higher the odds would go on her enemies killing Angelica to hurt her. Candice did wonder at the Bombshell's motives, though. If Kassandra believed she would get the head defender job by being generous or compassionate, she was in for a shock. Their rulers didn't play that way.

Neither did Puetts.

Candice carefully entered her parent's shattered door. The staff shrank back as she passed, recognizing her. They were carrying two slender body bags. Candice grinned. Puetts were survivors—all of them.

"It was amazing. She sent two of 'em out in bags!"

Her father's excitement was unexpected. Candice gaped in surprise.

"You missed the fun," Angelica stated. The flat was trashed.

"Who handled it?" Candice asked, guessing the assassins had broken down the door to get in.

Angelica shot an awkward glance at Mary. "I did."

"Figures," Candice sneered.

“She was so fast!” Bruce continued to gush over Angelica’s newly revealed skills.

“She can hunt with us now,” Candice confirmed. Angelica had already been doing light work on their crew for years, receiving a share that they all donated from each run. If the Network had known, they would have been arrested.

“Please...”

Mary’s distress pulled Bruce to her and drew a comforting hand on her cheek that made Candice’s heart clench with grief and anger.

Angelica shrugged at the praise, studying the outside through velvet curtains as she calmed herself. These rooms had windows with narrow iron bars, but the view of New Network City was mostly blocked by the hazy smog from the factory-type operations allowed to operate under the dome. The Network had a hand in about everything.

Angelica glanced at Candice before turning to the window. “Good practice.”

Her mutter was too low for the parents. Candice quelled a remark of encouragement. Angelica didn’t have a childhood friend to rescue, but she did have something that had served other winners of these games well—the change.

“You’ll add her gear?” Candice asked.

“Whatever your mother wants,” Bruce replied happily. “It’ll be good to have four on the crew.”

“One more word!” Candice’s mother hissed.



Everyone turned to find Mary glowering at Bruce with pink irises. His tenor was winding her up.

Bruce dropped his chin in submission.

Candice shoved to her feet. "I have to go."

She stopped at the egress and glanced back to see her mother laying a comforting hand on her father's shoulder. He lovingly nuzzled the scarred fingers. As Mary sighed in happiness, her wild eyes returned to normal.

Next to them, Angelica clenched her fists and moved away from the barred window.

Candice knew exactly how the girl felt. She waved her guards into place outside the family apartment. They needed the protection.

The halls were crowded as Candice strode toward her nicer room. New females were being set up for the next game, but she ignored their curious stares and fearful glances. *None of them are my enemy*, Candice reflected, *but the Network...*

#### 4

Candice's next interview was with the same part-time guard, part-time reporter. With those broken nails and that shaven scalp gleaming in the neon lights, Candice thought she had the lady pegged.

Candice leaned forward as the camera flashed to green, catching them in what she hoped seemed

like an intimate moment. “You smell good. Like honey and cherries, the ripe kind.” Her pitch was a caress. “Does the council know you rent yourself on their dime?”

The reporter cringed in shock, her secret brutally exposed to the world.

Candice blew a kiss as the crowd laughed and murmured, and the reporter stormed from the stage. “Next?”

## 5

“Welcome to evening three of this episode! Which of these two bachelor battlers will be in the final round?”

Letting the rage build, Candice stepped into the cage with the Ex-Defender. Unlike the others she had confronted, this fighter didn’t show off, but stood calmly near the bar now sliding down.

When the defender got set with the good stance of a lifelong fighter, Candice had a moment of unease that quickly faded. She had rage from years without her mate. It was more than enough. Candice grinned for her fans. The prizes in the guarded pen, she continued to ignore.

“Cage Match Five!”

The roaring jeers increased. “Kill the bitch! Kill the bitch!”

The Defender’s profile hardened into ugliness as the crowd displayed their dislike for her, their

need to see her pay. At one time, she had been a favorite of this crowd.

Candice waited, not about to rush in and give her opponent the edge. She sort of owed this former guard a favor, but there was no sympathy evident as she stared at the woman's hawk-like profile. "Baker says hello."

Those who heard laughed at the tactic, but the Defender didn't. She answered. "Tell him not to forget his promise. My son deserves freedom too."

Candice stared stupidly as the bell rang and the woman lunged forward. The harsh blow to her forehead knocked her off her feet.

She slammed against the fencing as the Ex-Defender charged forward again and kicked her in the stomach.

Gasping, Candice also kicked, hoping the Defender would jump it. As she did and landed, Candice lunged upward to deliver a staggering punch to the guard's throat. This one had to be taken down hard.

The Defender fought for air as Candice started to do it again, but then she flipped, changing into a brute. The Defender swung with sharp talons, ripping away her cloak and then grabbing Candice's arms to lift her off the mat.

Candice kicked again, nailing her opponent in the chest over her heart.

The bounty hunter slammed into the mat as the Defender grunted in pain and let go.

Candice scrambled to her feet, sucking in a tight breath. The fighter had caught her off guard, but Candice was listening now. She couldn't wait for the attack to come; it left her blind to those lightning quick blows. Neither could she waste her energy chasing what she had no hopes of catching. Determined to locate a weakness, Candice dropped into her training style and began forcing the woman to retreat with blow after blow that didn't land, but shoved her toward the fencing as she blocked. Candice was trying to get the Defender into what passed for a corner, but it was hard.

The Defender ducked a rough swing and delivered a hard hit of her own to Candice's ribs.

Hissing, Candice let the rage out, swinging faster.

The Defender caught her hits with heavy hands, bouncing them back to cause real pain that flipped Candice's vision to dark pink.

She tried to jump over the woman for a rear attack and took another nasty punch to the ribs. She gasped in frustration.

Stuck using dirty tactics, Candice cowered away from the next swing only to lunge up and nail the Defender in the chin with the top of her skull. There were no rules in the cage.

The guard staggered, blood pouring from her nose.

Candice went in for the kill while she could. Dazed herself, she blocked an automatic, defensive

swing and sent the *changed* talons of her other hand in to rip out the Defender's throat.

Crimson rained over them both.

Candice jerked her claws free to stunned silence from the watching crowds.

The Defender's mouth opened as she slid to her knees.

Candice focused on her with no remorse. "You underestimated a Pruett. That's how it happened."

Above the bloody cage, cameras zoomed in, capturing it all to be replayed for the council.

"Match to Pruett!"

There was no controlling the crowd. They broke through the barriers to swarm the cage. Climbing over Candice, they screamed obscenities as troops zapped them in vain. The bloodlust had peaked. Many of them had bet their life savings on the Ex-Defender and Candice was stung repeatedly by the things they managed to hurl through the fencing.

Then, the water hoses began blasting women off the cage and into the air, drenching her in the process. She struggled to remain standing.

Three full squads of defenders burst into the arena to escort her out with brutal blows to anyone who got in their path.

Candice wore her ugly grin the entire time.

In the room above the cages, the leader of the Network studied one of the monitors intently. On it, the Bombshell and a reporter with a gleaming scalp were in a secluded corner of an employee hallway under the main stage. The audio was being drowned out by the match results above them, but the council leader knew what was being discussed. When Candice found out her cousin had been kidnapped, it would either throw her off her game and cost both their lives or it would kick in the infamous Pruett determination that made them so hard to beat. If that happened, the next phase of the plan could take place. The leader was ready for either outcome, unconcerned despite the time it would take to find another wayward Pruett family member to use. History was fuzzy for the council, as well as for the people, but they'd found enough evidence of Pruetts supporting male freedom after the post-apocalyptic law was enacted to believe the family had ways in to those dangerous males that other trackers didn't. The files had also suggested councils of the past had tolerated such behavior out of fear, but that was also going to change. This current generation of wild Pruetts was smaller, making it a perfect time to eliminate them all—from the burnt-ups to the newborns. Plans were in place to make it happen.

*If I can keep all the wolves at bay for eight more weeks.* The leader switched to a different screen showing a large military and civilian presence growing on the Canadian side of the wall.

Built during the last two centuries, there were now only three gates into this entire country. To get through, the Canadian military would have to bring in civil engineers to blow a hole, but that would constitute an act of war. The United Nations had been trying to broker a peaceful solution between Canada and New America for a while now.

“Damn rebels!” the leader growled. After hearing voices, an escaped male had thrown letters over the wall. A friendship had begun and information had slowly filtered over, capturing the Canadian public’s attention. That had grown to include the United Nations, and now, they were insisting on inspections and proof the Network was abiding by the new world orders concerning males. The council had delayed as long as they could, but the UN had recently given a deadline of eight weeks for compliance. After that, they swore the inspectors were coming through, with the Canadian military right behind. Such an invasion would topple the Network and the society they’d spent centuries and endless lives building.

“I’ll never let that happen.” The council leader was angry. “I’ll destroy us all first.”

## 7

“I can’t be seeing that.” Angelica straightened, observing the hooded man coming down the hall without guards. He was dressed as a woman, but the furtive stares and jumpiness gave him away.

Angelica was on guard outside Mary's rooms, making sure no one used the family against Candice. It was tedious work, but she'd stayed alert.

Fascinated at the thought of males having enough courage to sneak out, Angelica stayed where she was and tried not to give him away. Wondering where he was going, she noted he'd waited for a late hour when these halls were empty and approved.

Hoping he made it to wherever he was headed, Angelica turned to check the opposite direction and found a pair of furious red orbs right in front of her. *Mistake!*

Angela crumpled to the floor from the vicious blow.

Jason ran away. He hadn't planned to be a part of an assassination attempt. Dismayed, he hurried back to the sick bay. The Pruetts would be too busy now to help anyone but themselves. He would have to find another way to warn the rebels.

The two kidnappers didn't notice the man in women's clothing fleeing down the hall. They'd been waiting for a chance to grab Angelica and didn't care what had distracted her. The girl was hefted over a shoulder and gone seconds later.



Chapter Six  
**Winner Takes All**

1

“Welcome to the Final Round of the Bachelor Battles! As I’m sure you know, we are down to three contestants and the blood has been flying.”

Clips of the week’s matches flowed on the giant screens as the massive morning crowd roared, pushing against the sentries and barriers in front of the Block.

“For this round, the Network will pick our elimination challenge. Let’s see what they’ve chosen...”

Their rulers liked to mix games for this part and the crowd quieted as they waited to hear what brutal testing tool the council had picked.

“Our challengers will have to...run the Tunnels of Time!”

*“Please report to the Tunnels of Time auditorium on the second floor. Follow the signs,”* the speaker in Candice’s flat instructed.

She flipped off the screen. Then she switched it off. The Tunnels of Time wasn’t life threatening from what she’d read, but it was designed to put the remaining contestants on even footing. Aware

of what was coming, Candice winced at the thought and went to the second floor. She didn't get far before her wrist communicator beeped.

*Angelica is missing. Waiting for the ransom note.*

Furious, Candice stayed on course for the next challenge. Mary would notify her when the note came. She couldn't go searching for her cousin. It would cause her to miss the next scheduled event, and that, would cost her Daniel. Even for Angelica, she couldn't do it.

“Here comes our next player...”

The contestants entered through a separate area, but Candice could hear the waiting crowd as she neared the door. Did their rulers hate how popular she was becoming? Candice hoped so. The Tunnels of Time was a race through three synthetic caves set side-by-side. Littered with sharp stones and shards of glass, it was a race to see who could endure the pain to come through the other end first. Candice stepped through the neatly marked gate, thinking again how grateful she was for the training she'd done. If they had let her fight the first time she'd been here, she would have been slaughtered. Candice was grateful they'd sent her home on the train. Because of that mistake, she now had a chance.

As the cameras swung to show her entrance, Candice saw the other contestants were already at the gates. *Good*. Waiting for her might have made them impatient, which could lead to being

reckless. These tunnels weren't the fast dash the announcers liked to imply. They were a mile long, pitch black, and contained surprises the former contestants weren't allowed to discuss. Some always did though, and Candice was as ready for the bolts of fire and bloodsuckers as she could be.

*"Please remove your weapons and shoes before entering,"* the computer instructed as Candice reached the open slot in the middle. The run was done barefoot and barehanded. Candice grinned for the cameras as she pushed her boots off.

The crowd roared in response.

"The first contestant to emerge from the Tunnels of Time will have a guaranteed slot in tonight's feature cage match! The other contender will be chosen by Network decision," the announcer informed everyone cheerfully.

*The mob of people watching must be huge,* Candice reflected, stepping into the center square where another small bar held her away from the dark entrance. The cheering and jeering echoed through the arena and rolled down the tunnels. Candice had never observed an episode of this game, but she'd trained for it the same as she had the others—intently. Walking on hot coals had made her feet almost numb by burning the bottoms until she had a layer of scar tissue to pad them. She'd had a lot of years to torture herself before she was allowed to be here.

"Ready... Go!"

Candice shot into the tunnel.

At first, she could hear the others in the tunnels on either side as they made the same sounds that she did—grunting at a particularly painful step, a wild stumble and swipe at a flying shape that dodged it and took a layer of skin in return, mutters over the insanity of their choice to be here. Candice was positive all the players in these bloody games went through moments of doubt, but she refused to let her demons win and pushed herself harder. Noises echoed loudly through the darkness, telling her they were all running about even. Candice smothered her automatic need to slow down and feel her way through. She wanted this to be over... No. She wanted blood. Candice went faster, sprinting through the darkness.

The glass cut into her ankle as Candice stumbled over the rocks. Pain brought her pink vision to the front. She wondered if the Network knew it provided a limited version of infrared.

“Ugh!” Candice ducked a second swipe of angry talons. Blood ran down her spine from the first gouge. *Damn the Network!* Her stride lengthened again, anger causing her muscles to swell. Silence had fallen, other than her own steps...

A spray of flames came out of the darkness, blinding her.

Candice dropped, rolling over the pointed ground. Singed hair implied she'd had a narrow miss, but Candice didn't pause. She wasn't afraid

of fire. She'd spent too much of her life battling the heat to be afraid of it.

Candice ducked a second flame spray, but slid into the third one. Her ripped cloak flame up.

She quickly pulled it off to beat it against her hip, but she didn't stop running. The fire blasts were random, blinding sparks to ruin her vision, and she understood that yes, their rulers knew about changeling vision and they'd compensated for it. Candice wondered how the others were doing and pushed her body harder, breath coming in short, even draws.

It went still and silent suddenly. Candice tried to be prepared for anything.

*Zzzzz!*

The blade flashed up on her right, barely missing as she twisted to the left. Skin fell from her hand.

Heart pounding, Candice scooped up a painful palm of glass and rocks to throw. The blood rolling down her wrist, she had to ignore.

The rocky floor sharpened, shredding the other edge of her foot as Candice slid, but the motion saved her life. It put her under a hip-level grinder that spun from the wall.

Candice stayed lower, tossing a higher path of stones that bounced off the walls.

Another blade whirled from the ceiling, slicing through her hair.

Candice felt the betrayal, the conspiracy, keenly then. The Network honestly didn't want her

to come out of this alive. It was an ugly feeling. As she sometimes needed to do on a bounty run, Candice let the changeling mutation takeover her body. The disease was an eternal torment, but it did have handy effects. Being able to move like a monkey that had been combined with a big cat made her a hard target to hit. The increased speed and agility had save her life numerous times, and they did so again as a beam of steel appeared at stomach level.

Candice contorted into a ball, rolling.

The edge of a spear missed her skull, but ripped through the lobe of her ear.

No longer thinking about anything except survival, Candice got up and resumed running through the darkness.

When Candice saw the tiny prick of light ahead, she began to force the changeling heat to retreat, hoping her ripped clothes appeared shredded from the tunnel. She wanted the Network to think she had made it through without needing her changeling side.

Still not hearing the other contestants, Candice twisted and then ducked, rolling under a final saw. She quickly gained her feet to dart into the center and break the stupid pink ribbon.

“That’s our winner, folks! Candice Pruett, the bounty hunting teenager, will be one of our contestants in tonight’s feature match!”

Candice controlled her breathing, thinking of the coming event where the council would choose her opponent. *If anyone else lives from this one*, Candice consoled herself. But they wanted a feature event, so at least two of the tunnels would have to have been clear of death-causing dangers simply to allow survivors for the final match. Likely, only the center cave had been rigged. Had that gate been random or intended? Candice hadn't paused on the way here, despite the call from her mother, and yet, the other two contestants had beaten her to the gates...and neither of them had emerged yet. Nothing was right about this.

The crowd was deafening as the announcer gushed, but Candice didn't stay to witness who placed second. She also didn't wave to a medico. Winning was all she cared about now. The Network could rig the matches, torture her, take her family, but she would never break, never quit. When faced with possible defeat, Candice got angrier. She would have that slot on the Block at any cost...even Angelica's life. Candice accepted that fact with a snarl of pain.

Everyone scurried backward as the bloody bounty hunter strode through the halls to her room on shredded feet. She left puddles and heavy swirls across the tiles, hoping the camera caught each gush of crimson that came from her battered body. Their rulers had interfered with the game. They'd tried to kill her and failed. When they replayed this

video, the council would know they'd made her list.

## 2

### The Network

“Why isn't she dead?!”

“Get Rankin!”

The entire unhappy council was in the command room. Candice's win had drawn shouts and threats from the large table.

“You set this up. You brought her here!” Terry accused.

“Yes,” the council leader admitted as they viewed the replay. “Amazing, isn't it?”

“She's going to win!”

“Yes. This will give my snakes time to eliminate the entire group, without the cameras.”

“No one could have survived that center tunnel!”

“She did. She wants Daniel.”

“But he's valuable!” Riana shouted angrily, openly supporting Terry. “Did you put him in the games on purpose?”

“Yes.”

“Why play with her? Why not kill her and keep the male?” Terry interrupted, always hoping to claim an empty seat of power for relatives if they could create one.

“Only one of their own can effectively infiltrate the rebels, and only someone in need of



saving can earn the true trust of a Pruett. Daniel is both.” The leader flashed an ugly glower around the table. “Don’t you all have work to do?”

The warning was taken. The lower ranked members exited the command room, grumbling. Their aging council leader was no one to push lightly. But then, neither were the wild Pruetts.

### 3

“Are you worried about your cousin?”

“No.” This was the first interview since Angelica’s kidnapping. Candice played it carefully, dangling bait. “She wasn’t taken. It was a misunderstanding. She went home early.”

The bald reporter she’d recently humiliated gaped at her. “But we sent the note an hour—”

“How do you know?” Candice glowered dangerously as the audience gasped, victorious in her guess. “We didn’t release that information.”

Candice saw those beady eyes narrow and knew instantly what had happened, who had targeted her. She had wrongly assumed it was one of the contestants.

“Traitor!” Candice growled as the reporter paled, not caring that they were on open air with the world and more importantly, the Network, listening. “I’ll wipe out your whole family and I’ll do it quicker than *they* will.”

Candice stood up, sight flickering pink.

The reporter jumped from her chair. When she turned to run, the hunter followed.

Lunging, Candice snatched the woman around the throat, spinning her around. She jerked the reporter off her feet as the audience went crazy and guards began to flood the studio.

“I’ll come for you. The Network couldn’t care less about your life, but I do!”

Candice shoved the reporter to the floor, then retreated as the defenders drew weapons. “If Angelica isn’t returned, unharmed, there won’t be anywhere you can hide. I’ll track you into the Borderlands and beyond.”

Candice hadn’t realized the reporters could be hired, but she suspected this was also personal. She had been heartless to them, so they had retaliated by taking something they thought she held dear. If they’d been smarter, it might have worked, but they had sent out one of those that Candice had already conquered and trapping the reporter had been easy.

Candice stopped at the stage curtains, still ignoring the tense sentries now gathered around the stage. She glanced toward the cameras. “Who wants to play with a Pruett?”

The roar in response was deafening.

Mary's happy voice echoed Candice's secret sentiment of relief. Some captives were executed instead of ransomed.

"They're asking for two hundred million UD\$ and amnesty from being hunted."

When situations like this came up, the family handled it their way. Together, the Pruetts were hard to beat. Candice was smart enough to know that. Her mother was sparkless most of the time, but on bounty runs or when her family was in danger, Mary was merciless. Candice much preferred that version of her, but either way, she could now concentrate on her opponents, her goal. She'd been pitted against the Bombshell for tonight's feature match. The Korean Killer would fight the winner in tomorrow's final show.

Candice paused in rewrapping her damaged feet and gave a short nod, regarding her mother. "Take care of it the way we always do."

Angelica, along with her captor, would be somewhere in the throng of drunken, bitter women who bought passage to tonight's match. Mary would make certain the exchange was set there, and they would all risk their ruler's wrath for not telling them what was happening.

Her parents didn't argue.

Candice was glad of it. The reporters had given her a way out, a way to have Angelica's life and still leave with what she'd come for. Her parents would handle it from that side of the cage, freeing Candice to do what she did best. *Kill.*

“Feature Cage Match!”

The scarlet-clad Bombshell waited in patient stillness. Her platinum hair hung to her hips in wild strands that Candice doubted drew any reaction when pulled. The need for blood climbed another level. *I'll draw a reaction.* Playing on any possible fears the Bombshell might have, Candice grinned in welcome of the coming fight.

Maybe the Bombshell paled, but Candice was too far away to be positive. They were standing at the gated entrances to the cage, waiting to be let in to spill each other's blood. In the rafter-like stands around the stage, the crowd roared in anticipation. The packed audience was screaming, red-faced and drunken, some being beaten for being too unruly. Candice turned her attention away from it. Once again, there were no bachelors here for the match, and she shoved that relief away as well.

“Players will now enter the cage.”

As the first bar went down, Candice dropped her cloak to the floor. Deep blue lights flashed as she strode confidently toward her life or death. She was as ready for either as she could be.

The gate locked them in as the middle bar separating them slid down into the mat.

Before Candice could move forward, the bar immediately rose, stopping the match.

“Halt!” a piercing shout echoed through the confusion.

“The feature match has been stopped! Let’s find out why...” the announcer tried to fill the unexpected moment with an explanation, scanning the audience.

“Let her go!”

“We have a fight in the stands!” the announcer blared triumphantly as she spotted the chaos unfolding in the front row.

Candice looked over to discover her parents facing off with the remaining contestant as the crowd around them scurried out of the crossfire. The Korean Killer had Angelica wrapped up with a knife to her throat.

*They underestimated us*, Candice thought, a bit surprised to find out how many people were in on the attempt to hurt her. The bald reporter, very dead, was on the floor at Mary’s feet.

“Tell her to lose!” the Korean demanded, digging the blade into Angelica’s skin.

“Keep the cousin!” Candice shouted. “I never liked her anyway!”

Distracted, the assassin glanced toward the cage.

Mary jumped forward to plunge her claws into the woman’s throat. Her other hand tried to keep the Korean from killing Angelica with her own clawed hand as she suffocated.

Bruce jerked Angelica’s unconscious body into his arms as the Killer let go and slumped into one

of the seats behind them. Blood gushed over her chest.

“Halt there or we’ll open fire!”

The guard’s cry froze everyone this time.

In the cage, the gate slid down.

The Bombshell advanced toward Candice with a snarl of hatred. “Damn you lucky Pruetts!”

“That makes this the final match, folks!” the announcer blared in delight. “Are ya ready?!”

Candice realized she’d been wrong, that the Bombshell had been in league with the others... Rage blasted through her mind and she lunged forward with a scream that was primal. *No one double-crosses me! No one!*

Candice swung with hatred, catching the Bombshell’s jaw as the blonde kicked her. Candice took the boot in the stomach, but still managed to hold it through the pain in her gut.

Caught, the Bombshell was dragged off her feet and swung around the cage like a doll as Candice tried to twist her ankle into breaking.

Desperate to get free, the Bombshell plunged her knife into Candice’s thigh. She hit the mat hard as Candice fell, letting go of the ankle.

Candice jerked the knife free and immediately threw it.

The blonde managed to duck by a hair. A thick coil of her platinum tresses stuck in the blade, pinning her to the bar that it had pierced.

The crowd shoved forward, screaming hungrily as death flew nearer.

Suddenly confident of her win, Candice pretended to lunge forward.

The Bombshell jerked free, ripping out a large chunk of hair as she fled to the other end of the cage.

Candice laughed.

Unable to take both that and the tittering of the audience, the Bombshell flipped into the change. Her scarlet jumper ripped down the legs as her muscles swelled, hair shooting out in rapid growth. Her claws became talons that clutched the bars hard enough to bend them as the pain of the transformation tore through her body.

Candice felt her own rage coming, but she didn't stop it this time. Teeth grew into fangs in an instant, new strength flowing into her hands, enlarging her body. Candice flashed crimson orbs, still laughing. "Let's play!"

The Bombshell dove forward wildly, but Candice met her with enough power to drive the woman back. Using the strength of her changeling legs, Candice drove the Bombshell into what passed as a corner, shoving harshly.

Candice tripped the fighter as she staggered for balance, slamming her into the bars.

"Ahh!" The Bombshell's arm popped as it broke. Right by a microphone, the snap echoed under her scream.

Candice pinned the injured woman with her weight and beat her with repeated blows to the

chest and neck. Her claws dug in with every swing.

The Bombshell's knife suddenly sliced into Candice's hip in a last, desperate attempt to live.

Candice grabbed the wrist, twisting viciously.  
*Snap!*

It was all over, but Candice couldn't stop. She spun around, delivering repeated slashes that sent gore across the cage and stage floor around it. When the Bombshell's body sagged against the bloody poles, she barely noticed.

“Match to Pruett!”

“She's won it all! Did you see that?! Candice Pruett has won this episode of the Bachelor Battles!”

#### 4

“Bring out the bachelors! Bring out the prizes!”

It was the chanting roar of the crowd that made Candice pause, their lusty shouts for the prize to be awarded that returned her fragile control.

*Daniel!*

Candice's heart thumped as she exited the cage and walked up the stairs to the Block, blood dripping from her changeling fists. *I earned my slot. I won him. Who cares that it was too easy or that I've never felt less human? Daniel is mine!*

The dazed prizes, who hadn't expected to put in an appearance for another night, were herded



into the arena in their underclothes. Terrified, the cowering slaves were slapped and pinched by the unruly crowd as they were hustled up the stairs between twitchy defenders in a squad that was twice the normal size.

Candice spotted Daniel right away, hurt by his horrified stare as he saw who had won. Under the blood, her face was as pale as his (She'd shared her own food for years before her parents had discovered her obsession), but she appeared indifferent to his terror.

Troops lined the males up in front of her, even pushing them to kneel at her feet.

Candice struggled to complete the plan. The Network couldn't know she'd come just for him.

“No black hair!”

At her call, the crowd screamed in ecstasy. Half of the guys were led away through the caged walk that Candice had come down to start the match.

She waved a hand, fighting the disease as the mob struggled to reach the stage. “No green!”

Another group was cut from the herd, removed among the laughter and drunken shouts.

Blue eyes begged Candice silently for mercy, pleading to be left alone.

“That one!”

Daniel's expression crumpled into terrified dismay as she pointed at him.

The crowd bellowed approval at the choice. Flickering crimson and onyx, Candice gave them what they wanted one last time. She grinned.

“Well, that’s it, folks!” The loudspeakers drowned out the mob as sentries rushed Daniel off the stage and took him toward the winner’s suite. “That concludes this exciting episode of the Bachelor Battles! Tune in next week for another...”

Suddenly without the need for protection, Candice made her way into the hall as the guards tried to hold back the crowd that was congratulating each other and her on gaining the prize, winning the bet. Her patience was a threadbare blanket. The disease was impossible to keep caged the way she’d been doing.

Candice went to her new room with quick feet. She didn’t have anything in the other flat to collect. The apartments for winners were a complete contrast to the deliberate, camera-ready décor of the games halls. These upper walls were a blank gray slate that her changeling rage wanted to splash blood across. No carpets softened the steps of her boots and the noise drew instant notice from the sentries at each intersection.

Candice didn’t need to flash her id card. They knew who she was. She ignored their hulking forms and lethal tools. She had her own fire hidden behind these glassy floors and identical doors.

The farthest apartment, the Bachelor Battles Suite, was hers while the council verified the win. Candice swung the barrier open as if in a dream...

Daniel stood by the large couch, pale and bruised. He was filthy, scent overpowering, and yet, there was *need* as she entered.

The door locked automatically, throwing them into dimness.

Daniel had been on the edge of manhood when taken, body recuperating with the extra food that she'd been able to provide. His thin profile had haunted her dreams, but that image shattered now. *The young boy I loved is gone*, Candice realized, stunned for a moment by the differences. She had taken a short glance into his cell, but there was no way to mistake it here. Daniel was still taller than she was, though not by as much, and the hands he had clenched at his lean hips were big. *Flames*, hot and hungry, crept through her mind. Rugged, wild, Daniel had a mouth that gave him a secretive, sexy look, but Candice couldn't ignore the pain in those stunning blue eyes. This wasn't her childhood sweetheart. This was a man—one she *would* play with, just not in the same manner.

"I've missed you."

Daniel flinched as if she'd threatened him.

Candice understood in a blinding wave of agony. *He doesn't know who I am! He doesn't remember us!*

The pain came, sharp and fierce, delivering misery that killed the bloodlust. She'd known he was being hurt, but she'd been sure that he had her promise to comfort him. It was crushing to find out otherwise. He had been completely alone, like he'd feared.

Candice walked to the washroom to keep from scaring him further. It shouldn't have come as such a surprise. It had been eight years and she in no way resembled the girl he'd known. Still, the bond had been strong enough for her to spend that time training to rescue him.

Candice scrubbed away the filth from her last match with an aching heart that she soothed as best she could. He was hers now, bought and paid for in blood. She had a lifetime to remind him of how loving they had been despite the callousness of his family. *Mine will help him adjust*, Candice thought, letting the hot water beat away her pain. Pruetts had been playing these games since before she was born, but Candice was determined that *her* children would not. This nightmare had to end somewhere, sometime.

*Why not with me?*

Chapter Seven  
**A Loving Owner**

1

**D**aniel didn't know what to expect when his new owner turned away. Previous renters had attacked the instant they were alone, so her control was unexpected. Those red orbs declared her a changeling. *Why isn't she easing her pain at my expense, like the others? I'm braced to take it.*

Daniel stared in confusion, vaguely noticing her hair was so dark it shined blue in the flickering light. She was dripping blood, covered with it in places. Part of her hair was gone, burnt away. She'd obviously gone through hell to win her choice of the prizes. *Why me?*

Candice suddenly spun around, almost as if she was reassuring herself that he hadn't disappeared.

The bachelor froze as old ghosts swept over him.

*"When we grow up, you'll be mine?"*

*"Sure. I'll love you and the change will go away."*

*"I'll love you, too. Not just for the painkiller."*

*"I know. We'll always be together."*

*"Yes."*

Daniel blinked, and the memories faded as they always did. Why would this violent, blood and tattooed-covered woman trigger a flash of the life he couldn't remember? Did he know her?

Candice shut the washroom door between them, but Daniel didn't move. He'd dreamed of being chosen, of finally having a loving owner and a true home, but deep down, he hadn't believed he would be released.

Hoping she wasn't one of those who liked to punish, Daniel ignored the throbbing of his new ownership mark and tried to make sure that she found things okay when she came out. He couldn't do anything about the way he smelled until she gave him permission. Without knowing what she wanted from him, Daniel had to settle for remaking the linens on the couch where he'd been sitting. There was nothing to do after that and the scent of his fear began filling the apartment.

## 2

It appeared he hadn't budged when she came from the washroom. Candice paused in the doorway. Daniel was fragile. He needed to be gently loved into who he had been, but Candice didn't have it in her. Knowing that would make things both easier and harder. Not ready to tackle his retraining yet, Candice continued to evaluate, starting at the top. She didn't think she had the control to work her way up.

His hair wasn't long, but it was obvious that he'd never had a real cut. The shaggy, uneven locks fell over his forehead and ears in a golden mane that fit him perfectly. It was darker, not nearly the bright curls she'd been so fond of watching move in the apocalypse winds. Now, it was streaked with dark brown. She wondered if he'd had to dye it for a renter.

Candice swallowed the revulsion, the absolute fury. She would stay away from those painful reflections or they'd spend all their time together in misery. She wasn't wasting it now that she had a future. Candice knew she wasn't the only one who'd suffered, though. Daniel was scarred, physically as well as mentally. Some of it was subtle and mostly hidden under his hair, but she had picked out the nail marks along his scalp, the tops of his shoulders. He'd been hurt so much. Would he ever be able to trust or accept what she had to give?

Daniel wore a Network jumper, dirty and reeking, but it clung to his wide chest in a way that outlined the swells of thick muscles and accented the slight bulge waiting for her use. Saliva flooded her mouth, helping Candice swallow the lump in her throat. She saw the mark on his big arm next, the one proclaiming him as her property... Fury.

The Network had the ability to power this city, keep food growing indoors, and to run the labs where scientists were currently working on a cure. It wasn't a city of light, but it was way beyond the

wild setting of the Borderlands. And they'd branded him! Her hatred of their rulers, which had already been growing, took a sudden leap. If she ever came face-to-face with the bitch who had marked him, the woman would die—just doing her job or not.

Daniel filled with worry at Candice's expression.

Candice went to the small kitchen area. "Join me."

He came slowly, warily.

Candice kept her distance as she prepared their first meal. After a minute, he perched on the edge of a stool, observing her every gesture and expression.

When she cracked the eggs, Candice saw him flinch. They'd taken him, hurt him, and left her with this trembling shell instead of her soul mate. What was she supposed to do? She'd never considered that he might not remember her.

Anger rose again. Her grip on the wooden spoon snapped it in half with a loud crack that sent Daniel flying off the stool and across the apartment.

Controlling her emotions, Candice dropped the ruined utensil into the garbage bin and got a new one, saying nothing. It was good the apartments were equipped with double and sometimes triple of everything regularly used. It came in handy when anger was the most common emotion in the population. As for Daniel, Candice decided she



would do the best she could with what they'd left her, and that meant dropping the past. If his memory returned, wonderful, but she wasn't going to sit down and explain their history yet. It was too hurtful, too complicated. She would fill him in on where he came from and what had happened to him when she thought he was ready for it.

The eggs were done before Daniel found the courage to retake his seat. Candice set his plate and cup on the counter, and then stood with her own a few feet away.

Seeing that she wouldn't be as close as right over the narrow ledge, Daniel sat down again, staying tensed for flight.

Candice ate and drank in silence, not appearing to be aware of anything but her own food as she subtly watched him start shoveling the scalding eggs into his mouth like he was starving... Was he?

Daniel stared at her while he enjoyed the treat. Without the blood to hide her beauty, he was shoved into a situation he'd never experienced. He had expected to submit to his new owner, as he'd been trained to do, but the sight of that tattooed body was making him uneasy for reasons he understood all too well. He might enjoy this one and unknown factors made him nervous. Never once had he been attracted to the females he'd been forced to satisfy. Daniel thought he might have met Candice before and wondered if the breeding program was where. There was something about her profile...

Candice met his stare with an intense longing that made him quickly drop his chin.

The action drew a deep sigh that also surprised the slave. Most of the others hadn't wanted him to make eye contact. It was a Network standard for guys to be submissive, but this changeling was different. He could see that. He needed to know to what extent. Did she want a mate, children, a family, as he did? That was what the Den Mothers had tried to sell, but it wasn't true of any of those Daniel had met. Males were used by the masses, with death as the alternative. *Does the outside world know how awful it is to impregnate a stranger and then never get to love that child or even know if it lived? Does this brutal woman? Do those things matter to my new owner?*

The heavenly scent of eggs overwhelmed the soap and dirt from their bodies as the tension thickened. Daniel loved eggs. They were his favorite, always on his list when he received a meal of choice. Had she known that? Daniel stared, trying to puzzle it out. *Did she research the bachelors? Was that how she picked me?* This violent female was exciting and terrifying. The gentle hands that could break an egg without shattering the shell could snap his neck. He respected her for it, for the lethal strength in her slender body, but he also wondered at her reasons for playing. From the reports, Pruetts were rich. Why hadn't she bought a man?

The second batch of eggs finished cooking and Candice got a clean plate from the cabinet. Daniel had scraped every morsel from the one in front of him as he studied her.

He tensed when she rotated toward him, but stayed on the stool as she carefully removed the first plate and replaced it with a larger pile. His face wrinkled in suspicion and then confusion, before his mouth opened. “Thank you.”

Candice resumed her sawdust-tasting meal with need flaring hotly in her gut. *His voice!* It was the sound of angels and devils in perfect harmony, tempting her.

Daniel abruptly shoved the plate away, grimacing.

Candice gestured toward his untouched cup. “The milk will settle your stomach.”

He didn’t notice the too sweet taste as he gulped it down. A very mild sedative, it would keep him from jumping so much and maybe let him sleep.

“You’ll be on the couch.”

The words brought instant relief, and in its wake, more confusion. She could tell he wanted to ask why they wouldn’t share a bed. She both longed for him to and wished that he wouldn’t. It might all be over if she had to explain it.

Daniel didn’t question her.

Slightly disappointed, she gestured at the steamy room she’d come from. “Clean up if you like. There’s a robe hanging on the door.” Her

timbre lowered into an edge of anger. “And a medical kit in the cabinet.”

Daniel immediately went to do as she’d suggested.

Candice watched until he was out of sight, thinking of all the times she’d envisioned this moment. Reality was a patch over a small section of the gaping wound in her heart. She’d won him back. She’d kept her promise.

Leaving the mess, Candice crawled onto the apartment’s couch-bed. She slid to the seam of the cushions, making it clear where she wanted him, and fell into a light doze almost immediately. It had been a long week.

*She’s on the couch. I assumed too much.*

Wearing only the silken blue robe, Daniel felt very unprotected and stayed in the doorway of the washroom. After witnessing her matches, he held little hope Candice wouldn’t wake up when he climbed onto the secondary bed with her.

Daniel tried to be reasonable. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t done this before or been hurt before. He just didn’t like the fear and the pain, the *dirtiness* that he knew was waiting for him afterward. Under it all, the familiar longing to know why he’d been given to the Network, why he was forced to live this way, burned hotly.

*It’s too quiet.* Daniel realized with a start. *She’s awake.* A shudder went through his legs, and he made them move toward the couch. *If I had real*

*courage, I'd drop the robe before I got there and push her over the edge, make her use the drugs when I can't satisfy her.* The hated black boxes with those loaded syringes were always scattered around the apartments.

He'd done that with renters when he wasn't able to stand what they wanted to dish out, but he sensed it might backfire with this one. In the two minutes it took the drugs to make him willing, she could snap. It had happened a few times—changelings bought or won a mate, and killed them during the claiming. Would she be one of those? Next to Rankin, Candice was easily the most violent woman he'd ever met.

“Daniel.”

Her timbre said he was wasting her patience. The scared bachelor slid onto the couch, but stayed on the edge, as far from her as he could get.

The milky drops would work soon, but Candice wasn't going to wait. *She couldn't.* Being careful of his now bandaged arm, Candice placed a hand on his damp skin and pulled him over as gently as she could manage. The sensation of his tense hip against hers made it final. She had what she'd come for, and it hadn't cost her life or even a limb. *Only more of my humanity,* Candice thought, rolling over to enfold his terrified frame into her arms. Daniel would help hold back the fiery darkness that threatened to consume her and she would return his identity. Together, they might even have some measure of peace.

Daniel never thawed against her, just went out all at once, and Candice allowed herself to stare. In a few days, they would travel to the Pruett homestead. Due to the mandatory verification period, they couldn't leave yet. Not that it would have mattered. Daniel wasn't ready to be in public with her. Candice drifted off wondering about his reaction to her home. It was his now, too, but it had been before, as well. Would he recognize the neighborhood or the evil people who had sold him into these brutal games? Candice was asleep before she could venture a guess.

### 3

Waking suddenly, Daniel flinched away from the feel of female heat, but he quickly stilled when he realized Candice was already awake. They'd shifted closer during sleep, so much that she could feel his erratic breath on the arm she had curled over his wide chest. The couch under them trembled as he waited in fear.

"I won't hurt you." Candice was proud of the calm, even tones that didn't hint at the hunger beneath as she saw him fresh from sleep. "You'll figure that out in time." She reluctantly withdrew her arm.

Daniel's indecision was clear. It was a long time before he gathered the courage to move from the couch.

*Thud!* "Sorry!"

His fast apology for the noise made Candice frown. She would have to shove some spine back down his throat. Males had that torn from them by the Network, but the true soul of a man could never be erased. *Her* Daniel was still in there somewhere.

*Slam!* “Sorry.”

Need, sharp and sweet, flooded Candice. She forced herself back to sleep. He was hers. There was time.

A bit later, Daniel listened to her thick snores in surprise. She had been so quiet during her matches and interviews that the harsh sound had made him duck for cover before he’d realized what it was.

*Snort!*

Daniel flinched again. It was easy to tell that he hadn’t been around women recently. He straightened his shoulders as he walked to the washroom.

While he showered again, Daniel went over his rules for surviving a changeling.

*One: Don’t make eye contact...* Except, she wanted him to. Daniel struck that from the list.

*Two: Be careful of smells.* Changelings were drawn to good scents. He moved his hand away from the sweet smelling soap to use the plain bar on the rack. Candice had left a hair on it from her own wash.

Daniel quickly picked it off. He rinsed it down the drain, shuddering. *Gross! Okay, where was I?*

*Three: Keep skin hidden.* He'd broken that one last night, but he didn't have any other clothes. He wasn't putting that jumper back on until it was clean.

Daniel frowned, moving on. *Four: Keep them well fed and in comfortable temperatures. Five: Never refuse anything. Six: Try to distract them when their irises flicker. Seven: Attack them before they can attack you.*

That one made him blush as he rinsed off. Changelings had a short fuse. If he could get it to burn down quickly, she would be blasted with relief and not be such a danger. He'd even once witnessed a changeling cry, but the easiest way to cool the fire was through physical contact. Daniel's body stirred at the thought. Candice was familiar to him for some reason and she had amazing control. As long as he followed his own rules, he would probably be fine.

*Back to it,* Daniel ordered, stepping out to grab his jumper and toss it into the suds for a wash.

*Eight: If the pain gets too bad, make them snap by responding as if willing. The medicos are very skilled. Nine...*



“She can go now.” The frumpy medical technician handed Angelica a bottle of pills. “She just needs to rest.”

Mary was relieved. “Should she come back for anything?”

The nurse shook her head, a bit annoyed at how fast Pruetts healed. “You can pull the stitches yourself in a couple days.”

Mary and Bruce helped Angelica off the examination table, one on each side to offer protection and support. Angelica wrapped up in her cloak, pulling the hood tight for privacy. While Candice and Daniel spent the mandatory three days in the winner’s penthouse, the rest of the family was going home. There was still a chance of being attacked, but it would come from grieving families taking revenge for Candice’s victory instead of players. They needed to get out of the city without drawing a lot of attention.

Angelica let them help her to the door of the small medical bay, but as it opened, she stood up straight and shrugged off their hands.

Mary attributed it to Angelica’s need to uphold the family reputation, but Bruce studied the teenager in thoughtful contemplation. Angelica had barely spoken since being rescued, though the medic had declared her fine other than a minor concussion and needing a few stitches in her shoulder. She had accepted Candice’s message to go home and recover without comment, but there

was a glaze over her eyes that said she was trying to adjust to what had happened.

Angelica walked in front of Mary and Bruce, head up. The fury radiating through her was almost palpable, keeping people at bay. Even reporters who wanted an interview maintained a safe distance as the trio entered the lobby of the games tower.

“Are you okay, Angelica?”

“Mary Pruett? Can we have a minute?”

The family didn’t want to stop and answer questions. In an attempt to duck the awkward moment that would plaster their faces over the news, Mary flashed red orbs at the reporters. “Don’t you have criminals to expose? We get tired of doing your job.”

Shocked gasps and worried glances toward Network cameras allowed the family to slip around the gaggle of reporters and get outside. Mary hoped the clip wouldn’t be shown at all now. The reporters knew the Network didn’t really need them and that clip would be a reminder of it.

The family moved quickly toward the garage that held their mopars, hoping no one else was waiting to speak with them. No one was in a good mood at this point, except for Candice, and she was too far away to lend any comfort. Despite their relief at her survival, it had made the family a bigger target.

Mary worried the Network had now been tipped off to how strong her line of the family was.

Bruce worried that Mary would somehow be punished for Candice's victory.

Ahead of them, Angelica wasn't thinking about the Network at all. She was stewing on the bachelor she'd seen sneaking down the hall before her kidnapping. It had given a new hope that her fantasies of remission stood a chance. If there was even one bachelor who had the courage to disobey his masters, she needed to meet him, and there was only one way she could do that.

Angelica waved Mary toward the mopars, noting the crowd around the dome had thinned a little. She was glad. Her control was a bare shield. If people rushed her right now, they would get more than they'd bargained for.

"We should stay together." Mary didn't want them split up again.

"I need air." Angelica's tone was rough.

Mary and Bruce exchanged frowns, but didn't argue.

As soon as they were out of sight, Angelica spun out of the damp garage. Mind spinning and heart on fire, she strode back up the glittery complex steps and reentered the dome.

Angelica was waiting on the front steps when Mary and Bruce rolled from the garage a few minutes later, towing her mopar. They'd had to show ids to the guards, and then Mary had performed a fast to check to be certain their transportation hadn't been sabotaged.

Angelica secured her ride without speaking, heart still pounding. *I'll tell them later*, she decided, falling in line behind Bruce to provide protection from the rear. *Candy's game just finished. They don't need more stress yet.*

The trio was quickly gone from the dangerous city, leaving Candice alone with her prize.

It was the safest place she could be.

Chapter Eight  
**Waves of Change**

1

Candice woke to a room softly lit against the darkness, fragrant with smells of cooking meat. A genuine smile came to her lips. *Our new lives can begin soon...* That second, familiar grin curved her lips into the merciless expression she was now known for. *Right after I take care of one little thing.*

“Would you like to eat now?” Tremors shook his voice.

Candice stretched as she stood up. She’d slept for twenty hours. “I’ll wash first.”

“I ordered a new robe for you.”

“Have you bathed?”

He nodded quickly; worried that she would be upset at his waste of water by showering twice.

“Good. I like cleanliness.”

At her words, a relieved expression came to his face. She placed it as she scrubbed off another layer of the week’s battles. She had told him something personal, something that he could use to please her. Did he want that for his survival or did he yearn for the life that everyone believed they would have together? There were other questions

that she also needed answers to. Today, Candice wanted to find out what Daniel knew about the Ring—the one their rulers paid so well to keep a fresh supply of slaves flowing through the games, the ones who had taken what was hers. Even after all these years, Candice still wanted that red-haired bitch dead. It had been number two on her list, right after reclaiming her mate.

The sight of Daniel in the robe replaced her anger with a flare of need that Candice knew was terrifying. It sent him stumbling into a corner of the apartment, but she couldn't help it. He was so beautiful!

Anger came again, as violent as any she'd felt during any of her matches. Candice controlled it even as she fed it. Someone would pay. Blood would spill for what had been done to him.

“There are clothes for you in my kit!” she snapped. Candice winced inwardly, but didn't take it back. The anger would keep her steady and allow time to *reach* him before she took him.

Candice spun back into the washroom at that thought, eyes no longer black. The disease was a torment dealt with daily. It had five stages, but only three of them were common. First was the start, the uncontrollable need to spill blood. After that, learning to master the violence as it intensified. Few got to this point. The third stage was where her mother was, burnt-out.

Candice shoved the image away in revulsion. *That, I will never be!*

The fourth stage was burn-up. It usually consisted of snapping and killing whoever happened to be around. Candice almost liked that one. It was infinitely better than having no fire left at all, but there was also a fifth, legendary stage that no one she knew had ever achieved. Remission. No one knew what combination of environment, diet, and daily life might accomplish it, but that was the goal for her future. *Not the sparkless female who calls herself my mother! But for our bounty runs, I would have no use for Mary at all.*

Daniel was dressed when Candice emerged, but the trousers and sweater were no better than the robe. The soft material clung to his body, outlining thick arms she needed to use.

Her expression must have been bad because Daniel raised a hand to protect himself.

The need and the rage slapped at Candice, but for once, the side that hardly ever saw the light of day flew out of her mouth first.

“You look very nice. Blue suits you.”

Daniel blinked, not expecting the compliment.

Satisfied with their new beginning, she went to the set-and-waiting table. “Let’s eat.”

*She doesn’t like the way I’ve been treated.* Knowing that was another relief. Daniel smiled shyly as their gazes met over the candlelight. He wasn’t ready to be taken, but what was a good dinner without good atmosphere?

“Do you pray?”

Daniel stared in shock. “Of course!”

She indicated for him to do so.

Daniel dutifully bowed his chin. “I thank the Network for the food, and the air, and the...”

Daniel felt her sudden wave of rage and froze, waiting to be punished. He’d said it so many times the words often rolled out without feeling. Maybe she didn’t think he meant—

“Do you know of God?”

Now he was confused. That was who he’d been praying to. Daniel instinctively kept that information to himself. “What?”

Flames flashed across her expression. Daniel watched her shove them back with a determination that he admired.

“We’ll cover it later.” Her eyes went to the camera in the top corner of the apartment.

Daniel understood it was something the Network wouldn’t like. He slowly resumed eating, not sure why she’d gotten upset. Who was this God? Was she like the Network? He had no idea how the real world worked. He hadn’t been trained for that.

Candice hadn’t realized their rulers denied the bachelors even a basic knowledge of their origins. It was a struggle not to set him straight. The Network was far from God and she was morally offended by their insistence to these men that they were. Once they made it out of this bug-infested place, she would make sure his retraining included



religion and the wonders of creation. When the Pruetts sat down to a meal, they offered no thanks or requests, merely an apology for the sins of previous generations. God was clearly angry.

The food was excellent, but the way Daniel kept checking for her approval made Candice scowl and him cringe. So far, he'd done little in his own opinion to please her, but until he could help keep down this fiery heat, his emotions would have to wait.

"I need to know some things you won't want to talk about."

He nodded fearfully.

Candice dug into her big bowl of stew. It was good, which meant they wouldn't starve. Cooking wasn't her skill. Killing was.

"What do you remember about your life before the Network?"

"Almost nothing."

His handsome face scrunched up in concentration. "Just words that I'm not convinced are true."

Candice spooned another heaping bite into her mouth and tore off a large chunk of the bread he'd baked. It was something the kitchens here couldn't stock enough of, but she also needed a defense against the sound of his voice. She couldn't fly over and bite him with her mouth full.

"I'd hear those," she mumbled.

“I was sick for a long time,” Daniel told her reluctantly. “The fever took away the parts I can’t remember. They say I was sold by my family.”

*True, so far.* As he spoke, Candice kept her eyes on her bowl to prevent him from reacting to her rage, her pain. “Go on.”

“They used to talk when they thought I was too ill to listen.” His timbre became a low rumble that made her grip bend the spoon into a foreign shape.

“They said I’m supposed to do something.” He hesitated, dropping to a lower pitch that Candice wanted to taste him. “I’m special.”

“Special how?” She raised a brow as if she hadn’t known, but of course, she had. Daniel was hers. How could he not be unique?

Daniel flushed. “I have a genetic marker that’s *different*. They studied me a lot.”

There was a sneer to the words, a hint of true emotions beneath. Perhaps there was still more to him than fear.

“What do you plan to do now that you’re free?” Candice asked, tackling her biggest fear about him first.

Daniel stared at her in panic. “Free?”

“Yes. You’ll hold your own papers.”

She was letting him go. Daniel had heard of that possibility from other bachelors, but hadn’t believed it. *Freedom*. What would he do out there? He had to have an owner, a protector. The Network had made that clear, and he wasn’t sure what to say.

Candice had returned to her food, but Daniel stared at his bowl in distress. She had done all this to release a prize from captivity. He'd looked the worst off, so she'd picked him. It explained everything and sent hollow suffering into Daniel's stomach. *I don't want to be free*, he mourned with a well-hidden ache. *I want a loving owner*.

Daniel swept her scars and angry wounds, the burns and missing chunks of skin. All of that to free a slave? It was unlikely. He studied her harder. Daniel saw the tension first, the stiff set of her thick shoulders as she waited for his choice. The grief hit him next. She was upset at the thought of being away from him.

Confused, Daniel ran through his stores of information, but nothing came up about women needing their slaves willing, outside of mating. He was suddenly positive though, and wondered if she would like him to beg to stay with her. Daniel was adept at giving a woman what she needed. Wants, however, he had to guess.

His shoulders went down in frustration. He might be reading those things in desperation to keep from being out there alone. He wouldn't survive. Drawing in air to keep calm, Daniel stole glances at his owner and tried to decide how to respond.

It was hard not to ease his concerns, but Candice couldn't let him see how much pain it would cause to let him go. She waited, observing the gambit of emotions. Did Daniel want freedom?

After everything he had suffered, she would give it to him and keep burning to make him happy.

“You don’t really want me, right?”

His simple response made the choice for both of them. The pain-laced words blasted through Candice’s layers of ice as if they didn’t exist. Shoving the table aside, she pinned him against the cold wall, fighting the blood red of her irises and the thick need tickling up her thighs, her spine.

Daniel trembled.

Candice leaned in. “I want you more than my own life, Daniel!” Her kiss was a hard press to his clenched lips, urgent and intense as waves of change rolled.

Daniel’s first thought was only to survive and he stayed as still as he could, shaking. His mind went to his rules, but he hesitated to push Candice in any way. His new master was deadly. He’d noticed it in the first introduction, when she’d had no mercy on her fallen assassin, but she wasn’t drawing blood now. Though, she was affecting it. His body was recognizing the match and approving. Except for Rankin’s torture, where there was never any relief for him, Daniel hadn’t been bred in over a year. He couldn’t stop from hardening against her slender hip. He had expected a beating, not an embrace, and he was unprepared for his own response. In the past, only drugs had gotten his cooperation.

Candice’s lips were soft and hard in equal measures, iron hands around his wrists, but then

she *changed*. Her body melted against his, tugging at pent-up desires. Horny and anxious to please, Daniel hesitantly return the kiss.

*Control*. Candice softened her touch, eased her grip. Instead of trapping him, she leaned against his hard body and felt the truth pressing into her hip. He might be scared, but he wanted her! Daniel's lips moved against hers in confirmation, and she groaned at the sensation. The stubble on his skin was a delicious torment sliding across her cheek.

She drew back, flames crackling. "Are you registered?" *Have you done this before?*

The thrill at his hesitant nod came from her need, but the fury at his violation made her grip tighten again.

Daniel tensed for a blow.

"Shhh. Just a taste...." She soothed him as best she could.

When Candice claimed his lips, Daniel met her with a shudder of fear and want.

In her delight, Candice let go of that infamous control a bit, running her fingers down his arms to wrap him in an embrace that he went to willingly. She could have him, now if she wanted!

The fire grew hotter, testing her. Candice gasped as his lips went to her jaw, her neck. His body leaned against hers with baking need, hands trailing her arms. She'd planned to wait, to give him time to remember, but her control was flying away in thick chunks. Soon, she wouldn't be able

to stop. Candice pushed away the caution, sliding her hands down his lean hips.

Her nails dug into through soft clothes, making Daniel tensed, but he only felt more shaky desire when she slid warm fingers under his shirt and up the bare skin of his waist. It pressed him close. Daniel tried not to rock against her hip, but was suddenly positive that he would before much longer. She was too hot, too *ready*, to ignore. She was also dangerous, but he was bracing to bleed in order to be fully bonded with his new owner. He wouldn't be out there alone. He would be at her side, where she could make use of his talents. He would be a grateful mate.

Steeling his nerves, Daniel dropped his hands to her waist. Candice drew in a sharp breath, and Daniel tightened the hold, sensing what she needed. Most of his renters had wanted to be in charge, but a rare few liked a bolder partner. Before he could make the choice, she rubbed against him, and Daniel was dazed with fresh waves of need. *Without* the drugs, he was ready to finish a complete session. It was exciting. He'd never had a woman that his body wanted. More of his fear slipped under the heat.

His breath caught as Candice rubbed against that iron bar again, grip tightening... Daniel jerked her off her feet and spun them around so that Candice was now the one pinned by the wall. His mouth slanted over hers, demanding surrender.

“Yes!” Candice shuddered as the heat rose to an almost unbearable, perfect height of pleasure and agony.

Daniel’s hand slid into her shirt, the hot skin under *his* fingers now trembling.

Candice arched as he squeezed. *Yes!* Another chunk of control was blasted away. She tried to stop then, but the lust was stronger and so was Daniel. His grip tightened further.

“Just a taste. Shhh...”

His throaty copy of her words cracked the remaining ice. Candice writhed in his knowing embrace as his hand slid into her pants. Not giving her time to hurt him, he was clearly no virgin to handling the needs of a changeling. Lightning flashed as his fingers touched her skin, body reaching out. Candice sobbed against his mouth. The flames rose as he began to stroke, carrying her into a world where only they existed.

Daniel used his most reliable tactics, bringing her up so fast there was no time for her to flip, but this! He wanted to slow down, to explore her silken and rough skin until he exploded.

Daniel shifted, rocking against her in short, quick jerks that had her groaning in the start of release. His body throbbed at the image of her climax, his needs rise up to carry him into a haze of shocked lust. Daniel stroked harder, hands and hips in perfect time.

Searing, burning ecstasy consumed Candice at his mating motions against her hip. She felt the snap coming...

Daniel knew and pushed harder, sending her into pleasure that she'd never felt before. The change was banished to a dim corner as brilliant light exploded.

Candice wanted to do the same for him, but even as she shattered, she felt his release arching against her thigh, drenching, scalding. They groaned and pulsed, holding onto each other for support.

Candice tried to smile. "I'd start every day this way." During the game, she'd had no fear that any weak emotion such as love drove her, merely the return of a beloved possession. *Oh, how wrong I've been!*

"I'd still give you freedom, Daniel."

He tensed against her cheek, teasing the need into scenting the musky air again. Candice grimaced as the flames flickered back to life. *So short a relief!*

Daniel shifted away from her, easy to read. He was worried he'd gone too far by taking the lead and dealing pleasure with no permission, that it hadn't been good enough. And there was confusion. Because he'd enjoyed it? That certainly wasn't the norm. Registered breeders could be had. Their willingness didn't matter anyway, but as timid as Daniel was, Candice doubted he'd had many good moments while pleasing the public.



Daniel stood stiffly with his hands at his hips.

Candice remembered her next question, distracted him with it as she fixed her clothes. “What is it the Network expects you to do?”

“They won’t tell me.”

“Who won’t tell you?”

His face became distorted. “I can’t see!”

Candice longed to provide the answers and ease his anguish. Because she couldn’t yet, she distracted him from that too. “We’ll finish eating now.”

He went toward the kitchen, and then stopped, reddening. When he detoured to the washroom to clean his hands, Candice hid her approval and her unhappiness. When the Network said trained to adapt and please, they weren’t kidding, but the price paid for that obedience was too high.

Candice thought about how quickly he’d responded to her sexually. Maybe deep down he did recognize her, or was it the self-preservation instinct that males had? She’d been in the cubicles where the drugs forced reluctant bachelors into hard readiness in minutes. They were trained to please.

*And, he did that,* Candice thought, shivering. The question, was why? She knew as soon as she asked herself what he would gain from it. If they were bonded before leaving, she wouldn’t trade him for a different prize. He was using the heat to manipulate her.

Candice felt her heart thump. That was the old Daniel, *her* Daniel, and she was ever so grateful for proof that he still existed.

Daniel had learned something valuable that he examined as he switched on the hot water. His enjoyment was not only allowed, she *liked* it. It would have been hard to mistake. He'd shown her he knew something she needed. All he had to do was be certain her needs were taken care of and she would keep him. In time, he might still have that loving owner.

It wouldn't be as easy to satisfy her before she flipped next time, though. The fear returned when Daniel came from the room to see her pink gaze. He knew from his training that temporary methods wore off quickly. Then the female was constantly hungry for her man to put out the fire. From now on, he would have to get her to the bed so he could use the cuffs.

Aware of her flickering irises and his own surprising interest, Daniel tried to distract them both with some of the thousands of questions he had. "How long will we be here?"

Candice pushed her empty bowl away, shrugging. "Would you stay a while?"

His look was all the answer she needed. He couldn't wait to go. "In the morning," Candice told him. "The council sent notice of the win being approved. Our passage is already booked for the train."

His expression darkened.

Candice understood, but said nothing to comfort him. Transportation of prizes was done like livestock, even down to crates. It was a humiliating Network rule, but she wouldn't break it. The Pruetts were careful to appear loyal.

“How long will it take?”

“Three days.” *Seventy-two hours where anything can happen.* “I'll be on the train with you, one car away.”

Discounting the expensive ride they were about to take, foot and horse were still the most common forms of transportation. Even hunting held more lure than the odd stores that popped up. There had been little advancement under Network rule. Candice was positive that was due to the lack of ambitious men with strong backs, and hoarding. The only people with access to the remaining bits of technology were the council and their lackeys.

*Also hired labor,* she contemplated with a mental sneer. The Pruetts always used their Network connection to pad stocks.

“What will I do there?”

Daniel's fears were endless, and some, a surprise. Their rulers claimed males had no real desire to be freed, but Candice hadn't believed it until now. “You'll help my family clear the old roads.” *And help me control the change.*

He was satisfied with that answer, but Candice wondered how deep into their mix Daniel would fall. Would he be with her when they were on

bounty runs or would she be forced to leave him at the homestead with the other guys? Would his childhood home make him remember her?

Needing space to avoid demanding a repeat performance, Candice went to the master bedroom that she hadn't used yet, still exhausted and sore. "I'll sleep in here tonight. Do what you like, but don't leave this apartment without me."

Daniel was horrified at the thought.

Candice settled into the large bed a couple of minutes later, filled with an emotion she almost didn't recognize. She was happy.

## 2

Hours later, Candice tossed restlessly in the bed, the nightmares not frightening, but still ugly. Outside, a lightning storm had begun.

*Bang!* A loud strike rattled the complex.

Half a minute later, Daniel tapped on the door. "Can I come in?"

Candice sat up with shadowy images of blood still spilling behind her lids. "Yes."

He had stripped down to the trousers she'd brought, a size too large. Her gaze went to that bare skin. She wanted him and it wasn't all from the disease. He was beautifully built.

"Are you okay?" she asked. His face was full of fear that was almost desperate. He didn't like to be alone during storms or maybe not at all. Candice cursed herself for not thinking of it.

During his *stay* with the Network, he had probably been around other males at all times.

“I’d be where you are,” Daniel answered in a rush.

*Hunger.* It took Candice by surprise so quickly she couldn’t speak. She forced a curt gesture, trying to recover.

The bed dipped under his weight as he lay down.

A minute later, Candice was back under the edge of sleep, certain it would be more restful with him at her hip.

Daniel waited until she was snoring softly and inched onto his side. Like most changelings, Candice didn’t use a blanket. The inner heat was more than enough to keep her warm, and he was able to run his curious gaze over her exposed skin. It kept him from waking her with his moans as the storm grew. Daniel hated loud noises, always had.

“Stop...”

Thinking she meant him, Daniel quickly put his head down before realizing she was still asleep. Fear of her was something he couldn’t help. The lust in those black eyes implied she liked blood—spilling it and seeing it—and as the winner, she had control. He’d heard of slaves who were taken from their owners, but that was when the male had connections to those in authority. Daniel had none. If he made a claim of abuse, it would be ignored. The Network wanted Candice out of here. Even *he* felt that. They wouldn’t keep her around to

investigate the claims of a prize. She was dangerous.

*Crack!*

Daniel jumped at the loud flash of lightning, wondering what it had hit. Not the games complex with the rubber-like roof, but close enough for fire to be a concern. Daniel told himself those running this awful place were also aware of the danger. After the incident where half a cell of bachelors had burned to death, there was now constant weather monitoring by the den mothers. New Network City had lost a hundred citizens to the blaze, but the rare males had been cried for by the public.

*Crash!*

Daniel jumped again, and then stilled, not wanting her to wake. He didn't think he would be able to sleep at all.

Seconds later he was drifting, unconsciously comforted by the presence of his new protector.

## Chapter Nine

# Fragile

Day 11

### 1

*We're home.*

The area hadn't changed much in the decade since Daniel had been stripped from her arms. Even the apocalyptic zones that surrounded them were the same. Only the cleared road was different. That Pruett commitment to the Network, one for which they were not paid, was a source of pride. They added miles a year to the streets, just the six of them. Candice swallowed a smile of victory. Now, there would be seven.

The slums were behind their property. To the south, the main road was alive with farmers working the birthing season. To the east, the Network-controlled cities with their larger populations lurked. And to the west? The other end of the country was a mystery to most. Only a rare visitor ever came from the western outpost. During all her runs in the Borderlands, Candice had never met someone from that side. Network news claimed it was uninhabitable. Candice's other cousin, Samantha, had told her differently. There were rumors of an entire city of males hiding in the

west, but after winning the Bachelor Battles, Candice no longer had faith in that. If there really were such a city, it would be controlled by the Network. Male freedom was a myth.

Candice studied the crate being unloaded from the hauler, discerning tense, blue eyes through the cracks of boards sealed with a Network weld over the top. The seal in the weld read: *Property of Candice Pruett, winner of a Games Challenge*. Candice hated him being penned like an animal, but until that box was set on their land, she didn't make the rules—the Network did.

The delivery guards were enormous. Few women would interrupt a cargo transfer with these big females to confront. Only previous winners could deliver prizes. Knowing they'd killed at least three contestants was a strong deterrent to those without the courage to enter the games and legally earn a mate. A transport job was waiting for Candice if she wanted it, but the thought was revolting. Still, prizes did occasionally go missing or arrive damaged, so she was relieved when Daniel stepped from the large box unharmed.

Daniel carried the kit she'd had ready for him, no doubt neatly repacked. He was a bit neurotic about being neat, something Candice liked. He was definitely different from what she'd expected. His education was a good example. Most male slaves weren't given one, but Daniel was literate. She was curious how many of the books he'd gotten through on the ride here. Reading was a treat in



any world and she had been delighted he knew how. She had actually brought the novels for herself. Candice mentally sighed in tired satisfaction. She had wanted to ride in the same car with him, but she couldn't afford the distraction while they were so accessible. As a result, she hadn't spoken to him in days. It wasn't surprising that she had been miserable the entire time, flashed back to all those terrible years alone.

“Anything else?”

Candice shook her head at the guard, signing the paper with her usual careless scrawl. Daniel was legally hers—signed, sealed and delivered. The feeling was indescribable.

Daniel waited patiently for instructions, determined to do well in his new life. He still wasn't positive why she'd chosen him, but he was finally in the real world with an owner and that was enough to make him hopeful. Candice was intimidating, but she was also vibrant and he was drawn to that. She was a lot like the owner he'd envisioned as the game for his papers began, but better. She didn't like the Network! He hadn't dared to hope for that. He would have a home now, with Candice. Where she went, Daniel already wanted to be.

He watched her flex a scarred shoulder, marveling at her fast recovery. Her feet had been the only area still bothering her by the time they'd left. He had tended them right before they took the train out of New Network City. The sight of that

scarred, charred, sliced skin had reminded him of her sacrifices and allowed Daniel to walk to the crate instead of being sedated as most prizes were for transport. It had also let him relax a bit during the trip, enough to read between considering the future. He belonged to a bounty hunter who lived in the wilds of Ohio, where their rulers didn't even have a hub. Despite his sentiments about the council, that complex had been his home. He was certain being away from there would make him uneasy at times.

Trying to banish a sudden flare of nerves, Daniel studied Candice. Unlike the fighting clothes she'd worn at the complex, here at home, she had sported jeans and a button-up black shirt under a new black cloak. The cloak had a high collar that protected her from the sharp winds while adding an exotic flair to her alabaster skin and ebony spikes.

She came lightly his way, moving with grace and determination.

Daniel stared. *The feet must be better*, he thought dizzily.

"Come on." Candice waved Daniel to her as the truck rumbled away.

He responded quickly, blue cloak flashing behind him. She wasn't surprised when he tripped over the rocks and caught himself with a tempting flush. Outside activities were forbidden to the bachelors at the complex. When they were taken out of there, they had to learn to walk. The real

ground of the earth was nothing like the smooth, flat tiles in the complex.

“This is your home.” Candice wondered what Daniel was thinking as his wary gaze went over the small, crumbling white dome where they would live. The mostly underground den had looked the same before. Would it trigger a memory?

“Just us?”

Candice swallowed disappointment and pain. *He may never remember.* She had to accept it and be happy that she always would. She’d kept her promise. In time, that would temper the pain. “My mother and father, along with two cousins and their parents, share this space.”

Daniel stared in surprise. Starting to realize how lucky he was or worried that he would be shared, Candice couldn’t tell.

“You have males here already?”

She turned a sharp regard his way, one he cringed from. “Fathers and mates with *changeling* children.”

His profile relaxed a bit. Clearly, he’d been expecting worse. In other families, Daniel would have been right to worry. The average home held five or more changelings at any given time.

“Do I...speak to them?”

Candice wanted to smile, but his fear hurt her heart. He was terrified she would slave him out to her family. *Damn the Network!*

“If you like.” She could have told him of their bonds, their differences from most citizens, but Candice strode across the yard instead. He would witness it for himself. She was hoping it might shock him into recognition if this first plan failed.

Daniel hurried, making her hunger increase another notch. When he wasn't tripping over his own feet, he had a swagger he wasn't aware of. It made his shoulders wider, his face more attractive. Had he been this beautiful as a child? Candice couldn't be sure.

Daniel stayed on her heels as she skirted the row of thorn trees to enter the rear yard. From here, they had an open view of the slummy street where he had lived. They were only a few hundred feet from his former home.

Candice watched his troubled gaze go over the shacks and the grimy children playing in the rubble that lined them. Did he feel anything?

“Who are they?”

Did she tell the truth? These were likely sisters, cousins.

He looked to her, full of confusion and something else as he waited for her answer. Awareness?

“*Poor* people,” Candice finally answered.

She could tell he didn't understand her scorn. He assumed she held them in contempt for having no financial value. Candice let him. It was better to take the blows in succession, than to be nailed with them all at once. Finding out your family had sold

you and then gone on to have more children was a vicious blow.

As if he read the thought, Daniel shuddered. “I know that place!”

Daniel studied the street that they’d run on, hidden in, looted for treasures. He’d never been allowed in her home. Not because he was poor, but because his family had always known *his* value. They’d taken no chances on losing him to the Pruetts for something as unimportant as a mate when there were millions of UDs waiting as soon as he fit the sale rules.

“Have I been here before?”

“Yes...with me.”

That admission made him forget his place again. Daniel’s tenor rang with delicious emotions. “That’s why I feel like I know you. I do!”

Candice willed herself into submission, but it was hard.

Daniel stopped, flushing. “Sorry.”

Carefully controlled, Candice remarked, “That’s where you came from.” She pushed him back to the awful memories now waiting just below the surface.

Daniel scanned the plastic-covered shacks and snotty children. “I’m very angry right now. Is that allowed?”

“Yes,” she snorted, realizing he had put the basic frame together. She could see pieces slamming into place in his mind with hurtful

blows. “If anyone has the right to rage, it’s the males of New America.”

“I want to go down there.”

She waved a hand in answer and trailed him as he went. He was having flashes. She could tell it by the sudden pauses and stiffening of those wide shoulders. The memories couldn’t be easy. Born to sell, the Malin family had done it for centuries. It was how they paid for so many daughters, Candice assumed. Though, after seeing how the offspring lived compared to the adults, she suspected that wasn’t out of love either. Candice had always believed they were a breeding farm, trying to have male births. What they were doing to ensure such success was a mystery, but they’d managed to produce a boy in every generation as long as their rulers had been keeping records. To achieve it, Candice had little doubt they were doing something illegal.

She smothered another harsh snort. Not that the Pruetts stayed on the Network side of that line.

“I played there.”

Her heart thudded. Played, laughed, *cried*.

“There was a girl...”

*Come on!* Her entire being was centered on willing him to remember her on his own. It stole her attention.

“You’re a man. You’re not allowed to be here!”

The warning came from a small, dirty girl with bright blue eyes and brown hair.

Candice scowled at her as Daniel tensed. “Get lost!”

Her growl sent the child fleeing into her home, Daniel’s home, but the damage had been done. He knew who the child was, what had happened to him. Memories of their friendship would have to wait behind the betrayals of his family.

“Sold? By them?” he choked on the words.

Candice didn’t lie. “Yes, as with every male they have.”

She had an idea of what to do for the depression or grief that she expected, but Candice hadn’t considered the livid fury that flashed across his thin face.

“I’ll understand if you send me away for this,” Daniel stated, almost calmly. “I am sorry.”

Before she could guess, he darted down the embankment.

Debris began to hit the shack in hard thuds, bricks slamming straight through the plastic over the roof. The missiles rained fast and heavy, full of a pent-up anger she hadn’t suspected.

“Slam you!”

Daniel’s enraged scream sent need, clever and hungry, up her spine. That was completely her Daniel and it had been so long!

*Thud! Thud! Crack!*

The last one came from a beautifully hefted concrete block slamming into a support pole. The frame shifted and then collapsed in a spray of dust and debris. It was merely a corner dry-out room,

shielded from the acid rain, but to have done it with his bare hands impressed Candice.

Daniel kept throwing.

She let him go until he was spent and a hard anger had replaced the hurt. By now, all the occupants of the street were hovering around their filthy windows and doorways, but not one of them approached Daniel when they spotted a Pruett standing tolerantly nearby. As for his cowardly family, there was no sign, but Candice was certain they were huddled in rear rooms, wondering if she would now come in and punish them in the ways that he couldn't. Candice wanted to. If she stuck to hurting females, she could easily pay the fines. Still, it would tell the Network more than she could afford them to know yet. It also wasn't why she'd brought him here.

Candice smoothed her expression. "Come along."

Daniel followed without question. He didn't glance back.

Now unclouded by the discovery that had lain in wait, Daniel noticed the differences as they walked back. The rubble faded into the row of trees, shielding the street, protecting them—from his owner. She wasn't an upstanding member of this community. She was a bounty hunter who had to be tiptoed around because of her affiliation with the Network, because she was dangerous.

"Will there be a fine?"



Candice shrugged, encouraged by the tiny hint of enticing defiance lingering in his pitch. “Don’t let it worry you.”

He sighed miserably. “Even if I need to do it again?”

There was the pain she’d been expecting, but Candice knew how to help him now. She could afford to pay for every brick he felt like throwing. “You’re mine, Daniel. Nothing you can do will change that.”

“You won’t sell me? Ever?”

Her snap came fast. They were on the ground an instant later, with Candice reminding him how much he was wanted.

His anger let him return the kiss and Candice felt another dark section of her soul lighten.

“So, this is Daniel, all grown up.”

Daniel tensed.

Candice reluctantly retreated from his lips. “This is my family.”

Daniel was mortified. He jumped to his feet the instant she rolled off him, cheeks flushed.

“He grew up.”

Mary’s approving tone encouraged Daniel to ask questions. Then he remembered his place and glanced at Candice for approval.

Her scowl snapped his mouth shut.

Candice grunted. He was so reactive to her expressions, so wary of displeasing her. What would ease that?

“Time.” Reading her, Bruce’s answer was comforting.

Candice nodded at her father’s comment. They had that now.

“Um, Candy?”

Heat flared at the name. “Yes, Angel?”

Her cousin’s fists clenched. “Have you done much since getting here?”

Candice flashed over their side trip. “There might have been a tense moment. Why?”

“No reason. Just wondering about the squad of troops coming up our driveway.”

Battle mode fell into place. “Have they spotted us yet?”

“In about ten seconds.”

Candice picked a plan and then threw herself at Daniel. “Grab me!” she demanded of her family.

Angelica understood right away, leading the others. “Don’t hurt him! He’s new!”

She jerked lightly on Candice’s arm, trying to keep her from the cowering male as the adults rushed to help.

“Stop! You’ll hurt him!”

“Halt there!”

The family ignored the order, pretending to struggle as Candice gradually let them pull her away. Daniel stayed on the ground with Angelica’s arm blocking his confused expression.

“You there! Halt!”

They all turned this time, showing surprise.

“Who speaks for this family?”

“I’m Marion Pruett.”

Mary’s voice, the one Candice had come to loathe since the change, was perfectly annoyed.

“We’re sorry for the disturbance.” Mary grew resigned and a bit frustrated. “She brought her prize home today.”

The guards scanned Candice, wanting to smirk, but they knew better after observing her matches.

“We have a report of property damage. Witnesses said it was a male.” The captain’s stern gray gaze raked over Daniel. “Fitting *his* description.”

“That coward break something?” Candice snorted scornfully, playing her role. “He’s not worth the ticket I paid to get in. I made the mess. Tell the Malin family to keep better track of their kids! I’m tired of them throwing rocks at our windows.” Candice strode toward the house angrily. “Send the bill here.”

“Go on, now.” Angelica waved Daniel after her. “Try to *calm* her.”

Mary distracted the sentries. “We had hoped she would settle down.”

Angelica completed the performance. “Maybe another episode of the Bachelor Battles?”

Mary cracked a weary smile. “Perhaps.”

Candice listened to the troops chuckling as she and Daniel slickly disappeared. It was almost as if they’d done this before.

Daniel followed Candice inside. He stopped to stare at the luxury of his new home in surprise

while Candice shut the door. She continued to listen, timing the moment the sentries would come around this end of the house to get back on their mopars.

Her home was different from what Daniel had expected after viewing the outside. The few changeling quarters he'd visited were luxurious and full of conveniences the rest of the country lived without. Those had been set up for uncaring, lazy people who wanted the latest in what was popular. Candy's home was the opposite. It was like stepping into the past.

There were paintings and sculptures, some of them vaguely familiar. The one over the table, Daniel recognized right away, but he couldn't remember the name of the awkwardly smiling lady. He spotted a shiny laser washer for the dishes and a newer wall screen that was first class technology for sure, but everything else was a rustic version from history. A massive stereo system, complete with stacks of disks and speakers placed carefully for surrounding sound, drew his attention. *That alone would get them arrested*, Daniel thought. Unapproved music from the old world was a hanging offense.

He quickly turned away, not wanting Candice to see that he'd noticed.

On the other end of the round room, Daniel picked out archaic tools and exotic decorations that he knew not to touch. Some were so old they would probably crumble into dust under his

clumsy fingers. His new family wasn't what they appeared to be, that was obvious. Most employees, even as far down the chain as bounty hunters, were strict about following the rules, but the Pruetts didn't abide by that line. Daniel considered the three pale relatives. How did her family view him? Was he the foundling that she'd adopted or an intruder to be watched for betrayals?

Candice was observing the situation outside, but she was also aware of Daniel's fascination. It was deceiving, but the Pruetts didn't flaunt their wealth. They knew better. Despite being worth more UDs than everyone in their neighborhood combined, from the outside they appeared as broke as the rest of their town. Stepping into their home had forced Daniel to revise his theories. Plush gray carpet and well-tended wooded walls surrounded them, along with expensive furnishings that included an art collection that would get them executed for treason and conspiracy if the Network unearthed it. They'd ventured into dark, dangerous places for these forbidden treasures. The Mona Lisa hanging over the table wasn't one of her favorites, but it was easily worth as much as their entire savings and no one knew they had it. The rest of the world had only glimpsed it in old books, but the Pruetts were collectors of such things. Their underground storage rooms held all sorts of blasts from the past, like the tattered document declaring this a *free* country. Their rulers would kill anyone caught with something like that, but

the Pruett family understood that history, good or bad, needed to be preserved.

Candice studied Daniel while she listened to her family manipulate the guards. He was shocked, unable to place this well-stocked, pleasant interior with the crumbling white dome and weather-beaten walls. “Welcome to your new life.”

Daniel gave her an uneasy smile.

Candice went to the window, certain he would follow. The blinds allowed a limited view into the house, but she doubted the troops would pay much attention to it after the show she planned to give them. As the squad began to pass the house on their rovers, Candice spun Daniel toward the window. The embrace was light, allowing her to see the nudges and mirth of the troops. Then he moved against her in response and Candice was lost again. His taste was enough to make her drunk.

“Well, this may get old.”

Angelica’s slightly jealous voice made Daniel tense again, but Candice refused to go this time.

“Did he really do all that damage?” Angelica asked as everyone came inside. “The fine is huge.”

Candice stayed against him as the sentries rolled out of sight. “Some overdue justice, don’t you think?”

“Yes...” Angelica answered thoughtfully.

“Not yet.”

“But we need another hand.”

When Candice spun from the room, Daniel knew to follow. “I’d like to help if I can.”

Candice didn’t respond to his softly spoken offer, didn’t need to. She’d given her answer.

“Can I come up?”

Angelica’s voice was full of humor, something Candice relied on at times. She said nothing, granting permission. The upstairs, all five rooms of it, had been hers for as long as she could remember. Other than the cleaners, no one was ever allowed up here. Candice was free to be her true self in these rooms—*changed*.

The family home was arrayed in a circle. Old wood framed it into a spiral of chambers that all had adjoining egresses. They were Pruetts. They liked exits. The second floor was reached by the same steep, rounded stairs. The dark paneling helped to keep it cool despite the height. It also held in heat and made the house warmer in the winter than most of the aboveground homes of their neighbors. On the walls downstairs was a variety of art and family items. Up here were the dark, mysterious collections Candice had gathered during their bounty runs. Her favorite was the black Jesus on the cross. Had the old ones really believed God was like a man? How could anything so complex, so completely self-sufficient as a planet, be created by a being like humans? People didn’t create. They killed.

Angelica had missed the daily workouts. They had no sooner entered the upstairs hall, than

Candice had to shove Daniel to the side so that she could deflect an attack from the girl. Angelica slammed against her hip, sending Candice into the wall with her new strength.

“Rough week?” Candice teased as she caught herself.

Angelica answered with a lunge that Candice caught and used to throw the girl into the wooden wall.

“Slam it!”

Candice laughed at her cousin’s very real frustration, causing Angelica’s profile to tighten.

Candice watched her pull the rage back in approval. Angela hadn’t been able to do that before. “Very good.” She wondered what Angelica had suffered during her time with the Korean, but the doctors at the complex had proclaimed her fine, so Candice wouldn’t ask. Pruett women were like that. If they had a problem they couldn’t handle, they gathered help. Until then, their business was their own.

Angelica grinned, a harsh mirror of Candice’s matches.

Candice held out a hand, yanked her cousin to her feet. “Come on. I want to get Daniel settled in his room.”

She slung an arm around Angelica’s thin shoulders and turned to find Daniel cowering where she had shoved him. His entire body screamed fear.

“Kinda jumpy,” Angelica observed.



Candice shrugged as Daniel understood, flushing. “He just needs time.”

Candice came toward him slowly, making sure to control her expression when he flinched. She held out a hand. “Come?”

He responded carefully, taking the light grip she offered.

Candice’s skin tingled, sending more heat into the furnace as they walked into her bedroom. She fastened the door behind them, ready to start his retraining. The first thing she did was leave him alone. “We’ll share this bed on my good nights. For others, you’ll have the adjoining chamber. You should go there now and put away your things.”

He was out of her sight an instant later.

Candice frowned at her flash of concern. His actions today proved the fear was weaker than his anger. She would use that to pull him out of his misery. What the Network had destroyed, she would patiently rebuild.

Daniel was almost unable to believe Candice wasn’t beating him for what he’d done, for the fine she now had to pay. She was so different from the females he’d had contact with at the complex. If not for the physical gratification Daniel knew how to hand out, he would have no idea how to survive her ownership.

His scanned the rounded bedroom, and then the small egress indicating a wash area. He stared in surprise. *This is all for me?*

It had been set up for a man, from the dark blue walls to the plain blankets on the enormous bed. Braced with tall pillars, it wasn't as large as the bed in Candy's chamber, but it was more than Daniel was used to. He found himself fearing it a little. *How alone will I feel in that empty space?*

Daniel glanced around from where he stood. There were enough clothes and personal gear to outfit him for a year, he estimated and felt his heart begin to relax from the hard ball it had clenched into upon seeing who had won his papers. Candice didn't have plans to sell him if she had spent this amount of UDs on his future care. She intended to keep him. It suddenly occurred to Daniel that she was more faith based than he'd first reflected. To gather so much, she'd been certain she would win. It was something else he hadn't expected from the brutal fighter.

Remembering she wanted him to unpack, Daniel got on it, admiring the soft textures she'd chosen. At the complex, new outfits were given every six months, with no exceptions. After repeated washings, they became threadbare very quickly. The clothes he now had would allow him the decency of being well covered, no matter how many outfits his owner tore up. In his heart, black holes began to heal.

Daniel got lost in exploring the gifts, but exhaustion soon had him stretching out on a corner of the bed, surrounded by his new possessions. A week ago, he'd been cowering in his cot, waiting

for Rankin's heavy service call. Now, he was...home?

*Yes.*

Daniel already knew he would come to love it here. All that mattered, was could he break through Candy's fire and ice to give them both peace? Considering who she was, the odds weren't good, but he owed it to her to try. She'd nearly died to win his papers. The least he could do was put the same effort into their future.

Chapter Ten  
**Network Run**

1

**I**t was quiet.

After the days they'd spent at the complex, Candice wasn't sure Daniel was capable of that unless there was a problem. She stepped toward his door with a nagging sense that she'd forgotten something. She hadn't searched the room before he went in, but Angelica had been here...

Her hand turned the knob before she stopped, remembering these weren't just her chambers anymore. Smirking slightly at the satisfied sentiment, Candice knocked.

"Come in."

His tenor sent that familiar ache into her gut. She pushed it back, frustrated with her lack of control. Candice entered, but didn't go any further. She wanted him to believe that this room, at least, was his so he would have a sanctuary. She had dens all over their hunting grounds.

"Thank you. I'll try to take care of it all."

Candice was glad he was aware of the cost of replacing things, but she needed him to understand it didn't matter to her. With a deliberate move, she

flipped the window open and shoved a box out the window.

Candice started to explain...

“What the hell?” Coming from the ground below, Angelica’s voice was angry.

Candice snorted laughter at the image of a box suddenly falling from the sky as Angelica walked under the window. Talk about timing. She snapped the window shut with an honest chuckle and finally took in Daniel’s reaction.

“Why did you do that?”

*He’s mad!*

To her shock, Daniel stomped for the exit.

“I want those!” he complained, hand reaching for the knob...then he remembered who he was yelling at.

Daniel expected her to be angry, but she was trying not to laugh! Not understanding, but determined to reclaim the gift, he stomped from the room without permission. On the way down the stairs, a sound rang through his head and stuck there. Candy was laughing. It sent flashes of that dream girl into his brain, bouncing around, opening doors.

Daniel stopped on the stairs, rotating toward the sound like a hunter scenting prey.

He wasn’t the only one it drew. Her parents came to the bottom of the stairs to stare up in shock. Daniel also felt her furious little relative nearby listening, and it took away the anger,

replacing it with curiosity. “I guess you haven’t heard that much.”

His comment pulled a snort from her father and a pointed look from her mother.

“When you were taken, she closed up,” Mary stated. “We haven’t seen or heard from *that* girl in eight years.”

They parents resumed what they had been doing as Daniel’s mind flew over the newest piece of his puzzle. He’d been Candy’s first. *Before the change, she wanted me.* It was a powerful moment, knowing he’d had at least one person he had trusted enough to be attached to. The rest of his memories were awful, ugly enough to make him wish the flashes would stop. He didn’t need to know everything that had happened, but he did yearn to have those images of Candice in the proper order, rather than the choppy pictures he worried might always be there.

Daniel went outside, spotting her cousin still by the clothes. He gathered the items into the box quickly. He wanted to say something: *Sorry they fell on you,* but knew better. Changelings didn’t handle the sound of male voices well. Even the den mothers insisted on silence. Candice was the single exception he’d ever known.

As Daniel turned to go, Angelica stepped in front of him.

He instinctively glanced up to the window, already viewing Candice as his protector.

Angelica noticed. She grinned at him.

Daniel was leery of her, but Candice clearly trusted the smaller woman and he decided to give her a chance. Angelica didn't seem to be hateful, just in pain. "Sorry if it hit you."

Angelica paled, sight flickering to pink.

Daniel hurried around her, worried again over the new rules he needed to learn. He had no idea what was expected of him, and he was so tired! He'd only allowed himself a few minutes rest. Veins were throbbing in his temples.

Daniel entered her open bedroom with a quick glance that confirmed Candice was still in his. Daniel kept his steps steady. He had to stop tiptoeing around her. It was embarrassing, but even worse, it angered her and that wouldn't help his plans to bond.

Daniel came into the chamber and set the box where it had been before, then focused on his new owner. A small smile played along her lips and she was warmer, more relaxed than he'd witnessed so far. *She likes being at home*, he realized. How nice that must be.

"Are you done for now?"

He nodded at her amused question, unable to miss the way her shirt clung to her hips. Clothed, she was a dangerous foe to be recognized on sight. Clad for bed, Candice was an exotic, tattooed temptation with fiery skin and sharp needs.

Candice saw the bags under his bloodshot eyes, the wild hair that he liked to be neat, and took pity. "Get in bed."

Daniel flinched.

Candice sighed. “*You, not me.*”

He flushed again, but moved toward the bed as she took up a seat on the wide ledge. She’d often lain here as a child to stare out the window at his house. Now, he was in *her* room, pushing his boots off to climb into bed. The moment was intense, but Candice kept her heat to herself, knowing he needed to sleep.

Despite her good intentions, the sight of him removing his cloak and tossing it over the headboard like a man getting ready for a fun evening made Candice stand up. *I can use a nap.*

Candice took off her cloak and weapons belt, then boots, before dropping heavily into the soft bed. She turned away, letting her lids shut. She had dreamed of sharing this bed with him, but she wasn’t sure she’d really believed it would happen. She had bought supplies and made her plans because that was how she was wired. She wouldn’t accept anything less than what she wanted, but she had felt fear. Now that he was here, Candice could breathe again.

She listened to him settle, wondering if the short conversation with her parents had given him a flash of their past. She’d listened to them with changeling ears, hoping.

Daniel realized she was tired and relaxed. Other than a few ten-minute droops when his eyes refused to stay open any longer; he hadn’t slept on the train. He was grateful for the books and the



light she'd provided, and still surprised by the size of the crate he'd been shoved into. It had even held a port-o, which kept him from arriving in a humiliating state. She obviously cared about him...

Daniel didn't remember dozing off, but he came awake instantly at the sensation of a woman lying on his chest. Candice was snoring softly. He guessed she'd been there for a while from the wide drool spot on his shirt. She was open in this moment, no longer a hardened killer, but the little girl he'd loved, all grown up. The past snagged him and Daniel went willingly into the grayness this time as a new memory rippled over his mind.

*"I won't eat them."*

*"Yes, you will."*

*"You can't make me!"*

*"Wanna bet?"*

*Daniel was under the concrete slabs, one of his favorite hiding places because of the graffiti the runaways left. The girl had tossed the apples into his hideout. He didn't ask for them!*

*"If I come in there, I'll make you eat them all right now and get the shits."*

*"Go away!" He was still crying from the awful words his older sisters had beaten him with and the sight of a Pruett blocking his escape route made Daniel strike out like a cornered rat. "I don't need your charity!"*

*“Fine, starve. Don’t know why I tried.”*

*The girl moved away.*

*Daniel waited, not sure if it was a trick. His family hated the Pruetts, called them killers of the worst sort, but the apples, well... he hadn’t had an apple in his whole life that he knew of and here was five of them!*

*It took Daniel until dark to finish the gift, sitting in that fly-infested shade with apple juice all over his chin and seeds littering the apocalyptic rubble. He even buried a few of them in the gritty sand, not thinking they would grow, but in his heart, the boy needed something to hope for.*

Daniel woke again at a louder, uneasy snort from the changeling on his chest, but the memory remained vivid. He had been slapped for the stains on his clothes and the carpet the next day, but it had begun a friendship that he’d never completely forgotten. He had tracked her down on her own turf a week later, sitting in one of the deadly thorn trees outside this very house. Candice had smirked when she came out for school and saw him. After that, they’d been together every day. The friendship had held him, given him strength to cling to, but it was still hard to place adult Candice with his little friend, hard to believe that it was *this* woman. In his concentration, Daniel didn’t realize she had stopped snoring.

Candice’s normal process upon waking was to examine the chinks in her control and shore them

up before facing a day among her family. She never relaxed around them. She feared it would also be that way with Daniel. She was so afraid of doing it again. The injury she'd given Mary was unforgivable some days. The only way to cope with everyone was to ensure that she was in complete control at all times. With Daniel, that would be a struggle and Candice began the day like she did any other. She took a deep breath.

Daniel's smells instantly swirled into her nose and set fire to everything they touched. Musky and sharp, she wasn't ready for the change, but it was coming. Her fingers tangled in the blanket as she struggled to keep from flipping into an animal. She didn't know he was awake until he spoke.

"I still hate apples."

Those words told her he was remembering how they'd met. She snorted, distracted from the rising need. "You shouldn't have eaten them all at once."

"You should have told me."

"I kind of did."

Daniel chuckled, but sadness and anger were clear in his answer.

"I'd never had one before."

Candice hadn't known that and her heart clenched. She rose up to regard him. "You'll never be neglected again."

Daniel slowly smiled. He reached out a big hand to smooth a lock of hair behind her ear. "Thank you, for not forgetting about me."

“I’ve needed you my entire life.” Candice leaned into his caress, dazed from his simple touch. “There was no choice to be made.”

She felt him shift, but she waited to see what he would do at her admission. Did he know of true emotions...of love?

Daniel gently drew her closer. His lips pressed softly to hers, but only lingered for a second of fire before retreating.

Wanting a real kiss, Candice dropped her head to his chest. When he sighed lowly, the noise rumbled through his body and into her heart like a bullet. *He sounds happy. That’s better than a kiss.*

Daniel was surprised by every new thing he learned about her, but even more, by her control. It made him bolder. She hadn’t snapped once and the blood she’d drawn was light nail wounds that were already mostly gone. He was remembering their past, starting to relax with her. Would she take him soon? He couldn’t stop the tensing of his arms or the rising of his trousers.

Candice noticed both. Her breath caught, nostrils flaring.

Daniel heard her nails rip into the sheet next to his hip and chose to confront his fear. He pushed the rules into a mental file, locking them up tight. From now on, he would play this game by instinct.

“Candy...” He knew what it did to her, to hear his voice, but he was guessing about the name. Daniel sensed that he had the right to call her that and more.

It was confirmed when she merely tensed further and asked, “Yes, Daniel?”

“It’s the start of a new day.”

He knew she understood his meaning by the way the sexual tension, already sparking between them, flared up hot enough to burn. Daniel wasn’t positive which way she would go or even which way he was rooting for. She was so dangerous...so sexy.

“As you would.”

Daniel’s heart thumped as delight spread across his lips. It seemed that he *had* been rooting.

Daniel wasn’t as careful as he’d intended to be when he slid a hand around her waist and pulled her fully on top of his hard body. His other hand went behind her tattooed neck and tugged her down for a taste of that sweet mouth. He wanted her. Now was as good a time as any to make certain she knew. His tongue dipped inside her mouth, catching her groan. It shot through his body like the drugs he’d used and Daniel rolled them over, pressing his hardness against her with a sharp thrust that sent the blood pounding into his heads.

Daniel deepened the kiss, automatically protecting himself from her razor-like claws as she writhed beneath him. He stroked her sleepy skin, full of her taste, her sounds.

Candice mewled, driving him into sliding a hand under her shirt to cup a full breast. He squeezed, thrusting.

“Candice...?”

Candice ignored the call, but Angelica's voice made Daniel roll away. *Damn it!*

"Candice?"

"We'll be there!" Her annoyed shout killed the rest of the mood. Sighing, Candice reluctantly stood up. "Get a shower if you like and then come downstairs. I'll be waiting."

Daniel went to the washroom right away, glad she was giving him instructions to follow.

Candice tried not to think about the flames or her charring skin as she laid out what she hoped he would wear. *He looks so good in blue.*

## 2

Daniel sat where she pointed, keeping his chin down as her mother handed out heaping plates that smelled better than anything he had scrounged from the kitchens. The council didn't want bachelors to get too big or too strong. Daniel slid his hands under his legs to keep from reaching for a spoon before anyone else did. He felt like he was starving again. That was how Rankin had gotten under his skin at first. Despite her abuses, regular meals were hard to come by, even for a games prize. When she'd offered deals, he had taken them.

Daniel bobbed thanks as a drink was set down.

"You're welcome," Mary stated.

The friendly pitch made him stare. It took a moment to understand that Candice's parent was in

stage three. *How did a meek woman run a bounty hunting family?*

The wooden table was wide, leaving plenty of space between Daniel and the younger female to his left. The bags under Angelica's eyes said she had passed a rough night. He wondered why she didn't have a mate yet. *Maybe she does*, he amended. He turned his attention away before it drew hers.

The light from the window was a pretty mix of orange and purple. The soft breeze and the scents of nature caught his attention. Daniel hadn't been outside after brought to the complex. He frowned, thinking he might—

*Squawk!*

A large black shape with broad wings landed on the window ledge and croaked again. *Squawk!* It had beady orbs that stared intently at the family.

Daniel watched it hop around in delight. He'd only viewed birds in books. "What is it?"

The silence made him glance around the table to find everyone observing him, trying not to be affected by his reaction.

Daniel flushed. He wasn't supposed to speak unless spoken to. He waited nervously for a punishment. Would her mother be lenient?

"It's a raven."

The tone was warm enough to get Daniel to look up. He didn't perceive any anger and immediately pushed his luck. "Are they pets?"

That drew a frown from Candice that he cringed from.

“No,” Mary stated gravely. “Nature turned against mankind. Pets are not safe.”

Daniel nodded as if he understood, vowing to keep his mouth shut unless he was asked a question.

“A fresh contract came this morning.”

Not expecting a call, Candice glanced up from her bowl to see her mother’s frown.

“They want four of us on this one,” Mary informed the hunters.

That got Candice’s full attention. She gestured in response to the raised brow directed at Daniel. *Do you want him to hear?* “Go ahead.” Better that he saw what they did for a living now, so he would understand the life he would have.

Mary slid the disk into the wall screen. They all listened to the computer-generated voice as they ate.

*“Hello and good wishes, Pruett family. The Network sends their regards. We hope to employ your services once again. Your successful record with this particular convict will earn you the standard fee of two million UDs. Full stock credits will be provided upon your acceptance, as usual.”*

Mary pushed another button and a familiar profile appeared on the screen.

“Baker!”

Angelica’s growl echoed Candice’s exasperation. It was odd that a contract for her



lover had come on the same day that she'd brought her mate home.

"Can't they build a slam that will hold him?" Angelica complained.

"How many kills does he have now?" Bruce asked. He was already certain of his daughter's choice. He was able to guess at her intentions the easiest. Mary had chosen not to go against their rulers to save Daniel. Candice would pick differently.

Mary hit the info button with a resigned sigh. She was brutal on runs, but she hated them. "Thirteen."

"What extras are they offering?" Angelica asked, letting Candice eat.

"Rations, weapons, a bonus for being fast...oh, wow."

Hearing such a fiery emotion as surprise from the burnt-out woman drew everyone.

"If we make the time limit of a week, they'll throw in a breeding pass. The same if he's brought in dead."

Candice winced. Dead or alive had finally been called. What had Baker done while she was away?

"For a male child right? A female would have to be aborted," Angelica clarified.

"No. Even for twin girls."

Candice' heart skipped. She could have a family! *But I won't get the pass*, she realized. It would come in her mother's name. Mary would have need of it when she and Daniel moved into

their own home. Mary might want to refill these rooms with life. *For her then*, Candice decided. *A small payment for the damage I've done...and for the chance to tell Baker goodbye in person. I owe him that.*

"I'm in." Candice dug into the remaining stew. She slowly became aware of the horrified attention on her. *Daniel.*

He was pale, almost ready to panic. "You're leaving?"

"Yes." Candice hoped he wanted to come, because she wasn't positive she could stand to leave him here. Surprising those at the table, she asked, "You'd go?"

"Yes!"

His eagerness pleased all of them.

Candice raised a brow at her father. "You'll see to it while we get things ready?"

"Of course."

There was no hint of how much Bruce was anticipating easing the other man's fears, but Candice knew. They all did and approved it. Angelica's parents had been away for a while now, tracking down a fugitive for a high bidder. Bruce missed their company. With Daniel around, his needs would be met too.

Candice could tell she had pleased her mother with the choice. Daniel however, appeared scared. She distracted him by asking her mother, "Has the fine come yet?"

"Yes," Mary answered. "Paid."

Candice assumed it was a surprise for Daniel to realize their household reported to her. Mary was the legal ruler the council preferred to deal with, but she had been grooming Candice to take over since she was born. Shortly after Candice *changed*, Mary had gladly passed the reins. She didn't have enough rage left, no edge to rely on to ensure their survival. She'd found her happiness with Bruce.

"What about the meeting?" Angelica asked.

"Contact along the way." Typing on the keypad, Mary was making the arrangements. She'd also been certain Candice would accept the run.

Candice grunted. Last time they had captured Baker quickly, only to have her take him and hole-up for a month of blissful relief. Candice had surrendered him afterwards, but she'd also given him a knife as they parted, so maybe she didn't agree with their rulers on that one, either.

"Do you want to listen to the clip?"

Candice glanced at Daniel, seeing he'd gotten the courage to ask her father quiet questions. She nodded.

Mary switched it on, then took her seat as the computer voice floated through the kitchen.

*"Richard Baker is responsible for thirteen murders. He recently escaped by slitting the throats of the transport guards while being taken to the Network's underground compound. With Baker, are two other fugitives: Cowan James and a female, Sammi Moores. Both have separate*

*rewards. Last known location is Nashville. Network forces were ambushed and suffered heavy losses there. The council prefers none of the trio be brought in alive, but they will still pay for capture. Please contact the representative for your zone with further questions or supply requests not already on the Pruett family lists. On behalf of all the citizens in New Network lands, thank you and happy hunting.”*

Silence filled the warm chamber as the others waited for Candice to sort through it. They usually hunted non-stop when they went on a run and then they spent a day resting before setting the ambush. With Daniel at her side, she would be distracted. Plus, a four-man crew for Baker was light. “We should bring in the trackers.”

“I agree.” Angelica had been thinking the same thing. They both focused on the person who was legally allowed to make the call.

“In the morning.”

They could tell by Mary’s tone that she wanted to do it this time, and again, it surprised Candice. Mary hated the snake women.

“We need to add up the total payday so we’ll know how to record the split,” Candice instructed.

“I’ll do it.” Her father moved gracefully toward the wall screen.

Candice pushed herself away from the cluttered table.

The instant she got up, Daniel began cleaning it. He put things where he’d seen them taken from,

neatly stacking the dishes for washing. At the complex, bachelors always cleaned their cells.

No one spoke as they studied his practiced, involuntary movements. It had been a while since they'd had a trained male around. The family had forgotten how deeply the former captives had also been *changed*.

“Daniel.”

He turned at once, worrying over their stares.

“Leave it. We have a cleaner.”

He flushed. “Sorry.”

Candice felt sympathy but said nothing else, though she could feel her parents hoping she would. Daniel had been broken. It would take time to repair.

“Seven even is 1.4 million.”

That was a good haul. Candice turned to her father. “Do a quick weapons evaluation with him while Angel and I sort the gear. We’ll leave early.”

Angelica fell in on her heels, waves of fury radiating at the use of the name.

Candice waited until they were almost to the egress before spinning around. “Now pull it back!”

It was a command from a level two changeling, harsh and penetrating. Angelica’s red eyes flashed, going pink as her fists clenched in effort. A snarl, tighter fists, and then black glared.

Impressed, Candice strode to the door, and Angelica followed. Only three years into the disease, her control was remarkable. Even Candice hadn’t been able to master it so fast.

“Thanks.” Angelica hadn’t wanted to attack, but the fire was consuming.

Candice slung an arm around her shoulders. “I know what it feels like to be called by the old name. It hurts.”

“Yeah.”

As they went out, Daniel’s concern burned into them. Candice didn’t have to see the worry to know it was there. Fear of being sold or left behind, worry about not being able to keep up, but more, worry over her safety against a hardened killer. *He may have observed a few matches, but he hasn’t witnessed what I can really do. Neither has the Network.* She’d had a fresh look for the last week—views of abuse, cruelty, and humiliation that Candice could detect little reason for. Shouldn’t something endangered be handled carefully? Shouldn’t it be gently encouraged to repopulate? Was there any excuse for the brutality that Daniel and others had been subjected to over the centuries?

These contemplations had kept Candice company on the train and left her with a single realization. Something needed to be done and she might be one of the few people who could pull it off. Her vow all those years ago rose to mock her and Candice shuddered, unhappily accepting the shift in her plans for the future. She’d hoped to let go of her hatred and retire with her mate. Instead, at the end of this run, she might be tracking through Gatlinburg or even the Borderlands with

her ears to the ground. There had always been rebellions against Network control, pockets of resistance lurking. Another mental shudder came. *I could lend assistance to them.*

“What are you thinking about?”

With anyone else, Candice would have lied. “Taking them down.”

“Nice.” Angelica knew exactly who her cousin was referring to. “I’m in!”

Angelica’s eager answer sent heat rushing into both their bodies, making Candice chuckle. Never mess with the Pruetts. When you challenged one, you could end up facing them all.

### 3

#### The Network

“It would have been better if she had died.”

“Yes,” Riana agreed as the pair walked through the tunnel to their living quarters in the top of the complex.

“Are we sure this is a good idea?” Terry asked. Riana was ruthless, not reckless. Terry was surprised her lover was supporting the leader of their council on this.

“As much as we can be. The boss didn’t give me a chance to interfere.”

“The Pruetts took the run for Baker. It seems like the grand plan, whatever it is, is working.”

“Yes,” Riana confirmed. She was deep in reflections on bachelors and tests, trying to figure

out that grand plan in time to mold things to her will. She hadn't made it onto the council by being submissive.

There was silence in the lavish halls of the upper complex, but outside, the streets were alive with chaos. A bomb had destroyed half a block this morning, taking out a row of food shops. Guards were currently inspecting apartments and executing suspected traitors. The blast had shaken the dome around the complex. The rebels were growing bolder.

"I don't trust them. The Puetts aren't loyal." Meaning they weren't in debt to the Network, and therefore, controllable.

"But they are good at what they do," Riana pointed out. "Baker could be ours in mere days."

"I still can't believe he's alive after all the trouble we went to with the last ambush."

"I told the boss to use the Puetts a long time ago. I didn't think anything would come of it until I saw Daniel's old file and the pickup address."

"Well, we're doing it now. You're sure they'll find him?"

"Yes. Baker needs help getting the other guys to the safe zone."

"If they make it into the Borderlands, we'll lose him," Terry worried.

"We'll follow the Puetts right to the stronghold where the rebels are all gathering."

"What if they join the rebellion?"



“Plans are in place for that contingency,” Riana repeated mockingly.

“Does Candice know he’s a rebel?”

“Not that we’re aware of. Baker inheriting it from his father happened while she was at the Time Trials in Adelfia.”

“Won’t the rebels get suspicious if the Pruetts show up and then there’s an attack?”

“It won’t matter if we take out the current leader. We have moles trying to get in from a dozen different sources, but these games are always the best draw because they’re watched so much. It’s the perfect place to dangle bait.”

“What’s so special about these prizes that the rebels want them?” Terry asked. As the council’s current go-to for information, Riana was the best one to ask.

“With these breeders, the male population could recuperate enough for them to become a common element in society again,” Riana confided lowly.

“We can’t let that happen!”

“No shit.”

“Have you seen the crowd out there?” Terry inquired nervously, holding open the gate to their plush apartment.

“Yes,” Riana replied. “Twice the normal numbers and they’re all changelings. We’ve doubled the sentries around the dome.”

“Good. I doubt that all of those females are under our control.”

“They came to root for the Pruett,” Riana comforted, locking the barrier behind them. “They’ll leave soon.”

“I hope so. If we shut the dome, it will interfere with the games. That would be very, very bad.”

“Yes. The breeding programs could be hurt, too.”

“Why don’t we do a series of shows that are reruns, like the short clips we already use during equipment failures?” Terry suggested.

“That’s a good idea. I’ll add it to the list of preparations for the power meeting. We might go off the air for a few hours during that action. It’ll be good to have clips ready.”

“You think the east will fire on us?”

Riana shrugged. “Maybe, but we have our bunker. Try not to worry over it. Plans really are in place.”

Outside the complex, screams of the poorer viewers rose to drown out even the inside audience of the current game that was running—Water Land.

“It’s getting more violent. We’re losing control,” Terry observed.

“We’ll be fine once the Pruetts take us to Baker. He’s the only leader the rebels have had with the strength to get them to work together.”

“I wish the serum was ready.”

“So do I. Being unable to lie would make it to our advantage to capture Baker. Since it usually kills the subject before they can talk, we’ll have to

be content with his death. We'll clear the other groups, the other problems, the same way."

"And the power meeting?"

"It's all set. Everyone will be there."

"Good." Terry's voice twisted with greed as they discussed the conspiracy. "One or two blasts will take care of them all."

"No more trains of supplies and no more threats," Riana confirmed. "The west coast has had us under their thumb long enough. Now, it's our turn to rule the world."

What about our other plans?"

"No progress yet. The Pruetts are too careful to be caught and too smart to be tricked."

"You'll keep working on it?"

"Of course. If you or I were running the council, this would be a great life. I don't plan to change a thing."

Chapter Eleven

# The First of Forever

1

“All done?” Mary asked quietly from the entrance where their underground fuel tanks were stored. This was the largest shed.

Angelica was tightening down the storage cap next to the mopars. “Locked and loaded.”

Mary’s face was already younger and Candice’s thoughtful mood eased into something that resembled peace. Baker alone was a challenge. With two other killers to capture and her mate along for the ride, it would be stressful. Mary was mentally preparing for it. Candice knew she should do the same by soaking up all the good moments that she could now, while there was time.

“He can shoot and load... He asked to join us,” Mary informed them.

Candice let out a growl that quickly faded. Daniel had to be near her. If he could be helpful, that was better. “His split goes in *his* name.”

Mary went to sign Daniel onto their crew.

Angelica’s voice came, curiously low. “What odds would you give me in the Games?”

It wasn’t as if Candice hadn’t been expecting the question. She gave the girl a full blast of her

changeling grin, but only Angelica's nostrils flared at the direct challenge.

"Better than mine were."

Angelica's pale face held a secret, and Candice shrugged. "We'll start working on it at your word."

The younger girl spun from the shed before her mouth could betray how bad the agony was becoming, knowing she could take a little more. Being in the house with two guys would be more than many changelings could stand. The sound of their voices alone was torture, one of the reasons Bruce spoke so rarely. Candice held little doubt that he would teach Daniel to do the same. They would all help Angelica adjust.

Finished with the preparations of their vehicles, the sound of steady firing drew Candice against her will. She didn't want to frighten Daniel, but the sounds implied he was doing well enough that her presence may not matter. Her father would never allow him to waste so many rounds. The council was generous, but not endless and the Pruetts had stocks to maintain. Daniel must be hitting what he aimed at.

Candice came around the shed to observe.

Daniel instantly seemed too young, too vulnerable to have a gun in his hand, but there was no denying the fit was nice. It gave him another level of attraction that was hard to resist. His cloak was pushed aside to allow access to the holster he'd been given and the thick muscles of his arms flexed against the material of his shirt with each

gentle pull of the trigger. Daniel, with one of her guns... *Heat*.

Daniel felt her watching, but tried to keep his attention on the targets. Her father, Bruce, was nice. The lesson had been fun so far.

“That’s enough.”

Her timbre was laced with that edge of hunger again; the one Daniel was coming to think of as her control line. He carefully handed the gun to her observant father. “Thank you.”

“Sure. We’ll do more lessons.”

Daniel secured his cloak and felt the heat in her gaze ease a bit. She’d been leering at him. *Good*. That was one of the three things he’d been advised on, though, he wasn’t certain about flashing his body. Bruce thought once they bonded fully, Candice would burn down and be safe, like her mother, but Daniel wasn’t certain he wanted that either.

“I’ll be inside.” Bruce left them alone.

Daniel stayed facing away, thinking about all she’d done for him. Had Candice known her father would answer his questions? Every word had brought him closer to full memory.

“Daniel.”

Of course, she knew. The tremor of worry in her voice made him offer comfort. “I’m not mad that you couldn’t stop me from being sold,” Daniel guessed, accurately from her flinch. “How could I be? You came for me.”

Her face slowly melted into the girl that he'd dreamed of.

"I'm sorry it took me so long."

Those words broke his heart, but in a good way, as well as bad. His family had sold him, but Candice had held to her promise. *I can trust her.* "I'm sorry I haven't remembered everything."

Candice melted. "*I remember!*"

Instinct said she wanted to be held. Daniel came toward her carefully, but without the fear he usually carried. He slid his arms around her and felt the heat of her changeling body burst into flames at the contact.

His willingness to comfort her was more than a spark or a fire, or even a blaze. It was an eruption, but not of lust—but of caring. It smothered the furious rage, bringing a sense of peace that made Candice clutching his shoulder in a sob of relief. *I missed him so much!* When his big hand rubbed her arms, Candice melted into his embrace.

They stayed that way for a long moment. She had her soul mate, and though he didn't remember her exactly, he knew who she was and he was here. It was incredible.

Around them, the darkness turned black and they faded into shadows as the moon disappeared. That romantic aura of being alone invaded the row of slumbering trees, but Candice forced herself to let go of him. Daniel had been severely mistreated. She had to give him space to adjust.

His grip loosened reluctantly, not wanting to let her go.

Candice sought to ease the sudden tension with the brush of her hand against his cheek, but he turned his head at the same time to place those full lips directly under her fingertips. Then he kissed them, pushing both their limits.

Unable to resist, Candice locked their mouths as heat raged. Every sign of his willingness was relief and torture.

Taking advantage of the privacy, Daniel surrendered to the passion and let lips carry him into that vivid world of pleasure only Candice induced. In his eagerness to be bonded with her, Daniel forgot the other two things he'd been told, distracted from who she was and where they were. When the ground suddenly pressed into his spine, all he could do was arch at the sensation of her body lying across his.

“Oh, get a room, already!” Angelica snarled as she went by.

The couple laughed quietly as the girl disappeared into the house. The sound of their combined amusement instantly sent Daniel into a flash of the past.

*“You do it.”*

*“I’ll get punished.”*

*“Not if I tell them it was me. Go on now, take a turn.”*



*Daniel raised his arm to throw the egg at the window and lost his grip. He squeezed...*

*The egg cracked open on top of his skull, splattering both kids in goo.*

*Candy laughed at his expression, hand coming up to swipe at the yolk. "That wasn't what I had in mind."*

They'd been friends. Knowing he'd had one was still something of a shock after all the isolation of the complex. Daniel pressed his lips to her cheek. "At least there's no egg this time."

Candice chuckled, sharing the memory with him as they stood and walked toward the house. "Don't give Angel any ideas. She still owes me one for the box."

Daniel kept an arm around her hips as they walked and was glad that he had when he felt her delight at the boldness. He'd decided that if he was going to bounty hunt with her and her family, he'd better try to gather some courage. Daniel wasn't positive he was cut out for being brave, but if he could be with Candice, the bachelor was willing to try. It was amazing how fast his bond to her was growing. He was in awe, with a fading fear that she was breaking through every minute they spent together. It was wonderful.

Three hours later, Daniel couldn't wait to be in bed. He wasn't used to this schedule. The Network always had them in bed by dark, but he and Candice were sitting on the couch adjacent the kitchen, listening to an old collection of music that he'd never heard. The soft tones were dragging him into sleep against his will. The Pruetts were still going over the details of the trip and Daniel had no resistance to the comforting sensation of being with them. Candice was against his hip, where she'd settled them upon coming in. Daniel inhaled deeper as a draft blew her scent over. *I could get used to this.* Daniel smiled.

He failed to notice the sudden silence until her hand slid to his arm. Her fingers were gentle, a caress. Daniel shut his lids at the contact. Affection was foreign to him and he absorbed it like a sponge. This was what he'd hope for as he lay in that buggy Network cot—not an owner, but a *lover*. As the conversation resumed, Daniel let the feel of her hand carry him to a place of warm comfort.

Candice didn't look away as the others left the chamber. It was later than they usually stayed up on the night before a run, but the atmosphere had been good for everyone. It was a drastic change for the family to see her being tender with someone. Their thoughts were easy to guess. They were glad she'd been strong enough to bring him home, but they were even happier to find out that he was

indeed what she needed. They were noticing the differences in her.

“Daniel.”

His eyes snapped open, fear flashing across his sleepy face as he realized they were alone. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Candice stood up before he could finish the apology, snapping, “You’re allowed!”

Daniel paled at her mood flip.

Suddenly very tired, Candice drew in a deep breath. “I get upset easily. It’s not at you.”

She could tell he didn’t understand. Candice stayed away from him as she struggled to explain why she was always angry. “What happened to you hurts me. When I see signs of it, I...”

“Want to spill blood.”

Candice gave him the games grin. “I want to *taste* it.”

“I’d be there for that!” Daniel swore.

His face was twisted in the hatred she’d begun to suspect lurked in all slaves. Satisfied he understood, Candice held out a hand. “Maybe you will.”

They went upstairs with an awkward silence between them. Candice could feel him wondering about the sleeping arrangements, worrying over it.

She let him off the hook, despite not knowing how she would sleep without him. “You can stay in your room, if you like.”

She smothered her disappointment when Daniel chose the second door, pulling him back for

a fast press of her lips to his that sent need flaring into alertness.

Candice searched his flushed face for some hint of what she needed as she leaned back. “Good night, Daniel.”

“Good night.” He trembled, waiting.

Candice spun away, aware of her thin control. *It will be safer for him not to be in my bed tonight anyway, Candice told her wounded heart. We have plenty of nights to spend together. I don't have to rush.*

### 3

Daniel huddled under the blankets of the huge bed an hour later, no longer sleepy. He was determined not to be a coward anymore, but it was so loud here! There was no layer of rubber to muffle or provide fire protection and he kept his mouth tightly shut to hold in the groans as the noises increased. Why had he chosen his room? He wanted to be with Candice in her chamber, her bed, her safety.

Outside, the storm picked up. Daniel heard every noise. The wind howled, shoving at the Pruett family home as if it was made of gel.

*Whooo!*

The animals were another thing to worry over. He'd never heard the hoot of an owl or the call of a wolf. It terrified Daniel to realize he was now sharing a life with those uncontrollable creatures.

The walls vibrated suddenly, shifting as the storm increased...

Daniel pulled the blanket over his head.

“Daniel.”

He shouted, startled, and sensed her wince.

“Come to my bed.”

Daniel’s feet hit the cold floor an instant later. He entered the dim room and climbed into her bed before he noticed the blanket on the window landing. She’d been having trouble sleeping. It was another surprising discovery. He had assumed Candice fell out right away like other changelings, but from the twisted blankets, he understood that wasn’t true.

Candice stood up, now torn about where she should go.

Daniel knew where he wanted her and slid over with a pointed glance as lightning glared through the windows.

It felt so odd to be following his lead. From their first days at the complex, Candice had been expecting a timid male who would have to be encouraged to ask for his needs. She was prepared to deal with it, to try to replace what the Network had taken from him, but it was a shock to learn that so much of *her* Daniel still existed. How had he managed to retain these manly instincts? Network methods were brutal, total... Did the others have this fire? Was it possible that these enslaved men had been fooling everyone?

Candice dropped heavily onto the bed. After sleeping with his big body last night, she'd found it impossible to drift off tonight. She had moved to the window and managed to doze a bit by staring at his old home and telling herself he was safe now, under *her* protection.

Daniel shifted, rolling onto his side. "Are you okay?"

Her breath caught at his concern. It had been so long! Candice was horrified to feel warm tears sliding from her eyes. This was their first true night of forever.

"Candice?"

She rolled further away, embarrassed by her emptiness, by her lack of control.

Candice stiffened when he slid that warm body against her and wrapped a big arm around her waist. He buried his chin against her neck, melting against her as if he'd always belonged there.

"I'm here now. That's what matters, right?"

Candice nodded, crying for the first time since he'd been stolen from her life. When Daniel tugged on her arm, she surrendered, rolling over to let him hold her while she sobbed against his chest like a baby.

Daniel didn't say anything, just rubbed her and held her. Right now, this was all she needed.

Candice fell asleep in his arms before the tears stopped.

They were woken by the sound of cursing.

Angelica was trying to get the gear loaded onto the mopars and it sounded as if she was having trouble. It was like this on normal days, but the extra strain in her voice said seeing Candice and Daniel getting to know each other again was hard. Downstairs, Mary could be heard securing the house.

Candice rose up to find Daniel already alert.

“Good morning.”

Fighting need, Candice shrugged. “Woulda been better without the four letter words.” Daniel was sexy with sleep still on him. It gave a woman the relentless urge to kiss away his fears, whether he was willing or not.

“Was she a sailor?” he joked.

Candice’s snort turned into a chuckle. She’d felt more alive in the last week than she had since he’d been taken. “Stay close to me.”

He knew she meant for the bounty run. “I will.”

The lust was tempting her to allow another moment, so Candice pushed herself up instead. They were about to go on a run for her lover and marked convict, Richard Baker. There would be plenty of time for heat and blood later.

#### 4

Daniel observed in silence as the family got set for the run. He was trying to stay out of the way,

but when they opened the larger of two sheds, he forgot his vow to be quiet.

“Bikes!”

“Mopars.”

His brow wrinkled in confusion.

Candice favored him with a tender glance. “They’re mini urban pacification vehicles. They’ll pull almost any grade with a two-ton load. They’re called mopars.”

They looked like the wide wheeled bikes Daniel had read about while in the complex. He was suddenly eager to try them.

The Pruetts loaded the three mopars with quick movements that told Daniel they’d done it more than a few times. He didn’t know much about bounty hunting. That side of the Network was one bachelors had no contact with. He saw Candice give her cousin a gesture and tensed when the shorter version of his owner stomped over to him.

“She wants you in a vest. Come to the little shed.”

Daniel followed Angelica uneasily. The smaller building was out of sight of everyone. Would he be in danger from Candy’s family? That was a common reason for signing up for the games—to eliminate family members and take their mates. Not just contestants were killed during those battles.

Angelica yanked the door open and waved a hand. “Pick one from the racks. It needs to be snug, but not tight.”



The walls of the shed were hidden with weapons and other gear, surprising Daniel that they had this building in the open. Then he remembered who they were and wondered if their neighbors feared them. Daniel felt it then, all the people studying the family. Locals were peering from chipped, broken windows and blinds, waiting for Candice and her crew to leave. Daniel realized that was why they left the shed unprotected and admired the intimidation technique. Their rulers often employed similar methods. It said 'mess with us at your own risk'. Were their neighbors glad the Puetts were leaving or did they worry for their safety while this dangerous family was gone? They had to know they were more protected by being wherever these bounty hunters were. Puetts had morals and ethics. The council didn't.

Daniel entered the darkness of the shed without looking at Angelica and felt her heat lash out to sample his smell. It wasn't attractive to him like it was when Candice did that.

Daniel shut the door on her in relief. He wasn't certain about the little cousin yet.

The first vest was a bad fit over his wide shoulders. He put it back on the hanger and surveyed the shed. The other racks held larger sizes and Daniel quickly strapped one on, not wanting to keep his owner waiting.

He tripped over the frame and caught himself awkwardly as he came out.

“I need to ask you something.” Angelica gently shut the door. Her eyes were slightly pink, but the control in her speech was good. “About the other bachelors.”

She scanned to verify that they were still alone.

Daniel believed he understood, but waited. She had that glaze... He didn't speak, but he could see her wondering if his voice would hit her as hard again.

“Are they all...scared? Like you?”

She was hoping for a mate with more courage than he had. It should have been degrading, but Daniel could only pity her for the agony she was suffering and respect her attempts to control it. “Mostly, yes.”

Angelica shuddered, small hands clenching. “What do they want? I mean, really want? To be left alone? To be free?”

*Oh, how I want to give her the truth!* If anyone could help the enslaved males, it might be this tough family, but they were bounty hunters on the Network's payroll. Daniel hadn't forgotten that. “A kind, loving owner.”

To his surprise, Angelica laughed at the scripted answer—a hard, bitter sound that suggested she wasn't convinced.

“Well, I can't help them there.” She spun toward the mopars.

Daniel followed. He only knew the world from a male point of view. Until being closed up with Candice, he hadn't considered what it was like to

be a changeling. How awful to be so afraid of hurting a mate that you couldn't love them.

"Daniel." Candice waved him to her bike.

Daniel slid excitedly onto the seat. He had remembered enough now to know that he loved being outside. He mentally cringed at the thought of all those years spent without the sun. *No wonder I'm so pale.*

Candice slid onto the cold seat in front of him, pulling her goggles on. When she handed him a pair, Daniel did the same.

She motioned him closer, patiently directing until he was hugging her small waist and leaning on her shoulder. They both tried hard to ignore the contact and failed. It felt too good.

The hunters wanted to make it to Kentucky by dawn the next morning and Daniel was eager for the sights. Other than the street behind the Pruett property, Daniel hadn't seen much of the neighborhood around them. He still hadn't remembered what it had looked like when he'd lived here as a child.

As they left, taking a different road than the one the truck had arrived by, Daniel wasn't expecting to see neatly maintained cabins with people living in them. Behind the opposite side of the town, where he'd lived, were homes and even a few businesses. Daniel read their names.

The Zapper.

Si-Shoo's Shoes.

Flo's Floozies...

What? He stared at the shack in concentration as his gut rumbled uneasily. Floozies? He'd heard that name before. The memory came without warning.

*The noise from the next room made him cower in the corner of the closet with the other boys. They'd been thrown in here after the women from the crossing checkpoint had picked out their fee. It was being taken in blood.*

*Daniel waited for his turn with shaking legs. His parents had sold him into this life. He was at the mercy of people who saw him as property! His young heart yearned for Candy's arms.*

*"Get two more. Floozie wants them."*

*The door opened, blinding Daniel and the other boys with the light. A rough hand grabbed his arm, but he didn't resist as he was jerked out.*

*"Not that one! He's already paid for."*

*Daniel was shoved back into the comforting darkness, but not before seeing the evil behind the order. Her red hair was in braids that were as long as her cloak and she was covered in scars. Daniel recognized her from the visits paid to his family during breeding time, and from his pickup. That awful woman owned him until he was delivered to...who?*

*Daniel huddled in the corner as other boys his age were chosen. He shivered. Already paid for. Who could afford the price his parents had charged? Only one source came to mind.*

*Daniel felt a tear slide down his cheek. The Network could afford it. He was about to become a games prize.*

Daniel returned from the memory as they passed the front of the rental shack. He understood what those other boys had been sentenced to now. He saw the hungry, red-eyed women snarling with need while they waited by the egress with their tickets. Floopies, was a brothel. Males were the product being sold.

On his right, Angelica's mopar slowed.

Daniel tensed, scared they were going there. He comforted himself when Candice didn't. *I belong to her. She'll never sell me.*

Daniel turned away from the shack of doom. Renting went on in the complex too, but to witness it happening so openly on the streets of the outside world was a hard blow. He had hoped conditions were better on this end of the chains.

Daniel's contemplations were heavy, but when Angelica's mopar disappeared from the spot next to them, it snapped the bachelor back to where they were. He glanced around to find Angelica getting off her ride.

Candice turned the mopar, but didn't follow. Her parents flanked her as they watched Angelica walk up to the woman at the gate of the brothel. She handed the shopkeeper a heavy looking bag. The clerk was clearly a changeling, sneering in a way Daniel was convinced would cause a fight.

The shouting did get ugly, but Angelica finally added a second bag of money.

The woman took them angrily and went inside.

Was Angelica buying relief? Confused, and a bit angrier than he wanted to be, Daniel watched as the gate opened again.

An extremely young group of males was shoved out by the owner. These were innocent—it was on their terrified faces.

Daniel felt horror rise when Angelica began pointing at women in the line. Seeing the kids given away to these dangerous women was... The women who'd been chosen didn't attack as he'd expected. Instead, they drew the young boys forward with black eyes and gentle smiles.

Now beyond confused, Daniel rotated to find Candice twisted around, studying him.

Mary explained, "These are our neighbors. They stay away as long as they can, but the *need* is overwhelming. If they have their own mate, they'll have a chance at peace."

Daniel still didn't understand, but he was happy when the women took the frightened boys away with gentle touches and kind words.

"She's giving them gifts of hope. None of them forget any of it," Candice stated.

As he understood, Daniel realized that Angelica was much kinder than he'd thought. He kept his voice low, but had to ask, "Why doesn't she keep one for herself?"

To his surprise, Candice flashed the harsh grin that scared him. Daniel couldn't stop a flinch.

"Because she can't wait for them to grow up like the women she chose will. She's burning faster. She needs relief, a mate, *now*."

Meaning those boys would be taken into homes and eased into manhood rather than being drugged and raped. Daniel gave Angelica a look of respect as she returned.

He felt her surprise and knew she hadn't done any of it for his benefit. She didn't like it being this way, and she didn't like her friends and neighbors going through hell. Why couldn't their rulers be more like the Pruetts? The other bachelors had been wrong. Not all changelings were animals. Some of them were good women just trying to survive an awful disease. Daniel's sense of being lucky increased. He held tight to his owner as they left the recovery zone of Ohio, head up.

Candice found out right away that Daniel wasn't a natural born adventurer. To get into Kentucky, where the trackers had set the meeting, they needed to cross the old Ohio River. It was dammed further up from where they would cross, so there was no problem with driving the mopars. If nature ever reclaimed it, they would have to locate a new route, but right now, it was a shallow creek winding through a lush oasis of greenery and wildlife.

After a light splash that made Daniel cackle happily against her shoulder, Candice crested the rough banks of the creek to detect a large buck and a doe foraging.

Daniel noticed them. He let go of her waist, twisting around as they went by. On the next turn, he toppled from the mopar like a sack of potatoes.

Candice spun in a wide circle, spraying dirt and gravel with a harsh grunt as she struggled to keep the vehicle from tipping at the sharp change of direction. She slid to a quick stop next to him, worried.

Daniel peered up at her with something akin to exasperation. “You scared them off!”

He swiped at the dust now coating his clothes and frowned deeper. “My ass hurts.”

For the second time in as many days, Candice heard the sound of her own laughter and felt complete.



## Chapter Twelve

# Trackerssss

### 1

Daniel was in pain. They had traveled straight to the Petrified Forests with only a single ten-minute break. Fifteen hours of riding, when he'd never done this before, was rough. As he pried his body from the mopar, Daniel slid to his knees from the aches and cramps.

“Walk around. It helps.” Bruce clued him in to finding relief while Candice and Angelica secured their campsite.

Daniel did as Bruce suggested, trying not to groan. Hoping the surroundings would distract him from the discomfort, Daniel scanned the area. Sore or not, he loved being outdoors.

A few of the trees surrounding them were small, and green enough to have been planted after the war. Daniel wondered who would have done that in the aftermath of an apocalypse. The petrified trees in comparison were staggering in their size, and so bland from death that they seemed more like walls left by man than nature. “Why are there no animals?”

Candice sighed.

Mary snorted.

They'd both been waiting for something like that from him. Daniel was so gentle it was amazing he'd survived so long in captivity.

Bruce answered, "Animals won't live where people do. They've gotten smarter. Hunting meat is a lot harder now than it was in the olden days."

That pulled a chuckle from Daniel. "Around then, were ya?"

"Ancient, that's me."

Bruce snorted happily at the joking, telling Daniel he'd pegged him right. Bruce was lonely.

Daniel turned toward Candice, hiding another groan at the soreness. The bikes rode so easy that he hadn't expected this, but he had enjoyed the beauty of the areas they'd driven through. Nature was uncontrolled out here. *Like the Pruetts*, he realized. The Network had them compliant, but under control? Not this family, and Daniel wasn't the only one who knew it. The homes they'd rolled by held people, but none of them had come out or even waved from a window. For some reason, he'd believed the Pruetts were upstanding members of lower Network society, but what he had witnessed so far suggested they were a dangerous necessity to be shunned unless needed.

Daniel inspected the towering trees and the thick underbrush that lined this secluded site. He wasn't scared of the dark, but he had never stayed outdoors. Should he offer to help? Daniel chose to follow the lead of the other male. When Bruce

began unpacking Mary's mopar, Daniel went to Candy's bike to do the same.

Bruce flashed an approving nod, but didn't speak. Daniel would need a lot of training. With this family, it would be easy for him to learn. In other homes, Daniel already would have been beaten for his lack of skills.

The next half hour was gone before Daniel knew it as Bruce showed him how to set up a temporary camp. It was sweaty work, but satisfying to witness the results and know he had done it. Daniel glanced up with a smile of welcome when Candice and Angelica returned from their sweep.

When he smiled like that, Candice's heart opened up and became a gnashing, wailing pain that demanded she kill someone. He had been hers and then he had been taken, and no one had paid for that yet!

His happiness faded into confusion at her anger, but she couldn't explain that every smile, every tender moment they shared, was a reminder of all the years they had lost and would never have back. It was a slap in the face to have him so *changed*. Daniel wasn't the only one adjusting.

"The trackers picked up Baker's trail in Jericho," Angelica stated.

Bruce immediately started to repack the camp. They always hunted without pause until they caught their man.

“They’ll meet us here,” Candice denied.

Mary and Angelica stared, but Bruce’s pleased expression was the one Candice cared for. She and Daniel would be bonded, but her father was the other male here and he would be aware of Daniel’s needs (in some areas) before she was. “We’ll have a hot meal now.”

Candice came to where Daniel stood, seeing he was doing exactly what he’d been trained for—following. Angry again, she grabbed his hand and tugged him away from prying eyes.

Candice could feel his tension, his worry, as she stopped them out of earshot and let go of his warm hand.

Candice leaned against a brittle trunk, smelling centuries of decay and wild growth. To her, it was heaven compared to the stench of New Network City. She suddenly wondered if Daniel missed it there. Had he held friendships to mourn?

Sighing, Candice tried to let the serenity of the forest soak into her concerns. With a population of less than ten thousand, Kentucky was untamed country. She loved it here. Someday, this is where she would build a home and raise her family. That thought made Candice focus on Daniel. If they were going to have a future, they had to get some things straight. She slid to the ground, waiting for him to do the same.

Daniel didn’t speak, not sure what he’d done wrong.

Candice tried to comfort him before they got into the details. “We need to talk before you go any further with me.”

She winced, as he did, hearing how ominous it sounded. “It’s about our future,” she grunted. “Relax.”

Again, not the words she’d wanted. Candice realized she was nervous. Why? *Because I need something from him.* The spark between them said Daniel could help control the change, but she had to know where they stood. The fact that it had been less than two weeks didn’t matter at this point. She would see Baker tomorrow or the next day, and the convict would know she and Daniel weren’t fully bonded. Baker was content to be her lover. If he believed she held any doubt about Daniel, he would do what he could to remain as such.

“Are you...unhappy with me?”

She stared stupidly. *Is he kidding?* “No.”

Candice could tell Daniel wanted more and the lump in her chest eased a bit. She hated emotional talks, but she was glad that he was willing. “I find you very pleasing.” As his handsome profile flushed, Candice grinned, a soft one reserved just for him. “Not just in *that* way.”

Daniel smiled as he understood it wasn’t a bad talk that she wanted, just an awkward one.

“And what of you?” she inquired. “Are you unhappy with me?”

His stare grew intense. “Quite the opposite.”

There was a charged silence while they stared, exchanging smiles. It felt so odd to be flirting! Candice had believed those things were beyond her. “You know that I’d give you real freedom if you ever want it.”

Daniel frowned, bobbed quickly. “But I won’t.”

Candice shrugged. She wanted to believe that, but hadn’t she hurt her own parent? Who was to say the same thing wouldn’t drive him from her arms? He was a trembling mass most moments, but she had her own fears to handle as well. Candice tried to conquer one of them now. “Do you want kids?”

That shocked him. Daniel could only nod, unable to speak. He’d been certain she didn’t after the way she’d yelled at his...sister. Daniel couldn’t picture Candice as a mother, so the idea that she wanted children sent many of his theories up in flames. *She must like them*, he thought stupidly, seeing a flash of her after she won the final match. A mother with blood on her hands, murder on her soul... Candice was clearly evaluating his reaction, making Daniel wonder why it mattered so much to her. Candice owned him. If she chose to register for breeding, who was he to argue?

“Do you have children, Daniel?”

*Raw Pain.* “Yes.”

She read his face for what he didn’t say.

Daniel could tell she wanted him to open up, but those ghosts he shared with no one. He stayed

silent, trying to mend the rift in his heart again. He had to every time the thought of being a father and never getting to love the child tore him apart.

“I might be able to locate them for you, if you have any details on their mothers.”

Stunned again, Daniel gaped at her with his mouth open. Why would she do that?

“How many?”

“Two.”

“It was recorded?”

“Through the Games.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

Her offer came, along with a tone that said he’d misjudged this violent female in many ways. It allowed him to form a question of his own.

“If you find them, will I... Can I see them? Even if they don’t know I’m there?”

Candice studied him with that unreadable facade, but Daniel had picked up things about his new owner. He sensed she now held a deep sympathy for the torment he’d revealed.

“If I can arrange it, yes.”

She didn’t make a false promise or a claim that she couldn’t back up. It sent the hope he’d denied into his heart and spilling out of his mouth. “Please! I have to know if they’re—” Daniel stopped, scared to let go of a secret he’d been hiding.

Candice raised a brow. “If they’re what?”

He dropped his chin, hoping she would miss the terror in his tones. Daniel didn’t want to feel

like a coward in front of her anymore, but he was suddenly very scared. The Network would have him removed for what he was about to say. “If they’re suffering like you and all the others... Or if they’re immune.”

Candice stared at him in shock. *Immune*. She’d never heard of any female who was.

The pain in Daniel’s voice was more than she could take, but Candice instinctively knew how to ease it. Some of the horror would fade when he had a child he was allowed to keep. *Mine*, she thought, warmth running through her body that was stronger than the rest of the fire he drew. His words slammed through her brain again. *Immune*. Their children might not suffer this agony.

Was he lying? No. There was too much open hope in his expression. How did he know of it? Were there others? Questions flew through her mind, and she took a minute to organize them. When she finally responded, Candice kept her voice even, not letting him see how much hope she wanted to have. “Why do you think they might be immune?”

“The scientists experiment on males in Network care. When my results came in, they put me into the breeding program. Men are supposed to be drugged so we won’t remember most of it, but I have a high tolerance and they talked a lot.”

She instinctively knew the Network would hide his answer at any cost. “You’ve remembered being taken.”



“Yes. During the ride here.” His rare anger flashed, laced with bitterness. “I remember what they did to me.”

Candice knew he was thinking of his family’s betrayal, but her mind was on immunity. Was it possible? She had a hundred questions to ask.

“It’s me.” Angelica joined them in the clearing.

Daniel stared at Angelica.

“What are you thinking right now?!” the younger girl demanded. She couldn’t take the pity in his gaze.

“They could have stopped your pain. “ His tone was unsteady, but his words stunned them both. “They’ve had a vaccine for a decade.”

“We have company!”

Mary’s excited call drew Candice toward the campsite, after motioning for Angelica to shield Daniel. As she went, the word *vaccine* exploded repeatedly in her skull like a bomb. Their rulers held a vaccine, but they hadn’t told anyone. That might be enough to bring them down.

Daniel followed Candice to camp, able to feel the rage and the confusion of the younger Pruett trailing him. Angelica wanted to ask questions, but she kept silent as they joined the others. Now obviously wasn’t a good time.

Their company was the snake trackers. Daniel stared in fascination. He’d heard of odd females, but this! Shrouded in scales that had to be from real snakes, they were vibrant shapes that flashed

and glinted as they moved. A foreign mystery, Daniel studied them without a thought of rudeness or his lure to all the females. The three women were tall and lanky, with cruel eyes that lit up in hunger at the sight of him. They wore animal hide clothes, with their weapons and gear strapped to their tattooed skin like shirts.

Daniel stayed in the rear as the snakes entered camp. Like the women, the horses were also covered in scales, even their manes and tails. Daniel realized the crew would blend perfectly into the natural surroundings. *How clever!* He continued to stare as Candice stepped forward to greet their trackers.

“Congratulations are in orderssss.”

“Yessss. How does he taste?”

There was a round of nasty laughter from the serpent-tongued scouts. Daniel felt Angelica tense behind him. She obviously didn’t like them.

“Where’s Baker?!”

The tone was hard enough to snap Daniel’s attention to Candice.

The tracker females bowed to it as well, returning their attention to Candice. “In Jericho.”

“And the others?” Candice asked angrily. She didn’t like them inspecting Daniel. Danger filled the fresh air.

“Nashville a week ago, but there have been storms. No traveling there when it floods. They’ll be trapped until the waterssss go down.”

“You’re journeying there now?”

“Yes, with a quick sssstop in Cumberland for supplies.”

“Good. Notify us when you make contact. If we have Baker by then, we’ll meet up and you can ride in for the exchange.”

The four snake females immediately blanched or shook their heads. The one Daniel assumed to be their leader spoke with fast words.

“We’ll take our cut from you, like alwaysss. It is a bad time to deal with the Network.”

“Why is that?” Candice wanted to know.

“They have a new group coming in for training. Many of the old people have been executed. These new rulers are filling the top ranksss with their choices.”

“Yessss...one of their henchmen is particularly loathsome,” another of the snake women stated. “Rankin offers high bounties to hunters and then sends in the hounds to steal the prey from them.”

Daniel froze at the name. He loathed Rankin more than any of the others renters. The old dream of killing her was still vivid.

Candice glanced toward her mate, drawn by their common hatred.

Mary snorted. “No need to pay for what you can take. Rankin’s always been that way.”

The other snake females waiting for the meeting to finish were busy feeding their mounts handfuls of something from pouches on their saddles. Daniel saw the animals were well cared

for. Horses were rare, no matter what land you were in, unless you worked for the Network.

“Exactly. Be careful that you don’t meet the same fate,” the snake leader warned. The slithering tattoo on her thigh revolved as her muscles flexed to shift her body in the saddle. “We will ssstill expect to be paid.”

“My coffers are not so low that I can’t handle my expenses,” Candice stated evenly.

“Just so, it is good business to have things clear up front.” The snake swung the black horse around as if it was born to obey her.

Daniel flinched when she stopped next to him instead of leaving. Aware of Candice tensing for battle, he peered up at the snake woman’s weary profile. For a moment, he was able to discern the tired female underneath the rage. Compassion had him opening his mouth even when he knew it wasn’t a good idea. “Would you like a drink?”

The offer, or maybe his voice, made the woman lean over to stare intently at him. Daniel felt Angelica step up to flank him as the snake shook her scaled head.

“No, but you have my thanksss for asking...” She inspected him for a moment longer, sweeping the brand on his arm that was being revealed each time the gusting wind blew his cloak around. “Perhapsss, I will return the favor.”

She kneed the horse and the snakes left, all of them kicking up dust that coated Daniel in a layer of grit. *What is it with women ruining my clothes?*

The Pruetts rotated to regard him.

Daniel flushed. "I'm sorr--"

"You did nothing wrong. In fact..."

"You might have gained an admirer," Angelica finished Candy's thought. "Trackers are shunned, even by their own kind. To be offered a drink is to be shown acceptance. Most people won't."

Daniel inspected Candice to figure out if he had angered her and saw that she wasn't upset.

"She'll understand you didn't know. If you don't repeat the offer, she'll see you've changed your mind and withdrawn your acceptance."

"I won't do that," Daniel promised. "It's not their fault their tongues are that way."

Candice shrugged. "But they are responsible for their actions. Be careful, Daniel. There is much you don't know yet about this world."

It was true, and he settled, with a slight frown, into the place she liked him on the mopar. She was right. There was so much to learn. Where did he begin? Who did he ask?

Not ready for the hard contemplations, Daniel tried to find a position on the bike that didn't hurt as he listened to Candice and her family discuss going into the city of Jericho. Before the apocalypse, it had held a different name. Now, it was a Network-controlled lion's den of barbed wire and machine gun nests. Why would a convict go there? Candice and Angelica were talking as if they knew this Baker person. Daniel remembered what they'd said at dinner before leaving home.

They had hunted Baker before. Would he surrender or would they have to fight? If the Pruetts had brought Baker in before, that meant he had gotten away from the Network. The council didn't like that rare occurrence. They never stopped hunting a fugitive. Daniel had seen a runaway brought back to the complex just to be placed into the very show he had fled. Their rulers forgave nothing.

"Let's go," Candice ordered, sliding onto the bike.

Daniel held tight and continued to sort through his thoughts.

An hour later, he knew they'd left Kentucky by the increase in homes and people. It was so much like photos here that he couldn't stop staring as they rolled by row after row of newly constructed cabins. In New Network City, trees and lumber were rare. Everything was made of durable foam or plastic, and then wrapped with concrete and rubber for extra protection from the storms. Out here, natural materials were used for building and it was remarkably serene.

Daniel studied the people around these simple cabins, surprised by what he detected. They were in as much need as those in the city! Everyone he saw instantly developed that telltale pink tinge upon noticing him.

Daniel tightened his grip on his owner's waist, sensing the danger. These women were desperate.

Candice stopped at the Tennessee Crossing checkpoint a few minutes later. The sense of menace grew as they pulled into the long line. There were dozens of women here, all staring at Daniel and Bruce with glares of madness. Candice and Angelica stood on their mopars and drew their guns.

Daniel began to understand the trouble it would cause to have him along for these runs.

At the quick display of force, the wild women returned to what they'd been doing, but their stares grew hungrier the longer they were forced to be around the males. Daniel tried to shrink into the seat and disappear. They were so far back in line that the river was out of his sight, but he could hear a motor of some sort. He wondered how they would cross. In the past, there had been clever boats to shuttle travelers. Those days, along with bridges, were gone. As far as Daniel knew, a sinker line was most commonly used now and he wasn't anticipating getting wet.

Daniel froze as a lanky form in grime-plastered clothes slid toward them.

"How much for an hour?"

Daniel cringed, grabbing at his new weapon.

Candice's hard hand on his shoulder stopped him. "No."

Her steel tone sent the filthy female on her way with ugly mutters.

Daniel waited anxiously as more women came toward them. He had no idea what to do.

Candice was tense. Almost all of the citizens around them were Roamers. Roamers would steal you blind and then slit your throat while you slept, if you were dumb enough to do so within miles of them.

Candice took the safety off her gun.

Angelica did the same.

Roamers preferred to work in packs, attacking together to grab the male or coveted item during the chaos. One would take off and hide the treasure, while the others slowed the owner or killed her. The Pruetts had the only males in sight and the wild gazes of these desperate women weren't leaving them. The sense of blood about to spill was impossible to miss.

“Move on!”

The call of the guard allowed Candice to roll them closer to the water, but it didn't break the tension.

Daniel was distracted by the sight of the river. Crystal clear, it was nothing like the dingy bodies of water he had studied in faded magazine pages when the den mothers were busy. This was beautiful, uncorrupted. “It's so clean!”

At the sound of his excited voice, time slowed, highlighting the lethal error.

*I thought he knew not to speak!* Angelica's shock mirrored Candice's as they turned to defend their males against three dozen Roamers.



Candice jerked Daniel from her mopar and shoved him toward her father as Angelica and Mary tightened the gap.

Bruce knew to get in the middle of the three angry Pruetts. He yanked Daniel down next to him as their family opened fire.

Unlike the Pruetts, the roamers weren't armed. They lunged at the males in vain, clumsy attempts. Blood splattered before they could get within reach, steady fire coming from the triangle formation.

Four bodies fell on the right, three on the left.

Two more hairy women shoved Candice's mopar out of the way and dove forward, only seeing Daniel. She pulled the trigger with little remorse.

The gunfire lasted for a full minute. A dozen roamers lay on the ground, the rest fleeing as the Pruetts stopped firing. Even during the rages, self-preservation still existed.

Candice verified Daniel and Bruce were unharmed and then scanned the battle scene. Checkpoint troops were rushing their way.

The remaining changelings around them vanished.

"Halt there!"

At her nod, Angelica and Mary holstered, but didn't move out of the formation. They wouldn't until Candice told them to.

"Hands up!"

Candice slowly put her gun away. “My id card is in my top pocket.” She gave her Games grin, hoping to be recognized. “With payment for the mess I’ve made in defense of my mate.”

The guards scanned the two men cowering between the three armed females. The sentry in the middle came forward. She wore the uniform and gear of a Network warrior, but Candice sensed sleaziness. It stopped her from attempting to sway the river guards to their causes. Gathering friends and contacts was a natural part of this career, but Pruetts didn’t align themselves with snakes unless they had to.

The guard looked like she’d already had a rough day. Candice forced the rage back to give a half-apologetic tone. “I can have my males roll the bodies into the water for—”

“Shut up!” The guard was staring at Daniel with clear intent.

“I enjoyed the games!” Candice snapped back without hesitation. “You’d better be fast. I am.”

That garnered an instant response from the troops behind her.

“Pruett.”

“She’s a Pruet!”

“*All* Pruetts,” Candice stated pointedly.

The sentry became businesslike, pink fading. One Pruet was a challenge. Three was suicide.

Candice allowed herself to breathe. There were only a dozen guards here, but in the fight, she would lose either her mate or father and she

couldn't tolerate either. Guards were much better fighters than roamers.

As Candice was identified, she began to have more of those disturbing contemplations about their rulers. They had just killed a dozen women to keep their men. Both the attempt, and the defense, was legal. There were no laws against kidnapping or killing. If someone could take a slave, he was theirs for as long as they could hold onto him.

*It shouldn't be this way.* Candice held no animosity towards suffering females who only lusted for a relief from the torment. And then there was Daniel. She had felt safe bringing him along for the run because of the strict training bachelors received, but he knew almost nothing. Why hadn't he been taught these things? It was as if the Network had never intended for him to be in the real world. For Candice, that was proof of his words about immunity. They'd never intended to let him go, which meant her winning had been a conspiracy.

She pushed those ugly memories aside to finish dealing with the mess. The bounty hunters had been as careful as they could to hit targets, not civilians. As usual, their aim was good, but their luck hadn't been this time. Two shots had taken innocent lives. They paid the farmer in UDs for both hogs and the extra bit of gold dust Mary pressed into the older lady's hand gained them another ally. Now, the farmer could justify eating the two animals and still have something to show

for it. Here in New America, surviving was the best most people could hope for. Getting ahead was for those in New Network City and the Pruetts tried hard to never forget that.

Candice motioned Daniel onto the mopar Angelica now had upright, without the punishment that he probably felt he deserved. None of this was his fault.

Daniel was too shocked to enjoy crossing the wide river on the ferryboat. He didn't care that it was his first ever or that the feel of it could have been incredible. All those women were dead because he'd made a careless mistake and there was no way he could take it back. He wanted to hide.

Daniel kept his cheek against Candice as he struggled to keep from crying in shame. More lives lost, just for him. When would it end?

## 2

Candice knew Daniel was upset, but she didn't realize how badly until she stepped from the mopar hours later. Daniel didn't move, just stared, waiting for the blows to begin.

Her heart broke. "Come with me."

Candice led them into the shadows of the trees, choosing her words. He didn't mean to be reckless, and until she had time to train him properly, she wouldn't blame him any more than he deserved.

Despite it being spring, only small areas of the eastern country were in bloom. This was one of them. The western half was a desert with little to recommend it besides the leftover tools of their nuclear relatives. Neither of them admired or frowned at the contrast in views. As soon as they were out of sight of the others, Daniel went to his knees at her feet, trembling.

With her father's training to pull on, Candice understood Daniel might torture himself over this if he weren't punished. Not about to deal with that drama as Bruce and Mary often did, Candice handled it differently once again. "What would the Network have done?"

"Speaking...is a serious rule." His eyes shot to her, voice carrying a tremor she loathed. "I've heard they use a whip."

Candice scowled. There was no way she would do that. "If you break a rule and need to be punished, do you believe I'll do it?"

He nodded quickly, forehead wrinkling in that familiar way.

"Speaking is not against *my* rules, Daniel." Candice struggled to sound angry when she really wanted to comfort him. "Those women could have controlled themselves. *We* do."

Candice was noticing fresh signs of her Daniel daily, like the way the middle of his forehead squeezed together when he was frustrated or when he was hurt. There was no way she would let him regress into the shaking form she'd first been

given. “In my household, you are a person, not a slave. *My* rules stand before Network laws. If you plan to stay with me, you’ll accept that.”

Candice left him kneeling there, waiting for pain that wasn’t coming.

Daniel didn’t understand why she wasn’t upset, but her veiled threat to take him back if he couldn’t follow her rules sank in deeply.

Candice had known it would. She didn’t like using his fears against him. She would only do it when she felt it was sorely needed, as it was now. He didn’t need to carry the guilt of those deaths. He had an owner who already did.

Daniel was grateful and was able to put it out of his mind because he knew she wouldn’t like it if she caught him dwelling on it. The images he’d witnessed, the snarls and the screams, wouldn’t go away soon, but he had gotten good at hiding his thoughts from the other bachelors and den mothers. He would use that skill now. *I won’t be separated from her. Not after all she’s done for me.* He quickly got up and followed.

The hunters had chosen to take an energizer and get this run cleared up instead of resting. It had already become worthless in terms of UD’s. The council would have huge fines waiting for them now.

Candice watched Daniel stare at the stars, the moon, and even the blowing leaves as if in a trance. She gestured no in response to Angelica’s quick glance at him. Daniel wouldn’t get an

energizer. He would sleep, tied to her this time, while they rolled to Jericho. Tomorrow would be a better day for all of them, she hoped. This one had been rough.

### 3

“I want that male.”

Silence fell around the companionable campfire of snake women. It had been hours since they’d given the Pruetts information and left. The four-woman crew was eating the horse stew their cook had made and using grease from the meal to re-seal the scales on their bodies and gear. The technique was a defense against the stiff winds and downpours they often traveled through on jobs.

“Cross the Pruetts?!” Brea was the worrier of their group. “No one will do that.”

“I will, if the price iss right.” Gracie was up for anything that ended in chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

“Pruetts fight too well to face head-on.” Gale considered, also adventurous. “We’d need an ambush.”

The leader let her crew talk, but all of them knew the choice had been made. Their other option was to leave before the run, but then they wouldn’t get to share in the plunder.

“I don’t mind following them.” Gale was their roamer and scout. “I can provide information on locations.”

“I can do that too.” Gracie began packing up her gear. “I’ll go with you.”

The snakes fell into setting up the attack. This wasn’t the first time they had spotted an appealing male and decided to take him and it wouldn’t be the last.

“Report every six hoursss,” Anna ordered.

“If they get Baker in Jericho, they’ll head for the nearesst hub to drop him off and claim the reward. After that, they’ll go home,” Gale guessed. “We could be waiting for them at their homestead or along the way.”

Brea snorted, distorted tongue giving the noise a soft rattle. “We need to sssplit them up. I’m telling you, there are too many for usss to handle.”

Anna agreed with Brea. “I think the Network needs a hand capturing Baker in Jericho. Don’t you?”

The women around her laughed as they realized they were going to ambush the Pruetts and make it look like the Network had ordered it. Their leader was a genius.

The petrified trees around them groaned and creaked as the wind increased. It was common for large branches to fall during storms, but the snake women were used to this lifestyle and didn’t react. Very few people traveled the wilderness as much as they did.

When the wind continued to build, warning of an eminent storm, Anna motioned for the fire to be put out. Petrified trees didn’t burn well, but the



dried debris along the ground did and snakes were always careful not to reveal their presence. Their kind was hunted even without Network warrants.

Unlike most of the snake clans who spent their time fighting among themselves, Anna's crew was organized and obedient. They had all come from ruling families the Network had destroyed during anti-mutation campaigns over the last century. As surviving daughters of powerful snake leaders, it was their family duty to reclaim past glory. Stopping to grab someone's male on the road to that glorious ending was just one of the benefits of not having to follow anyone's rules except their own. They'd been together for a long time and that certainly helped. Most of their kind preferred solitary lifestyles because they knew they couldn't trust each other. Anna's crew didn't have that problem. She was the boss and she made the rules. Anyone who didn't follow them was eaten. Out in the wilderness, food was hard to come by.

The tradition of eating their males after using them had only come about because the females were starving. The Network had made sure the snakes had no support, no matter what town they passed through. The locals wouldn't serve them, brothels wouldn't let them in, and weapon shops barred their doors as soon as snake crews hit town. Forced to do whatever it took to survive, the clans had become mercenaries and black-market security. In another thirty years, they wouldn't exist unless something drastic happened. Anna was

determined she and her crew would be involved in that. There was a sense of urgency and a need to reach New Network City, a place their kind usually avoided as much as the borderlands. Something was about to happen. Anna didn't want to miss it.

“We'll have to make sure she's dead.” Brea was still stressing over betraying the Pruetts. That family was infamous.

Anna shrugged, flipping another chunk of meat toward her nervous companion. “Pruetts and snakes have never been friends.”

“They've always hunted snakes for the Network,” Gale pointed out as she and Gracie prepared to leave. “I have no problem with this plan.”

As they discussed the details, Anna considered the possible loot. Not only did the Pruetts have two males, they also had mopars that were likely full of gas. Everything they needed in one hit was a good run. Anna just had to pick the right ambush site. If she chose wrong, all four family lines would end in the attempt. The Pruetts wouldn't forgive this betrayal. There would be no survivors.

Chapter Thirteen  
**All the Walls**

1

*There's a wall around the city!* Daniel gaped in fascination as they crested the hill, unable to see any gaps in the ten-foot barrier. Made from planks and slabs of concrete, the barrier around Jericho was speckled in faded graffiti. Almost all of it was anti-Network.

“Looks like they’ve fixed the hole in the south wall,” Candice stated, peering through a pair of expensive binoculars. “But not the one in the north. We’ll slide in through there and sweep toward the Square.”

The Square was in the center of the city, where Baker had a den. Bruce had informed Daniel that this had been one of the first midwestern towns to be rebuilt. The citizens had erected the wall in order to keep others out. The Network had put a quick, harsh stop to that, but left the wall and turned the city into their final outpost before the borderlands of Arkansas. Everything south and west of that point was ruled by the West Coast, sister to the council the Pruetts served.

“There he is,” Angelica called softly, pointing through the dusk shadows that covered their presence.

Candice stared in shock. Baker was still here. *What the hell is he thinking?* He knew she would accept the job, so what was he doing standing outside his hole-up?

Candice studied the surrounding area, finding too much debris and stacked furniture to be certain he was alone. She gave the signal for her parents to drop back and send in a sighting alert to the nearest hub. Then they would all move in and snatch Baker. It was a simple plan, but thanks to their hunting skills, prey often thought they were much farther away. Right now, the snake trackers were passing word they’d stayed a night in Kentucky. They shouldn’t be expected so soon, but the convict shouldn’t be out in the open, either.

Baker rotated suddenly, hand dropping to his lean hip. Candice stared at his body. She’d used it many times, in many ways. She had found Baker hiding under a house a few weeks after Daniel was taken, too exhausted to pay the local gang leader for a night’s bed after evading sentries all day. Their friendship had come easily because of a common hatred of adults and authority. When the disease was first starting, Candice hadn’t cared that Baker was male. She only saw his strength and his friendship. As the pain grew out of control, he’d eased her into the cool relief that came after one of their sessions. Those first few years had been

awful. Daniel hadn't been gone a month before the heat came, making her feel as though she was burning alive all the time. To survive, she'd adopted a substitute.

Baker wore an earring in one thick lobe, an onyx circle with an indecipherable symbol in the center, and a silver chain around his neck that she believed might be made of titanium. In all the times they'd slept together, it had never snapped under her changeling strength. Baker moved with an arrogance that said he was on his own and surviving. That was another part of him she'd been fascinated with. Even as a homeless teenager, he'd been confident. Candice had needed that for what she was planning.

They'd spent time working on her strength nearly every day. He was the reason she had survived the game. When Baker had made the council's wanted list, they'd been lovers for half a decade. She'd captured him before, but it was something Candice didn't think she could do now, despite accepting this assignment. Their rulers would get other hunters when she let him go. She hadn't agreed for the UDs or for the chase. She needed to see him...feel him. She had to know if he still hit her as strongly. She had to let go of Baker to have a real future with Daniel and after the month they had spent together in the very den Baker was standing in front of, she wasn't certain that was possible. Before she'd signed up for the games, Candice had feared she might be falling in

love with the convict. She needed to know if it was true. If she loved both Daniel and Baker, there were different choices to be made.

*I'll have to shoot myself, she joked mentally. Sometimes even the one is already too much to handle. Imagine the chaos the rebel would bring.*

Putting away her amusement, Candice joined Angelica and Daniel at the mopars they'd left back by the wall.

Bruce and Mary were guarding from nearby.

“You ready?”

Angelica's snort said she was jumpy.

Candice gave her a look of recognition. “Why don't you hang back, have a ride ready?”

Angelica understood what Candice wanted. If there were trouble, she would get Daniel out of harm's way. Candice would rather have the girl with her, but Mary would be concerned with her own mate and Candice was the leader. Daniel had to be protected.

Candice waved her crew forward with a sense of things about to go wrong, but she didn't call it off. Besides needing closure, she was hoping Baker would have information on the Ring. That fury was still burning hotly.

The bounty hunters spread out in a V formation that put Daniel in the center as they walked into the city with hands hovering over their guns.

Minutes after easing inside the walls of Jericho, they entered the alley where Baker had been standing. Crates and old garbage littered the narrow dimness. The apocalypse debris was a foot deep and flattened down, but not lifeless. Tension crackled in the smelly air.

Candice waved them forward with a shiver. Was Baker setting her up? He had to know she would never allow that to pass, lovers or not. Candice wondered briefly what Baker saw now when he stared at her. She'd asked him once, what he was drawn to when he could have his choice of changelings in the breeding program. He'd surprised her and won a chunk of her affection with his answer.

*"You represent freedom and strength that I would do anything to have. When I'm close to your fire, I know I'm alive and there's hope."*

Candice believed he was seeing her differently than that now. She was no longer his tattooed mistress. She was someone's legal mate.

"Stop there," Baker called.

Candice shifted so that Daniel was by her hip, picking up the waves of male menace aimed his way. Baker wasn't happy her new man was along for his capture.

"Comin' in."

The timbre failed to stun her. Candice was relieved. They would be on equal terms this time.

"Slowly," Candice warned.

A shadow broke away from the wall with careful movements.

Daniel stared in surprise. He hadn't known anyone was there.

A big hand raised black goggles and glinting silver orbs regarded everyone coolly.

"Baker," Candice greeted.

His shined orbs flashed intimate warmth. "Candy."

He wasn't expecting her reaction, and really, neither was Candice. Her blade spun by his ear and sank deep into the molding wood that had camouflaged him. "No more!"

Baker nodded, not taking any new offense that Candice could spot.

"I had to be sure."

"This is Daniel. *My mate.*"

The two guys took an instant dislike to each other.

"Mate?" Baker's voice rumbled insultingly. "That weakling?"

Daniel's hand dropped to the new weapon belt on his hip. "Can I shoot him now? It said *preferred dead.*"

Okay, maybe it was more like instant loathing. Candice kept quiet as her men glared at each other.

Daniel hated Baker on sight. The rebel was unkempt and wild, a smirking threat to Daniel's place that he wanted gone. This heathen had been with her! Baker knew *his* Candice intimately. The



jealousy, the absolute fury, made Daniel fearless. “She’s mine!”

“Not likely,” Baker countered. “You’re just a new toy.” His laughter was salt in an open wound. Before Daniel could answer, the convict leered, “She’ll break you the first time out.”

Baker had already sensed they weren’t physically bonded and he was using it, testing the limits.

Daniel didn’t stop to think. He followed the anger and yanked a weapon from his belt. Aware of Candice moving to stop him, Daniel threw the six-inch spike as hard as he could.

Not expecting a trained prize to be a threat, Baker spun at the last second, taking the blade to his shoulder instead of his neck. He slid to the ground in a spray of blood.

“Ugh!”

*Crack! Crack!*

Angelica ducked out of sight as bullets flew through the moldy landscape, slamming into anything in their path—including Baker.

Candice grabbed Daniel and shoved him into a corner before returning fire.

Bruce and Mary darted out of sight, hopefully to come out behind their attackers, as they always tried to do when ambushed.

“Aim low,” Baker, not dead, ordered. It wasn’t his people out there.

“Can I shoot him now?” Daniel demanded, drawing his gun.

Candice fired at the moving shadows. “Later.”

Together, they swept in the pattern that Bruce had started teaching Daniel, and were able to drive the dark forms back a little. Behind the attackers, fresh gunfire sounded as Bruce and Mary tried to even the score.

The sound of a mopar coming was a relief to Candice. As Angelica slid to a stop, Candice spun Daniel that way. “Get out of here!”

Angelica dragged him onto the ride as Candice put down another spray of cover fire so they could escape through the alley.

“Low!” Baker’s tone was urgent.

Candice caught the rest of his meaning this time. As she pulled the pins on two pineapples from her belt, the second half of the trap sprung.

“Damn!”

Hounds came from the sewers.

Candice rolled the grenades in three directions as she ran toward Baker. He wasn’t preferred alive. Apparently, the council meant that.

*Ping! Thud!* “Ugh!”

Another wave of slugs slammed into the ground and people. Candice stayed over Baker as much as she could, getting him on his feet.

*Kablamm!*

*Boomm!*

The third blast didn’t come, a dud, but the first two cleared the path. Full changeling now, Candice hefted her wounded prisoner over one shoulder and got out of sight before the smoke

could clear. She darted through the debris cloud with Baker clinging to her waist.

“Get them!”

Baker tensed at the shout. “Rankin!” he growled in rage.

Candice didn’t waste her breath, but she remembered the snake tracker’s words. She’d been betrayed.

Candice wasn’t used to carrying so much weight. Blood dripped from them both as she leapt over piles of unrecognizable junk, traction boots catching her on even feet. She darted across the deserted roadway to vanish into the deep shadows of a different alley. There were no sounds of pursuit, but with those hunters, there wouldn’t be. Network hounds were almost impossible to shake once they caught a scent. The single thing that threw them off was deep water.

Candice waded into the reeking muck in the center of the cracked sewer tunnel and kept moving. Their followers would know they had come this way.

“Go faster!” Baker demanded, grip tightening.

Candice stepped up the pace, mind flying. She couldn’t wait. There was one choice—a fast exit from this city. “Hang on.”

Above them were few signs of the quickly coming night, merely more haphazardly piled debris. This area was a dumping ground from those living above the chaos.

Candice tensed, pulling on her changeling strength. She lunged...caught her footing on a metal beam as they landed. The makeshift bridge creaked but held, and she grunted. *Men are so heavy!*

Candice sucked in a fresh lung of air. "You okay for a hard ride?"

She felt his grip tighten in response.

"Here we go." Candice ran along the soft wood, dripping muck and blood into the cesspool below. The beam ended suddenly and she jumped, landing crouched on the edge of the crumbling wall as she searched for their escape. She got moving again, hunting for the right tunnel as bullets spun through the air.

"Coming in low!" Baker warned urgently, neck craned to see behind them.

Candice didn't look, only pushed herself harder. She'd found what they needed. She just had to reach it.

Candice flew across a gap, landed awkwardly, and sprang away. *Almost there...*

"There they are!"

"That's the watershed!"

"Cut 'em off!"

*Too late, ladies!* Candice dove into the churning mass a second later.

It had to be a nightmare for Baker, taking it upside down. His grip was like iron around her hips as they were jerked under the water.

Lungs full of air, Candice yanked Baker upward. He resisted at first, confused, but her force went with the water and she was able to wrap his big arm around her neck as he came upright.

Half a minute later, her lungs were getting tight. Baker's grip was frantic as he struggled to hold out.

Candice groped for the trigger on her belt, getting it on the second try.

The raft inflated quickly, pulling them through the churning water. They broke the surface together, gasping for air.

Candice clung to the fragile boat, attached by her belt rope. As soon as she could breathe, she secured Baker's heavy weight the same way. Where the raft went, so would they.

Unable to see or hear any signs of pursuit, Candice sucked in more air and gathered her strength. There was still work to be done.

It took a lot of effort to get both of them onto the floater without tipping it over.

Under their weight, the raft immediately rode faster through the mucky water.

They stayed still for the first minutes, glad to be alive as the walled city fell behind and the sky darkened. The watershed was unusually clear of debris and they moved steadily west, both bleeding.

Candice finally sat up and leaned forward. "Let me see how bad it is."

She snatched her hand back as his knife glinted in the moonlight.

“You first.”

She shrugged at his wary tone, confident she could take the blade from him if she needed to. “Feels like one in the arm...no two. That’s a double-tap. One in the thigh. Now yours.”

The rebel wasn’t certain he should let her even though she’d saved his life. Candice saw it in the way his usually bright demeanor was so dark. What Baker did when he was away from her, Candice didn’t know. He had never volunteered the information and she had never asked. She also hadn’t visited him before the show, hadn’t told him about it before she left. He’d found out the same way everyone else had—by the Network’s official announcement of the contestants. Even her family hadn’t known. When she’d passed her eighteenth birthday and didn’t enter the games, her mother had thought she’d let Daniel go, but Candice had been waiting for the game with his papers. She had infinite patience for a good plan.

“Relax.” Candice shoved his hand down. “If I wanted you dead, you would be.”

With a few quick twists, she had wet strips from her cloak wrapped around his wounds that she could reach.

Candice moved away from his temptingly bloody scent in relief. She settled carefully on her end of the small raft, sharp ears straining to hear anything.

“He’s changing you already.”

She sighed. “More the game, than him. It was...rough.”

“It’s awful!” Baker agreed vehemently. “No one should ever have to do that for a mate, and no man should ever be treated that way. It has to stop.”

With those words, Baker became what Candice had least expected—an ally against the Network. She didn’t answer, but she agreed. After what Daniel had been through, how could she not?

They spent the rest of the ride in silence, staring at the darkness and each other. It was impossible not to compare Baker to her new mate. Baker was thick, but in the hard, dangerous way that had drawn Candice to him before she had known what to do with a friend like that. His sideburns came all the way down to meet in a light goatee of black shadows and mysterious allure. He liked her tattoos, but had only gotten one of his own during the time they’d been together. On his neck was the green rose and sword she’d put there herself. Now, he was sporting a new tat on his upper arm that made his muscles stand out. Tanned and rarely shaven, Baker’s good looks screamed from that unforgiving chin and those deep-set silver eyes. He’d told Candice one of his clients was a medico. She had done it for him in place of money for his rental. He’d had those eyes when they met... How long had Baker thought of her as a friend before he saw her as a future purchaser of

his services? Had he ever doubted it? They had used each other for their own reasons, but against her will, a bond had grown. It wasn't the same as what she had with Daniel. Baker was too independent for that, but it was still enough to make her mourn a little for the life they might have had together if they'd met in a world without Daniel's ghost between them.

## 2

Candice and Baker drifted for hours before the land around the watershed became familiar to her. Glad they had finally arrived, Candice slid into the cold water and pushed the boat toward the steepest edge of the watershed. "I have a den near here. Can you climb?"

"One-handed." Baker sighed ruefully as she guided the boat. "Your mate hit a muscle."

"Slide over here." Candice couldn't have been more pleased despite the inconvenience. "Seems like maybe he'll do."

"Maybe so," Baker grunted as he lowered himself into the water and slid onto her back.

Candice swam to the bank, relishing the strength of her changeling body. She got them to the edge of the crumbling outflow pipe without trouble, but labored up the rocky bank. It was an ugly, graceless climb where she scrambled for a hold while Baker's big hands did the same. They



were both glad to be lying across the top of the watershed wall a few minutes later.

They peered down on row after row of barbed wire barriers where occasional shadows shifted in the darkness.

“You ready?”

Baker bobbed weakly against her shoulder.

Candice understood he was about done, but her body was already healing. None of her wounds was life threatening. His, she wasn't sure about.

With Baker on her back, Candice moved slowly through the tangles. She'd chosen to come here because only one other person on the planet knew where it was. She always made sure her mother knew how to reach her.

“Down!”

Baker's hiss put Candice on her stomach in the debris field, where rats and who knew what else survived under them.

Lights swept the barbed wire, searching...

They stayed motionless, letting centuries of apocalyptic rubble be their disguise. It helped that they were coated in muck.

“Send in the hounds!” a guard ordered.

“It was just an animal.”

“Send 'em in!”

Candice tensed, sweeping the shadows of the alley they needed to reach.

“They'll come straight for us,” Baker warned.  
“You should leave me beh—Ugh!”

Candice took off, stopping his words. They both listened hard for the pad of dog feet.

Candice dropped again, relieved and saddened to see a human shadow break away from the barrier right in front of them.

The orphan ran with a noticeable limp. The hounds got her before Candice could consider helping. Her rage went up another notch. The fire hounds were menacing with their red eyes that mirrored female fury. Humans weren't the only living things to be infected with Rage Walkers disease. The contamination had destroyed the females of all the species humans had depended on, had befriended. A cat was a rare sight in New America, but toads were abundant due to their ability to shift genders. *If only people had the same skill.* The hounds certainly didn't. The disease did to them, what it did to the women. They'd grown larger, angrier, and desperate for a mate. Candice hated them even as she understood what made them so bloodthirsty.

"We gonna be food too?" Baker inquired lowly.

Candice smirked, moving again. Was there a way for her to combine her two lovers? She had forgotten how alive Baker made her feel.

They slid into the alley without being noticed, and Candice hurried through the darkness with her prize. She was relieved to be here. Even for a changeling, this was too much to sustain.

Baker kept a tight grip on her as she climbed a stack of wooden skids.

Candice stumbled as the skids shifted under their weight, regaining her balance right as she reached the top. Almost an entire warehouse of pallets had been in this alley when she'd found the den. It had been simple to rearrange things.

The wood on the roof gave easily under her hands, sliding over to reveal a hatch.

“Hey, wait. We don’t...”

Candice dropped into the hole, jerking the rope to close the hatch behind them.

Ignoring his yelp, Candice slung Baker into the single chair. His sound quickly became a moan.

Baker slid to his knees, in agony, Candice thought.

He lifted his goggles and kissed the dirt floor. “Land!”

She hid a chuckle, knowing he could see every detail of her expression with those shined eyes. Candice went unerringly to the table and lit the lantern to break the sparks.

She took stock quickly. There wasn't much to work with. It had been a while since she'd been here. This storeroom was in an old Network warehouse that included a bomb shelter. The warehouse had collapsed, but the rock chamber behind it had stood, buried, until she found it. Now it was stocked with a cot, a chair and table, and a few other basics for when she needed space. It was

the first time Baker had been here and it would be the last.

“Let’s get your wounds taken care of.” She drew her knife.

Baker swallowed, gesturing at the blade. “You still prefer full credits for captures to halves for bodies, right?”

Candice snickered. “Your body is too useful to kill. Stand up and hold still.”

Baker gripped the chair as she knelt behind him to dig out the slugs. He stayed silent the entire time.

He was so different from the males she knew, so tempting. It was no wonder she had given him first honors with her body, but things had changed. They had a bond that wouldn’t be easily broken, but the man she wanted in her bed was Daniel.

“You gonna turn me in or what?”

Candice recognized the pain distraction. She was no one’s gentle anything with a knife. She shrugged. “I’ll vote to go after the others.” Candice felt him tense as the blade went deeper. “Sorry.”

She flipped the metal out with a brutal jerk that sent blood streaming down his leg. “There we go.”

His wounds weren’t as serious as Candice had feared. He had taken a number of hits, but only the leg wound and Daniel’s surprise blow were serious. After rest and food, Baker would be able to travel. They would medicate him along the way if it became necessary.

Candice settled Baker in the cot, an indifferent nurse to keep him alive. Sparks flew each time their gazes met. This would be their last night together.

“You should take the bounty on me and settle down with him.”

Candice ignored that.

“Or you could join us.”

“Us?”

Baker twisted to watch as she flipped a slug from her leg and wrapped the wound with a strip from her battered cloak. “The rebels.”

Candice paused. “That’s why the Network sent hounds, snakes, and Pruetts for you.”

Baker’s mood lightened at her quick calculations. “The council knew you’d find me first, but they also knew I would be alive when you handed me over to them. They don’t want that anymore. Their trackers had been onto me for a week. I’d been shot at twice before this.”

Candice’s mouth dropped open. She couldn’t help gaping. “Then why come out?”

“I knew you would be the one they sent...” Baker’s silver eyes flashed dangerously. “I wanted to see the new man.”

He didn’t say, *the one who replaced me*, but she felt it. Despite the casual arrangement, bonds had grown for both of them.

Candice grunted, not anticipating Baker knowing the truth, but willing enough to give it now. Before, when it was a cool dream in the fiery

darkness, she'd been afraid to share her plan. "I knew Daniel before he was sold."

"But they put us into a training program before we're ever prizes," Baker countered. "You would have been..."

"Twelve."

The convict understood then what she'd done. "That was why! To learn from me so you could get to him. I was nothing to you!"

Unable to take Baker's pain, Candice shoved over to the cot. Her voice was a harsh whisper. "You were my saving grace, my light in the darkness. So much more than nothing!"

Baker kissed her.

Candice allowed it, but the violent flare that had always come before had been replaced with a vague flicker.

Baker shoved her away abruptly, understanding they were done. "You smell like shit!"

Candice caught herself, laughing. *That* was the Baker she knew. "Will you try not to kill him?"

Baker grinned, almost a mirror of her games leer. "Does he know about us?"

"Not until today."

"You'll tell him the rest?"

"Of course," Candice confirmed, cleaning up some of the mess.

Baker blew out a sigh and pulled his goggles over his eyes so that she couldn't read him any

longer. “Better make the same deal with him, I think. He’s got a fuse like yours.”

Candice was fiercely proud of Daniel. Later, when there was time, she would show him how much.

“I meant it, my offer. Not just anyone can get you in.”

That implied Baker was more than a member of the rebels. He was important to them. Candice nodded, no longer smiling. “I’ll pass it on.”

The convict snorted. “*You* make the choices for the Pruetts.”

“Not this one.” Her cold tone implied she was seriously considering it.

Candice slid onto the floor pallet she’d made and tried to sleep. She wasn’t used to being confused or hesitant. She liked to take action to attain her goals. Knowing she wasn’t free to do as she wanted was displeasing. Women had multiple lovers, it was accepted, but it was still wrong by her standards.

From across the room, she could feel Baker’s pain, but Candice didn’t go to him. They were finished.

The temperature quickly dropped over the next few hours. The wind howled through the cracks in the nook, pushing frigid air into the damp chamber and over wet bodies. Candice didn’t have clothes stored here, and ended up revising her choice not to share a bed with Baker. They huddled together

in the cot, sharing body heat. Baker understood without being told when all Candice did was let him wrap her up tightly. They rested, drowsing, but sleep didn't come for either of them until the dim rays of sun said a new day had arrived. Night was a lethal time in Network lands.

### 3

#### **The Network**

“That’s it. Switch on the tracking device in his brand and fire the missile,” Terry instructed. The reports from the snakes had come in. “They’re all together.”

“Not yet,” the leader overrode. “Give them time to get to the others. Baker won’t have a base so close to one of our hubs.”

The screens behind the council members showed a variety of locations—the swamps of lower Georgia and Alabama, the Arkansas borderlands, a crumbling bridge over the dry Ohio River. Most of the screens showed areas the council was monitoring for possible or known trouble. Like Atlanta, where nature had taken over completely. There was little to see but twisting vines and insects the size of the purple flowers they were nesting in. The Network didn’t control that area. No one did.

The next small screen showed the deserts of Nebraska. Once covered in enough crops to feed a country, the breadbasket had been smothered with



volcanic ash during a post-apocalyptic eruption and still hadn't recovered. The ash, which was actually tiny bits of volcanic glass, was still slowly spreading east on the winds.

Another monitor showed a dilapidated nuclear power plant in the Missouri quake zone. They were observing the radiation levels from the minor meltdown in 299AW, when temperatures had stayed below freezing for six months and stopped the flow of water to the reactor.

Another square screen revealed a section of the sixty-foot wall that divided New America from Canada. On the other side of the heavily armed barrier, the mob of protestors grew daily in number.

One of the oldest council members, Lauren, waved a hand. "We don't have long before it all blows open."

The monarch gave a pacifying grunt. "The meeting is two months away. Vaccines are being shipped to other countries, slowly. It'll hold them a few weeks and then it won't matter. But let the rest of our hounds out. Clear the hiding places we know of. It won't help us to be caught unaware."

"Do we capture the Pruetts if we find them at one of the dens?"

"No," the council leader instructed, protecting the grand plan. "Their duty to the Network isn't over."

Chapter Fourteen  
**Network Rider**  
Frogtown, Alabama

1

“Candy?”

There was that hated name, followed by a painful flash of the girl who had been too weak to stop Daniel from being taken. “What!”

“Remember the deal we talked about?”

Candice didn’t come fully awake at the concern in Baker’s tone, but she registered it. She was very comfortable against his heat. She wanted to sleep. “What deal?”

“The one where you tell your new man I’m off limits.”

Candice struggled to think, groggy. “What about it?”

“*Now* would be a good time.”

Baker’s tone finally sank in. *Daniel*.

Candice’s lids snapped open to find Daniel glaring at them. It was easy to feel his fury and reason warring for control as he pressed his knife to Baker’s throat.

Candice sighed, flipping into alertness. “It’s gonna be one of those days, I guess.” She could tell what Daniel was thinking and why not? She

was wrapped in the convict's arms. They'd clearly passed a long night. "So do it."

"What?"

"What?"

Candice yawned sleepily at their reactions. "I'll tell you once, Daniel. I do as I please. It's not *his* choice any more than it is yours."

Everyone was stunned at the callousness, even the parents waiting near the door. Mary had been able to sneak in from the opposite direction, allowing them to avoid the climb and drop that Candice had done with Baker to get inside the den.

Candice snuggled deeper into Baker's tense embrace to prove her point. "Get a body transport ready. We leave in half an hour."

Candice wasn't sure if Daniel might do it anyway. She was ready to take another wound for the rebel to make her mate understand his place. She was the lead, always.

Daniel couldn't help the jealousy that had drawn a blade to his hand. Finding out he would have to share her was a blow he hadn't expected. His hand trembled, wanting to do it...but then she would be done with him. Even sharing was better than not being with her. Daniel lowered the knife in misery, heartbroken. *I thought she was mine!*

Broken again, he trudged to a far corner and waited for instructions, as he'd been taught.

"Damn," Baker rumbled. "Remind me of that the next time I invite you over."

Baker's tone was condemning, but his body said he was hers if she wanted him. Should that level of servitude be required, Baker would happily pay the price.

"You fit for a trip to Atlanta?"

Baker wasn't surprised to learn Candice had chosen to escort him home. "I'll be good as new in a day or two. We rollin' or glidin' in?"

Candice chortled against his big chest. "Neither."

"More water," he grumbled under her. "Great."

Candice reluctantly pushed herself up and out of his arms, sure she would be sore. And she was, but not so much that it would get in the way.

She bobbed thanks when Angelica held out a small pouch of supplies. All of the Pruetts were fast healers. Within a day or two, scars would remain where she'd been shot. It was one of the few benefits of this agony. It was also another way they differed from the average citizen, but not from the other changelings. *They* also healed fast, making kill shots a necessity.

Candice dug through the pouch and tossed a small jar onto Baker's lap. "After you use it on the places you can reach, Daniel will do the rest."

"Like hell he will!"

Daniel's gasp echoed through the den at Baker's blatant refusal of an order.

"Fine. Angel?" Candice triggered the heat intentionally. It would be a test of Angelica's control.

Recognizing that, Angelica nodded tensely.

“I’ll do it myself,” Baker growled.

“You’ll do as you’re told!” Bruce’s tone was commanding.

“Whatever.”

Baker’s childish response made even Mary crack a grin.

Candice sat at the small table and waved Daniel to the chair beside her. Bruce joined them as Angelica went to Baker.

“I’m taking him to Stone Mountain,” Candice informed them all.

“We’ve already sent notice of an assignment withdrawal due to injury,” Mary replied.

Candice watched Angelica extend the jar so Baker could dip his fingers into it. She was holding her breath. So was he. *Maybe Baker can help her*, Candice thought. She scanned Daniel. “How was your first night without me?”

As his mouth opened, Candice willed him to fight, as he might have with Baker.

Daniel’s chin dropped. “Rough.”

Instead of giving into the urge to comfort him, Candice fell into making plans with her parents. What she was about to do, crossing the Network to help this rebel get home, could result in their deaths. She needed to be certain all angles were covered before they left. She didn’t have the patience for another ambush unless she was the one setting it.

Once plans were made, the bounty hunters moved Baker from the den to the medical cart. They towed his chained body behind as if it was a corpse. Bodies were only worth half a credit. Few people would cross a Pruett family team for that tiny amount. Under the shield of a heavy fog and the noise of water rushing from the watershed, the small group left the area unnoticed.

To Candice, Frogtown was as ugly in the daylight as it had been in the damp darkness. The council had declared martial law here in response to riots over the height restriction for a breeding pass. Their rulers only wanted perfect specimens to reproduce, and the short, squat females of the Bama Swamps weren't happy about it. The nearby hub that oversaw the single train to the western outpost had been under citizen control for a few days during the rebellion, but the Network still hadn't let up even though the muck-dwelling females had been conquered. The hounds had taken care of that.

As if her contemplations had conjured them, Candice saw three sets of ears rise up over the stacks of cut hay that lined this road.

“We have company.” Hoping there weren't more dogs coming, Candice ordered, “Males in the cart, on my order.”

Tension sparked as everyone understood there was trouble.

Angelica gasped as a slobbering hound bounded from the trees to their right.

“In the cart!” Candice ordered.

Daniel scrambled in with Bruce as Baker slid over to make room. The cart was attached to Angelica’s mopar.

As soon as they were in, Angelica sped up.

Four large hounds came together, red-eyed and snarling. They were hungry.

Candice fired, hitting one of them in the shoulder, but the angry animal barely paused.

Daniel cringed in horror at a hound running alongside the cart. “Candy!”

“Down!”

Daniel ducked as Candice fired. This time, the slug went into the dog’s socket and through its brain. As it fell, a second dog lunged overtop the dead one to snap at Daniel’s arm.

He jerked backward and the hound followed, knocking them both from the cart with the heavy weight.

Dazed, Daniel scrambled to his feet.

“Don’t move!”

Daniel stopped. The hound’s face was inches from his. He was aware of Candice trying to get a clear shot, but at that moment, staring into the creature’s vivid irises, he could feel the pain. Unlike changelings, he sensed these animals needed comfort and attention instead of sexual relief. He extended a hand that only shook a little.

The hound didn’t react beyond those red orbs. They flared hotter as his scent filled its nose.

Daniel slid his fingers through its chin fur without flinching. *Soft!*

He murmured the same and felt the animal relax a bit under his attention.

“They sometimes obey commands...”

Daniel understood Candice’s softly spoken meaning and said, “Go home now. Take your friends with you, please.”

Before he could cower, a huge tongue slid over his jaw in affection.

Daniel chuckled as the hound slowly left, wiping away the slobber.

The other huge dogs quickly followed, all of them taking curious sniffs of their merciful leader.

Daniel regarded Candice and her family, who were sharing surprised glances. He could tell they believed he should be dead.

Daniel let himself open up a bit, wanting them to understand. “It’s one of the ways I’m different. I don’t think the Network knows or they wouldn’t have let me out.”

In the stunned silence from her family, Candice could only feel relief. She’d almost lost him again. Her heart still wasn’t beating correctly. She’d been angry most of her life, but fear was an entirely different emotion and Candice didn’t like it at all.



As they cleared the city limits, Angelica and Candice took the road that would lead them to the nearby train. Her parents took the wild path that would guide them north so they could pick up the other fugitives and appease the council's anger for failing to turn in the convict currently bumping along behind Angelica.

Daniel's grip was a warm comfort. Now that a few hours had gone by, Candice was stunned by what they had witnessed. She'd never heard of it before, not even when civilization had been at its most evolved. The hounds didn't bond with people. They ate them.

There was no line to wait in for boarding when they arrived at the hub. The train was ready to go as they rode up to the cargo car. Candice was glad to see light security. She didn't expect trouble on this ride, but if it came, at least there wouldn't be a flood of troops to get in her way.

A short haggle with the tall redhead minding the wide bays of the hub got them the three rear rooms of a fancy car for half the price. There were few reasons for people to come here, making the sentries short of funds and lax from boredom.

*Not wise*, Candice reflected. This area was as dangerous as the few people who dared to venture through it. Towering trees and winding paths branched off in every direction, taking a continuous rail crew to keep the tracks clear of debris. The reason she'd chosen to take the train was lurking within that dense forest, discouraging

direct land travel for the rest of the journey. Pythons in the southern areas had even taken over the crocodile population. The effects of the war were uncountable, immeasurable.

Candice scanned their surroundings as they boarded. This hub was at the center of three states—Tennessee, where they had captured Baker, Alabama, where Candice and Baker had denned, and Georgia, where they were traveling to now. It should have been a busy place, but it never had been, as far back as she could remember. It was as if the Network didn't want people in the borderlands.

Daniel loved the train as soon as he saw it, and remembered not to say so at the last second. He saw only Network women here, but he felt their attention shift to him in instant need. It was clear they hadn't seen a new male in a while. Daniel was careful to avoid their leering gazes. Unlike the crate ride to Candy's home, Daniel thought he might enjoy this trip. Black and sleek, the train had silver edgings and a feeling of luxury that was enhanced by bright, crystal chandeliers above the windows.

The train rumbled around them, but not as loudly as he'd expected from such a massive machine and Daniel followed his owner, eager to begin this newest leg of their adventure. He was no longer as worried for his safety. Candice was adept at reclaiming her property and these women knew it. She'd been recognized by at least three of the

black-and-silver clad females. He could tell that by the way those guards were now studying his owner and not him.

Once they got Baker's body secured in the storage car, the train departed. Later, they would bring him up to their suite. When the Pruetts rode the rails, they were known to waste an hour or two with the rentable men. The guards weren't aware that the hunters were slipping the slaves food and medicine. There was a lot their rulers didn't know about the Pruetts. The family had always tried hard to keep it that way, but things would change soon. Candice knew her growing rage wouldn't allow her to keep playing these games.

The railcars were lined in silver and black paneling, with red carpet and delicate velvet draperies to match those fragile fixtures. The chairs and couches were thick and plush, the kind that encouraged sweet sleep. Each seat even came with cute pillows in all three of the themed shades. After the constant green of the isolated wilderness they'd been traveling through, it was a little overwhelming.

"In here," Candice instructed.

Their sleeping car was large, but the bed took up half of it. Daniel swallowed a lump in his throat to begin putting away the things he believed Candice would want for this overnight stay.

Candice remained in the doorway as Angelica secured the other rooms.

Daniel put away her clothes and personal items. As he slid cuffs into the top drawer, Daniel could feel her eyes burning holes into him. He'd packed them from her things at home and received an approving gesture.

Daniel finished with his chores and then glanced toward the small washroom. When he glanced at Candice for permission, she only stared back without answering.

It took a moment to understand what she hadn't said. His choices, his freedoms, would be as many as she could give.

The washroom was small, but well stocked, and Daniel took advantage by using some of the samples. He liked to be clean and to smell good. Before, being dirty had been a tiny defense. Now, that wasn't necessary. He wanted to be taken.

### 3

An hour after boarding the luxurious train, they were all gathered in the dining area of their cars. Baker was lying on a couch in the far corner. Angelica was by the exit, not eating or talking and Candice understood why. The smells in this car were tempting. Both guys had showered. The scent of freshly washed meat was making changeling nerves tingle. It wasn't as bad for Candice. She was noticing the subtle differences, but for Angelica, being around them both was torture. Candice could feel the fire, the heat, as Angelica

waited for this run to be over. She didn't realize Candice was doing it to her intentionally. Angelica could have been sent with Bruce and Mary, but she needed this. Candice's success at the games had convinced the younger girl she stood a shot, but being around Daniel had made the final choice. She wanted one of her own. Angelica would probably sign up when they got home and Candice was determined her cousin would survive.

Daniel was staring out the window at the darkening landscape flying by. The light draft coming from the cracked glass was pulling his scent directly toward the door, where it swirled around Angelica before wafting to Candice.

Angelica's hands clenched at a fresh wave, irises flickering from pink to red.

Candice recognized the moment. "Get out."

She waited until Angelica was gone before looking at Daniel. "You too."

He walked stiffly to the exit, understanding she wanted time alone with Baker.

Candice clamped down on comforting words. Daniel would learn to trust her. If she wanted them both, she would have told him that. As it was, Baker's fresh skin held an appeal, but there was little heat behind it. She'd made her choice a long time ago.

As Daniel quietly shut the barrier to their bedroom—Candice could see through the mirror on the railcar door she'd left open—Baker sat up.

"You're a real bitch to them, you know that?"

Candice ignored the attempt at conversation. When it came to their safety, yes, she was. Angelica couldn't be so distracted. It would get one of them killed.

“What's it like?”

Candice focused on Baker, who was now staring at the muted wall screen with loathing. A new episode of the Bachelor Battles was playing.

“Are they safe?” he asked. He had escaped before being put into a game.

Her mind flashed to the cells, to the blood and bruises. “No.”

Baker wanted details, but more than that, he wanted help. It was a surprise to discover and Candice reacted like a true Pruett. “Let's get this straight. I owe you for the training, and I'm paying for it by delivering your injured ass to Stone Mountain. Anything else will have to wait until I know who you've drafted to replace the Network that you're hoping I'll destroy.” Candice tried to shut him down, but she suspected it was already too late for that.

“We're good men, Candy and they're dying so fast!”

Her grip tightened on the chair. His tone implied she would find so much desperation in his rebels that not helping would hurt her more than facing the Network.

“Why were you there?” she asked suddenly.

“You won. You can get us in.” His honesty demanded her assistance. “*We* have a right to live as free men.”

The conversation had gotten more emotional than Candice had expected from him. She understood this wasn't one of his many challenges or a service he needed handled. He cared for them. Her eyes widened, and there was no stopping the shift to pink. “You're more than a rebel.”

Realizing he'd given himself away, Baker leaned against the seat and crossed his arms over his chest. “I've been leading since the Network murdered my father during a live broadcast.”

Candice placed it an instant later. A tall, sandy blond fugitive had broken into the games during an episode of Vulture Run. As his punishment, he was forced to become a contestant right then. The most brutal of the Network's entertainment, the ragged, starving male hadn't made it ten feet into the birdcage.

“Why did he go? He had to know he wasn't coming out.”

“My baby brother. We heard rumors he was a prize for that episode.”

Baker's lids shut, and his voice, that pitch of confident power she'd always depended on, broke her with the anguish.

“He was left in the nursery.”

That was a common punishment for rebels and sympathizers, but her heart filled with fury. Candice had only thought of Daniel for the last

years, and of her own torment, but there were countless others like the tortured man across from her. They needed help... Her mind swam with contemplations of the secrets she suspected he would reveal. This tattered, jealousy-hiding convict was her way into a new game if she wanted it. He was a free ride to twist the hand of fate and maybe save an entire world as she played the Network for all their lives this time.

Candice reflected on her matches and the interviews she'd given, dominated. Maybe she'd been planning things even then, going through their reporters one by one to prove she could. Maybe she'd been plotting. The angry side of Candice had never intended to go home with her prize and settle down without handing out justice to those responsible. Daniel's family would have been an easy target, but the Network had made all of these horrors possible. She'd always known who the true enemy was.

Irony prompted the harsh laugh that spilled from her lips. No wonder Baker had come to her. For a duty this big, the one doing it had to be fearless, and she was as close to that as it came. Her terror had always been Daniel's absence. Now, she didn't have that weakness to stop her from joining their cause.

“Would it help to know there are more of us than the Network admits to publicly?”



Candice's lips drew up as she pushed her buzzing mind into concentration so she wouldn't miss any of the details. "How many?"

"Enough to fill every car on this train."

#### 4

Daniel was angry. Candice and Baker had been alone for an hour. Then she'd helped Baker back into the middle car and shut the door while she talked to Angelica in the hallway. She hadn't even looked at Daniel.

Baker was surprised that Candice had left them alone together. Daniel wanted him dead.

Daniel glowered as firmly as he knew how. He and the convict needed to get some things straight and it had to be now, while they had this minute alone.

"You can stop. She made her choice."

Daniel hadn't been expecting that. He waited, trying to figure out if Baker was a threat.

Baker shrugged. "Yeah, I don't understand it either. What the hell does she see in you?"

Daniel growled at the insult, but there was no denying the pain in Baker's voice. Candice had obviously told him they were through. It went a long way toward soothing Daniel's wounded ego, and he stopped the words he'd been mentally rehearsing.

“You better be what she needs, *boy!*” Baker growled, showing some of the menace that Daniel was positive had attracted Candice.

Daniel leaned forward, showing he had picked up his own version of her rage. “I’ll still be holding her when the Network shoots your ass.”

“Slam you, playboy!”

“Right back at you, convict!”

The door slid open, forcing them to stop as Candice entered.

She read the tension, letting out a deep sigh, but Daniel sensed that she actually liked it. He puzzled over that impression.

“I see you two are getting acquainted.” She waved a hand at her mate. “Come along.”

With a last gloating glare at Baker, Daniel followed.

Chapter Fifteen  
**Rebel Charms**

1

Candice had put Angelica with Baker for the night, but when she and Daniel came through the hall, the girl's gear was outside the egress.

Candice scowled, jerking a hand toward the car where Baker was. "You can't keep track of someone like him from so far away."

Angelica growled, the change flickering.

Candice shrugged, moving around Angelica's stiff stance. "He's healed enough. Ask him."

There was another of those nearing violence snarls, and then Angelica grabbed her gear and stormed into the middle car with Baker. She slammed the door.

Candice doubted Angelica would take the advice, but having them together would keep them from stewing on their own miseries. She and Angelica were enough alike that Candice believed they would pass the night talking.

The motion of the train was usually steady, so Candice wasn't expecting the rough shudder that ran through the metal. Grinding in an ear-splitting shriek before straightening out, she assumed

they'd hit debris on the tracks and continued to her room. Just next door, she was glad the walls were thickly padded for privacy. Screams might carry, but not conversations and that was good. Candice sensed her new mate had a tirade waiting. Daniel had been silent since she'd put him in his place, and Candice was anticipating setting things straight. She'd made the choice. She could take him with a clear conscience. She still didn't plan to rush it, but the only thing holding her back now was timing. Candice wanted to be able to remember it forever.

As the couple entered, that creak of agonized metal came again, this time without the shudder. Candice didn't let it worry her, but she saw Daniel's shoulders tense. "There are escape hatches in all the cars."

Daniel's mouth opened.

Candice braced for his jealousy.

"Why didn't you claim Baker?"

She hadn't been expecting that. Without a rehearsed answer waiting, Candice gave the truth. "He wasn't you."

Daniel's happiness lit up the darkest places in her heart. Candice sighed. "Nothing happened last night. It was cold. That's it."

"But you care for him."

She didn't lie. "Yes. He helped me through the worst years of my life."

Daniel's beautiful face darkened. "While you were *changing*."

“No,” Candice corrected, pulling the string on her battered cloak. “While I was without you.”

That eased his jealousy, and she finished it off with, “Baker and I are over.”

“Why? You’re allowed to have both.”

His quick response made her wonder what he and Baker had talked about when she’d left to settle them all in for the night. Had they discussed sharing her? Candice snorted again at the thought of trying to live that way. “One at a time.”

Daniel winced at her choice of words.

Candice cursed her thoughtless mouth. Instead of explaining her meaning, she pushed off her boots and sent her hands to the long shirt she always wore over her normal clothes on runs.

Daniel watched her come into focus like it was a show. He wasn’t sure, but he may have stopped breathing as her silken body began to emerge. She had muscles tattooed with roses, stars, animals, and names of the places she’d been during her bounty runs. He couldn’t look away. Her peach swells glowed in the flickering train light, causing jealous contemplations to fade into desire. She had that effect on him. Daniel suspected she knew and was using it. Candice obviously wanted him willing, but Daniel didn’t think she knew how well her plans were working. He had to clear his throat before he could speak. “Where do you want me?”

The heat in her pink gaze made him flush. He hurried to remove his own over clothes, thinking it would be perfect if she took him with Baker in the

next car. Hoping she didn't notice the gloating attitude, Daniel folded his cloak and laid it on the bed.

Her gaze burnt holes into Daniel as his hands went to the buckle of his jeans. The bachelor had the sudden intuition if he pushed, he could snap that famous Pruett control. Candice had spent the night in *his* arms without seeking relief. She had to be ready.

Hiding from her sharp gaze, Daniel took off his shirt and then started on his pants.

When he took his time instead of scurrying under the blankets as usual, Candice understood what he was doing. On another day, it might have made her angry or forced her to teach him a strict lesson on trying to manipulate her, but right now, there was too much heat. The time in Baker's arms, smelling him for those hours, had given her a wall of fire that she'd stored behind the rage. The sight of Daniel now trying to push her into what she wanted anyway had Candice waiting to see how far he would go. If it was as far as she hoped, the cuffs were in the drawer.

His pants were neatly folded and placed on the stand. Bare skin gleamed at her and Candice gave him the games grin. It was only fair to know when you were pushing a changeling into an attack.

Instead of a flinch, Daniel answered, "I'm ready."

*Heat. Lightning. Flames.*

Candice pulled down the sheet and delivered a single warning, “I can break most cuffs.”

“I hadn’t planned on using them.”

Candice paused, body hardening into pointed peaks that drew Daniel. *She is so sexy!* He felt a tremor of worry as her nails shredded a hole in the top sheet. She didn’t seem to be aware of it. Hoping he wasn’t about to make a mistake, Daniel dipped the mattress with his heavy body and rolled toward her.

She was lying stiffly with her hands clenched at her hips. Candice didn’t move as Daniel slid his thumb along her cheek, her lips. She was beautiful to him, so different from before when he couldn’t stand to look at a renter. Daniel traced her shoulder scars—her badges of honor. He was awed by her resilience. She’d been sliced, stabbed, shot and beaten, but little slowed her down. *What I wouldn’t give to be like that!*

Daniel slid carefully over her, bracing an arm on either side. As their bodies met, Candice growled.

Scared again, Daniel froze.

Trying to remember that this was his idea, Daniel held still as she slowly leaned forward. When she pressed her mouth to his, moaning, Daniel responded.

Candice let the kiss linger, lips sliding, breath mingling. When she broke the kiss, her orbs were almost solid red. “Any farther and I may not be able to stop, Daniel.”

“I don’t want you to,” he admitted shyly.

Her nostrils flared as if she was scenting prey. Her lips rose to his again, and this time, her mouth was demanding. His grip tightened on her arm as he slid his tongue over those sweet lips. She tasted good!

“Mmm...”

Her moan dazed Daniel. He kissed her like he’d been wanting to since they left the complex. He threaded big hands through her short, silky hair and held her still as he stroked her tongue, teasing. He was well trained in pleasure. She would be clear on that when he was finished. Daniel heard the sheet rip again. It was incredible, sending his need into a new level. She shuddered.

“Easy...” Daniel dipped to her neck, nose full of her exotic scent. He pressed a kiss to her throat, feeling hunger rise. It had *never* been like this.

“Kiss me?”

Candice met him with a snarl of lust. His hand slid up her ribcage to cup a breast and her legs went around his hips. She thrust against his hardness with no thoughts of stopping...except maybe long enough to put on the cuffs. She could already feel blood dripping from her clenched fist.

He shifted, bringing their bodies flush.

Candice groaned against his mouth when his member twitched against her thigh, seeking entrance through his undershorts. The kiss deepened, electricity flowing.



Candice was aware of a noise beyond their groans and breathing, but the need to finish was driving at her control. He was more than willing, and she...was about to be attacked! In their passion, Candice hadn't noticed the train stopping. She saw the door inch open with red sight, fury exploding at the interruption. *This will be bloody.*

Candice rolled Daniel toward the wall and shoved him off the bed as the door swung open and shadows darted in. She followed him over, snatching her guns from the table.

“Get the lamp!” someone ordered.

Candice shielded Daniel's body with hers as the lights were shot out. The hall outside their car was already dark.

Candice pressed Daniel into the corner as she fired, but there was only a brief glance of shiny forms in black to aim at.

“Don't killsss the male!”

The shout startled Candice more than the recognition. Changeling fights were usually quiet except for the growls. She swept the car with gunfire, hitting one of the five. She should have known the trackers would come after him. Daniel had shown them acceptance. That was a rare as winning Vulture Run.

Catching movement, Candice aimed high and took out a second slithering bitch. She switched to the other gun as the remaining snakes lunged for her.

“Candy!”

They hauled her away before she could finish reloading.

Daniel was snatched by rough hands that tried to throw him over a shoulder, but he shoved backward, forcing the female to follow. It was the woman he'd offered the drink to and Daniel instinctively spun them toward the wall while slanting his mouth over hers. It was all he could think to do.

She froze.

Daniel deepened the kiss. Touching her scale-coated form was disgusting—slimy and unpleasant—and he struggled with fear and the need to survive as she rattled against him. Daniel didn't want to know what part of her made that sound.

The tracker had frozen at first, but that was becoming something dangerous now. Daniel tried not to gag as her forked tongue hesitantly met his. Determinedly envisioning Candice in his head, Daniel pressed against the revolting woman and willed his owner to hurry. The snake's control was weakening, her grip tightening. Much more would get him killed when he couldn't give what he was promising, but Daniel kept at it even though he'd never been so limp. He had to buy Candy time to deal with the others.

Daniel was suddenly jerked away from the snake and spun over the bed. He hit the floor with a heavy thump, skull slamming against the wall.

Dazed, he sensed more than saw Candice kill the snake with her bare hands.

Candice sent her nails into guts again, delighting in the screams. She jerked on warm organs, and then ripped them upward, making sure the snake was hurt before she lifted her other clawed hand to slit the traitor's throat. The blood haze had fallen when she found Daniel in the woman's arms.

Candice rotated toward him in raw fury that she couldn't control.

Angelica burst into the car, weapon drawn.

Candice snarled a warning that the younger girl heeded instantly, stopping.

Candice pulled the rage in the same way she was always demanding of her little cousin, but it was hard.

When she believed she could, Candice jerked a hand toward the doorway, where Baker was lurking. "Get him out of sight."

Scanning the scene, Baker grunted in amusement and looked down at Daniel. "I knew she'd break something the first time out. Just thought it would be *you*."

"Go on!" Angelica shoved Baker toward the other compartment as troops entered the hall. Their flashlights made ugly shadows on the walls and bloody bodies.

Candice's eyes were solid red orbs that kept the big women in the doorway of the car. Their attention went over Daniel, who was almost naked and still on the floor, and then the bodies. The

ranking female gave a short bob. “We’ll report it and send in a crew. You’ll need to clear the area.”

Candice gestured Daniel to leave.

When he stood, the sentries leered over his exposed skin.

“I’m good to go, if you’d like to try,” Candice warned. She was speaking to them while fully changed. Blood still dripped from her claws.

These guards clearly hadn’t run across a changeling who could think and battle the fire at the same time. All of the big women began retreating from the car.

“Wise choice.” Candice pointed at the bodies. “They’re all wanted. Make sure I’m not attacked again and this shift can split the bounty.”

Her generosity surprised them, gaining allies that Candice wasn’t certain she would need, let alone use. Still, it was good to have people on the inside.

“Thank you, Miss Pruett,” the leader of the shift, Pamela, stated. “Please rest assured that your remaining time on the Rider will be uneventful.”

Rage slowly fading, Candice glanced at Daniel as they left. She understood he was only trained to handle horny females in one way, but it didn’t stop the pain.

When he began donning on fresh clothes from his kit, she waved at her cloak. He was splattered in blood. “Wear that, too.”

Candice felt his need to apologize, but she refused to listen to it. He’d been saving himself.

How could she stay mad when his actions had kept him here? If they'd gotten him off the train, he could have been lost again and in more ways than the obvious. When snake women finished draining their males, they ate them. That was the council's most convincing reason for the extermination campaigns. The snakes were barely surviving the Network's attempts. Forced out of the cities, the scaly tribes were mainly concentrated in Frogtown and the swamps, but ones like these had left their people to come farther north for a different life. Most of them ended up being trackers. With their new tongues, they could find anything. This time, it had been death.

As soon as Daniel was dressed, Candice switched them to the other car so the waiting crew could begin cleaning up the mess. She pointed to the empty couch between Baker and Angelica.

Daniel went quickly, miserable. He wished he had done anything else now. He had no idea how to make it right.

Still smirking, Baker took in the swollen lips that Daniel could feel, then Candy's half-naked body. Daniel's misery deepened. All he did was cause trouble. She'd have been better off renting him out at Floozies. Daniel curled into the corner of the soft couch and ducked inside her cloak. The comforting scent filled his nose and Daniel tried not to shake. *I've ruined everything.*

Angelica was talking to Candice in low tones that he couldn't make out. Daniel heard Baker

stretch out on the other couch. What would happen now? He'd shown her disloyalty and that wouldn't be forgiven. Would it?

Scared of losing the first real home he'd had, Daniel listened to the sound of the train starting up and let the jerky motions hide his struggle to find a solution for the mess he'd made of things.

"You should take him in the other car and finish it."

Baker's challenging pitch sent the flames into Candice's guts, but she only snorted. "They don't make cuffs that strong."

Baker's face said that with him, she didn't need them, that he never created this type of chaos. She knew that to be a lie however, and raised a brow. "Maybe you and Angel should take it."

By the way his profile darkened, she knew she'd guessed right. She ignored her cousin's gasp of anger. "She's generous, too." Not wanting to kill anything that might grow between them, Candice gestured toward the door. "We'll stay out here."

"So will I." Angelica's voice was strained.

Candice shrugged. "Suit yourself." She gave Daniel's huddled form a heated look, implying she wanted this car for her own purposes.

Angelica jumped to her feet. "Fine!" She stormed to the exit with a hard glare at Baker. "You touch me and I'll rip your head off after it's over."

Baker chuckled. "Might be worth it."

The door slammed behind her.

The convict gave Candice a worried glance. “She’s burning hotter than you.”

Candice nodded, not upset by his interest in her cousin, but still wounded by Daniel’s attempt to save himself. It was clear who she valued more. “Be gentle. She won’t be able to resist,” Candice suggested.

Baker gave her another of those searching looks.

“It isn’t a test,” Candice stated. “If you can help her, my approval is there.”

Even Baker understood to ask first. It was how males were trained and Candice loathed it. She wanted a soul mate like those she’d read about, someone to stand beside her, not a man who would sell himself out for protection.

Now that she had herself almost under control, Candice finished donning clothes and then went to Daniel. She pulled the edge of the cloak down, shocked to find tears.

He regarded her in utter dejection, pale skin glistening with his misery. “I didn’t know what else to do!”

In that instant, Candice let go of the pain. He was so fragile, so vulnerable... She sighed, running a hand along his cheek as her heart broke. He may never turn back into the Daniel she’d loved as a boy, but there was no doubt she wanted him in any condition. “I forgive you.”

“I’m sorry.”

Candice dipped to his lips without another worry over his loyalty. He hadn't wanted to be split from her and had relied on the single skill he'd been taught. It was enough.

When his arms tightened, Candice gently pushed him away. He'd had enough trauma for one day. So had she. "Try to sleep."

Daniel stared at her in worry, not convinced things were okay between them.

Candice leaned forward to place another easy kiss to the mouth she was beginning to think she might be addicted to. "I'll be right here the whole time. Sleep now."

He obediently lay down.

Candice stretched out on the other couch. She would miss having him next to her, but with blood still drying on her hands, she was dangerous and not just to him. Even a trip to the washroom would have to wait until she was seeing through black again. Someone had tried to take what was hers. So she had killed them. It wasn't the first time and she would have to do it again. After the betrayal with the hounds, Candice wasn't entirely certain this hadn't been a case of the same thing. Had the Network paid the snakes? She reflected on the bullets they'd taken as she found Baker. Maybe the trackers had been the ones shooting. When they got home, she would check into it. No one double crossed the Pruetts and lived to tell the story. Not even their rulers would be excused from that strict rule.



Chapter Sixteen

# Kudzu Karma

1

**M**orning brought another tense hour of riding in the car together as the hunters waited for their stop. Angelica and Baker seemed to have worked some things out. They were playing Hob Jong at the small table, exchanging threats that weren't so hostile as to hide the sexual tension flaring between them.

Did that bother Candice? Daniel couldn't be positive. She was stealing glances at them the same as he was, but her expression was blank. He couldn't guess at her thoughts. Daniel knew she was fond of her cousin, and sharing one male among a household was an accepted practice in most families. Daniel wondered if the Pruetts agreed.

*“Atlanta, five minutes to Atlanta. Please prepare to disembark.”*

The cheery train voice made Daniel peer through the blinds in anticipation. He'd read articles on the Georgian city, but had never dreamed he would actually get to visit it. Last night's horror was locked away with the rest of the ugliness in his life. Candice had forgiven him and

it would never happen again. Next time, he would fight.

Satisfied with his own progress, Daniel studied their destination. The city had once been a beautiful southern Mecca backdropped by magnificent mountains and majestic blue skies. Daniel had glimpsed it once in a very old magazine one of the other bachelors had swiped from a renter. That image had been in his mind every time the Pruetts said Atlanta, but it wasn't like that now. Every inch of the city was hidden in green vines. It looked like a jungle and Daniel stared in amazed disappointment. "What happened to it?"

Daniel felt everyone rotate toward him, but he didn't understand how this city could be so overgrown. None of the others he had observed on wall screens or in books was like this.

"They used to keep the vines in check by trimming them," Angelica explained. "It grew a foot a day. When the apocalypse came, this area was abandoned and the Kudzu plant took over in man's absence. It now grows a foot an hour."

"Makes it the perfect place for all of us," Baker confided lowly.

"All of us?" Angelica glared at him. "Are there a lot of males here?"

Candice flashed the convict a sharp glower.

Daniel assumed that meant Baker shouldn't answer the question.

"Yes," Baker replied. "Dozens."

Angela groaned. “Oh, shit.”

Candice threw a glare at Baker. “Thanks.”

“Like she wouldn’t have noticed,” he responded dryly.

“She didn’t need to spend this time worrying about it!” Candice snapped.

Daniel was gratified when Baker flinched from her anger, but he also hated it. The rebel might be a harder class than Daniel, but he was still a scarred, scared man looking for a loving owner. The Network had robbed them all. Daniel kept his attention on the jungle of vines as the train rolled to a gentle stop.

Candice reluctantly filled her cousin in. “I wasn’t going to tell you until we arrived.”

“Figures.”

Daniel heard the younger girl shove herself to her feet, and then Baker grunted in pain. Daniel guessed that Angelica had hit him.

“What was that for?” Baker questioned in surprise.

“Don’t go against Candice again. Ever.” Her loyalties declared, Angelica’s steps took her to the exit. “I’ll do a sweep.”

The door shut behind her and Daniel listened to the rest of the conversation with an intensity he was glad they couldn’t see.

“Where will we pick up a ride?” Candice asked.

“Two miles in. Already there and stocked.”

“Quiet?”

“Unlikely.” Baker grunted. “They’ll want to talk to him, to see if he wants to stay with us.”

“I don’t,” Daniel spoke up.

“He’ll talk to them,” Candice promised.

Daniel stopped another protest. *Candice won’t let them keep me. I know that.*

“What about your cousin?” Baker asked. “Will we need to lock her in a cell?”

“Not unless you throw in a male,” Candice snorted in amusement. “She’ll rip the bars off to get to them if she wants one.”

After witnessing Angelica’s compassion, Daniel knew that wouldn’t happen. Candice was joking. It was another discovery.

“We have the titanium cuffs,” Baker taunted.

“Really...”

Daniel felt her attention swing to him, heard the convict’s amused grunt.

“Yeah, they might hold you.”

Daniel flushed at the contemplations that comment brought. He was glad when the train alert sounded again.

*“We are arriving at Atlanta Depot. Please check your cars for items before disembarking. Thank you for taking the Network Rider.”*

Daniel was still red as they moved toward the exit.

The weather had been unusually calm for the last few days, but the hunters saw that had changed as they exited the rickety platform. The wind was gusting heavily and the gritty sky was alive with

dangerous shades of purple and green. A storm was coming.

Hoping it missed them, Daniel shivered, stepping closer to Candice. Then he registered their surroundings and forgot about his fears.

The Kudzu plant was everywhere. It wound up trees, choking them until the trunks underneath were as petrified from lack of water and sunlight as they had been in the forests of Kentucky, but this was worse somehow. Instead of dead trees, these were dying trunks with their killer living around them like a shroud. The Kudzu had enveloped every inch of ground and area. How did Candice plan to travel through there? The bachelor doubted he was much of a hiker.

Daniel glanced over to find Baker staring at the greenery and vines with a slight smile. Daniel shrugged as he realized the convict considered this home. Maybe there was something valuable underneath, but from where Daniel stood, it was just a jungle to be conquered. The only open area was directly in front of the platform. It led to a small row of shacks that held mostly empty stores. The other few passengers who were getting off at this stop moved that way. Daniel studied the signs he could read from the platform.

*Enter at your own risk. Unguarded.*

*Stay on main path and turn around at the marker. Those who go further will NOT be searched for.*

Daniel's attention lingered on the last one.

*People who've gone off the beaten path to never be heard from again: 198 200 211 234.*

The number clearly wasn't finished growing, but before Daniel could wonder if he might be the next statistic added to it, Candice let out a low snicker.

"Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?"

Baker chuckled. "Gotta keep them out somehow."

"How many of those missing people exist?" she asked.

"Ten or so. All but one chose to help us."

Daniel wanted to ask what they had done with the one adventurer who'd found the rebel base hidden in this dense jungle, but chosen not to keep the secret, and managed not to. There were other people around, one even staring at Baker as if she recognized him. Daniel now knew better than to speak and draw more attention while guards were surveying them. Daniel was glad it was the crew from last night. They would report the rebel sighting, but maybe not exactly where Baker had gone or who he was with. That sent Daniel into another level of panicked worry. What would happen when the Network found out the Puetts had aided Baker?

Angelica joined them.

Daniel listened to her words, but his mind was on the future. If the Puetts were arrested, would he be able to help them escape somehow?

“Your parents have the other two convicts in custody. They’re exchanging them at the nearest hub.” Angelica’s dark eyes switched to Daniel before returning to his owner. “I’ll take him home if you want.”

Daniel clamped his lips shut, worried.

Angelica’s offer was tempting, but Candice made the only choice she could. If he were away from her, she would be distracted. “No.”

Angelica shrugged and took drag, while Candice took point. With Daniel and then Baker behind her, it made a neat little sandwich. The guys might not like it, but Angelica would keep things under control while Candice led them into breaking a dozen rules. Helping the enemy, not reporting rebel sightings or locations, lying, falsifying papers, requisitioned supplies for personal use, evading, trespassing. Candice sighed. If they were caught, she and Angelica would be executed on the same stairs as Baker and his rebels. As they ventured under the naturally formed green archway, Candice felt her mental clock started ticking. The council would be told, but not for another day. The sentries currently holding heavy pockets had Pruetts to thank for it. Candice rotated suddenly to give them a hard look. One of them grinned in admiration and Candice returned the gesture.

“Let’s go,” she ordered.

The group openly moved off the path and into the dense jungle, drawing shocked murmurs from the few tourists.

“Won’t the sightseers call it in?” Daniel asked in concern, slapping at a bug hovering around his neck.

Candice let out another sigh. “Yes, but they won’t know exactly where we went.”

“What about your parents? Won’t the Network detain them?”

Angelica gave him the comfort he needed this time. “They’ll be questioned, but they’re turning in two of the marks. They have a perfect alibi. The Network won’t hold them responsible for our actions.”

“But they track all messages and—”

“Stop.” Candice included Baker as she laid it out. “The Pruetts are for freedom. We always have been and we don’t consider gender a deciding factor. If I choose to help the rebels, we will, and we’ll handle what comes. Do you understand what I mean?”

Baker was grinning. He obviously did, but Daniel shook his head. “You’re putting your family at risk for him.”

Candice gave Daniel a warm gaze, meant only for her mate. “Some things are worth dying for.”

Daniel flushed in pleasure. “Whatever you want to do, I’m in. You know that?”

“I do.”



It was hard to walk and the bugs were annoying. Thick vines kept tripping Daniel even though he was trying to move like the others. Candice took high steps that got her where she wanted to go, but when he tried it, the clingy plants still wrapped around his boots and jerked him down. After ten minutes, Daniel had fallen twice.

Angelica came over to him through a cloud of gnats. “You almost have to bounce when you land or they tangle you up.”

When she demonstrated, Daniel picked it up easily, but his lack of knowledge about the outside world made Baker smirk.

“Thanks.”

Angelica gave Daniel a curt nod as she went to her post.

Daniel sighed. He had hoped to settle into his new life and be happy, but adjusting was harder than he’d expected. Daniel swiped the sweat from his brow and followed his owner deeper into the jungle. Maybe next time they could go to some place easier, like a beach. He’d never been to one of those either, but from the pictures, it would be better than this.

The jungle thickened as they walked. It wasn’t until Daniel tripped over a thick patch of purple flowers that he realized they were already in the city. It was so overlaid with the vines that he hadn’t noticed. Daniel stared in surprise, bringing

their little convoy to a halt once again. The thick masses he'd believed to be trees were actually walls, pillars, and old relics of the past that had withstood the tests of time, but not nature. Considering the level of growth here, he imagined even these remains would be gone but not for the covering that kept them from crumbling. If the vines died, what was left of the city would probably collapse into piles of rock and gravel.

The tips of arched roofs jutted out from the green leaves, hinting at decaying frames and thickets of nasty surprises. There would be skeletons in those overgrown walls, graying bones with no owners, only ghosts. The reflection gave Daniel a deep chill. He turned back to the path and flushed at the hard looks.

No one spoke. They didn't need to.

*I have to stop doing that!* Daniel scolded himself as they got moving again.

Candice held in a reprimand as they reached the river, sensing danger coming. One second, they were deep in the jungle, and the next she was pulling her mate away from the edge of a steep incline that overlooked a crystal blue river winding through the vines.

Daniel clutched her thick arm. "Thanks."

Painfully aware of how fascinating Daniel found water, Candice rotated to give him a sharp warning, but found him already absorbed in the glistening ripples. She sighed. "Ten minute break."

Baker grunted behind them.

Angelica snorted in cynical amusement. Thanks to the convict's loose tongue, Angelica was now stewing on having to control herself around many males. It was a fun trip they had going so far.

“Can I—”

“No.” Candice hadn't meant to be so curt with him and added, “It's not safe.”

And yet, they were about to ride the river. Candice could see the edge of what was probably a scavenger boat waiting around the bend. She gave Angelica a quick wave.

The girl moved off in that direction to meet the passage she had secured while on the train. There were always ways to get what they needed and the Pruetts knew most of them.

Daniel stopped at her side as Candice studied Baker, who was leaning against a leaf-hidden pillar. His goggles were down, making Candice wonder what he was thinking as he stared at them. She knew Baker well enough to be certain that he would recover. She had been worried about having feelings for him because of that. Baker wasn't a one-woman man, or at least she hadn't thought so.

Ignoring the bugs, Candice surveyed the river they were about to use to delve further into the jungle-like city. They could stay on these paths, but once they reached the edge of town, they would have to hack their way in. Candice had chosen a route that was easier and faster than that, but more dangerous. She felt Daniel's attention

shift as the boat slowly rode the waves into full view.

“We’re sailing?”

Sweat dripped from his brow and her need flared hungrily. Candice found very few things sexier than a man working up a sweat. Smiling at his eagerness, Candice lifted a soft hand to push the hair from his damp brow. “For a bit.”

He beamed and Candice spun away before she could kiss him. She wasn’t overly concerned with Baker’s feelings now, but she also didn’t want him hurt. Behind them, Candice sensed a new conversation coming and waved Angelica toward the former captives while she went to inspect the boat.

“What’s she waiting for?” Daniel hated himself for asking, but Baker knew. He’d lain with Candice, loved her. No one else had ever gotten as close, Daniel was positive. Did Baker regard him as a weakling because he didn’t know any of these survival things? Was he a threat for the good looks or a joke for his clumsiness? *Is Baker as confused about me, as I am about him?* Daniel thought that was likely. Candice seemed to have that effect on people. Baker raised his goggles and Daniel studied the hard lines of his face, those wild, shined eyes. This had been his substitute, and in many ways, still was. How could he get Baker out of her mind?

“When I met her, she was determined to do one thing—reclaim something that had been stolen

from her,” Baker responded bitterly. “I didn’t know it was you. Until she signed up for the games, I believed we might...come to love each other.”

“Candice? In love?” Daniel mocked. He knew better.

Baker rolled his eyes as if Daniel had said something stupid.

“She’s always been taken. I just didn’t know it. She won’t mate with you until she knows you’re willing.”

“And after?” Daniel forced out through the hope, the fear.

Baker scowled again, this time with sad hatred that Daniel instantly pitied him for.

“You’ll never be sold, never be alone. She’ll love you so completely that your past will vanish into those happy dreams the den mothers tried to sell us on.”

Angelica advanced to break up the fight she assumed was coming, but the two guys ignored her.

Daniel asked, “What about you? She cares. You can’t deny it.”

To Daniel’s surprise, Baker laughed. “You really are a rookie. She used me, *kid*, to learn enough to save your ass.” He slid his goggles back into place. “I always knew it wasn’t for me, so save your pity. I enjoyed every second of servicing her needs.”

Jealousy seared Daniel. He could imagine Baker using those heathen arms to pleasure his Candy. Daniel spun toward the river, but he listened as Angelica picked up the conversation.

“So you’re not in love with her?”

Baker chuckled. “Why? You wanna rent me? I do make my living that way, you know.”

Daniel ignored the flirting, understanding Baker was trying to hide his emotions. Daniel didn’t understand that type of reaction. Why lie? Baker’s pride would get in the way of any relationship that he tried to... Daniel realized it was intentional and his anger faded. Baker was trying to keep from appearing hurt or even interested any longer. That was a tempting tactic, but Daniel couldn’t use it. He’d already revealed his heart to her. Hadn’t he?

Unsure, Daniel followed his owner from the land and onto the water.

Their driver, Drea, was tall and wiry, wearing camouflage clothes and black paint over her hands and cheeks. With a small boat decorated the same way, she appeared exactly like the images Daniel had seen of the old world army. She even had a weapon on the front that he assumed was a machine gun. The neat coils of ammunition gave him a flash of their kamikaze captain polishing and reloading while eating dinner from a can.

Daniel peered over the edge of his seat to spot what could have been the dried husk of a bean. He turned away to hide the smile. Daniel didn’t see

any signs of males around, but once they got underway, he understood the crazy pilot had a death wish that only these debris fields could satisfy. A man would never be enough for her. The ride on the flat bottom boat was one Daniel would never forget. It was scary and wild, and he loved every second of it. Candice sat behind him with a rope attaching him to her belt in case he flew out during their driver's frantic plunge down the river. Despite the water being so crystal and pretty, there were entire city blocks of debris from the apocalypse in their path that had to be avoided. Instead of a slow, careful pace, Drea flew in and out of these death traps as if it were a race. Under hulks of concrete slowly crumbling into the waves and then around bobbing chunks and swirling floaters that had broken loose, the boat zigged and zagged wildly. They were all soaked by the time she stopped.

“Again!” Daniel laughed, leaning against Candice. “Can we do it again?”

Delighted, she shifted for a sharp kiss that made Daniel clutch her arms. In that moment, it was only him and his owner. It was perfect.

They moved back slowly, eyes locked. Daniel gently touched her cheek. His fingers slid along that sensual jawline, and he felt her tremble. The need was raging, but she shifted out of his reach to stand up.

Daniel followed her back onto the land with a small smile of happiness that he couldn't have hidden.

“How much farther?” Candice asked.

Baker's tone was unreadable. “We'll be met right here in five...four...three...”

The jungle narrowed to a thin path behind the small, wooden dock their crazy driver was tying them to. The single path into a thin canopy that formed a living archway made Daniel think of old ghosts again. The deepest shadows of this archway moved, becoming the forms of three people dressed in green. It blended them into everything.

Daniel stared in appreciation. As they advanced, he could see the green clothes were actually streaks and swirls of paint on their skin, allowing them to blend perfectly.

Baker came forward and the stiff posture of the three shadows relaxed.

“Baker!”

“Welcome home!”

To everyone's shock, each of the males bowed at Baker's feet.

“It would seem that we haven't been told the full story.” Angelica's comment pulled no response from Candice. She frowned, realizing her older cousin had already known.

“Oh, get up!” Baker ordered in embarrassment.

Candice understood the rebel leader was trying to revive male instincts and not having much luck. She flashed a games grin that all of his guys



flinched from, proving her observation. Didn't he know it took a woman to bring out the drives of a man? Her sight flickered pink, testing.

“What the hell?”

“Are they changelings?”

Baker led the trio away to explain.

Candice gestured to her crew. “Stay close.”

Angelica and Daniel were clearly hoping that she would give them the careful words Baker was delivering, but she didn't run her ship that way and really, they knew it.

Angelica gave her a nasty glower and then grunted. “Thanks.”

“You're dealing with enough. I *know*.”

“You ready?”

Baker's call brought them to the path, where Candice studied his two guards. The only marking she saw that set them apart from their surroundings was a tattoo she recognized. It matched Baker's new ink and finished selling it for her. He hadn't lied about his importance. He was a hero to these weak men. How could he not be? Compared to them, Baker was probably a legend for surviving on his own, and for killing women to do so. Candice smothered praise and need at the sight of their bare skin under the camouflage. They were wearing tank tops and jeans, but the coloring had fooled even her a second time. Ingenious. She pinned the smaller one with a hard look. “Are you the artist?”

“I’m Greg, in charge of security,” the rebel answered nervously. “Eric makes things pretty.”

His wide brown eyes went to the beautiful male on Baker’s right and Candice understood that these were more than rebels, but wasn’t certain what that meant yet.

“I like pretty things.”

Eric’s timbre was sweet to her, Daniel could tell. This one wasn’t shy, wouldn’t jump at her touch or fear her embrace. *That prissy playboy is a former prize and likely a renter too, from the way he’s studying my Candy. I’m getting tired of these people.*

The new males stayed on each side of Baker while a third man, a huge and hulking shadow with gigantic hands, kept watch over the path they had come down. Each of the new guys had a thinly supplied tool belt and a small kit, but of weapons, all Daniel spotted was knives. If someone came here, what did the men plan to do? Paint their way out?

“Let’s go.”

The hunters followed the rebels deeper into the jungle than they’d had ever been. The sense of being on camera began to fade, allowing Candice to relax. She placed a gentle hand on Daniel’s arm to give him the comfort of a casual walk before they hit the tension again. She was aware of how hard he was trying to fit in, but she had decided he would stay at home with the other men for the next run. She spent too much time worrying with him

here. The problem was that she knew she would worry no matter where he was. Daniel had a way of getting into trouble without even trying. She'd no sooner had the thought than Daniel tripped and fell, rolling down the incline to their right.

"Damn it!" Candice dove after him, going under the vines. She snagged the edge of his boot.

"Something's got him!" one of the rebel males shouted, retreating.

Angelica's boots bounced down to them. "It's the vines. They're not exactly dead, you know!"

She began swiping at the greenery with her blade, and they were all a bit shocked to witness the vines retreat a foot. *She's been studying on her own again*, Candice contemplated.

Daniel was huddled in a ball under the shocked plants. Candice jerked him up. "Can't you be more careful?"

She gave him a slight shake, needing the shock of the vines to fade from his mind. He already feared her. That was enough.

Daniel snapped his head up, voice tight. "I was!"

The anger in his response immediately sent her mouth to his.

"Help him!"

"She's gonna hurt him!"

"She's the one who better be careful," Baker warned, laughing. "Come on. They'll catch up."

Around them came the sound of footsteps and then silence, but it wouldn't have mattered. When

these moments happened, it was as if only they existed.

Candice rose up with flames licking her guts. She ran her thumb across his bottom lip before pressing her mouth to his.

He tensed, hands tightening on her hips, and then they were falling down into the sweet smelling Kudzu in an embrace that could have melted icebergs. Candice wasn't looking to shore up control before they went in, but when he slid a hand toward her heat, she considered allowing it... Just as quickly, she chose not to and drew him to his feet. The next time they got that intimate, she wouldn't stop and their first time wasn't going to be in the middle of a jungle with a skeleton city buried beneath them. This new world called for more respect than that.

Chapter Seventeen

# Inside Information

The Rebel Base

1

As soon as he saw the cave entrance and realized they were actually going into the mountain, Daniel panicked. “I can’t.”

His endless worries and fears were something that Candice preferred to handle with tolerance, but their rulers might know where they were even now. They needed to be concealed. She swung Daniel up over her shoulder and strode forward. He was still struggling lightly as they entered the rebel base.

Made of smooth stones for the seats and rough rock floors, the circular chamber was a spacious area with four exits. The stone seats were terraced from the top of the round, high walls, ending in the center to leave a “10x10” ring. It reminded Candice of the posters in the complex that glorified the ancient Roman death games. The architecture was remarkably similar.

Lines for power ran along the stone walls, chiseled in to disappear and reemerge like the roots of a mighty tree. The tunnels weren’t wide, but they were long and the floors in them were

covered in soft, tan sand that was out of place among so much grey. Natural torches made of jungle plants woven into cone-shaped handles lined the chamber. The light smoke and heavy aroma of flowers that floated to the top was drawn out through the cracks in the gray stone. Candice glanced around, senses triggered. The shadows were deceiving, telling her that they were alone when she knew otherwise. She was impressed Baker had been able to teach his men that.

The Pruetts were met by a group of rebels who looked like they were teenagers. Candice snorted at their shaky attempts to stop her with old guns she doubted would work. “Baker told you we were coming. Clear a hole!”

The rebels flinched at her order.

The shout brought Angelica and Baker back into the tunnel.

Candice shook her head at the timid response to a possible intruder. “This doesn’t look good.”

Baker motioned toward Daniel, who was still over her shoulder. “That doesn’t either.”

Candice heeded the warning and swung Daniel onto his feet as Angelica took their flank.

Candice steadied him. “You can do this. You will.”

Daniel was glad to be upright. “Yes, Candice.”

Candice entered Stone Mountain with her own timid male following. It would seem that both she and Baker had a lot of work to do.

They traveled through the dim tunnel for a full minute before reaching a heavy metal door. The five males around Baker helped him open it.

“We don’t have electricity connected to this exit,” he explained, swiping at cobwebs. “We usually take the long way.”

That would be directly through the heart of the jungle. Candice hoped they wouldn’t explore too much more of that before leaving. When they next boarded a boat, she hoped it would take them out of Georgia, not deeper into this overgrown state.

“Welcome to my base,” Baker said, opening the barrier to reveal another enormous stone room...and more males than Candice had expected.

Behind her, Angelica growled.

The sound of her changeling fury sent rebels into halls and corners, many darting into the shadows even though Angelica hadn’t moved.

Once again, Daniel did what he wasn’t supposed to. He stepped forward and tried to calm them down. “They’re not like the others.”

Candice grabbed his arm and shoved him behind her, making his words a lie.

The former slaves panicked, grabbing weapons from wall racks.

“Stand your ground!” Baker ordered.

Daniel vaguely noticed that Baker wasn’t limping anymore. The convict was a fast healer.

“It’s Baker!”

“They’re with the boss!”

“Baker’s home!”

Rebel males flooded into the chamber at the calls. Daniel understood they loved him by the way they flocked to him, touched him. Their reaction was like that of the bachelors and the den mothers at the complex. Daniel relaxed a little. These guys were his kind.

Baker was busy explaining things to his men, so Daniel took the time to observe Candice and Angelica. Being around so many males usually sent changelings into a frenzy, but Daniel was expecting better from his new family. Despite her first reaction, Angelica stayed behind them, watching the rear as she was supposed to do. Candice was listening to the hurried conversation with a bored expression. Daniel straightened his shoulders and tried to pretend that he belonged with these strangely wonderful women.

Baker came their way with his five sentries, and Daniel did a quick count of the faces behind him. Roughly three dozen. How many more were behind the doors that led from this room? Baker had a small army here. *What the bachelors at the complex wouldn’t give to know about this!* Most of the males Daniel had been bullied by dreamed of a place like this. And he was welcome to join. Daniel could feel the automatic assumption that he needed to be rescued.

“Do you want to talk to them first or eat?” Baker sounded different, more powerful somehow.

Candice shrugged. “Either is fine.”



The convict gestured toward the largest tunnel to their right. “How about a short tour and then we’ll talk and eat?”

“Agreed.”

Candice followed Baker.

Daniel stayed on her heels, surveying everything in fascination as they went through the first tunnel.

They noticed the noise as soon as they entered.

“What do you use for power that makes so much noise?” Angelica sked.

Baker laughed. “That’s the sound of a rookie getting inked.”

Angelica’s swept the rebel tattoo on his arm, then the one on Baker’s neck that Candice had put there to declare him protected. It was a Pruett symbol and their coat of arms.

“You want it?” Baker asked sexily.

“Yeah.” Angelica’s hands went into her pockets as she moved away from his slight smirk. Baker knew what effect he had on women.

“We use the river,” Eric stated in the silence, trying to tempt Candice with the sound.

She didn’t respond, busy scolding herself. They had a natural source of power and it made no noise that could draw attention. Baker was smarter than she had given him credit for. Candice accepted that with the shame she deserved.

“We have nine areas. Three are cooking, washing, and laundry. Two are dorms for sleeping. The others are like this one.”

Candice didn't stop a harsh grin as she scanned his training setup. There were rope bridges and rock walls with blue grips that gleamed in the natural light. The ceiling of this chamber had a huge, jagged hole in the center, probably the result of a tremor that had cracked this section of the mountain. Candice saw Baker had left the vines alone and approved. Why try to deny the plant what it would eventually have anyway? The effort was better spent on other, more realistic goals.

On the uneven floor were obstacle courses and workout mats lined with crates of stolen equipment to mark off each individual spot. There were knotted ropes hanging from the craggy edges, and wooden stairs that went up for thirty feet to curve around an entire wall before coming down at an incredibly steep incline. Her need flared into a thousand tiny pricks of heat. All over these training tools were men, *working up a sweat*.

"I'll be in the hall." Angelica spun from the room in a fast movement.

Candice let her go. There were thirty dressed men out there. In here, there were fifty half-naked targets with only slick, tempting skin to protect them. The scent of it was enough to make even her own sight flicker.

Baker tossed an amused glance toward Daniel. "We keep cuffs for guests."

Candice saw Daniel flush. She gestured toward the egress. "Distract Angelica if you can." She delivered a pointed gaze that said to do it carefully.

Daniel moved out of her sight with a snotty glare at the rebel leader.

*His spine reappeared with Baker*, Candice reflected, delighted. She scanned the watching rebels. They were staying close to each other and to the weapons that lined the walls. She couldn't help flashing them another pink-eyed grin.

Now they rushed for knives and chains.

Baker stepped forward, sighing resignedly. "She's with me."

"Who is that?"

"Baker?"

"Baker!"

A few of the males had the courage to approach, but they didn't run to Baker the way the others had. She understood these former captives were more careful. They were being trained. Candice also noticed how quickly he was separated from her. Maybe he *had* made some progress with the timid men.

Baker spent long minutes talking in low tones, where those listening darted quick, disbelieving glances in her direction. Candice scanned the chamber again. There were no photos or anything that could be mistaken as personal, but a small area in the corner held a stack of books that drew her. When they weren't eating, sleeping, or training, Baker had them reading. *Interesting*. What did he think they needed?

She inspected the small, well-worn stack and her lips curled upward. They were all romance

novels. He was trying to reteach them to be men. He considered that more important than a normal education. *Very interesting*. Leading by example, Baker was trying to exude that sense of complete calm and control over the situation and it impressed Candice. She'd known Baker when he was a rebellious teenager bent on finding a way to take down their rulers, so this image didn't fit... Yet, in some ways, it did. He was fulfilling his dream of freedom for all men.

## 2

"Is there anything I can do for—" Daniel stopped as Angelica spun around, expecting the worst. He still didn't know her well. Daniel wondered if she appeared as dangerous to the other males as she did to him. Angelica was smaller than Candice, with shorter black spikes and paler skin, but there was enough heat boiling in her to rival anyone.

"Yes."

Daniel blinked. "What?"

"There is something you can do for me."

"Name it," he offered generously, confident Candice would help him if he got into trouble.

"Tell me how you do it!"

"Do what?" Daniel asked, confused.

Angelica fought to master her impatience. "Help her control the fire! She spends time around you and she's suddenly this rock of indifference."

Angelica leaned in, drawing attention from the rebels around them. “When I pick a mate, he has to be able to do that for me so I don’t hurt him!”

Daniel gestured sharply at a trio about to interrupt, noting the hulking forms of those they’d chosen for security. “I’m not sure.” Daniel glanced toward the door, trying to explain what he had no real words for. “Candy feeds off my happiness, I think. Knowing I’m here, that she was able to rescue me, helps her when it gets bad.”

“How do I know the *right* bachelor?”

It hit him then that she’d already gone far beyond thinking about the games. Daniel’s voice went up a level. “Angel, what did you do?”

Angelica shoved him against the wall, but the name wasn’t the cause. “Tell me!”

“I’ll try,” Daniel promised, suddenly not afraid of her. She was terrified. He had to help. Ignoring the rebels running to get Baker, Daniel pushed at the arm across his throat.

Angelica immediately eased her grip. He doubted she realized how strong she was. Most changelings didn’t.

Angelica slowly retreated, neither of them responding to the yells, the doors opening, or feet moving their way.

Daniel made sure she could hear him over the din. “They’ll feel it too. There’s no hiding it.”

She blinked, not expecting such a simple answer. “Then...they want ...?”

“To be loved. As much as *you* do.”

Hurting, she spun away.

“The legends say a perfect match will cause visions, but I can’t verify that yet.” Baker was amused as Angelica stormed by. He waved impatiently at the near panicked males who had come to get him. “They’re just talking. Stand down.”

Baker focused on Candice, making Daniel frown. What did the rebel leader want from her?

“Maybe we should stay together for a while.”

Candice gave a short bob at Baker’s suggestion, but her attention was on Daniel.

Daniel wanted desperately to know what Candice was thinking right then, but the bachelor had to wait as the tour continued. As they went by two more doors, the rebel leader pointed out their room. Daniel noticed the handcuffs on the wall with red cheeks. Next to the cuffs was a wide bed with no less than eight thin poles welded to the edges. Spaced a few feet apart, he understood what they were for and flushed darker.

*“They’ll feel it too and there’s no hiding it.”*

Daniel’s words were repeating for Candice as they settled on the hard stairs of the small arena to eat. At another time, being here might have sent Candice’s thoughts to the game she’d won, to the blood she’d spilled in other places like this, but all she could think about was what she had just learned. *“There’s no hiding it.”* The look in his eyes as he’d said that! Daniel cared for her. It was just a beginning flicker—with the short time they’d

had, there was no way it could be more—but Candice planned to encourage that tiny glimmer into a fiery explosion. She would spend the rest of her life trying to make Daniel love her the way she did him.

“Stop drooling and listen!” Baker growled.

Candice let out a hiss of need that scattered those closest. Roughly fifty males were in the chamber with them, all dressed in t-shirts and jeans that didn’t hide what they were—men. Everywhere she looked hard, nervous guys met her assessing stare. *They’re certainly healthy.* She stored the thought. Baker had strength in these men. Would he be able to give them the courage they needed to go with that brawn? Compared to these free men, Daniel was happy. Most of them were bigger than he was, but his profile held contentment Baker couldn’t give the rebels. They needed women for that. Her orbs flashed pink.

Men flinched.

“When I snap, you’ll know it,” she sneered.

Baker chuckled again.

Daniel surprised them both by joining in. He was starting to relax.

“Candy...” Baker frowned when she didn’t react. “That’s it then.”

Candice nodded. “Yeah.”

“You gonna go sparkless on me?”

“Never!”

“Then listen!” Baker shouted at her, shocking most of the rebels with his gall.

To their relief, Candice calmed down. “I am.”

“There are *five hundred* of us.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock.

Nearby, Angelica froze.

“Most are at the safe zone.”

“You’re gathering an army.”

“No,” Baker corrected, silver eyes flashing.

“I’m trying to *train* an army.”

Candice knew then, what he wanted from her.

She opened her mouth to say no... “Sell me.”

Even Candice was surprised. When Baker had said Daniel was changing her, he had been wrong. The Network had opened the door to this other person she was eager to explore. For this new world, she might be a leader of a rebellion, of men instead of women! The thought was both terrifying and exhilarating. Candice began to listen with an intensity she’d been lacking.

“My father escaped from an auction and took refuge here. After he realized the defenders wouldn’t come in, he began gathering other rebels. He was still in his twenties.”

*That explains the high number of escaped men here,* Candice noted. The rebel that had been ripped apart by vultures on live TV had been at least double that age, maybe even triple.

“He spent his life in hiding, organizing areas for others like us. When slaves escape now, most try to reach a safe zone. We put them in places the Network won’t go.”



Candice's mind spun out a fast list of possible locations for a main bunker with four hundred males. The Borderlands topped it. Candice confirmed her guess by saying, "Yeah, guards don't like fighting dust, bandits and mutations all in the same place."

Baker grunted in satisfaction. "I knew you were the right one for the job."

Candice frowned darkly. "I haven't taken it yet."

He waved to a few of the timid rebels. "Join us. She has questions only you can answer."

Eric and Greg, from the first meeting in the jungle, joined them. Without the paint, they were both beautiful. It was clear they had been abused. Candice loathed the defensive scars across their arms and shoulders. She had little doubt their pants and tops hid more of the same.

"Eric and Greg were both rescued right after they were won. We grabbed them from a transport truck. They've spent their lives in the dome, from birth, until six months ago."

Candice studied them, collecting more information from their appearances and reactions than she believed they would be able to tell her. Eric's expression also held a slight shadow that she recognized as need. It was hard to miss when she spent so much time battling it. "Tell me about the training, in as much detail as you can manage."

Her order pulled a twitch from Greg. He was scared to talk in front of two un-cuffed changelings.

“She won’t. My word on it.” Candice didn’t need to look at Angelica to know that the girl was emanating waves of menace while the fire tried to take over. All things considered, her strength was amazing.

“You’re sure?” Eric asked.

Candice had to shut her lids at the sound of those bell-like tones coming from that stunning mouth. It made her want to sink teeth into his skin and bite until the blood soaked in as if it was hers.

Candice turned to survey Angelica, but the girl was moving toward the main tunnel.

“I’ll be around,” Angelica growled.

Candice gave a deep sigh and then drew in a tight breath. It filled her lungs with the scent of the male at her side. Heat flared. Daniel was almost ugly compared to Eric, but only her bachelor could flip the change on and off with a simple glance.

*“They’ll feel it too. There’s no hiding it.”*

The same was true of a changeling.

Candice saw Daniel’s lips curl upward as he realized the effect he was having on her. She gestured toward the tables of food that were spread out. “Go eat something else.”

He was too thin in her opinion. Candice was glad when he strode toward the sweets trays. Any fat he put on, she would turn into muscle. The lust spreading across her face was unstoppable.

Baker waited impatiently, but he was also storing information about the new couple. Even though they weren't fully mated yet, the regression was already starting. Candice had been tempted and simply switched her attention, allowing the heat to fade. It was more proof that he was on the right track with the retraining of his timid male counterparts.

Candice suddenly snapped another piece into place. "Where are the women?"

Baker's gaze was smug as she continued to prove her intelligence, declaring herself worthy of the job without trying. "We don't have them here very often. There are none right now."

"Not without you here?"

"Never. They wouldn't handle it well on their own if one of the females was strong enough to feign normalcy and sneak in," Baker responded, showing how much he cared for his orphaned males. "They would be wiped out. I won't let that happen."

"Do you bring women in for experiments or relief?" Candice questioned.

"Mates."

Candice raised a brow as though she'd misunderstood, but she hadn't. It reinforced her earlier impression about the reading material. He was matchmaking in the middle of a rebellion. Beyond interesting, it was now downright exciting to her. Baker was trying to repopulate the earth under the Network's nose. Candice suddenly

respected him a lot more than she ever had before. Courage was something she found irresistible.

“A little detail on that would be good,” she led.

Baker refused the offer of a second helping of food from one of the men.

Candice gave him a sharp look.

Baker took the plate of dried staples.

Candice didn't say if he thought to do all this, he needed more weight to throw around, but he knew. Baker took a bite and then continued. “There are women who help us. In return, we help them. The males who truly want a loving owner are allowed to pick from the few friends we have who can protect them, or at least keep them out of sight.” His tone grew proud. “The Stone Mountain compound has placed more than eighty former captives with good homes over the last thirty years. Good homes that have already produced two dozen illegal *male* children.”

Storing that piece of gold, Candice gestured at the timid male on his right. “And the ones like this, who have no wish to be owned or loved?”

Greg flushed, lips clamping shut.

Candice understood that might not be true. Was this another case of great acting to be left alone until he made his own choice of a mate? She hadn't believed bachelors could be this clever until rescuing Daniel. It was delicious.

“I get them to the main safe zone after I give them a few months training to help them survive

the trip,” Baker answered. “There are no females there, ever.”

“You realize that will have to change?”

“I’m counting on it. After we take down the Network, my men will all need to be placed with mates so we can rebuild the world of light that my father foresaw.”

Candice was stunned. Baker had more faith and bigger dreams than she did. How had she missed that? Stewing, Candice sat quietly for the next few minutes and wasn’t disturbed. She assumed Baker was giving her time to process the new information, but she was actually putting mental puzzle pieces into a solid frame. She’d been working on it for half a decade, trying to build a trap that even their rulers couldn’t escape. When she hadn’t been training, she’d been studying the thousands of possible variables, hoping to detect one small chance of success. Now that she had, all the other ideas she’d been forced to discard were back on the table for finishing that puzzle.

Candice began the next layer of questions to gather pieces for the bottom corner.

Chapter Eighteen

# There are Ways

1

“Tell me how you know Daniel.”

Eric and Greg both flinched. Greg was scared, but the other male was a temptation to be resisted. Eric had decided he wanted to belong to her. His beautiful face said he was busy searching for anything he could use to pry his way in.

“You can’t stop looking at him,” Candice pointed out, steeling herself against their voices.

“The scientists pulled DNA from the immortality drive that was on the international space station when it fell in 308. It contained markers without mutations. They’ve been working on it ever since.”

Instead of lust at the sound of their speech, the information kept Candice focused. “You know about the vaccine.”

There was no surprise in the room.

Eric grew bitter. “They created it by using the blood of bachelors who produce male offspring. There were twelve of us. They also use our children.”

Her eyes swung to Daniel. *Produce male offspring.* She instantly sensed that he was one of

those. It explained him being pulled from the renting and breeding programs. “How long have they had the vaccine?” she asked.

“Ten years, that we know of.”

Candice listened in furious silence as they filled in the rest of the ugly picture that Daniel had only held small pieces of.

“They don’t want the women cured or the male population restored. If that happens, men might regain their former power. There isn’t anything the Network won’t do to stop that.”

“They figured out that if the mating is willing, with one of the twelve bachelors who have male children, then the offspring will be immune. They’ve managed to create that mix a dozen times. There’s a certain spark that’s needed,” Greg picked up where Eric left off.

His incredibly sweet tone rushed over her skin like a wildfire. No wonder he was so scarred. The feel of it! Candice forced herself to focus on Baker. “How many of the twelve have you gathered?”

“Six or seven.”

*No wonder they want him dead!* Candice continued to sort and organize the new, deadly information as they dealt it out.

“They’ve known for a long time and hid it to keep things in chaos. They sell these secrets to other governments and the sister Network in the west. It lets them control our world,” Baker stated.

Candice contemplated the discovery they'd made years ago. The Pruetts knew of the wall around the country they accessed so far. Candice was positive the west was the same. *To keep us in or others out?*

"No one knows," Candice muttered.

"*We* do, and we'll die to take them down." Eric's vow had a determination that sent fresh hunger through Candice. She liked a rebel. Her relationship with Baker proved that.

"They use those dozen guys for a lot of things. Most of the time, it's a breeding tool for those rich enough to buy a child. When it's a boy, the scientists passed it off as luck, but when the male children get old enough, they take them back to use them in the program." Greg added another piece.

Candice's grip tightened on the spoon. "Studying and controlling the next generations." Daniel was right to be worried for his missing offspring.

"Yes. They have our kids in the complex...where the *games* are held."

Candice knew what she would want, what she would do, if it were her children. "You're not going to the safe zone until you can take them with you."

Baker nodded. "We can still do it from there, but it's farther away, so the information trickles in. We'll be blind in too many ways."



“The Ex-Defender said not to forget your promise.”

Baker sighed in regret as Greg blanched. “I haven’t.”

Candice didn’t ask how he planned to get the children out of New Network City once he rescued them from the dome. Only one method of transportation would put them in the borderlands within days and she admired his sand. If only Daniel had a bit more.

Daniel understood they wanted her to get into the complex to rescue their missing children. Would his sons or daughters be among those?

“We need to know anything you can tell us about the complex security,” Greg pleaded.

“You’re one of the twelve,” Candice guessed. Her attention shifted to Eric, the one Daniel already hated for the way she stared at his pretty face. “So are you.”

“Yes, but it’s not about us,” Greg answered. “We want this to end for all men.”

“You need someone on the inside,” Candy observed.

“You offering?” Baker asked quickly.

Daniel’s heart was pounding. To get in, Candice would have to sign up for another game. He was glad when she blew out a snort.

“What the hell would I do with a second mate? I’d be too busy keeping them from killing each other to get any relief!”

Laughter spilled out.

Daniel tried to relax. Candice had won. If anyone could find a weakness, it was her.

*Groan...*

The hunters glanced upward in concern.

The rebel males exchanged amused gazes at the nervousness.

“It’s solid,” Greg stated, reddening when Candice locked onto him.

“The stone shifts with the weather,” Baker explained. “It’ll hold. The council would have to send in a plane, but the storm won’t let them do that right now. Even if they knew where you were, they couldn’t get in,” Baker stated confidently.

Daniel noticed Candice’s frown at the statement. Did she know something the leader didn’t?

## 2

“Are you okay?”

Daniel found an imposing man on his right. The slave had been beaten so much that his nose had more ridges than the mountain they were hiding in.

“Yes. Thank you.”

The big man stared, seeing Daniel’s lack of fear on their level. Daniel was getting used to being with a changeling and it showed.

“We’ll help you get away. Baker will.”

“He doesn’t seem like a hero,” Daniel pushed for information carefully, ignoring the offer.

“He is, though,” the big man assured. “Baker’s dad was a breeder, like you. They found each other while running.”

“How did that happen?”

Daniel noticed there were others now seeing it might be okay since Candice hadn’t stopped Daniel from talking yet. These were rebels?

*Grind...* Daniel ignored the sounds of the walls to listen to the backstory he’d been dying to know.

“Baker tracked us down.”

“Was his dad glad to see him?” Daniel hated the tremor in his tone, but a loving father was something he’d never had.

“Not at first. Baker was a convict. His father was afraid it would expose us. When he found out Baker had a forged good relationship with the Pruetts, he changed his mind. We never knew why, but I’ve always thought it was for their Network connection. Pruetts have been bounty hunting for them for centuries.”

“Were they tight after Baker came to live here?”

“Not really. Baker had a little brother they were searching for when his father got caught—Cain. Other than his missing boy, Baker’s father only cared for taking down the Network.”

“What about him?” Daniel asked, meaning Baker.

The big man’s gaze swung to his leader with devotion. “He cares about us and rebuilding the world. We stayed with Baker’s dad because it was

safe and there was nowhere else to go. With Baker, we stay because he's our leader and we love him."

Daniel was having a hard time placing the convict with this level of caring. Was there was something of value in Baker that he was missing? Daniel resumed listening to the conversation between Candice and the small group around the fire.

### 3

"So what happens when you get them out?" Candice asked. "You get to the borderlands in time to be trapped between the two Networks?"

"We wage a final fight for freedom," Baker responded. "We take them *all* down."

Daniel heard it then, the tone of command that made him stand up straighter.

The hulk knew. "He'll give us what he promises, if he can get enough help."

"What do you want from me?" Daniel demanded.

Hulk laughed. "Not you, *her*. She'll train his army."

"Daniel will help, too." They were joined by a tall, slim man with a purple streak in his hair that came from being the prize in an animal game. He wore the same clothes as the others here, but Daniel sensed wildness underneath. Baker's little group of rebels might be more competent than their jumpiness implied.

“You’ll help repopulate the earth,” Animal man told Daniel. “As one of the twelve, your success is important.”

It was a lot to take in. Daniel stored that information while trying to act as if he had known all along. He had two sons. Pride filled him, and after that, pain. “I’ll do my part.”

Both of the rebel males swept Candice in appreciation.

“Bet you will!”

“With that to work on, I might too!”

He couldn’t help but chuckle at their teasing. They didn’t mean any harm and he happened to agree. Making babies, sons, with Candice would be his dreams come true.

Candice observed Daniel joking with the former prizes as if he’d known them as friends. The bigger of the two was staring in a way that implied he would be like Daniel and eventually overcome his fear. The purple-haired male clearly hated women and Candice doubted that would change. She rotated to the abused shell on Baker’s right. “How do they train you to please us?”

Eric flushed, eyes dipping to her chest.

Candice felt Daniel’s growl more than heard it. He was keeping track of her, as if he was jealous. That was attractive.

“Drugs,” Eric answered. “It’s hard not to get aroused.”

“Once you’re trained, you’re rented?”

“Half of each bachelor cell is donated to the breeding program, but the babies are always female,” Greg explained. “They only allow a male child when it’s for the immortality program.”

“And then they come and get them...” Her mind went to Daniel’s sale. The Network had been planning to take him back all along. “Why is the Malin family on that special list?”

“Their bloodline. The females in that family have no signs of the disease.” Baker took over again, and Candice was glad. The sound of Greg’s timbre was wearing down her control.

“They’re naturally immune.”

It all fit. That was why they never fought with the Malin clan. Except for having no emotions towards their children, the Malin family was free of the infection. Their rulers had been using that miracle as a breeding tool to keep a careful number of unique male births to supply their experiments.

“Why are they still experimenting if they have the vaccine and know how to create immune offspring?” Candice asked.

“*Immortality.*”

She frowned. “Say that again.”

“The children are special. They don’t get sick very often and they heal faster.” Eric had clearly been the partner of someone high up to have such detailed information.

“They’re trying to give that to themselves?”

“They want to rule forever,” Eric stated. “With our kids, it might be possible.”

Stronger kids, a different future, and a conspiracy to rival that of the nuclear war that they still didn't know the exact cause of. So many thoughts, so many possible directions to go in. Her mind went to Daniel first. She took a quick glance to verify his safety, then turned back to Baker. "Pruetts have been around since the council was formed."

"And always stayed on the same side," Baker confirmed, studying her. "Until now, maybe..."

*Except we've never been as loyal as we appear,* Candice added silently. "Tell me about being a bachelor. Run down an average day. Maybe I'll spot a place where you can slip someone in."

#### 4

"What did this place used to be?" Daniel had been wondering that since they'd arrived.

"Another arena for those who liked to cause death," Animal man sneered hatefully. He obviously believed Candice was that way.

"We're not sure where it came from. It's old, from before the apocalypse even, but we couldn't find any records on it," Hulk spoke up quickly, hoping there wouldn't be a fight. The animal prizes were exactly that—prizes for animals. They didn't know any other way to act. "It was already rigged for electricity. These tunnels were used before we took over."

“What relics did you find?”

“Not one,” Hulk answered. “Only empty benches set up for people who no longer exist.”

Candice took another of those quick scans to verify where he was and Daniel felt his pulse increase.

“She’s very possessive,” Animal man directed the conversation to a more important subject.

“Protective,” Daniel corrected. “I like it.”

“Why?”

“The change is hard on them,” he answered quietly. “I think most of them don’t want to hurt us. They can’t help it.”

“They’re beasts!” Animal man insisted.

“So were men, before,” Daniel pointed out. “The apocalypse flipped everything around. It’s not their fault, either.”

They had questions for him. Daniel leaned against the rocky wall and gave a short bob that he thought Candice would have liked. “What do you want to know?”

“How do you...make them gentle?”

“How do you get them to not attack you?”

Daniel contemplated the moments with Candice and flushed. “I don’t know. I like that, too.”

They were staring as if he was crazy. Daniel gave them his truth, but doubted they were brave enough to accept it. “Changelings don’t want cowards. They need courage. Accept their embrace, willingly, and they change.”



“Does she?”

Daniel smiled toward his loving owner, able to admit to himself that he had that now. “Even when she flips, she remembers who I am.”

“She hasn’t hurt you?”

“No.” Nail marks were not injuries where he came from. “I don’t think she can.”

“What’s it like...belonging to her?”

Daniel grinned, letting them see how happy he was. “Amazing.”

“Not the sex, the relationship!”

Daniel joined in the laughter without correcting their impressions and felt the last of his worry over their mating fade into anticipation. He wasn’t one of these trembling bachelors. He belonged to Candice Pruett, winner of a games challenge. *When she wants me, I’m ready.*

## 5

“What happens then?” Candice pushed harder, not caring for the sudden worry of those who were listening. If the conversation sent her need into a dangerous zone, the man she wanted to put out the flames was in reach.

“They bring in level three and four changelings who don’t have a mate. They tell us what to do to them. If we follow the instructions and films exactly, we’re rewarded.”

*That’s it. That’s how they get in,* Candice thought, but didn’t tell Baker yet. She wanted to

know one more thing about this group of men—did they have the sand this plan would require?

“What happens you fail to please a woman?”

Eric’s chin went up, profile transforming into exotic lure. “*I* wouldn’t know. I was always top of my class.”

It was a subtle advertisement of his skill, an offer if she wanted to take it that way. Candice could feel Daniel’s anger from across the room. Testing it, she gave Eric a smile she usually reserved for her mate. What would her timid male do? Anything? She doubted it, but here in this nest of rebels, her action was more likely to draw out that primal spark if it still existed. “What if I want proof of that before I buy?”

Now there was complete silence. Candice felt their desires, those carefully caged male instincts lurking behind uneasy expressions. Baker might not be able to bring that out in them, but she could.

The man-for-rent stood up eagerly. “I have a bed across the hall, but leave *him* here,” Eric ordered. He’d already placed her type and was taking control. “I’ll kill your slave if he interferes.”

Candice didn’t see the reaction coming. One minute, she was opening her mouth to deny the claim. The next, Daniel was jerking Eric away from her.

Daniel had watched her flirt without showing a response to the pain of it. If she made the move, it was her choice, but to hear that ignorant little speck threaten his place was more than the stunned

bachelor was willing to take. These males would find out right now that she was his! Daniel's hands clenched into tight, angry fists for the first time in his life.

When Daniel shoved away from the wall, Animal man tugged Hulk out of the way. He knew what was coming. He just didn't understand why.

Busy trying to secure a higher place, Eric didn't hear Daniel coming.

To Daniel's surprise, neither did Candice, which infuriated him. *She might really want that pretty boy!*

Eric's nose crunched under Daniel's first blow, but he didn't stop swinging. For a change, it was *him* drawing blood instead of Candice, *him* wanting more of it.

When they finally pulled him away, the little speck wasn't even conscious and Daniel had crimson running down his fists. "Kill that!" he sneered, jerking away from their loose grips. He glared around at the shocked, timid men. "Anyone else want what's mine?!"

Baker laughed aloud, clapping. "I give you the final proof of my words, gentlemen. That's what you'll be when we're finished training you. Amazing, isn't it?"

Disgusted, Daniel moved toward their chamber with no fear of being punished, full of an anger that he couldn't place. Was it because these former captives were free to become more than they had

been? Candy would give that to him if he wanted it. *Do I?* He was full of confusion.

Candice followed Daniel in and fastened the barrier, but he didn't face her yet. *What do I want?* Daniel had spotted the titanium cuffs welded to the wall when they were brought in. He stared at them now. That was the answer, wasn't it? He wanted to be hers and there were ways...

Daniel was thinking of doing something she wouldn't like. Candice knew it, but the sight of blood on his fists had her observing with open lust. She had never witnessed two males fighting. She only wished Eric had been more sporting. The rush from it was incredible!

Daniel tore off the cloak, wiping his hands on it. Before she could recover from that surprise, he tossed it into the corner! She hadn't understood how the women of the old world had let their men get so out of control, but with Daniel storming around the room, sending out waves of anger, Candice was...*hungry*.

His boots went sailing against the wall, socks following. He moved toward the wash curtains without asking her permission.

*Sexy!* Candice spun to block the way, not about to leave him alone and let that delicious rage cool. "What?"

Daniel stopped, mouth opening.

*Come on, she roared, don't stop now!*

"I don't like it, what you did."

Candice couldn't stop the laugh at his tone.  
*Finally!*

His face darkened and those big hands came up. He jerked her against his hard body. "I'm not kidding, Candice. I...I don't want you to do it again!"

Daniel glared without flinching as Candice gaped, unable to believe it was her timid mouse sending out these piercing waves of authority.

He saw her body respond, how her chest was suddenly pointed and her irises were pink. "I mean it, Candy."

Candice inhaled of the lust in the air, feeling the change sweeping through her body.

"If you do it again, I...I won't please you anymore."

Did he know what that sounded like to her? The challenge was sizzling meat hot from the pan. As soon as he opened his mouth to continue protesting, she lunged.

They rolled as they landed, Candice hissing in need when his body pushed her against the floor with his weight. She wrapped her long legs around his as she jerked him down to meet her eager lips.

Daniel had been goading her, but he hadn't expected it to work so fast. *She likes it that I demanded her fidelity!* Daniel allowed her to claim his mouth while he chose the next move. Unless she got totally out of control, he wasn't stopping.  
*I'll fix this match!*

Instead of the gentle treatment she'd gotten from him so far, Daniel tangled hands in her hair and delivered a punishing kiss that left him breathless. The taste of her was intoxicating. He deepened the kiss as he thrust forward, holding her in place, and was rewarded with a low moan he was immediately wanted to make louder. She wouldn't be thinking about renting a male when he was through.

Daniel snagged the corner of her cloak and lifted the string. The black material fell aside and he nuzzled the perky breasts he still hadn't viewed. *That's about to change.*

Daniel used a hard finger down the button-line to rip her shirt open and she sucked in a tight breath that made him thrust against her heat. Daniel liked her pleasure. He couldn't wait to taste her. He'd loathed it with the others, but they weren't his Candy.

Her bra was black, as he'd fantasized. Daniel slid the straps over her shoulders with hot hands and a thumping heart. She was watching. When he released the clasp between those tattooed swells, her pink eyes filled with crimson and her nails began to grow. The change was here. He would have to cuff her, but first, he wanted to *see* her.

Daniel jerked on the button of her pants, causing the bra to fall open. He throbbed at the sight of those perfect breasts. She had tattoos over her ribs and hips, the erotic kind with spiked, attention-catching details that said the person who

had inked her had enjoyed the work. Disappearing into her snug pants, the intricate green and black design ran up both muscular hips and came out to encircle bright pink nipples that he had to lick.

Daniel's tongue lashed over a taut tip.

Candice cried out, claws ripping into his wrists.

He rose up, noting the muscles in her arms were swelled and her breathing was harsh. He flicked a rough thumb over the rocky nipple he'd just had his mouth on.

Her body shuddered, lips parting. "Get...the cuffs."

Daniel had blushed earlier at the thought of using them, but he wasn't embarrassed now. He wanted her locked up tight so he could explore that exotic body. How far did the tattoo go?

Candice took in another ragged breath when Daniel moved off her, staying still as he got the metal and snapped it around the nearest pole.

Luckily, they'd landed by the bed, but he didn't think of stopping to get them onto it. She extended her arm for the first cuff that Daniel quickly snapped it into place. On the second, Candice hesitated.

Worried he might hurt her? It was a surprise to think that. Daniel dropped the other cuff to the cold floor. "That's enough."

Candice shook her head as he carefully lowered his hard body back to hers. "That's not a good...oohhh..."

His kiss silenced her moan and Daniel quickly fell into the haze of lust as she arched under him. *If not for our pants, I would be in her now!* The image made him rock harder, squeeze tighter, kiss deeper.

He'd lost control of himself. Candice recognized it. Fire spread through her gut as he ground that steel bar between her legs, groaning into his mouth again as he roughly pinched a rocky nipple. Her hand threaded through his silken hair and held him tightly, already at that golden edge. Even through clothes, he knew exactly what spot to hit, how hard to squeeze... Candice stiffened in his arms as hunger seared her. She trembled, fighting for air as he slid a hand down her stomach and inside her pants.

*He isn't stopping.*

The thought made the fire flare back to life before it had even burnt down. She hissed in agony when he pushed that big hand against her, fingers dipping in to stroke her molten flesh. She cried out again as he hit it just right.

Candice was aware of him shifting, of her pants being jerked off, but all she could feel was the raging inferno he'd brought to life. The cool air on her skin was another delight to be savored and she kissed him without a concern for safety as the pain-like pleasure swept her up again.

Fingers moving in light circles, his mouth traced down, skimming her jawline, her neck, her chest...



“Uuuuhhh...”

In her lust, the lack of clothes between them was a blessing, not a worry. She felt his bare leg against her hip and shivered, on that edge again as he moved on top of her.

The thick muscles in Daniel’s arms clenched as he lowered his naked body between her legs, stiff erection finding her slick skin...pushing into her.

That’s when her control snapped.

Daniel couldn’t stop. Her nails ripped into his arm as he shoved forward and buried himself in her tight body.

A scream echoed off the walls and he dropped his mouth over hers in lust. He’d never felt anything like her furious heat. Daniel slid his tongue into her mouth as he thrust forward, sinking into her perfect flesh like it had been made for him. Her legs came up to hold him, nails taking skin from his arms.

Daniel ground his mouth against hers, taking everything she wanted to give and more. Her breasts pressed against his chest in silken peaks and he ripped his mouth from hers to suck on a tip. Her heat clenched around him and the handcuff split apart with a loud shriek they both ignored.

Candice rolled them over, pushing down to take him deeper, and then Daniel was the one arching, thrusting upward to accept what she was offering. Her nails sliced into his chest and Daniel jerked her down for a punishing kiss as they mated. The pain was distant, but this need! He

used his hands on her naked breasts as he shifted, thrusting upward.

The door to their room opened as Daniel's grip on her hot body tightened. He held her when she would have looked up, craving another taste, and felt her nails sink into his shoulders to draw warm drops that matched the ones still on his fists.

Daniel rolled them over as he slid forward. Candice shuddered, grip on his hardness tightening into pleasure that sent *him* out of control. He pinned her wrists to the floor and thrust into her again, hard enough to draw another cry. She stiffened, clamping down as she exploded.

Her tattoo flashed as she arched, and Daniel shoved deeper. He'd never felt so good, so alive! He pulled out of her slick body and pushed her over. The tattoo ran across her back and the cheeks of her ass. Daniel jerked her into the position he wanted so he could rub against the ink while he gave her a son. That thought finished him off. He thrust deep as he held her by the hips and groaned in ecstasy.

"Now, that's what she needed." Baker's comment came through the haze of pleasure that had Daniel locked against her slippery body. "Let's go."

"But he needs medical..."

"She'll handle it. She always did with me."

It was amazing how fast those words drove the need to claim her back into Daniel's body. Groaning, he sent a hand to the trembling flesh in

front of him and leaned down to taste her tattooed skin.

## 6

Angelica stormed from the cave, unable to take the sounds of passion echoing through the stone. She was happy for Candice and Daniel, but she was also burning up. It was worse now that she was surrounded by men.

Pain lanced into her temples, turning her eyes red.

Men hurried to open the main door and let her out.

It locked behind her just as fast.

Angelica wasn't concerned about being in the jungle alone. It was infinitely more dangerous for her inside the mountain with all those easy targets.

The cool wind blew over her fiery skin, but it provided no relief from the jabbing agony or the blood that felt as if it were boiling in her veins. She needed a release or she might snap right now. She'd never felt so close to that edge of losing control.

Movement snared her attention, triggering her hunting instinct. She gave chase against her will.

The deer was no match for the changeling teeth and claws that ripped it to shreds in seconds.

Following her, Baker paused at the sight. He'd seen changeling get like this, but none with the

skills of a Pruett. If he wasn't careful, she would attack him.

“Stay back.”

Her bloody gargle warned Baker of the danger and sent a shiver down his spine. Candice was lethal. Angelica was worse. He'd forgotten about her when he'd decided to evolve Candice with the rebels, but he should have known she would stay with her cousin. It was an oversight on his part, one he needed to handle right now before she snapped and hurt someone. “I'd like to offer you a service.”

Anglican's head snapped up, brilliant red orbs all he could see in the darkness.

“Not a full service—just a quick moment to help you regain control.”

Angelica sniffed the air hungrily, feeling as much the animal as she knew she looked. It was easy to tell Baker was scared, but she could also smell it. Everyone was scared of a changeling on the edge. *Where's the man who isn't? 'Cause that's what I need.*

“Go away.” Angelica took off running to leave him behind. When she came to the river, she dove in without hesitation. The cold water would help her regain control and erase evidence of her minor snap, but she wouldn't forget it. The disease was getting worse. Soon, she would burn up and die.

It was almost a relief.

Chapter Nineteen  
**Falling Hard**

1

“**G**ood morning.”

Her eyes were already tinted pink as Candice took in the hardness against her hip, the sights and smells of their pleasure. “Daniel, about last night, I’m—”

He didn’t let her say anything else. He wrapped his arms around her naked body and sent his mouth to her neck. He knew the truth. She didn’t want the rentable guys. She lusted for her mate and the feeling was mutual. His hands slowly slid down her arm to her tattooed breast. He ran a rough finger over the hard tip with a chill. She was so hot! *And mine!* Daniel nuzzled her neck, pressing against her cheeks and she shoved back almost frantically. He slid a hand between them to adjust, sliding in from behind as she arched.

Daniel growled low in his throat as he pushed deeper, spreading her thighs. She twitched against him, nails out and searching. He pulled her against his hard body as he rubbed her from the front.

“Oooohhh.”

Knowing their morning noises would echo in the tunnels sent his lust up a notch, and he thrust

slowly in and out of her stunning heat, feeling her hips responding, keeping pace. Her core was soaked, sucking on him. Daniel pinned her in place with his hand and body as he took what he wanted...her. Shoving harder, he drew a gasp from those lips that nearly sent him over the edge. When her body began convulsing, he tightened his grip and pushed deeper, drawing a groan that made him explode.

In that chaotic moment, Daniel saw how she'd bound him, how any other woman's pleasure would never affect him the same way. Candice was the one for him, owner or not, and Daniel shot seed into her with every thick wave of piercing ecstasy.

## 2

When they exited the room, sharing gazes of satisfied desire, a low cheer sounded and then swelled. It came from the bachelors who were gathered for the morning meal.

Daniel flushed. He was a hero to them for standing up for himself and for surviving it, but also for doing it so well. None of them, not even Baker, would have had the sand to *take* a changeling.

Glad Eric wasn't in sight, Candice gave Daniel a gentle push toward the rebels he'd been talking to last night. "Go spend a few minutes with your new friends before we leave. And eat."

Instead of rushing off, Daniel ducked to her cheek for a gentle kiss. Then he walked proudly to the food, leaving his loving owner with a smile that felt foreign.

Lurking in the corner, Angelica growled in agony. She hadn't made use of Baker on the train. Candice already knew Angelica wouldn't touch one of these meek males either. She wanted what Candice now had.

Candice walked toward the food line with soreness and a satisfied feeling that allowed her to calmly swing her arm around Greg's thin shoulders. He froze, like the rest of the room, as she leaned close enough to lick his ear if she had a mind to. "Send in your spies as the level three training changelings. Try to wait until the final match when they bring out the prizes to grab them. Do it while the winner is picking."

She watched his face flood with happiness and discovery, already falling into the planning with his inside information. Candice inhaled deeply. *Nothing.*

Her obvious happiness drew both Greg and Daniel toward her. Her mate wasn't happy.

Candice delivered a glare.

Daniel stopped.

Greg flinched. He was within range.

Satisfied that she'd made her point (She was still the leader, no matter how much his defiance pleased her.), Candice focused on Greg. "You'll have to leave the adults and you'll never be able to

use that plan again. They'll figure it out after they examine the tapes."

"What about the sealed gates?" Greg asked. "They don't open until days after the winner picks."

"You take them out the same way they took you in."

Greg paled. "The Ring..."

Candice flashed a games grin as she dropped her arm from his stiff shoulders. "Can be bought. Their profession says it's true, but there will have to be sacrifices." She scanned the rebels. "A few of you will get hurt to distract them enough to not watch the monitors or tunnels."

Greg gazed back with more guts than she'd given him credit for.

"If it gets my sons out of there, I'd service all of them myself—without the cuffs."

Candice snorted. "You'd better take a lesson from Daniel then, because they won't use the cuffs, it might not work, and you may end up dead." She softened her tone. The differences in her were obvious now. "Send in someone who can take what they dish out and ask for more."

When Greg looked at Daniel, Candice shut it down. "Win your own!"

Now there was fury, but it was defensive, striking out merely because being away from Daniel had crossed her thoughts. That wouldn't be allowed, *ever*.



Candice took a plate from the stack and slapped a few rolls on it, vaguely wondering which one of them could bake. She hoped they didn't send him in. Someone gentle enough to make crust this flaky had no business trying to infiltrate the Network.

When Candice had glared, all of Daniel's fear returned...and vanished as fast. It was a simple correction. He was able to tell the difference after being so close to real danger. When he studied her for a moment, he also realized she wasn't putting off the furious waves of need like she did with him.

"You're lucky," one of the rebels at his side praised shyly.

Daniel lifted his chin. He'd never been looked up to. It was wonderful. "She makes me this way."

And she did. He'd been a massive coward before Candice had come for him, but she'd changed that in a couple of weeks. What could she do for these males in a few months or a year?

*A lot*, he contemplated. *And I'll be with her for all of it.* They wouldn't be separated now unless he asked for that. He'd become certain of it this morning when she pulled him into her arms right before they stepped through the door and hugged him. Candice! Hugging! He had no illusions about who was in charge, but when it came to helping her control that rage, he was the lead. In return, they would all be influenced by this incredibly

hard woman. She would set his kind free and deliver the cure to the rest of the world.

What a way to live! No fear of each other, no death or pain. Even their ancestors hadn't known such an existence, but they hadn't had his mate to teach them. Daniel was positive her idea of training and Baker's would be completely different, but he was anticipating watching them clash over it now. His life had gotten so much better. There were only two things, other than his missing children, that still bothered Daniel. One was the feelings he believed Candice might still be carrying for Baker. He hoped that would fade in time. The other was sitting in the corner by herself with a look of absolute dejection that subdued Daniel's happiness. Angelica was like Candice, but burning hotter. Renters had come and gone at the complex, and it was almost always the ones with that glaze over their words and gestures who snapped and hurt the males. For Daniel, it had been while he was still in the care of the Ring.

That took his contemplations to an ugly place and Daniel moved toward the corner, battling it in his mind. He didn't think of his slavery in terms of the pain very often. He'd learned to ignore it and let it emerge in his nightmares so that he could get through each day. Witnessing how hard Angelica fought to control the violence made Daniel sorry for her and even have a little pity for the woman who had raped him. He was supposed to be unbroken when brought in, but he had been

changed forever in one session of pain and humiliation. Three years after that, he was enrolled in the breeding program and selling his favors outside of it to survive captivity. He had all of his memories now, but most of the time, he wished he didn't.

“What?!”

Angelica's snarl was on the edge. They needed to get her out of here soon and give her a break from all of the scents and curiosity. With the stories of Daniel *taking* Candice circling the rebels, the glances being cast toward Angelica were enough to bring an attack from an average changeling, though it was clear she was more than that.

“Can we talk?”

Angelica latched onto the distraction, as he'd hoped she would. “Sit. Down.”

Her cruel tone, however, made him pause. He wasn't stupid.

Angelica glowered up at him. “When you stand over me, it's like I'm...”

Daniel quickly sat down. “Burning up?”

She nodded, clenching her hands into fists when he accidentally brushed her leg. “Careful!” She leaned away.

Daniel made sure his voice wasn't any louder than it had to be. “Do they know yet?”

She flinched, drawing attention. “No.”

Daniel did what usually got him in trouble. He reacted without thinking and patted her hand in comfort.

“Get...back!” Angelica’s command was a razor.

To everyone’s surprise, Daniel didn’t move. He had a plan, though the outcome was unknown. “Look at me.”

It was the same tone of command he’d used with Candice last night.

Angelica snapped open blood-red orbs. Her body trembled as she fought for control.

Daniel pushed his luck, tightening his grip on her hand. “They need you to be yourself.”

“Daniel...” Candice wasn’t certain either.

Daniel was. He said, “They’ll love you, whichever one you pick.”

Angelica struggled to talk. “You...you’re sure?”

A tear splashed from her changeling eye and he opened his arms as those red orbs flooded with black misery. “Yes, Angel. I am. You’re special. They’ll sense it.”

Candice observed in complete shock as her brutal little cousin collapsed into Daniel’s arms, sobbing. She’d known Angelica was planning something—entering the games eventually was what she’d assumed—but clearly, the girl had already signed up. And Daniel knew! He’d been aware of Angelica’s true fear of not being wanted. He had risked her rage to offer the comfort he

knew no one else could. *And he thinks he's honored!* Candice understood she had a mate filled with courage and warmth that didn't stop with his needs or hers. He would enrich all their lives.

*I can't love him more than I do right now.* Candice started to join them, eager to let Daniel know how thrilled she was... The floor rumbled under her feet. It swayed, dipping with a violent tremor.

People froze, their worst fears suddenly happening. *We'll be buried!*

Candice took off toward her family...

Daniel lunged her way...

*Bboooooommmmm!*

Around the harsh, ear-splitting cry of screams and the crash of grinding rock and shattering stone, the mountain began to collapse.

### 3

"Candice!"

"Again!" Her voice drowned out the other awful noises.

Daniel drew in a thick lungful of gritty air. "Candy!"

She grabbed his arm seconds later. Daniel clutched at her in the darkness. "Candy!"

He was so glad she was alive that the panic around them receded. He shoved his mouth against hers in desperation. *I almost lost you!*

She returned his emotion with the same fierceness, letting him feel her terror, her relief.

Candice ended the kiss abruptly, but kept a tight grip on his hand as they moved through what remained of the rebel base. The blast had hit the mountain right over them. If not for the natural strength of the main chamber, they would all be dead. As it was, half the ceiling had cracked and sent giant slabs down to crush people. Blood now stained the neutral stone.

Daniel glanced away from the sight of Eric's now forever-shut eyes. Candice pulled Daniel through the debris, going to the corner where he'd been sitting with Angelica... He suddenly understood her hurry and tried to help get them faster through the death and destruction.

The rebels were stunned, shrouded in grit, tears and hatred. They knew who was responsible. The Network had found them.

“Angel!”

She was lying face down, curled over the top of someone they couldn't identify yet, but Daniel was positive who she had tried to protect. Angelica was willing to give her life for Baker. Daniel realized he wasn't the only one who'd felt something special just from being around the leader for two days.

He and Candice started clearing the mess as the others gathered around. Above them, there was another grinding sound.

*Crackkkkk!*

A thick chunk of the ceiling broke away across the room and hid Eric's body. It sent a fresh cloud of dust over everyone, bringing more coughs.

"Angel!"

"Stop yelling, already!"

Angelica's snap drew an immediate response. The rebels who were closest—Hulk and Greg—began to help. Daniel gave them a grateful nod, and more men joined in.

"You okay?" Candice wanted to keep her cousin talking, but Daniel thought she was worrying over little at this point. If Angelica could growl like that, she wasn't at death's door.

"Peachy." Angelica's hand shot up through a gap in the debris.

The sight of those bloody fingers brought the rest of the males forward. Daniel watched in surprise as they crowded Candice out to take over the rescue.

Candice didn't care about their motives or their lack of fear. She let them move her aside with careful shoulders and hands. Their bodies were much more suited to this task.

The debris pile quickly vanished.

"Step back," Hulk ordered as they got to the larger pieces.

Candice did, hearing his furious undertone. She had misjudged on her first impressions. She had believed these men had no fire, but she'd been wrong. As they worked, the rage was unmistakable. Fury was rising amid these shattered

walls and it wasn't coming from the changelings. Their rulers had gone too far this time. The former captives wouldn't stand for anymore.

Candice saw Angelica stand and then lean down to help pull Baker from the floor. Candice shoved her way through to grab her cousin for a fierce hug.

“Damn it!”

Candice jerked back to find Angelica's arm hanging at an odd angle. Candice quickly scanned her for other injuries. *Broken or maybe dislocated arm, bleeding gash down her hip, blood running from her forehead.*

Changeling fury was in Angelica's red orbs, but they all knew her anger was aimed at their assassins this time. None of the males flinched away as Angelica came forward. The disease had little to do with this awful sense of betrayal.

“How did they know where we were?” one of the rebels asked in bewilderment.

Candice didn't want Daniel to hear the answer yet. She turned to Baker to assess his injuries.

“I'm good.” The convict knew, but there was no way he could keep it hidden for her.

“I'll handle it.” Candice promised.

Baker turned to Angelica. “Shut your eyes.”

“Just do it!” Angelica snarled, in agony.

The rebel leader hesitated. “I can't with your eyes like that!”

Even Baker was scared of her. Angelica snapped her lids shut in frustration.



Baker's rough touch quickly put Angelica's arm in place, sending a scream through the stone wreckage that chilled the other males. They had never witnessed a man causing a woman pain, for any reason. They didn't like it.

Candice let Baker swing Angelica into his arms and carry her toward the clear tunnel. She was far beyond any of the previous rage she'd felt, except maybe for the moment she'd lost Daniel. Angelica's blood was literally on her hands. The feel of it was enough to shove Candice over the edge. She'd been hurt repeatedly by the Network. They all had.

Her heart filled with the cold ice that always came before she battled. This abuse of power wouldn't be allowed anymore. The Pruetts would see to it.

None of the other chambers were accessible, but the survivors knew the fate of those inside by the lack of sounds. Banging on the stone drew groans, but only from the wounded mountain and Baker reluctantly made the men stop. Due to the round construction of this room, the outer walls collapsing had held it together with that force. If it had been anything but a direct hit, the center would have fallen too.

Using the moment to teach them, to distract and calm his army, Baker tended Angelica's injuries.

Candice was glad to know they were mostly minor. It could have been worse.

“Candy...” Angelica was furious, needing an outlet.

Candice intended to give her one, but not yet, not here. “Pull it in!”

Angelica did it with almost no visible effort, flipping from solid red to that familiar black.

Candice delivered what her cousin needed—approval of her decision. “Remember this moment when you’re at the games. Use it to feed and control your rage, and you’ll come out with one of your own.”

Angelica sagged against Baker’s hip and he hugged her gently, impressing Candice. They were already learning from her brave mate.

“How?” Daniel hadn’t been distracted, she realized. He’d just known to wait.

Candice sighed, understanding she couldn’t protect him from this. The fact that it wasn’t his fault wouldn’t matter to him. “They probably have a tracker in you. I didn’t check. I was distracted.” Candice planned to take as much of the blame as she could.

Daniel froze in horror. “They followed *me*?”

Candice turned to comfort him, and to make sure the others didn’t hurt him in their grief.

Daniel jerked his knife free. “Get it out—right now!”

Impressed again, Candice was forced to deny him. “As soon as I do that, they’ll lose the signal and send in troops or another bomb. Right now, they can’t be certain how many of us survived

because even dead bodies put off heat for a while and satellites are unreliable here.”

“If his beacon suddenly disappears, they’ll know we’ve figured it out,” Greg clarified, clearly the brains of Baker’s outfit.

“You have to go to the safe zone,” Candice confirmed. “Now.”

“We won’t leave our kids!” Baker protested hotly.

“Then give up your new lives and join them in slavery!” Daniel argued. “You can’t stay here. They’ll firebomb it next, to make sure no survivors are hiding here.”

“How long for that?”

Candice shrugged at Greg’s question. “If I were them, I’d wait a few hours to track any movement on the satellites. If there were positive readings, I’d send in the troops to round them up. If not, I’d blow it so that no one else could use it this way in the future. I’d say six hours from the first blast, at most, before even the Kudzu plant no longer lives here.”

Baker surveyed his rebels. If the Network took out the plant with their chemicals or fire, all of their hiding places would be gone. It was an awful choice to make.

Candice felt more sympathy than she normally would have, but that clock was still ticking. The Network knew she was here. They thought she had gone rogue on her family. It was time to go.

Around them, the males were now gathering gear from bodies and not being gentle about it. The apathy over the deaths, now that the rebels were about to do something, was disheartening to Candice even though she understood. Most of these men had come from the complex. They'd learned not to get attached to each other so that it couldn't be used against them.

“Candice...”

She could feel Baker wanting her to volunteer to escort them. Candice wasn't sure before all was done that she wouldn't agree. She was far too angry to let this go.

Quickly ready to leave, the males stared in horror, stunned at the sight of what had been their home, their shield against the brutal world. Baker would help them, but would that be enough? Would these vulnerable slaves make it to the safe zone with only the convict to lead them? It was a duty Candice was reluctant to accept, but really, her choice had been made the instant the Network had tried to kill her in the Tunnels of Time. She'd needed to be sure the rebels were worthy of the sacrifices she might have to make to ensure their freedom. In the end, even they might not be happy with it.

“We need you,” Baker stated awkwardly from the exit. He was trying hard not to beg.

Candice looked to where Daniel stood, Angelica at his side. Her loved ones were battered,

but alive. Would these males be in a week? And even if they did manage to get to a safe zone—which would be no easy task with the Ring or troops following—they would be entering the gates of hell. The borderlands were two states wide and six states deep. They split the country in half, and because of the shift in the jetstream, had become the most dangerous place in New America. Even on a good day, the weather was challenging, but there were also annual dust storms that ran for weeks. There were bandits, mutated wildlife, and huge pythons that came up out of the ground to swallow mopars whole. It was a totally lawless land that even their rulers had no control over.

“Will you at least meet us there?” Baker asked curtly.

After everything that had happened, it was hard for Candice to refuse. The Network wouldn’t stop until Baker was dead. He needed protection. Candice also remembered the way the males here had been before their enemy had extinguished those lives, how Baker’s quiet leadership had been changing them. He could return a lot of what had been stolen, but these males needed someone who could teach them to fight.

“Please...”

She’d never thought to hear Baker beg for anything. Candice let herself ask a foolish question that mattered only to her. “Why Pruetts?”

Baker’s mouth opened, but Greg answered, “They’re scared of you. The council has no hold

over the Pruetts. With a family like yours around, they know these truths will eventually be discovered and revealed.”

Her family was in danger, but not just the few who were bonded. Their entire bloodline had been targeted. Candice reacted the only way she could. She grinned.

Baker’s profile melted into relief.

“I’ll send some others to help, as well,” Candice stated, thinking of Angelica’s sister. Sam was on a bounty run in the borderlands. She knew it better than anyone did. Candice was positive that she and her parents would agree to help. After everything that Candice had unearthed, she actually believed they might *have* to include Sam and her parents in the plans. They were also Pruetts who had been betrayed. They would want to have a say.

A few minutes later, Daniel stepped out of the entrance behind his owner, chin high and mind in tatters. Baker’s safety mattered to Candice. She wanted to go with them. Daniel assumed she was taking him home and then joining the rebels—her and a few of the friends she’d been gathering. Daniel hated it that he was a hindrance. As they cleared the tunnel, Candice stopped, expression spilling secrets that Daniel was guessing she had held for a long time. Baker had been her friend, his stand-in. If Daniel wanted her to let go, he had to have trust.

“Go with them,” Daniel told her firmly. “Send me with Angelica.”

The few rebels within hearing distance flinched away from the couple at his words. Men didn’t tell women what to do!

Behind them, Baker stopped to stare with the same surprise that Candice had.

“I’ll hold you up and cause trouble.” Daniel took a dejected step toward Angelica. “Leave me.”

Daniel found himself on the ground under a furious changeling a second later.

The males didn’t yell this time, but all of them watched in worry as Candice pinned his arms.

“We will never be parted!” Candice slowly lowered her lips to inches from his. “I’ll make you the strongest man in his safe zone. You’ll be at my side while we help him rebuild our world. Together.”

Beyond thrilled, Daniel rolled them over and claimed her lips.

Baker laughed in satisfaction at the confirmation of her plans.

Daniel slowly drew back from her mouth, still finding her taste exotic. “I love you, Candy.”

Candice had never thought to actually return the foreign emotion, but it came to her lips as if it had always been there, waiting for her. “I love you too, Daniel. *Nothing* will ever change that.”

He kissed her again, harder this time, and heard the others move back inside to finish

salvaging what they could for the trip now that the exit was clear.

Candice held him tighter, feeling him tremble, his need for her. She'd woken the instincts that Baker would need in the others and Daniel was already learning to use it. His hands roamed freely, without any fear of her rage and Candice didn't protest when he began to make love to her right there under the tunnel archway. He'd earned the right.



Chapter Twenty  
**Pruett Tokens**

1

**T**he jumpy boat driver was relieved when they emerged from the jungle, but that quickly faded as she realized it was only Pruetts.

“Baker? Eric?”

“Baker made it out,” Daniel told her, not caring if his voice triggered anything. An hour of trekking through that jungle, after being bombed, had left him entirely without patience.

Drea’s eyes welled with tears. “Eric?”

“Gone!” Angelica snarled, arm hurting. She’d refused painkillers.

Drea covered her mouth to hold in a sob. As Candice joined Angelica and Daniel on the boat, the wild woman caught her arm. “Are you going to help them now?”

Candice sighed. Apparently, the rebel males had created bonds everywhere they went. “Yes. I need to get home. We’ve lost our transportation.”

Drea let go to wipe away her tears, anger coming next. “I can have you at the Kentucky, Ohio line in one day. The channels are clear enough.”

Candice was grateful. “Keep us as quiet as you can. I don’t want you to lose your boat.”

The woman sniffed, hoisting the anchor. “I’d give more than my boat to see them taken down. If I’ve got something you need, it’s yours.”

## 2

### **The Network**

“Why did you order that?! Have you lost your mind?”

Every head at the table rotated toward the west coast attaché in surprise at her rudeness.

“I saw the alerts,” Greta accused. “If you’ve killed them all, we’ll never find out where the bigger safe zone is.”

The door slammed shut as a late arrival entered the meeting. The lower ranked member hurriedly took a seat as attention returned to the ruler of the table, the biggest seat.

“It will demoralize those in that zone,” Terry supplied in the silence. “It was a group vote.”

“I wasn’t here,” the western woman complained, slinging her fancy shawl onto the table.

“It was unanimous,” Riana tried to console the outsider. “You would have been outvoted.”

“But we needed them to lead us to the safe zone!”

“He still will. Daniel’s tracker is moving again. As long as he’s with Candice, she’ll keep him

alive,” Terry stated. “The Pruetts forgive nothing. It’s why we’ve always worked so well together.”

“I don’t understand.”

There was a tolerant chuckle from the boss of the table. “That’s because you’re new here. The west may align itself with untrustworthy dogs, but we here in New Network City prefer a higher class of servitude. When they figure it out, the Pruetts will join the rebels and fight for freedom.”

“Why the hell would you want that?” Greta insisted, plopping into the farthest chair.

“Because they’re stronger than most of the animals under our rule. They’re smart enough to figure things out. If they stay on our side much longer, we’ll be too busy fighting them for control to accomplish any of our goals. Knowing they are an enemy is infinitely better.”

“Why not kill them?” Greta asked. “I handle things like that for the west. I can do it before I go back.”

There were snickers and snorts at those words.

“What?” she asked, not used to scorn. Greta was sought after for her killing skills in the west.

“You obviously haven’t seen the Bachelor Battles recently,” the leader commented.

“I don’t watch any of the shows,” Greta confirmed. “I have better things to do.”

”Make an exception,” the leader instructed. “Before you try to kill a Pruettt, you should know what you’re up against.”

A hand moved over the console. The recent, familiar episode of the Bachelor Battles flickered into holographic life in the center of the table. There was a blur while it ran through each clip of Candice—from sleeping to fighting. Every move she'd made after entering the city was on tape.

Enjoying the technology here, Greta leaned forward to view her prey as the video slowed and finally stopped on a zoomed image of a cage where two females were confronting each other. One was a former defender that anyone would have recognized for letting Baker escape. The other was a teenager with flat, black eyes and a lean, hard body. Under her image was the name C. M. Pruett.

The video played at normal speed, council watching as the wild teenager sent her claws deep into the throat of her opponent, ripping upward. As the body fell, she grinned, an ugly glare that promised more blood. The council leader froze the video there as the regulars at the table discussed it.

“Her parent was just as violent,” Riana remarked nervously.

“Her mother burnt out when we let her have a mate,” the ruler pointed out. “We would do the same with this one, if there was more time, but the rebels are gaining ground. They have seven of the twelve now.”

“If we can follow them to the safe zone and bomb it, we take care of both problems at once,”

Riana reminded everyone. “I still agree with the original plan.”

“You know it’s in the borderlands?” Greta interrupted angrily. “You haven’t told the west that!”

“We don’t report to you!” The boss’s chair squeaked as it was vacated. “And you haven’t told us what hits you’ve taken from them, so don’t think you can come here on a trade-off for information and not give any. If you want our secrets, you’ll share some of your own! Have respect for the freedoms we allow.”

Greta shifted nervously. “We’ve got the same problem as you—the rebels, and behind them, the rest of the world. It’s getting bad. We’re no longer taking the calls from the UN.” There was a deep sigh. “Where to you want to start?”

Before the ruler could respond, a lower member’s voice echoed in shock, “Look at the new list for the Bachelor Battles.”

The name at the top drew frowns and nods, some of the members quickly seeing how it could be used. With another Pruett in the games, the Network now held an advantage.

### 3

They were home.

Daniel still had a hard time believing that it had only been four weeks since Candice had come for him at the complex. Traveling by boat was

faster than even the train and already, much of the trip felt surreal.

Mary and Bruce were surprised by the story they'd been told, but they had accepted it without comment. It gave Daniel the sense they had known what would happen as soon as Candice had disappeared with Baker. Daniel believed her father had been rooting for her to get involved. Her mother, he still couldn't figure out. Mary was sparkless, as Baker had called her, and other than her strength on the runs, Daniel didn't understand why she was a hunter at all. Why would she want this for her family? Was she still a bit more dangerous than Candice thought? Daniel held his suspicions to himself. He would watch and if he could help that Pruett female in some way, he would. He owed them so much!

When they had left Pruett land a month ago, there had been concerned attention on them, but now it was intense, dangerous. Did Candice feel it? Daniel moved a step closer. He had a long way to go before he could protect her from their enemies, but he was determined to learn how. His new family had already begun teaching him, changing him.

Candice turned from the mail slot, profile saying whatever was in it would firm her choice as to where they went from here. Daniel waited as patiently as the rest of the crew who followed her in. Whatever she chose was fine with them and she knew it.

“Where is it?” Candice asked as they gathered in the kitchen.

“It came this morning,” Bruce said, handing Candice a small disk.

Candice knew what it was as she slid the disk into the wall screen. Arrest orders.

*“Candice Marie Pruett! You are under investigation by the Network Council. The charges include murder of trackers, treason against the Network, aiding and abetting rebels, hijacking a train. Your personal account has been frozen to prevent flight. You must turn yourself in immediately! If you do not comply within 24-hours of this message, defenders will come for you.”*

Except, Candice had cleaned out her accounts the instant they hit civilization. Computers were lightning fast, but they still depended on people to put in the information and she’d been relying on that. The Pruetts were traveling heavy now.

Bruce flipped on the news station. They viewed the afternoon report.

“...rebel base hidden in the vine-wrapped jungles of Atlanta was destroyed by Network forces. We have reports of over a hundred dead, including the escaped convict and suspected rebel leader, Richard Baker. Cleanup crews at the scene have removed his remains. They are being routed to New Network City for identification.”

“Trying to hurt the other rebels who don’t know he’s alive?”

Candice nodded at Angelica's question and resumed listening, but underneath, she was topping off another corner of the plan. What happened when they walked outside a few minutes from now would have the final say. After, all that would be left was to play it out on whichever line was chosen. If she was wrong about their neighbors, they would have to run for their lives.

"...surviving rebels managed to overtake the Network Rider. That fast train has been found abandoned on the outer edges of the Missouri Borderlands. The group of wanted males swarmed from the Kudzu-covered jungles hours after the blast, arriving in such numbers they were able to overpower security. The guards and passengers were removed without injury, though shots were exchanged when the sentries tried to reestablish control.

"The Network considers these men armed and dangerous. Troops have been dispatched to deal with the growing problem. This group of rebels is rumored to be led by Candice Pruett and her new mate, who she recently won from the Network during an episode of the..."

Candice switched off the screen. Their rulers knew she wasn't part of the hijacking, but they had made sure she would have a hard time catching up to help. She was well known. It was only a matter of time before someone with a grudge grew a spine and tried to claim the reward the council was certain to offer when her time was up. In fact, most



bounty hunters didn't wait for an official call when they were confident that one was coming.

Hearing engines, the family followed Candice outside. They flanked her as she ran through the plan one more time. She couldn't miss anything now, not when it was all starting so suddenly. Every Pruett would be suspected of involvement. Did it matter if all of them left town for a while? Candice didn't want to confirm the Network's assumptions about the rest of her family, but it wasn't safe for them without her, and she wouldn't forsake the cause to stay. They would come.

They felt it, standing behind her as Candice planned a future that might be the end of them. The Pruett had been on the Network side of the line for as long as they'd been around. *Until now.*

Candice glanced at her parents. "Maybe you two should get out of here. We'll catch up when we've gathered things."

Bruce nodded, but Mary didn't. Candice hadn't expected her to.

"We'll go *together* and we'll *stay* that way."

It was an order from the legal ruler of their household.

Candice bowed to it reluctantly. "You'd be safer—"

"But you wouldn't be."

Candice smiled at her, the usually sparkless parent she believed she could learn to love again now that she understood the urge to fall into Daniels's arms and never come out. If Mary had

helped save Daniel, before Candice could help fight their rulers, they would have all been lost and this moment would never have come.

In the distance, the engines grew louder.

Candice gestured to Angelica. “You can’t be spotted with us. After your game, come to the safe zone. We’ll send you an escort.”

Angelica paled a bit. “You’re kidding, right? Me, in another compound, but with five hundred of them this time?”

“Four hundred.” Candice’s voice was a shard of inner agony that she took out of her hiding place to stab the girl with brutally. “The Network already took a cut.”

It burned her, as Candice had meant it to. She pushed the pain in deeper, where it would eat the girl alive unless she found a cure. “They’ll have us next, Angel. You, me, Daniel, Baker. We’re all dead. If you don’t get one of them now, you won’t ever. The games are on borrowed time.”

Angelica could have her pick of Baker’s rebels now, and probably from most of those waiting in the safe zone once they got to know her, but she wouldn’t settle for buying a cow from the market. Angelica needed to hunt and there was only one place to do that. While she was there, she could also gather the inside information that the rebels needed.

Angelica’s irises shuddered into full red as she flashed a games grin that Candice would have been proud to wear. “To the death!”

“Yes,” Candice agreed. “The Pruetts have been manipulated long enough. Now, we’ll be the ones to fix the show.” Candice gently shoved Angelica toward a mopar in the large shed. “Get out of here.”

Angelica didn’t say goodbye to any of them.

When the girl pulled into the woods, not taking a main path from the beginning of her journey, Candice was relieved. She glanced at Mary, glad when her mother took up a defensive stance.

“You did well to get her out of here. They can’t blame her for our actions.”

Candice nodded at Mary’s confirmation as Bruce and Daniel stayed close. “You’ll have to guard them both.”

Mary placed a hand on her daughter’s arm, swallowing her own fears. “I’ll protect him like he’s my own.”

Candice shrugged off the warmth. She had no time for compassion. “If I die, he will be. He’s never to be rented or sold, even if he starves to death because of that rule.”

“My word,” Mary promised, filled with a mother’s terror. She’d foreseen this moment all those years ago and hoped it would be successful, but she’d forgotten the sweating palms and the lump in her throat. They might lose everything right here.

The squads of troops came over the rise a minute later. Their foamy horses and the cloud of dust implied they'd ridden hard to get here.

Behind the line of riders were fast bikes with troops snarling in anticipation of drawing blood. Apparently, they didn't plan to ask for surrender.

Candice waved the males toward the house as Mary flanked them. She had no idea how she would take down four dozen defenders, but she had to try. This was the part she'd been dreading. If she were wrong in her assumptions, the rebels would have to find different Pruetts to train them.

Candice stood at the end of their driveway, illegal radio in hand. "This is Candice Pruett. You all know me, and you know my family. Defenders are coming to arrest us. When they finish here, they are going to loot the town and take every slave they find. I'm calling on all those who can to join me in defending our homes and families. The Network doesn't belong here. *We* do."

Candice paused as the riders, bikes and dogs spotted her. "Pruetts are for the law, for freedom. We're also for the blood of our enemies. Sweet red death waits for us, ladies. Come end your torment, if only for a few moments, and be rewarded with a Pruett token."

Candice stored her radio before the defenders got close enough to witness it. She was already in trouble. She didn't want those on the other end to be searched. She also hoped whoever showed up, if anyone, would have the advantage of surprise.

“Candice Pruett!”

Candice instantly disliked the loud woman with the strange accent. “I’ve got half a day left to turn myself in.”

“We’ll escort you,” Greta insisted brightly. She’d been happy when Terry told her the council had chosen to take her up on the offer to kill the Pruett.

Knowing she needed to buy time for any help to arrive, Candice kept her hands in sight and stayed still as she talked. “I wasn’t on the train.”

“You *were* in Georgia,” Greta countered. “We have it on tape. Your equipment has been taken to the confiscation depo.”

Candice frowned. “I liked that mopar. Any chance of me getting it back?”

Greta frowned, confused. She’d been told these Pruetts were dangerous, but all this one seemed to care about was her ride. “If they let you live, maybe you can make a deal. I hear your family is famous for negotiations.”

“We’re actually known for getting our man,” Candice corrected.

“You let Baker go!” Greta accused in angry revulsion. “You’re a criminal now, like him.”

Candice didn’t like being called the name she felt her enemy wore so well. Her lips thinned into a sharp sneer. “You have a vaccine the public doesn’t know about. *You’re* a traitor.”

Greta’s eyes flickered pink. “Candice Pruett, you are under arrest.” She swung down from her

ride and stalked forward. “Come easy or I’ll kill you here and now.”

“Without a trial?” someone shouted.

“Have you been vaccinated?”

“Traitor!”

“How long have you had it?!”

The shouts continued, causing Greta and her defenders to swivel around as angry women surrounded the property. From their weapons and red irises, Greta understood she’d made a mistake. Instead of denying the vaccine, it was now public knowledge. The council wouldn’t be happy.

Believing Greta had been sent to kill them all, Candice and many of the others didn’t wait for the defenders to give an attack order. Candice tossed her first spike, hitting Greta in the neck as she dismounted, and then it was chaos as the neighborhood came together to vent their fury. Unprepared for the ambush, the defenders were quickly killed. Besides being outnumbered, they were in shock at an entire town turning on them. They had believed their Network connection made them safe.

Thanks to all the help, Mary was able to keep their males safe and observe the fight. It was ugly and bloody, but it was also satisfying. She’d sacrificed as much as her daughter had to have her mate, and then she’d had to witness her offspring go through the same hells that she had. Now, watching Candice duck under swipes and slit

throats was gratifying. Mary had made the right choice. Candice would liberate their country.

#### 4

Ten minutes after the squad came into sight, the few survivors were fleeing toward their masters, all of them injured. The neighborhood women had also taken losses, but not as many as Candice had expected when she'd envisioned this phase of the plan. As they all caught ragged breaths, glancing around at the carnage, Candice realized it was time for the next part. She raised her voice to be certain it carried to those who had already started to go to their homes to pack. "The Network will come here in force. Stop at our shed and take what you can carry. Keep it to prove who you support."

"Where should we go?" one of the bloody women inquired.

"New Network City would be one suggestion," Candice offered, flashing her games grin.

Nods and murmurs swept through the fighters as they realized there might be more blood to spill.

Candice marched toward the sheds to outfit them as much as she could for the journeys that some of them would make. "Thank you for your help, and for your loyalty. Come take what you can carry."

Daniel watched as a line of gory women formed behind Candice, noting the rage eyes were

gone. Worry and impatience was the most evident emotions in these females now. Daniel studied them in fascination, but none of them even glanced his way. Their lust had been satisfied with blood. Daniel spotted movement in the distant trees and recognized Angelica's mopar. She couldn't come out and fight, but she'd stayed in case she had to do just that to protect her family. They needed all these witnesses to say she wasn't here so she could still sign in for her game. They needed the information, but Daniel understood how hard it had to be for her. He turned away before the urge to wave took over. She would probably fall back in with them as soon they got away from here. Her episode hadn't been scheduled yet. She would want to be with her family until it was.

"There's no erasing this," Bruce stated quietly.

Mary didn't answer. She'd known that the minute Daniel was taken. The council had no idea what they'd unleashed with that one choice.

"Can she do it?" Daniel asked, staying in the shadows of the house as the changeling fighters streamed by with arms laden. They still didn't glance his way, though. Daniel was grateful.

Mary stared at her daughter, expression both proud and terrified. "Once a generation, a Pruett comes along who is so strong that she can either destroy the family or raise it up to new levels. I knew who Candice was going to be when she claimed a mate at such a young age. The disease hadn't even set in, but she was already preparing



for it. Then, I overheard her talking to you about remission. She's always been special, different." Mary brightened, scars seeming to disappear into the wrinkles. "She'll free the men."

"I don't think she'll stop there," Daniel confided. "She wants everyone cured and people to have a chance at peace. She's going to free the entire country,"

"Or die trying," Bruce mouthed in concern.

"I won't let that happen," Daniel vowed. He clapped Bruce on the shoulder. "Come on. Let's get her out of here and into the borderlands, where she'll be safe for a while."

Mary trailed the men, happy to see Daniel and her mate getting along, but it was more. Both men had already changed since Candice had gone to the games. Mary couldn't wait to witness the rest of their progress as Candice led them all toward independence. As a parent, she'd never been prouder. Maybe someday she could find a way to express it to the one who needed to hear it the most. Until then, Mary would follow and support Candice in any way that she could. After all, this was what she'd been training her for. Daniel and her daughter being allowed to bond hadn't been an accident. It had been the first step in a rebellion that would free their world.

## Chapter Twenty-One

# Closing

### 1

“How far into the Borderlands did Baker get?”

“Almost ten miles,” Candice answered. “They’re hiding in a cave. The dust storms are bad right now. They can’t move.”

“We’ll try to slip in between the squalls?” Mary asked. They’d been on the run for a full day now.

“Yes.”

“How many of the males did he lose?”

“The message doesn’t say. Sam found it in the abandoned train Baker and his rebels hijacked. She got to it before the Network did.”

Angelica listened to the conversation between Candice and Mary without letting them know she was awake. Around them, the apocalyptic darkness was full of death and danger. Like her heart.

“Will Sam help us get Baker and his group to the safe zone?” Mary asked. “She’s the best escort they could have.”

“She said there’s a family matter to be cleared up first. She’ll be here around noon. She headed for us two days ago.”

Angelica heard Mary groan. It mirrored her own silent noise of misery. Sam knew she'd signed up for the Games. Little else would get her big sister to delay the challenge of escorting rebel males through the lethal land she spent most of her time in.

"She knows," Mary stated.

"Yes," Candice confirmed.

"How?"

"The Network scheduled Angelica's episode and announced it two days ago, along with some amendments to the rules. She has to report to the time trials immediately."

There was a stunned silence where Angelica could sense them rearranging plans and worrying, but all she could feel was relief. A week from now, she would be in New Network City, battling to the death. *Finally, a place to put all this hatred!* She'd been dreading the normal wait it took to be scheduled. Months in the rebel safe zone around five hundred tempting men would bury her.

*Four*, Angelica amended, still feeling the slashing burn of their deaths. They'd lost a cut in Stone Mountain—beautiful, skilled, enslaved males whose murders hadn't been avenged, but they couldn't strike the Network openly. They weren't ready for that yet, though the war had started. As a Pruett, Angelica was relieved and frustrated.

"Sam wants to make sure she sees her...just in case," Mary offered lowly.

Her cousin Candice knew Pruett nature better than her mother did. It was the reason she was the leader and that sharp intelligence showed in her answer.

“More likely, she wants to escort her and cheer from the stands. You know how Sam is.”

Angelica certainly did. Her sister wouldn't like the choice, but she would understand. Sam was the wildest Pruett in the family. Watching her go through an episode would be a thrill.

“So, the Network has succeeded in splitting us up,” Mary stated ominously. “It gives them the advantage.”

“They've always had it,” Candice responded with her usual no-nonsense tones. “Sam will escort Angelica, and we'll help Baker.”

“Whatever you think is best,” Mary replied.

“We'll cover it when she wakes up. No need to ruin a good night's sleep.”

Angelica thought about rolling over and telling them she hadn't been to sleep yet, or even trying to frighten Candice like she used to when they were kids, but she didn't. Candice was already worried. So was Angelica, but for different reasons. Candice didn't want to lose her new mate or the very special males they were risking everything to help. Angelica didn't want to lose herself.

The change had swept her away as it had nearly every other teenage female in the world, but Angelica was burning faster than the rest of her friends and family. Candice had been close to this

heat before she'd won her mate back from the Network, and she had told Angelica what had slowed it down, but Angelica couldn't do that. She would never rent a male or have one around just to provide a service when called. If Angelica did that, she would lose her chance at a real cure, because she'd never leave his arms long enough to search for a match. It would be hard for her to give up any form of relief from this torment once she experienced it.

Due to the lack of males births, her changeling body was demanding a mate, was being driven to continue the species. There was no other way she could stop the rages that had come with puberty and would leave with death. The years between would be an agony of burning under the skin and blood behind her eyes as the disease progressed through the common levels. The Changeling Winds had come, twisting her into someone she hardly knew. She would never be the old Angelica again, even if she accepted the Pruett ruthlessness and took what she needed. A service might slow the progression, but that wouldn't stop it. Eventually, she would burnout or up.

Mary, Candy's mother, was a frightening example of burnout. Her aunt was so happy with her male, so in love, that she had no fire left. The only time she got riled was when he was in danger. If not for the family reputation, and the protection Candice made sure that they all received, Mary would have been killed long ago and her mate stolen. That was

the most common form of finding relief from this hell. Stealing a man wasn't a crime in the world, only killing one was.

Both were fates that Angelica abhorred. She couldn't stand the thought of winning one of those timid, cringing males for herself and retraining him, freeing him to live beside her as an equal, and then not be able to defend him. Or worse, maybe she would snap and kill him by accident. It was awful how the sight of blood, the feel of it, could send the rage down a notch. Every time she took a life, her control grew.

That was the method her sister, Sam, used to battle her rage into submission, why she stayed in the lawless Borderlands. Their family had their ways to maintain that iron Pruett control, but they were still burning. In time, stage three or four would claim them. They'd chosen to accept what relief they could find until it happened, but she'd sworn that none of those would be her fate.

*Remission.* The word terrified her. The fifth stage of the change was one that few found. Remission had occurred twelve times in the history when two compatible, willing partners came together. It didn't sound that hard, but *willing*... Males were slaves. They did what they were told and most changelings did exactly as her family—took relief where it was found. Angelica was determined to be stronger, but this fire! Because she denied her body the contact it craved, she was burning faster.

Angelica could feel that evil part of her, and it was growing faster than her control. It wanted blood.

To keep from spilling it out here, she'd signed up to do it in the legal confines of the Network's complex. It would give her a male of her own and a possible chance at remission, if she could spot a brave bachelor—something Angelica doubted even existed—but it was mostly to satisfy the endless need. At the Bachelor Battles, Angelica was required to spill blood. She was praying it would knock the fire back long enough for her to get to know the mate she chose, so he would come to her willingly. Angelica was afraid of the time they would spend alone together. She didn't have Candy's iron control.

It was hard to remember how happy Angelica had been before the change. A part of who she was had begun to fade. Nothing was the same. Angelica loathed the Network and wanted Baker's enslaved males freed, but she wasn't really sure of her place in the rebellion yet. It was the fire she sought to ease by fighting to the death—live—on wall screens across the world.

“What type of amendments?” Mary asked.

Angelica had almost forgotten Mary and Candice were talking, it had been so long since once of them spoke. She wasn't the only one deep in thought.

“More contestants and no limit on visits with the bachelors as long as she doesn't give mercy.

They've added the withdraw ropes again. She can back out of two matches," Candice explained.

"She won't, and I pity the one who tries it with her."

"Same here."

"I know she's burning hotter, but are you sure she can do this?"

"Yes. Angel will get her own mate now, and their rule changes won't make a difference. The broadcast said the amendments had been in the works for a while, but I doubt the timing."

"They don't want her to survive."

Angelica agreed, but she couldn't stand the thought of her family worrying about it. She rolled over, shrugging off the chills she'd gotten from thinking about unlimited visits with the bachelors. The Network had sweetened the honey pot.

"I think they're shoring up chances of success, like we do," Angelica said.

Candice and Mary both turned in surprise, drawing attention from the guards. Bruce and Daniel were standing watch over the small campsite, but they weren't as sharp as a changeling and someone always stayed awake while they pulled their weight, in case there was trouble.

"They're covering both ends," Angelica explained.

"Make it harder and maybe kill off another troublesome Pruett, or follow her straight to the rebels."

"How can you know that?" Mary asked.



Her mind flashed those dead males, remembering how full of life they'd been. "Because it's what I would do. They killed a hundred with the last episode. Why fix what's not broken?"

"They'll use the same tactics," Mary said.

"Yes. We'll play it like we don't know," Angelica instructed.

"And while you're inside?" Candice asked with a frown that drew Daniel to hover at her side.

Angelica didn't hesitate or bother to warn them that she'd be using her own rules. She said the only thing that mattered. "I'll act like what I am—a Pruett."

## **End of Book One**

### **What would you like to do now?**

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## **Note from the author**

This first episode was written in hopes of being chosen as a Kindle Single, but as it grew, I realized there was a lot more to the Bachelor Battles than a short story. There's a rebellion brewing against the Network and the Pruett family is now at the center of it.

If you've read my big series, Life After War, then I'm sure you've recognized a few things from this story. Does the Bachelor Battle future connect? Yes. This is the world that would have been if Adrian hadn't been able to get his refugee camp of gifted survivors to work together.

If you'd like to contact me, that information is on the final page in this file.

Waving at you,  
Angie

# Deleted Scene #1

“Those are our people!”

The man tightened his grip. “We’re not ready to fight the Network, son. We have to build a haven and learn to survive on our own. We’ve been cared for our entire lives.”

“We were slaves!” the boy refuted angrily.

“And now we’re fugitives. I’m not sorry. The brothel work is too bloody.”

The riders had hit the main street now. The boy clenched his fists. “There won’t be enough of us to fight for freedom if we wait!”

Baker’s father sighed wearily. “I worry about that too, but without a safe zone or a way to get through the dome, we won’t win anyway.”

“We’re going to try, right?” the boy asked, voice breaking. “To free them all?”

“Yes. I’ll go south or west, and search. There has to be somewhere we can hide and learn to fight.”

“We have to hurry. This yearly roundup is wiping us out. We have to do something for them!”

“We will. We’re not the only ones who want this. There are still a few strong families left.”

“You mean the Pruetts, the reason we came here?”

“Yes. In the future, they’ll be powerful allies.”

“How do we get in with them? They work for the council.”

The wanted man scanned his son pointedly. “We’ll use the games and we’ll use you.”

The boy realized his father had new plans, but he refused to let new anger in his heart. He didn’t have any more room for it. “What are you making me do this time?”

Simon dropped his hand. “Something dear to the Pruetts has been taken and there won’t be anything they can do about it for years—years that you’ll have here to get in with them. In any way you can.”

“That’s why you came here,” the boy realized. “You’re leaving me. Like you did to Cain before he was taken.”

Simon’s hand flashed out and slapped the boy, knocking him to the ground. “You mind your mouth.”

Baker climbed to his feet, once again corrected and full of seething hatred for all authority. “Am I the runaway or the service provider?”

“Both. There’s a reason that family has survived since the apocalypse. It may take a decade, but they always come for what’s theirs. They won’t expect a bill from you for a long time. Pruetts like to build up the favors and then cash them all in at once. When they do that, be on their team.

“Are they really that dangerous?” the boy asked sullenly.

“Yes. They never forget and they never forgive. They’re lethal. I want you to learn everything that you can from them. The future of our kind depends on it.”

“Why wait, then?”

“We need the next generations, while they’re burning, and that will take time.

“What will you be doing while I live on the streets?”

His father stiffened, timbre hard. “Gathering every slave I can. By the time the Pruetts can help us, we’ll be ready.”

“These people had better be something special. Not just anyone can fight the Network.”

“You’re right about that, boy. Come on. We’ll slip you into the town now and meet with the orphanage owner. She sometimes buys boys your age and she’s now short two. The Ring will keep their attention on the Pruetts, like you should.”

Baker dutifully followed his father. At some point, there would come a time when he wouldn’t have to obey and the child was already anticipating slaying all of his demons—including the one taking him into Pruett town to be sold.

## Deleted Scene #2

Candice snapped awake in the darkness, instantly alert.

The shadow by the door froze.

Outside, thunder rumbled.

“As you were.”

Daniel moved quickly to the washroom, but Candice didn't shut her lids yet. Light rain was still drumming against the complex in rivulets of liquid acid that slowly burned through anything except rubber and concrete. It only eroded those. Lightning flashed again, the vivid blast glaring off the black tinted window.

Something thumped against the building as the wind gusted and Candice watched Daniel scurry back in as if he were being chased. *The storm sent him to me, not fear of being alone*, she realized.

*Crack!*

They both jumped at the next blast. Her lips curved upward. “Nature's fury.”

His shadow paused, hesitating as thunder rolled again. “I know.”

Candice wondered if he would have the courage to rejoin her in the bed. If he didn't, she would insist.

Daniel finally came toward her and she studied him without violent need, but when his weight dipped the bed, it sent a curl of want through her stomach.

He settled onto his side, and the storm, as if responding to her lust, intensified.

*Crack! Booomm!*

Daniel flinched at the brilliant burst.

Candice shifted to be ready for the next hit. While she waited, she sent pink sight over his body. Lean and hard, he was made to survive in this harsh world...and to produce children. Her lips stretched harshly, glad that he was facing away. In time, she would have all that he could give.

*Bam!*

Daniel jumped again and Candice caught him with her palm before he could roll against her.

He immediately froze.

She gently tugged on his arm, willing the weather to help. "Come here."

Silence... *Crack!*

He shifted, sliding his big body along her hip.

Candice ducked under his arm to press herself firmly against him. Her cheek went to his tense chest, groaning in bliss as his scent filled her nose.

It took Daniel a while to realize that she wanted to be held and even longer to slide an arm around that black-clad waist. It made him lean fully against her, and Daniel wasn't surprised when her sharp intake of air sent blood rushing through his body.

"This is nice." Her breath whispered along his chest.



Daniel wondered if she knew there were freckles on her nose from sun exposure or that her hair glinted with blue flashes in the flickering storm. He wanted to embrace her warm body, give her the relief she wasn't asking for, but he was a coward. She only came to his chin, but she towered over him with her muscular arms and her careful control.

*Crash! Bang!*

He tensed and was surprised when she comforted him again.

“Easy, Daniel.”

Her hand rose up to stroke the bare skin of his arm, and he trembled under her touch. Lightning flashed, then darkness. What would she do now? Was this the time? Fear blossomed in his throat.

Pushing her control, Candice allowed her thumb to brush his shoulder, discerning the next flash through red tints. His skin was hot, smooth and hard against hers. She swept a light nail over his neck, shuddering. Not certain how far she might go, Candice eased up onto one arm to regard him. She waited for the next flash before moving again, letting him view her face. It was only fair to know when you were playing with fire.

*Crack!*

The flare of light was short, but Candice saw his face fill with as much desire as worry. She leaned down. “Kiss me?”

Candice was unprepared for the way he lunged forward, rolled them over. His mouth crushed hers,

demanding and filled with a need that matched her own. His scent rushed over Candice again, musky and sharp. She moaned.

When her lips parted, Daniel dipped in to taste her, body tight. Each sensation was intoxicating—her tremble, the sensation of her nails digging in to make shallow grooves down his shoulder. Daniel dipped into her again, licking. *So sweet!* Without much thought, he held her hip with a big hand and thrust against her.

Candice shuddered again, control gone as he tasted her. His bare skin against her fingers was like fire, and she groaned as he rocked faster.

*Crack!*

Her eyes flickered in the light. At first, Candice believed the change was what she was seeing. Then she realized it was blood.

Daniel felt her withdraw and nervously tried to hold them in place. “I’m fine.”

Candice broke his grip easily, moving from the bed to switch on a light. Blood had already stained numerous places on the sheet, dripping from nail grooves in his chest and shoulders. Two of them were oozing freely.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Candice demanded. She hadn’t even known she was hurting him.

“I’m sorry.” His voice trembled, full of confusion. “I didn’t know you wanted me to.”

Candice’s patience snapped a bit and she glared. “Now you do!” She saw the nail marks

darken with fresh blood as he stood up. “Tell me *before* you bleed!”

“Yes, Candice.” It was an order received.

Her brow lifted. “Do you need help with it?”

“No!” Daniel cringed at the thought of calling a medico. “I’ve got it.”

He hurried to the washroom as Candice berated herself. She’d drawn his blood. That could never happen again.

Daniel wore a white shirt when he returned. He was trying to blend the bandage in so that she didn’t notice it as much, but that made her gaze narrow in on it harder. She was a real threat to him, even for a lingering kiss. If she couldn’t learn to control this fire, he would have to be sent away from her for his own safety.

## Deleted Scene #3

(This is from the very first edition, where the book was in the first person pov.)

### **Daniel**

I knew what she was thinking. I had only belonged to her for a day, but I knew. She wasn't going to get close to me again, not until she could be sure that I wouldn't be hurt. There should have been great relief that she didn't want me harmed, but all I could feel was crushing disappointment—as if I'd just lost something special without knowing what it was.

“I'm sorry, Daniel.”

It stung her, the changeling, to say that to me, and my own concern rushed out amid a stiff jumble of secrets I didn't want her to know. “It's only scratches. Please don't send me back. I'll be more careful.”

### **Candice**

But he wasn't being that now, the sound of his begging was sending flames into my eyes to war with the regret. There were ways... “I'll think on it.”

He nodded, headed for the bed, and I allowed it, telling myself I could do this much without hurting him. I wasn't sure I believed it, but later,

when he rolled against me in his sleep, I was able to relax in his embrace by remembering the way he'd taken control and smothered the fire. It was something even Baker, my lover, hadn't been able to do for me, and I drifted off knowing the future now held hope.

### **Daniel**

I hadn't wanted her to stop.

It was a shock to realize, and not even the storm's fury broke through the delighted haze. I...I wanted her. Hidden by the change, she might be exactly what I'd been hoping for. The urge to force her into taking me was another surprise, especially since it wasn't being used as a defense. I wasn't trying to soothe her anger, only her pain. How had I come to care for her in only one day?

I knew her. That explained it, but I couldn't place her if that were true. I thought about her reaction to hurting me. Had I found my loving owner? I'd know for sure when we mated, but I was also watching for those other things I would need. Patience, retraining, compassion... It was a lot to ask and I drifted off hoping my new master was up to that challenge.

### **Candice**

Instead of the instant fear when he woke, Daniel met me with a question I didn't want to answer.

“Why are you waiting?”

There were too many reasons to list them all, but only one that mattered.

“Is it because I don’t remember anything?”

I winced at his accuracy and felt him tense. “Yes.”

“You know that it doesn’t matter?”

“Yes.”

He wanted to push it and I willed him to.

“Please tell me?”

I sighed. He’d pushed, but much too easily, and I denied him access to my inner thoughts. “I worry for your safety.”

So did he, I was sure. The change would take over, and I was trying to build immunity first.

“It’s a risk I’d take!”

Daniel was tempting me, I realized in surprise. I’d hoped he might relax a bit without it hanging over his head, but his tone! It said he feared I didn’t really want him, that I might cast him out if we weren’t bonded fully. Would he admit it? Did I need him to? No. I only needed him to be sure it was what he wanted, and after a single day, there was no way he could be. It was too soon.

I started to move from the bed, pain flashing up my spine. And then he tackled me.

We landed with him on top, between my spread legs, and I slammed my eyes shut. I tried not to let his actions anger me, or trigger anything, but I was unprepared for how far he’d chosen to go.

“There are ways, changeling!”

Again, he snapped my control like it had never existed.

With a fast move, I rolled him under me, straddling those lean hips until I could feel his hard heat... And then I rocked. Head buried against his chest, I pleased myself on his body, groaning and shuddering as he held still and let me have my way. He would learn that I was no one to push.

My climax tore through me, and I cried out in release, body shattering in weak pleasure. It would hold me for a bit and give Daniel time to think.

I could feel his excitement as he stayed still under me, but I rose indifferently and headed for the washroom.

“You’re right. There are ways.”

I left him lying there; hating the embarrassment I was causing, but confident in my plans. He had to obey. Anything else might get him killed.

## **Daniel**

I stayed still until I thought she was busy, and then took myself in hand. I’d been sure she would follow through, and my body was on fire for it. Mentally though, I was relieved, even when I felt her return in time to observe me buck in my own grip and explode.

I opened my eyes to see those solid red orbs staring back.

“That would have done it,” she stated mildly, turning back toward the washroom.

I stored the information for next time. I didn't understand why she hadn't used a set of cuffs if she was that worried about my safety, but I wasn't brave enough to call her on it. However, I was determined to be hers. The Network wouldn't take me back if this didn't work out; they never gave away the same bachelor twice. I would be sold to another changeling, and through the last hours, I'd made my choice. Candice didn't want me hurt, I didn't need drugs to please her, and she was deadly. There was no one else I'd be safer with once we were bonded. I just had to survive it.



# Changeling Winds

## Book 2

### 1

Angelica knew these cold halls, knew which way to turn. She was pleased to find herself next to the very cubicle that her cousin had been in during her week of battles. Angelica had been here then too, kidnapped from another hall. That had been the last straw. She'd signed up the same day she was rescued, picking the new rush, double-or-nothing version of the show. If she won, the teenager would receive a prize and a nice chunk of cash. If she lost, her bank accounts and property would belong to the council. Angelica was worth over 4 million, money that had been hard earned, but she hadn't batted an eyelash over the choice. It was immaterial compared to the murders she was about to commit.

*More fun*, Angelica contemplated sarcastically. Unlike her fearsome cousin or her wild sister, Angelica wasn't so hard and dangerous. Sure, she had a skill for picking out weaknesses and yeah, she had a trick or ten that they'd been perfecting over the years, but what mattered was nerve. Did she have enough to do this, knowing that her

worries on the ride here were valid? Not all of the matches were a given.

Angelica slung her kit onto the chipped green counter while listening to that angry voice inside. Until the sunrise chime, she was allowed to withdraw. *Should I get out now?*

*Can I?* That was the better question, she realized. *Can I live with myself if I tap out?*

Angelica scowled bitterly. No. Even without the family reputation to live up to or the need for information on the complex for the rebels, there was still the cold bed waiting for her return, that painfully *empty* bed. The disease had come and turned her into something else, something that hungered and burned endlessly. She didn't want any of those frightened bachelors, but she *needed* that cure. Even death would be better than the constant agony and she had come here to earn one or the other.

# **Rules of the Bachelor Battles**

\*Ten Contestants will fight to the death for their choice of one prize. Mercy is discouraged.

\*A single viewing of the bachelors will be provided. Only one contestant is permitted in the Cells at a time. Light sampling is allowed.

\*Attacks and battles are forbidden in the halls or private chambers. Everywhere else is fair game.

\*Anyone can kill a contestant, including friends, family, and outsourced labor.

\*Battle loot belongs to the winner, to be disposed of as they see fit.

\*Broken rules will result in the contestant being arrested and replaced.

## **The Fine Print**

\*A week before each episode, the contestants are required to run time trials to determine their rankings for the start of day one. The top time will receive the Network logo patch and an extra one million UD credits.

\*Each contestant must submit to an interview a day.

\*Once a contestant has entered, they cannot withdraw from the game.

\*When Round Two is achieved, the remaining contestants will be given larger, private rooms in a more secure wing of the complex.

## **Stars & Guards**

\*Stars are given for each kill, for high popularity and by council decision.

\*Each star gains the contestant one Network guard (in halls and private flats) and a fresh cache of food, weapons, and medical credits.

\*Stars cannot be lost, but can be given away to protect someone else, such as visiting family.

## **Matches**

### *\*Round One (Days 1-3)*

Battles are chosen by Luck of the Draw. One contestant is chosen to face three randomly drawn matches in a row. If they fail, the Network will choose who takes their place with a second Luck of the Draw. The survivor moves on with fresh credits and more sentries. No other battles are held during this time, but attacks and assassination attempts are encouraged.

### *\*Round Two (Days 3-5)*

There are two matches a day, chosen by the viewers, until seven total contestants are eliminated.

### *\*Round Three (Day 6-7)*

The three remaining contestants will confront a council-picked challenge, and the winner gets a set place in the first elimination match. The challenger will be chosen by the computer.

The winner and the remaining contestant will then star in the feature fight. This is the final match, though few episodes make it so far. Due to assassination attempts and mind games, most Bachelor Battles are over by Day six.

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