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The Survivors

by
Angela White

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Prologue

Like most days, the sound of the ocean is haunting. Not much scares me anymore, but the whispers I hear in those powerful swells are terrifying. Thanks to the apocalypse that caused the end of the world, I've become the guardian of a refugee camp called Safe Haven. Surrounded with carefully observing sentries, I sit by the immense Pacific Ocean as people work and play, confident that my Eagles will protect them while I tell you about the war, and about how we were forced to flee our beloved homeland in the awful aftermath. The fall of society was a nightmare from which we couldn't wake. Some of us still haven't, and soon, we'll be at the water's mercy again. In less than two months, we're going home. And I'm the only one who knows.

The real America still waits for us to rebuild, but mostly, simply, for us to return. Before we undertake that perilous journey, I have to get the three hundred fifty-seven souls here ready for the trip, and I only know one way it can be done—Adrian has to come back and lead us home, as he promised. Adrian... That incredibly patriotic man has been exiled, even though he is the only reason we survived. His secrets were the excuse the camp needed to turn on him, but I won't do that. I can't. I swore myself to him the same as the rest of his Council, and like them, I still believe.

I've gotten ahead of myself, far beyond the beginning, when our future didn't look as good as it does now. Most people surviving here won't talk about the long, ugly journey we made together. They say those memories have faded, but I know a lie

when I hear one. Some horrors, you just never forget. Like our final battle with Cesar. It's been five years, but I still see the thick streams of blood running down rain-soaked trees. I still smell men burning alive in their metal coffins. I dream of it sometimes, of the cold, wet night when I was the bait, and I'm sure Adrian does too. It was the moment we knew our people would live—because of one man's dream and his terrible lies.

Adrian kept us alive, gave us everything he had, and he always did what was best for the camp, no matter what it cost him personally. He taught us to be stronger than we thought we could be, to defend each other and ourselves and through it all he lied by omission. He knew these scared, hurting survivors would never have trusted him, would never have given him a chance, if they'd known who he really was.

We came a long way together in the year after the war, thousands and thousands of miles of heartbreaking devastation, and it hurts those of us who remain loyal to witness him accept their unfair judgment without a fight. It makes everything we lived through feel less important than it was, weakens the magic somehow, and I can't allow that.

I've been detecting open doors again, and that sly ocean cautions me, says the trip home will be as hard as the one we undertook to get here. If there's a storm coming for the flock, then it's our guardian we'll need to guide us through it.

So, for Adrian and for those of us standing by him, still ready to die for him, and for the dreams he made me believe in from almost the first minute I set foot in his refugee camp, I will tell our story and leave nothing out. Maybe then, these people will realize what he did for our country, accept how much we owe him, and allow him to reclaim what's rightfully his—us.

Before I tell you about our harsh, ugly journey, let me show you what happened on that day, what they did to us and what we did to each other.

This is how our story of survival began...

Chapter One

This is the Way

December 21st, 2012

1

“This is a joke, right? One of Milton’s gags?”

When no one spoke, President Carter examined the paper he’d been given to read, wishing he had surrounded himself with more experienced people. He had no idea what came next. It wasn’t something he’d planned to conquer during his time in office.

“Where do I give the speech?”

Carter had discovered a love of talking to his people, but Ben Seiling, Deputy Chief of Staff, gestured to the radio the president used for the weekly addresses.

“It’s not safe in public. The rioting started an hour ago in most places, and is spreading faster than we can keep up with.”

“No cameras? Press?”

“No,” Ben refused. “We already have two security tapes missing. No reporters, no questions. Too many people will still suspect the truth.”

Usually confident, Carter was almost speechless, unable to imagine how his country would react. He slid behind the impressive desk, for once without reminding himself that it was his. Hand hesitating, he looked up. “We’re sure?”

Ben’s curt nod confirmed it, but the sheer number of Secret Service Agents roving the halls of the West Wing, filling his Oval Office, was what drove it in. As Carter had the thought, three more uniformed men came in from the doors that led to the

Rose Garden, expressions shouting excitement and a touch of fear that wasn't comforting.

“Yes. The agents will take you and your family out as soon as you're finished here. The vice president and joint chiefs will be in the air shortly, headed for the Essex Compound.”

The president flinched as two more shots rang out in quick succession somewhere nearby. He swept the damning newspaper lying on the spotless desk:

Betrayal is the Foundation of America!

The Gospel of Mary was discovered in Southern France last month and has now been proven genuine by experts secretly asked to test the parchments. In them, is a tale of murder, extortion, kidnapping, and forced reproduction that scientists claim have kept secret the descendants of Jesus Christ. The list of powerful families around the globe that are being accused is staggering...

Carter gestured to the newspaper. Tomorrow's edition; he was positive he didn't want to know how it had been obtained. “When did they discover the site?”

“An old manuscript was unearthed in France last year. One of the experts refused a large payment to keep quiet and we couldn't secure all the copies of his findings. A local station is set to run the story tomorrow.”

“Not anymore.”

“Exactly.”

The first term president stared at the Seal, the desk, the walls. These things had been his, and he had done justice to them where he could, but this? It was beyond his control.

Carter hadn't quite believed it when he'd first been informed of the file known only as “DOC,” but it hadn't taken him long to understand how much the world would change if the public

suspected the massive secret that had been kept all these years. The days of government rule would be...

“Mr. President, please.”

Breaking into a sweat and not caring that he was ruining a very expensive suit, Carter stared at the small sea of faces, now hearing heavy stomps above them which could only be agents storming through the Residence for his family.

Ben, perhaps reading some of his thoughts, spoke up. “These men have no families to rescue, have been paid well in gold and passes, and all of them voted for you. There are no deserters here. You and your family will make it to NORAD, safe and sound.”

Only slightly reassured, the president skimmed what might be his last address, worry burning intensely. He glanced up from the pages at the impatient Deputy Chief of Staff. “You’ll activate the sirens?”

Both of them looked up as the ceiling lights changed to a pale red.

“As soon as you’re on your way. Now please, you have to go. DC is a direct target!”

Carter delayed, hating it that he was being rushed, wasn’t being told everything. “What about air traffic and vital services?”

The deputy’s lined face went blank, and when he replied, it was with a tone that implied it didn’t matter. “They’ve been instructed to land the planes anywhere they can, so Star Wars doesn’t shoot any more down by mistake. Last report said four confirmed crashes, two more suspected. Mr. President, we have to—”

“What about vitals? Evacuations?”

Ben sighed in frustration, knowing the president would have his report before he did anything. Carter could be pushed, but it had to be gently. “The internet is locked down; only our senior military have the codes needed to access it. As for EVACs, those on the lists are thirty-five percent recovered at this point. Ahead of schedule.”

“And vitals?” Carter insisted, knowing it was ugly. In the answer, he heard the same terror and anxiety he felt in his own stomach.

“We have reports of massive abandonment of posts already. Media stations in France and China are on it. Daycares, schools, hospitals, radar and traffic towers, police stations, utility plants—they’re already starting to shut down. Citizens will have nothing to depend on, no way to survive after the first few months.”

The deputy’s voice lowered. “The draft convoys started out half an hour ago. Waves of refugees have been spotted hitting towns ahead of the trucks. Some of those places are attempting to barricade themselves in. We’ve covered it. *Our* men will follow orders.”

The president winced at the mental image. He’d been briefed, but he hadn’t honestly thought they would do this to their...

“Carter.”

It was the first time the deputy had ever called him by his first name, and to do it here, in this hallowed place, was such a transgression of protocol that it got Carter’s full attention. This was the strategy that smarter men than himself had agreed upon, and after, when it was time to come out of hiding, he would still be in charge. The US presidency was not allowed to change hands during a time of war, unless there was a death.

“We’re using the rest of our arsenal? Retaliating, even though we caused it?” Carter questioned.

Ben motioned for one of the agents to grab the tapes and hidden microphone from the desk. “It’s all under way.”

Carter’s finger pushed the button, not asking how that was possible without his approval. He’d learned a lot about leadership in the last few years and one of the biggest lessons was that you didn’t ask questions unless you could take the answers. Stomach churning, he began, “My fellow Americans, this is your president, Carter Heins, and I have grave news. Let me start by asking each of you to care for and comfort each other in this time of crisis, and we’ll get through it. Together,” he lied,

ignoring the man waving at him to skip what didn't matter; to just inform his people that the entire world was about to change violently and forever.

“At ten twenty-eight this morning, a terrorist was able to gain access to our nuclear arsenal by hacking into the system and introducing an unknown virus that shut down our firewalls and allowed our defense system computers to be breached. As a result, control of over half of our warheads was compromised. The terrorists immediately initiated multiple launches, and the warheads are not responding to the abort codes. Ten minutes ago, these stolen weapons began reaching their targets, and other countries have retaliated, thinking we've declared war.”

The president paused. He couldn't believe he was saying this, and he felt an entire country holding its breath, listening, looking for comfort that he couldn't give.

“We predict that the United States will take at least five nuclear hits. The list of cities that are expecting bombs include Washington DC, Houston, Lansing, New York City, and Los Angeles. Leave these areas immediately.”

Noise levels instantly went up throughout the White House, and outside more gunshots destroyed the tense silence. Loud and rapid, they should have drawn immediate attention. When they didn't, the president understood this was really happening, and he was positive he'd be the last man to sit here. Gunfire directly outside the fences, and the agents in the room hadn't even blinked. It wasn't a tasteless joke. The world was really ending.

“I'm declaring martial law nationwide, effective immediately. The curfew is an hour before sunset. Looters will be dealt with harshly. Our southern border has been closed, all air traffic has been grounded, and prices are frozen across the board.” He hesitated again, and then drew in a deep breath. “I've also reinstated the Draft, effective three hours ago. All males, ages sixteen to forty-five, will surrender to the convoys of trucks on their way from bases across the country. People who refuse, flee, or follow the trucks with harmful intentions will be

considered treasonous and dealt with accordingly. Stay in your homes, do what the soldiers tell you to, and pray for your country. God bless you and God bless the United—”

He was jerked out of the seat at a motion from Ben, and the president stopped struggling as the agents rushed him outside, where panic was roaring from the streets.

“Warning! Incoming!”

The lawn speakers blared behind them and Carter suddenly understood that it was too late. *We’re not going to make it!*

The agents literally threw him onto the chopper, and the president huddled with his pale wife and twin boys as Marine One quickly rose into the air. As it ascended, the blades were assaulted with rocks, shoes, briefcases, and cell phones that doomed citizens threw in fury.

The agents on the ground began to fire as a mob overwhelmed the iron gates and rushed across the White House lawn.

Blood splattered, bodies fell, and then Marine One reached an altitude that cut off Carter’s view of the ground.

“Daddy! Fire in the clouds!”

The explosion was blinding, and Carter kissed his wife’s tear-stained lips as the shock wave caught up to them.

There were no survivors.

2

Only two White House security tapes survived the blast, thanks to the quick instincts of a well-connected reporter with a shark’s reputation, and they were what most of the stunned viewers were switched to when the president’s voice disappeared so abruptly. The first was a ten-second clip, and in that short time, one perpetrator of the apocalypse was revealed.

Former President Robert Milton slid the disk into the main computer with a sneer of contempt that few would have recognized from his time in office. Once exalted, he was now

reduced to message-boy for the current administration, and he had volunteered for this part of covering the centuries-old lie.

Clearly trying to hurry, the traitor looked over his shoulder repeatedly while typing in codes. He placed his hand on the scanner, and the lights in the room flashed to deep red. Stepping over a body, the broken man took a marker from the desk and wrote on the wall before the screen faded to black.

The second tape was shorter. Only four seconds, it was a brief flash of the same traitor, now putting the shiny barrel of a gun into his mouth, hands already stained with blood.

There was a violent flash and the former president slumped to the floor. His message on the wall glared at the crimson-streaked camera lenses.

I did it for my country, because my country would not do it for herself.

These two clips only circulated for a few minutes before the stations airing them went to static, but it was enough. Most people understood the truth. There hadn't been a terrorist attack: the government had caused it. America, and the world, had been betrayed!

As to why—that didn't become clear for a long time after the war, and even then, only a select few ever discovered the secrets of the Freemasons. There were more imminent atrocities to be survived first.

3

Marc Brady

Virginia

In northern Florida, a twenty-megaton ICBM caused the swampy shelf to begin cracking like window glass. The blinding flash was felt as far away as the Virginias, where fleeing citizens

were stuck in crammed lanes of traffic on Interstate 81, with no way to avoid the danger. Nor could they escape the long convoy of draft trucks that were battering their way through the wrecks and vehicles in the grassy median, following orders with no exceptions.

“All males will surrender to the draft! If you resist or run, you will be shot!”

The faint bullhorn woke those who had been dozing in the uncomfortable seats of the cold Greyhound bus, and a ripple of warning went through the armed man sitting against the frosty window. People were standing, muttering among themselves, but the grunt only observed, waiting to determine how he should react.

“Hey!”

“He hit an old guy! They can’t do that!”

“They shot a woman! Murder! Call 911!”

Sergeant Marc Brady used his military voice to be heard over the din, shouting, “Everybody out! Make room!”

The others who were stuffed into the crowded bus shifted toward the doors at the order, but they were panicked, shoving and yelling.

Marc hefted himself up onto the vinyl seat and dove out the open window as more gunshots and screams exploded from the traffic behind the bus.

People were pouring from their vehicles now, running for the nearby homes and businesses of Wytheville as the MRAPs full of soldiers followed, firing M16s at the citizens who refused to surrender. Backdropped by thick, black smoke and an angry, red sky, these soldiers remorselessly shot fleeing males and anyone else who got too close to their intended targets. Only a few of the soldiers bothered with the bullhorns or their aim. These were government men, specifically selected for draft recovery, and they didn’t listen to begging or excuses.

Recognizing the bloodlust, Marc rolled through the slush, moving under the bus, and he stayed there as the chaos got closer, arms and ankles locked tight around the greyhound's icy frame. The war had cancelled his leave, but he had to get home, and he *was* going—a decision these draft enforcers would shoot him for.

Gun in hand, Marc stayed still as the trucks rolled by and the citizens he was sworn to protect were gunned down.

A second later, the air shifted, thickened, and he instinctively shut his eyes and buried his head against his arm as the sky lit up and the sun fell on him.

4

Samantha Moore Wyoming

The electro-magnetic pulse shot out brutally, and the devastating wave traveled the same path as the radiation and pressure blasts and then went further. Moving through the air and over the land, the EMP traveled like electricity—surging through train tracks, electric lines, and low band communication equipment. The surge short-circuited nearly everything it touched—sparking fires, stopping pacemakers, making engines stall...and causing planes to fall from the smoke-filled skies.

“Please, can't you tell us where we're going?” Samantha asked, staring intently at their captor.

Her mesmerizing blue eyes and calm demeanor encouraged the grim soldier to answer her when he hadn't answered any of the others crammed into the chopper.

“We've been diverted to NORAD. The Essex Compound is under evacuation.” He said it soothingly, but the deadly rifle in his hands didn't lower as the loud chopper blades struggled to cut through the thick haze.

The chopper suddenly lurched sideways, and Samantha stifled her scream, but not a low groan as the chopper was hit by an invisible wave of force and lurched again.

The other Seattle civilians aboard the struggling chopper echoed her noise of near panic.

Taken together, they'd been "relocated" from their jobs at the Environmental Protection Agency by big soldiers with clipboards, government passes, and guns. After witnessing a coworker shot when he tried to run, none of them had rocked the boat despite obviously being abducted by their own government.

The need to fight warred with her survival instincts and Sam brushed only a quick glance over the other well-dressed, "lucky" few on board with her. In their faces, she recognized the same dismay and slowly dawning terror, and yet, she could have been alone—she didn't feel a connection with them. She was different.

Samantha fingered the badge around her neck, almost wishing she didn't have it. If her alarm hadn't worked, the former president—Robbie Milton of the infamous suicide video—would have died in Nebraska, and none of this would be happening. Sam had been horrified to recognize the "terrorist." Did her saving his life four years ago make some of this her fault?

Sam assumed they were flying low to avoid Star Wars, and she stifled another sound of misery as the cities rolled by. She was unable to believe that was her country down there tearing itself apart. Shootings, fires, assaults, murders, and bodies everywhere—in cars, on streets, even on playgrounds! Moreover, no one was coming to collect them!

Samantha swallowed her panic. This wasn't happening. Just a horrible nightmare—

She gaped in terror, forgetting to breathe, as an unending line of destruction rushed over the land, eating everything in its path. Power lines lit up, sparking violently; gas lines ruptured and exploded; and homes and cars disappeared under the rapidly advancing brown and gray avalanche of death that was now

drawing even with the military transport chopper. They were out of range, weren't they?

“Get higher!”

Even as Sam finished the shout, the blades stopped spinning, her ears registered the sudden, deafening silence, and then they plummeted to the earth in a sickening blur of swirls and screams.

The government bird slammed into the rocky, Wyoming ground at a hard angle and flew back up, flipping and twisting into new shapes. It blew through a thick tree and rolled, scattering awful debris and thick smoke along the crash site.

Samantha groaned, not opening her eyes. Her hurting body checked in as bruised and ready to hide but otherwise uninjured.

The lack of noise (not a whimper or scream) told her that the rest of her traveling companions had not been so lucky, and Sam moaned again, dazed.

Forgetting for a second about all that had happened; she hoped someone had already called an ambulance.

“There! Told ya it's a woman!”

The voice released her tears. Help was here! In a few minutes, she would be bundled on a stretcher and on her way to the emerg—

“I'll hold her down 'n you can go first this time, but let's pull her away from all that glass.”

Hands clamped like iron bands around her slender ankles, and Samantha began to scream.

5

Adrian Mitchel

California

Less than half a minute had passed when another wave of destruction rushed out—one of pressure and wind at levels that not even buildings, let alone people, could withstand. Those who had time to get below ground did so, but they were not as safe as

they thought they would be, especially in California, where the “Big One” finally came.

It went mostly unnoticed. People were already busy dying.

“Is it true? Are you his son?”

Adrian opened his mouth to confirm the lethal secret he’d just been confronted with by his fellow Greenpeace members, but he snapped it shut as the neighborhood sirens wailed again. The radio blared out a reporter’s shocked words.

“...has been unlike anything my generation has ever experienced. We are watching in horror as each of these bombs hits and...it’s so ugly! Huge fireballs instantly create gaping, fifty-mile wide craters around the point of impact and blast all those buildings, cars, and people into the sky. As it rises, it forms a gigantic, toxic black mushroom cloud that immediately begins to spread with the wind.

“Instantly following these explosions are rushes of thermal heat and light that shoot out in every direction, peeling skin away from bones and blinding every living thing facing that direction. The temperatures are in the hundreds of degrees, and those in the path have no chance of escaping as our way of life comes crashing down...”

The station faded into a national anthem as a city siren reached a peak. Earsplitting, it overwhelmed, for a brief second, the horrible noises going on outside the small, San Bernardino ranch home and across the riot-ravaged country.

Adrian’s patriotic heart bled for people he didn’t know. The powerful secret he had held for so long suddenly seemed tiny in comparison. But it wasn’t. It was the sum of all secrets. Likely, it was the reason their world was ending.

The radio on the basement steps wailed again, mirroring previous sounds of arriving warheads. Adrian stepped under the protective planks next to the Christmas tree as a dozen angry men surrounded him, shock and outrage on their faces.

“You caused this!”

Adrian had a brief moment to think he was glad that most of those who had come for the meeting had already fled at the reports of a bomb hitting the capitol, but even this dozen was too many to fight unarmed if things got ugly. Good thing he wasn't unarmed. How had they found out?

“Answer the question!”

“Tell the truth!”

The furious men came at him, and the plastic tree and presents went flying when he tried to use them for a shield.

“We'll beat it out of ya!”

“Did you know the war was coming?!”

“Did you help them hide it?”

Their faces and voices were full of hate, demanding answers. Again, Adrian started to answer the demands, but he was cut off, this time by a vicious rumbling that came hard and fast. Dust from the stairs fell over them as it pounded through the rock and stone.

Adrian had been in enough hot landing zones to recognize the danger, and he threw himself to the tiled floor, putting a hand on the gat in his pocket as some of the men followed his lead. Others lunged his way, thinking he was trying to escape.

“Get him!”

“Incoming! Get down!”

The walls above them exploded an instant later; blown away like brittle leaves in the fall, and then the small, neat house above crumbled, burying them all alive.

6

Angela White

Ohio

These were the first and most direct effects of the war on American soil. It was the beginning of a hard new world, where all authority disappeared. In less than one day, calm, arrogant

safety vanished and took with it the rest of society's perceived protections that had always been taken for granted. Like calling 911.

“He didn't say Fort Defiance. He didn't.”

Angela dropped the stained hospital scrubs she'd just changed out of and gripped the chair in stunned agony. Oblivious to the gunshots and screams outside, and to the pains tearing through her slightly rounded belly, she stared in terror at the CNN report on the plasma TV. The reporter was talking of an impact over twelve hundred miles from her Cincinnati home.

“...latest word is five million dead and another two million injured or exposed, and the cloud is moving west, northwest toward the Alabama state line at thirty-seven miles per hour. Camp David is gone, Houston, all the coastal oil refineries...”

“Charlie?”

The woman slid to her knees on the plush carpet of the two-bedroom apartment, the agony in her chest worse than the bands of pressure clamping around her stomach, pushing down.

Footsteps thudded in the halls outside her door, followed by more shouts. Both went unnoticed.

“It can't be!” The cell phone slid out of her hand, liquid suddenly oozing down her thighs and swollen legs as Christmas lights flashed mockingly in place of emergency blinkers.

“I would know!” she cried suddenly, doubling over. “I would know!”

The door in her mind rattled and she grunted in pain, trying to draw on a gift (*curse!* her mind screamed.) she had locked away over a decade ago, but she was weak and those magic halls remained shut.

Her forehead thumped on the carpet as pain, raw and sharp, tore through her abdomen. Darkness flooded her mind.

Now unheard, an emotionless voice echoed calmly: “Please hold and the next available operator will assist you. 911

estimated wait time...two hours, fourteen minutes... The system is currently experiencing heavy call volume. If this is not an emergency, please hang up and try your call again later. Service outages can be expected in some areas. Please continue to hold and the..."

On the TV behind her, the horrified reporter continued to describe what was happening, but few people were listening. The end had come.

"...Chicago barrier gave way and millions of gallons of debris-filled water barreled downstream, overwhelming towns and cities for forty miles before joining the Wabash River, swelling it even more. It has poured down every stream, sewer, creek, and river it touched, sweeping away thousands of people in each state.

"This merciless torrent split briefly between the Wabash and Mississippi Rivers, widening the path of damage, and then merged again in Louisiana, where it finally punched a hole through the city of Baton Rouge and emptied into the already flooded Gulf.

"In an ironic twist, the ancient New Madrid fault line under St. Louis also woke today, causing a 7.7 earthquake that has leveled untouched areas. Aftershocks are being felt as far away as Kansas City and Louisville. Places like Humboldt and Jonesboro have simply collapsed like dominoes, already weakened by the surge of debris-filled waves...."

7

Kenn Harrison

Arizona

Once again a target for the government they represented, the military was especially hard hit. Most of the service men and women who survived later denied they were ever a part of any armed force. As few as three of every ten came through the war

alive, despite being so well trained. Most of the deaths came from attacks by individuals in their own groups, and from their neighbors, who had ended up with desperation on their side. Even those who were still following orders didn't have an easy time of it. They became walking targets.

“Damn!”

Kenn ducked, pushing the muddy hardback as fast as it would go.

Fort Defiance was under siege. Furious and terrified citizens were trying to get over and through the ten-foot-high electric fence that surrounded the seventeen mile-wide compound. It sounded like a giant bug zapper—poles, cars, furniture, and even people were being used to try to break the live wires—but so far, the strong magnetic force had held.

It didn't keep out the bullets, though, and the Marine pulled his cover on tighter as the popping grew steadier, almost rhythmic. Someone out there was firing an assault rifle.

Kenn's grip on the wheel tightened, knuckles white—he hated the feeling of near panic that lurked under the surface. He had to get there first! Choppers were swarming over the grounds of the base, trying to evacuate the Marines and “draftees,” but the violent winds gusting from the direction of Houston made landing difficult and might give him a chance.

In the past, the weather was the worst challenge the pilots had to face here. Now, it was the least of their worries. Arriving birds were being blown out of the smoky skies before they could descend to safety—crashing, exploding, and flinging twisted metal debris into the screaming mob of rioters. A few of the aircraft were only damaged and crashed later in a remote location, but many were lost on the scene. The telephone poles and grenade launchers were hard for the overloaded choppers to avoid. In short, it was mayhem.

“Yes!” The cadet barracks came into full view through the thicket of trees. “He has to be here!”

Men shouted, hungry rioters screamed, guns fired, and gust after violent gust of stomach-churning wind pushed against the truck, slowing it down. The sky above the base roiled with thick red clouds that flashed angrily, and black flakes fell like a blizzard, coating everything with a heavy layer of soot that looked like ash from a volcano.

Kenn looked up suddenly, the shadow of the chopper passing overhead not what drew his attention, but the silence of its engines. He stared in shock as the big bird began to spiral toward him.

Kenn mashed the pedal and ducked as the chopper spun past, but the truck's engine had died too and the hardback didn't respond. He met the eyes of the horrified pilot for a brief second before the chopper hit the main dorm and exploded.

Orange flames and thick black smoke billowed upward, and Kenn's heart froze as the cheers and screams of those outside the fences grew louder, hungrier. If the boy had been in there, he was dead now. No one could have survived that.

8

Falling apart at the seams

By midnight, communication lines were down across the country. There was no internet, no phones, no cable—and unchecked rioting spread across the nation. With their lives suddenly blown away, the stunned survivors had no idea what to do. Few thought to help each other.

Split between broken states that had only small areas capable of sustaining life, most people tried to get out of the cities. Searching for safety and unaware that it no longer existed; millions more were lost in the aftermath. At dawn, the American people were confident and arrogant about their future. By dusk, the dream was crushed, faith not only shaken, but also mortally wounded.

Less than a week after the war, the death toll stood at two hundred and fifty million in the United States alone. Millions of those who survived the initial blasts were seriously injured or blinded, and another seven million had radiation sickness. Most of those injured by the war didn't live to welcome in the New Year.

The numbers were staggering, inconceivable, and yet, real. Our worst fears had been proven true. The horribly high cost of freedom was paid for with the blood of the innocent, as debts like these, in the end, always are. The people should have been prepared, ready, and instead, the governments hurt their citizens as much as the actual bombs did. The draft took tens of thousands of desperately needed doctors, scientists, nurses, engineers, and it stripped farms and factories alike of their crops and livestock, leaving their owners' bodies rotting where they fell. They took it all.

Some people fled before the president's broadcast aired, tipped off by determined sources as the governments began locking down the internet. A few of those quick-thinking souls survived, but flight was not an option for most people. There were loved ones and supplies to be gathered first, and by then, the roads were crammed with traffic and accidents, and were impassable. It forced those people to either wait in their cars for the convoys of draft trucks or set out on foot to find somewhere to hide.

Those were the people who fled too late and got caught out in the open with all those who had already been on the road for the holiday. The rest of us hunkered down where we were and hoped our town wasn't a direct target, or near to one.

The war came when we weren't guarding against it...and then life became hard.

Chapter Two

The Storm Tracker

January 1st, 2013

Outside Bonneville, Wyoming

1

“**T**here’s a storm coming.”

Samantha’s tone was low, respectful in the cold, Wyoming wind, but it didn’t matter.

“Tell us something we don’t know. It’s rained every day since you geniuses blew us up!” her captor lashed out.

Flinching, Samantha ducked her head, dirty blonde curls hiding a pale, bruised face full of loathing. Instead of arguing, she poked at their reluctant fire with her once expensive shoe, observing the creepy darkness of the highway overpass around them. The clinking echo of the heavy chain around her ankle made her quit before Melvin could tell her to. Now was a bad time to draw attention.

Samantha had never hated anyone as much as she did the two drunken men sprawled carelessly in lawn chairs behind her. They were warm in their paint-stained overalls and long johns, but she shivered miserably in the same torn, reeking office clothes she’d been taken in. She wanted to be alone inside their rusty van, out of the icy wind, and searching for something she could use as a weapon, but the two males liked to wait until she was nearing frostbite before climbing in behind her to take what they wanted.

The wind blew harder, bringing sounds of dogs yapping incessantly in hunger and thin, distant screams, loud bangs they couldn’t identify. Sam tried to huddle into a ball that would keep

it all out. The thought of sex while there were bodies rotting in cars around them made her stomach lurch. It was supposed to be Henry's night—the younger of the Cruz Painting Company brothers who were sharing her—but Melvin was making shot after shot of Wild Turkey disappear. When he got like this, both Samantha and Henry gave him what he wanted to keep him from getting bent out of shape. Melvin was mean and bitter when he was sober, but he was a violent drunk.

Instant dick, she thought, skimming the vague shapes of farmhouses and fields at the other end of the windy overpass. *Just add alcohol.*

Blackness surrounded them in every direction. There wasn't a speck of light except for their tiny fire. Gently touching her swollen lip, Samantha tried not to think about the horrors she couldn't identify through the dark. The two with her were enough.

"Where we gonna go, Mel? It's all trashed."

Melvin took another long swig from the dirty brown bottle, dug at the filthy crotch under his large stomach. "Nah, man. Not south. We'll stock up and go to Mexico. Take over like the A-Team."

"Don't hafta go on no boat, do we?"

"Prob'ly." Melvin's voice was distracted, bloodshot leer on the pale leg showing from beneath Samantha's grimy skirt, staring at his own thumbprint on her calf.

"Ain't goin' on no boat," Henry whined, blowing out a hard belch.

Melvin gestured toward Sam, his mean smile showing yellow, broken teeth. He threw a small rock at her, hard, and both men laughed when she cried out in pain.

Knowing the overweight alcoholics were hoping she'd fight, Samantha let their laughter wash over her as she listened to the terribly angry earth around them, resisting the urge to dig at her dirty hair or rub her stinging hip.

The two abusive pigs, who were keeping her captive and passing her like...like a bottle, assumed she meant a thunderstorm, but it suggested snow to her—maybe even a Blue Norther—and about the weather, Samantha was hardly ever wrong. Her predictions had earned her the pass to safety...had given her this hell instead, but she didn't consider trying to tell them again that a storm was coming. The longhaired, thirty-something-year-old painters liked to pinch and slap as punishments, and she was already covered in bruises. Keeping her mouth shut was a hard lesson to learn.

Get away. Try again! her heart demanded. The wind suddenly blew harder through the Wyoming basin as if to reinforce the thought.

Sam shivered. The wounds and marks from her first attempt had mostly healed, but the damage to her self-respect never would. Not that she had time for something as trivial as that. Only survival mattered now.

The trio tensed at a loud bang echoing from the west, but when a second shot didn't come, the men returned to their bottle, and their slave resumed her desperate plans. She was a fighter. She just needed to stack the battle.

Closing her eyes, Samantha inhaled deeply. There would definitely be snow to usher in the New Year, and before morning, too. Could it help her? Maybe, if she manipulated things a little. Right now, the two men were drinking heavily. Set to stay up late and wake up even later, what would they do upon rising to a foot of snow on the ground?

She frowned. They would take the way they had already cleared to get this far and return to the other end of the overpass—to the deserted farmhouse they'd stayed in last night. The brothers would hole up and wait out the weather, even though they were only an hour from moving the last of the abandoned vehicles out of their way before they'd be in the Bonneville city limits—an ugly place full of the dead and the wails of those who would soon follow.

The thought of being snowed in with these horny idiots filled her gut with hot fire, and her mind worked on the problem while her stomach burned. She had always been a plan-ahead person, but who the hell could have prepared for this? What she needed was for the heartless drunks to sleep now and get up ready to go on, before the snow got bad. It would put them all out in the blizzard together and might give her an opportunity to escape.

You know how, don't you?

She shuddered, drawing in a deep breath. Yes, she did, but she didn't want to, couldn't stand even the thought of being the one who started it, let alone having to participate or pretend she was willing. What she needed was a weapon. It would be easier to kill them.

Sam ached to think of possible help at the Essex Compound being so close and yet so far away, but she would do what she had—

Pop-Pop-Pop!

The sound of engines and tires squealing followed the loud gunshots, echoing from the total darkness to the south. Coming their way?

“Shit! They're back!”

“Henry, get that fire out!”

Samantha was already climbing into the van as fast as the loudly clinking chain around her ankle would allow, as eager for the tepid warmth as for the hiding place. She slid onto the bed in the rear of the van, and they were plunged into darkness when the two men piled in behind her, slamming the door. She didn't struggle when Melvin pulled her roughly between them.

The males cleared tiny circles on the dirty windows. Samantha kept her head down. She would be shoved away if she tried to peer, but she found she could easily imagine the loud group that was now within at least half a mile of the overpass where they were hiding.

There would be only lights at first, and gunshots, and then dirty, muddy, rusted-out jeeps and trucks with gun racks. There

would be cruel shouts and mean gestures, scared, abused women cowering in trunks and on floorboards, their futures grim—short. All of it surrounded with dangerous, reckless driving, shooting at anything that caught their attention, and a complete disregard for all the death that had already occurred.

Danger filled the air as the noises got louder and the barely-breathing trio in the van remained still and silent. As the group got closer, slugs began to slam into the overpass. Bullets hit the cars around them and then the van, making Sam bite her wrist to keep from screaming. The gang drove by very slowly, it seemed to her, headlights glaring off the dirty windows. None of them budged.

They were all glad when the men avoided the jammed-up overpass from Interstate 26, traveling below it instead. They seemed to be going directly into Bonneville, where desperate voices on the van's CB radio had been calling for help for the last few days—for American assistance.

What they're calling for and what's coming, Sam thought, trying to ignore the hands now roaming her sore body from both sides, are as opposite as they can be.

As the last of the engine noises faded, the van began to rock. Gently at first, it soon became violent and a scream echoed. Full of pain, the sound was cut off suddenly, and a light, freezing rain began to fall over the broken land.

2

A short (*Long! So long!* her mind screamed.) hour later, the brothers were passed out in the back, and Samantha was in the front passenger seat, as far away from them as the rawhide leash around her neck would allow. Full of cold depression, she longed for even a cup of charbucks coffee as she shivered and hurt. She wiped away a single tear at the thought of where she'd been at

this time two weeks ago—at the rear table with a paper cup, the car and driver idling in front. What a difference from this hell.

She had been with the abusive brothers for ten days now, had turned twenty-eight in captivity, and for Samantha, who knew where two government compounds were, it had been beyond awful. She'd begged them repeatedly to take her to a bunker so that someone could verify she was supposed to be inside. She had even promised to get them passes. A lie, of course—she'd hoped to get the evil men shot—but it hadn't mattered. They did not intend to give up the slave that had literally dropped from the sky into their laps.

Samantha shivered at the thought of that first night. It had been life changing, and no one had helped her. Not the convoys full of draftee's and soldiers as they rolled by, loaded down and certainly not the terrified citizens that were fleeing ahead of them. She'd watched unarmed men be shot down, women beaten—her dreams were full of the haunting cries of the others who were now in the same situation that she was.

It had taken days to stop herself from calling out to those around them for help, before she realized that even the police with all their expensive gear and years of training hadn't stood, hadn't even been able to save themselves. In most of the places she'd been dragged through, the uniformed dead outnumbered the civilians. They'd lost everything. It was all gone, and she was stuck in the middle of it with men who knew she had been one of the chosen few valued by the government, and tormented her for it.

When the war came, Sam had been mostly alone but content. Her needs were met by her butler and servants, and then by the agency staff when she'd taken over her parents' work after they were killed trying to measure a tropical storm during the height of hurricane season. A year into that wild ride, she had predicted the Supercell in Nebraska during the Democratic National Committee—had maybe even saved President Milton's miserable life—and that was how she'd ended up here.

Samantha was used to being cared for, but thankfully, she was also strong, able to face her terror and still react. It made her a formidable opponent in that she didn't fear death, only the pain, and becoming a storm tracker like her parents had been as natural as breathing. She had guts and she would have to use them now.

The aching woman lit one of her "reward" cigarettes and studied the darkness through the dirty window. They would be on her in an instant if she tried to run for it now. She had to be patient. The rain splatters were fading to light gray sleet, covering the dead world around them, and she ignored her pain, calculating. The next eighteen hours would be hard, but if she was careful, if she picked just the right moment, this time tomorrow she would be free.

3

Samantha wasn't sure if it was the icy cold or the bands of pain low in her stomach that woke her to day eleven of captivity, but she came fully alert all at once, mind immediately going to the plan she had been working on before falling asleep.

She had decided she wouldn't go to the Essex Compound. On the chopper, the soldier had told them it was being evacuated. It was the direction she'd seen radiation victims coming from. Plus, the brothers knew to follow her there. She couldn't take the chance that they would hunt her down and capture her again. If they did, she'd get no further opportunities to run. This was her last try, and Sam took another long minute, preparing herself to follow through, no matter how ugly it got.

Stomach shifting uncomfortably, Samantha stretched her arm over and started the van's engine. As she flipped on the heater, she told herself at least she wouldn't have a baby. She'd had a shot the day before the war, and it was good for three months.

"What...uh? What're you doing?" Melvin questioned groggily, elbowing Henry.

Samantha struggled to breathe normally as the wipers cleared a vision into a wintery hell, surprised the weather had muffled so much of the sound. *We slept through it*, she thought sickly, and hoped the gang had traveled on in the night.

Bonneville was in flames, the smoke was the only thing moving, and it firmed her decision. Today had to be the day. She wasn't going in there. No one who ventured into that warzone would come out unscathed on the other side. They would be lucky to emerge at all.

"I think that city is on fire." She didn't bother telling them it was also snowing.

Her words got Melvin up, as she'd known they would, and he woke Henry. While Sam was glad that something had happened to get the painters moving, she worried that her freedom might come at the cost of innocent lives. Had she made it happen with her hurting wishes? Was she responsible?

Sam's grieving mind said she knew better. They had hidden from those men before, seen the smoke and fires from the direction they went. The group was attacking towns, trying to... What? Eliminate the survivors? That fit, and her heart cried in protest at the loss of people she hadn't even known.

Someone has to do something, has to fight back, Samantha thought, never considering the possibility that she would become one of those heroes.

When Melvin and Henry stepped outside, she gently started searching the front for anything she could use as a weapon if they did decide to wait in the farmhouse. This was the first time they had left her alone inside the van, and she was very quiet.

"No way is your girl there, man. Look at all those flames."

Melvin scanned the storm clouds that were currently raining ashly flakes over them. "Gail'll be there. I told her to stay."

"I don't know, man." Henry was staring at the roof of the farmhouse they could barely detect. It wasn't his girlfriend, and he clearly didn't want to go where there was such obvious danger.

“I do. We’ll make it by dark. We gotta get started moving shit again.”

“It’s an overpass, Mel. No stores if the storm gets bad.”

Melvin waved a dirty hand. “These cars’re the grocery now—and we’re not stuck anywhere. The van’ll go through any storm, even a Norther.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

There was deep reluctance in Henry’s voice, probably because of the rotting corpses in so many of the cars.

Melvin’s laughter was mean. “The bitch’ll hunt for supplies while we’re shovin’ that bus over. We’ll chain her to the bumper like usual.”

Samantha’s gut clenched with nervous anger and hope. Maybe she would find a real weapon while searching those cars.

“Turn off that engine! Get out here, slut! Time to earn your keep.”

Samantha was careful to put heavy loathing into her voice. “In the snow?”

She could hear them snickering as she pulled the keys from the ignition with trembling hands and stuffed them up under the dash. Hopefully the jumble of wires would hide the keys long enough to buy her a head start if fate gave her the chance to run...although she wasn’t sure she would now. There was too much hate to scurry away.

“Yes, in the snow! Come on!”

Melvin opened the side door, and Sam quickly pulled on her flats.

“Get out here.”

He leaned inside, and she tried to control her voice and pounding heart. This was it. “I’m in a skirt. I’ll freeze.”

“Then hurry up and find some clothes in them cars out there—for you too, but only dresses or skirts. My women don’t wear the pants; I do.”

Samantha nodded obediently. Wanting desperately to spit in his face, she held her leg out for him to clamp the hated tow-

chain over the raw, bruised skin of her ankle and sighed in relief when he yanked the rawhide leash from her neck.

She forced herself to give him a small smile. Melvin was the one she might have to kill to get away. It would be best if he thought she was accepting her fate, so she would have the element of surprise.

As Samantha stepped nervously down into the half-inch of gray and black flakes, her shoe landed on a slick piece of wrapping paper with a bloody Santa smiling happily at her. She slipped awkwardly, crying out as the van's sharp door caught her leg. The rusty corner tore through her skirt and she hit the wet ground, landing hard on her ass as blood welled.

The two painters were laughing, Melvin doubled over, and Samantha's anger grew as cold as the wind.

“Get shoes too. Dumb-ass woman.”

Samantha picked herself up, rubbing at her throbbing thigh. She wanted to scream that she had been grabbed and thrown onto a government chopper, she hadn't been planning to travel in the snow or anywhere else, but turned away before she could. Fighting back now was not part of the plan—a weapon was.

Sam's feet were ice within the first minute and she stomped to the farthest car she could reach—a long, brown, dented station wagon. The frozen vehicle was, thankfully, empty of remains, and she discovered small, useful treasures as soon as she ducked inside the front and began searching. She stayed at it steadily, anger flaring hotter when her nail caught on the ankle chain and ripped off in a hot flash of pain. She was almost at her limit.

Five minutes later, Samantha was still searching the wagon. First darting a quick glance at the two men struggling with the tow chain, Samantha was relieved they weren't paying attention to her, and took a moment to evaluate what she'd found. A fanny pack, a lighter, and two Bic pens, one of which she slid behind her ear and covered with her dirty hair. Half a pack of smokes and one unopened can of Diet Coke completed the stash, and she

shoved it all into the small pack before moving to the rear. This vehicle was so crammed with bags, suitcases, and boxes, it was a wonder there had been room for the driver.

The suitcase at the very bottom of the far floorboard was newer, barely in reach...and full of women's clothes and belongings, she realized, staring at the lacy bra she'd fished out. Her numb fingers resumed exploring the many pouches and slots.

In the last pocket, when she could almost feel Melvin coming her way, Samantha found the Taser.

The cold edge of power filled her as she sought and found the symbols for a fully charged battery. She grinned harshly at the footsteps crunching behind her, at the man who didn't know the coming battle had shifted in her favor. She now had surprise and the power of electricity on her side. Samantha deemed it enough to try with as Melvin stomped over to her.

"What are yo...?"

Sam hit the button as her arm was jerked around, and the vicious blast of electricity slammed into Melvin's chest.

"Uuhhh!"

He jerked, letting go of her, and she stared coolly as she held the button in and watched him stumble, teetering.

The instant she let go, he thumped heavily to the wet, snowy ground, and his eyes rolled back into his head. His yellow, nicotine-stained knuckles landed on her foot and she smiled coldly, kicking his hand away. "Shoulda been nicer, Mel."

Sam's taunt was low, tight smile seething hatred. *That felt good!*

She tossed the weapon and its jumble of wire darts into the wagon's rear seat, while Melvin's body continued to twitch as if he were touching a live line. The Taser probably wasn't reusable, but Sam had the other weapon she'd found—one Henry wouldn't even consider to be a threat.

"Hey!" she shouted toward Henry. "Something's wrong with Mel!"

Henry came on the run and dropped to his knees in the snow beside his brother, who was now drooling, trying to talk—to warn him.

Sam snatched the Bic pen out of her hiding place, keeping it behind her as she let the cap fall to the frozen ground.

“What is it? What happened?” Henry demanded.

Melvin’s eyes had shut, body stilling, and the younger painter was gaping at her in helpless fear. He’d forgotten that they weren’t in this together.

Sam shrugged, trying to match his tone and keep her body blocking his view of the wagon and the Taser. “A seizure?”

Henry looked down, and Sam immediately lashed out—swinging from the hip and leaning her weight into the unexpected blow.

The pen plunged easily into Henry’s neck, making an awful ripping sound, and she jumped as his body went rigid, blood squirting.

Eyes bulging, Henry’s arms jerked wildly as he started suffocating. The end of the pen protruded from above his Adam’s apple, and blood rained down his shirt in furious streams. He collapsed across Melvin’s chest, glaring up at her with a purple face as he died.

Sam sucked in a ragged breath, glorious in her victory...then cold, hard reason took over. She couldn’t stand here and wait for Melvin to recover! He was definitely the more dangerous of the two.

As if to prove her thought, the surviving brother moaned.

She got moving.

Samantha clenched her teeth against a surging stomach and used her foot to push Henry’s bloody body over. She quickly used the dead man’s bootlaces and bound Melvin’s hands and feet, shivering violently as he stirred again. With this setup, he wouldn’t even be able to stand, let alone run after her, which was good because he wouldn’t take her body for this. It would be her life.

Satisfied with his bonds, she took a minute to clear the blood from her hands, using the icy slush to scrub with as she finished choosing where to go. That icy feeling inside had little to do with the wind or ice. She was a killer now, and she would act like one again if needed.

Sam already knew she would avoid the burning city and the Badlands to the northwest—she wasn't going anywhere she had already been or anywhere Melvin might think she would go. There was also no possibility of traveling the Rocky Mountains that littered her hazy view to the southeast, not alone and on foot. Taking the van was out of the question. Melvin would track her down too easily and there was no way she could squeeze it through the traffic by herself.

To the west, more smoke was rising, backdropped by distant purple mountains, and she shivered harder. *Yellowstone*. Bad things were happening there. That only left due east or south. Samantha pushed off the wave of fear that wanted to overwhelm her. NORAD was south. She could make it that far.

“Ooohh...”

Melvin was regaining consciousness, and Sam made sure she was out of his range as she stepped to the snow-covered wagon.

The black flakes fell thickly, the wind gusting harder as she pulled the suitcase of clothes out and set it on the hood. Behind her, the trussed man came fully alert, twisting and groaning.

“What the...? Henry! What'd ya do t' Henry?”

Samantha ignored him, stepping casually by the feet that tried to trip her, hated ankle chain rattling.

“You killed him!” He glared at her, struggling against his bonds. “I got the keys, bitch! Come get 'em!”

Sam did look at him then, coldly choosing his fate. Did he need to die, too? That was the only kind of death she was okay with handing out—the needed kind.

“Come on, whore!”

Samantha grinned, going to the wagon. “It won't take long to get the Taser ready again. I'll 'come on' after your heart attack,”

she stated ruthlessly, sitting down on the icy seat. Her teeth were chattering loudly as her fingers began to feed the wires into the small black box.

Melvin started scooting backwards when she paused to give him a furious smile of anticipation. “Wait! Okay! We’ll trade. Let me go, and we’ll split up—never see each other again!”

Samantha wasn’t sure the weapon could be reused this way, was sure it needed a new cartridge or something, but the asshole at her feet wouldn’t know that and hopefully she could bluff him. Sam smiled eagerly. Then again, she didn’t know for sure that it wouldn’t work either. If not, if he pushed her, she had another pen.

The snow was falling in sheets now, the wind spinning small drifts in circles, and she worked faster, able to feel it getting colder as she watched the trapped man push himself awkwardly through the slush.

“Okay! Okay! The keys are in my front pocket. You can have ‘em. I won’t hurt ya!”

Sam nodded again, still smiling that tight, malicious grin, and Melvin began to beg, finally sounding sincere.

“I’m sorry, lady, really.”

His voice got louder when she stood up, anger burning hotly in her heart.

“Please don’t, please, lady.”

“You don’t even know my name!”

“No, come on! You’ll kill me. No! I’m sorry for what we...”

The man froze as Sam dropped to a knee beside him in the icy slush, shoving the box hard against his crotch. “It might not kill you, but you’ll wish it had,” she sneered. “Be a good dog now, Mel, and don’t even breathe.”

He pleaded with her as she sent a rough hand down into his pocket and came up with her freedom. Enjoying the fear on his dirty face, she jumped out of range of his kicking feet and immediately unlocked the hated chain. It fell into the dirty snow.

“I should lock you to the bumper and leave you here!” She landed a vicious kick to his knee as she stepped over him, going to the hood of the station wagon. She stripped while he watched, revealing the dozens of purple and yellow bruises and the dark blood crusted to her thighs. There was loathing in her glower as she used the grimy skirt to clean up, and her face mocked him as she threw it in his direction.

She pulled on a pair of warm sweats with a taunting smile. “Who wears the pants now, you piece of shit?”

Melvin said nothing, only kept track of her and the Taser that stayed by her hand. She kept track of his slow backward progress as she got what she needed from the weathered wagon.

“What’re you gonna do?” His voice was even, though he was starting to shiver.

Sam snapped on the pack and shut the suitcase before turning to sneer, “Henry always carried that knife, the one he used to cut my hair. Find it and stay away! Don’t make me kill you.”

“Just ‘cause you had a pass don’t mean you’re worth a shit out here in this world!” the captive man spat, hatred lining every inch of his face. “I hope it haunts you that we went right by that compound!”

Samantha left without responding to any of his taunts, threats, lies, or pleas, thinking she would have to watch out for him. Melvin deserved to die. That was the only way she would honestly feel safe, but she couldn’t, not unless it was needed. One premeditated murder was enough. The feel of it was...heavy, as if a chain had been clamped upon her soul—binding it to this world.

Samantha traveled fast, glad when the snow became thicker and the wind blew fiercely—it muted Melvin’s screams and would cover her tracks better. It also might kill her if she waited too long to take shelter, but Sam didn’t stop right away, going past house after warm, empty-looking house to keep her enemy from detecting where she was.

Sam longed to drive one of the vehicles she was now climbing over and around, but they had spent the first few days after the war hunting for something quieter, easier on gas, and she'd been forced to tell them about EMPs and that they'd been lucky Melvin's van—parked under a sewer overpass—had started. Anything with electrical components in a damage zone was junk now.

Samantha blinked away tears as the frigid wind stung her, lungs aching from the cold in the thick air, and she sniffed before running a damp sweater sleeve across her dripping nose. Her feet felt leaden, sliding on black ice, and she curled her numb fingers tighter into the wet material as she caught her balance and pushed on.

Sam sucked in a surprised breath as another icy blast of wind hit her in the face, but she didn't stop. The more space between her and Melvin, the better.

"By and by, Sammi," she told herself, lowering her head against the wind. "One foot in front of the other."

She would stay away from highways and frontage roads. Maybe, with any luck, the storm would get worse, and Melvin would have other things to worry about.

4

Fifteen minutes later, the snow had become blinding, and travel through it was no longer possible on foot. Sam broke into a house set behind a thick row of trees, her hands, feet, and face burning.

She filled up a bag of treasures from the home: blankets, a man's heavy trench coat, a pair of shoes, peanut butter, and a loaf of bread with only a little mold on it. Tempted to stay and enjoy some of the old comforts, she made her feet take her instead to the small tool shed behind the house. Being a girl scout had saved her life more than once in the days since the war had come and blown away everything she knew.

The shed held a small, green riding mower and three bales of inviting hay, and after putting her things inside, she opened the window and went out into the cold. It was a struggle to shut the door and lock it, the gusting wind pulling it from her numb fingers, and she tried to hurry, looking over her shoulder before climbing in through the window. Enough time had gone by for Melvin to have gotten free and started after her, and he would have his rage to drive him through the storm.

Sam closed the window, hanging her wet shirt over it. She wasn't afraid of the pitch-blackness or the unfamiliar room. Her terror walked on two legs, and she was very glad to be out of sight. She planned to lie low for a few days and then continue her solitary journey south, the Cheyenne Mountain complex that housed NORAD now her goal. There was no way the compound had been breached. That bunker housed the president, the joint chiefs, and of course, the records of those with a pass. All she had to do was get there.

Sam made a bed in the warm, scratchy hay, and after two peanut butter sandwiches and the icy Diet Coke, she dozed. Covered in blankets and stiff garden bedding, she held a long kitchen knife tight in her grip and rested easier than she had in the last eleven days.

5

Melvin didn't find a knife. He hadn't thought to check his dead brother's boots, and the wind-blown snow covered him in a short time. His body temperature dropped steadily.

Just before dawn, the painter was dreaming of falling into the icy pond behind their childhood home in southern Michigan. The frigid water was suffocating, no Henry there to pull him out this time. As his heart stopped beating in the dream, Melvin went into cardiac arrest under six inches of drifting snow. He never woke up, getting off easier than he deserved. Slipping away

while sleeping was one of the kinder ways to die in this harsh new world.

Chapter Three
The Marine and the Boy

January 6th
Outside Williamsburg, New Mexico

1

“**W**ho’s here?”

The call held equal amounts of control and command, and it would carry easily to anyone hiding in the abandoned barracks.

Moving cautiously, Kenn stepped into the oval, dorm-style room, scanning empty footlockers and scattered contents. Someone had been hunting for food. Had they found any?

Stopping near the middle of the thirty-bunk aisle, the Marine saw grit and sand, but no footprints or signs of recent life. The base was mostly empty, looted. Only a few men had been left behind. Kenn had seen some of those who had escaped the draft or been overlooked, and was hoping the boy had been as lucky. Half of the buildings behind the chopper crash had survived the fires and Kenn had been searching them since then.

“Come on out. That’s an order!”

LC Kenn Harrison winced as the sharp tones bounced at him from the thin walls, and his hand dropped to the 9mm on his hip. Instinct said he wasn’t alone.

“Charlie?” Kenn called the name as if they were at home, ignoring the gunshots still going on outside the base, and was rewarded with a small shuffling noise that made him tighten control over his emotions. He had been sure the boy would be gone—had been forced onto one of the evacuation choppers.

The Marine slowly advanced to the end of the aisle, preparing himself to react as he read the heavy waves coming off the person. *Desperation*.

“Come on out.” Kenn forced himself to be patient. He would not have been in the past, couldn’t, but the war had already begun to retrain him in things like compassion and understanding.

Two filthy hands emerged from under the bunk on his right and Kenn grinned, freeing his relief. The boy was here! He was alive! He was...hurt? Was that blood trickling from his ears and—Oh God! Where were his eyes?

“Sir?”

The boy’s bloody, gaping sockets stared around, oozing crimson streams.

The Marine automatically lunged forward to catch him when he stumbled, fell.

“Want...my...mommy, sir!” the dying child gasped, splattering them both with red droplets as he struggled to breathe. “...Mommy!”

Kenneth Harrison snapped awake with a startled gasp. He swept to the boy who was lying nearby and staring at him with alarm. It was okay. He’d found the child in time.

Kenn calmed his breathing. It had taken him two full days to search. The smart boy had moved to empty buildings to avoid being taken, and Kenn was still feeling the effects. The nightmare was a nasty reminder of the fear and hopelessness he’d felt when the chopper had crashed into the officer’s dorm in front of him.

The darkness around their well-blended tent was absolute in the wet, New Mexico landscape, and that unwelcome sense of danger flared.

When Charlie started to speak, Kenn shook his head, senses switching to full alert as he listened. Light rain drummed on the

tarps over the truck, wind howling through the junipers around them...had that been a twig snapping?

Kenn quietly drew his M9, straining to see anything from the spyhole he had left when they made camp in the thick grove of piñon trees. They were too well hidden. No way was someone out there observing them, no way.

He slid his wrist under the blankets to block the light as he checked the alarm console on his wrist. It was armed and unbroken.

Kenn slowly settled down. An animal? He kept his gun in hand in case it was the two-legged kind. Light, freezing rain thumped on the bare branches, the tent, the shed they were behind, and the tarp-covered vehicle, and sleep called, seducing...

Lightning flashed, bright enough to illuminate the tent, and then there was only darkness again and the heavy patter of the rain again. Kenn started to drift off while waiting for the inevitable crack of thunder.

Crunch.

Baamm!

Kenn's eyes snapped open, moving to the scared teenager's face in the darkness. *Someone is out there!*

Snap. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

There was an alarm for each breach, telling the Marine how many ambushers they had.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The two males reacted instantly, following the plan worked out before leaving the base ten days ago. Kenn slit a long gash in the tent wall and in the thick, black tarp over the MRAP. The boy immediately slid their things inside the vehicle, staying low in case gunfire broke out.

Footsteps came and the Marine inside took over, evaluating the threat and picking the proper action in seconds. Not rushing, but sneaking. If the intruders were unaware of breaking a perimeter alarm, then they weren't professionals....

Snap!

Moving fast instead of carefully, the soft murmur of voices instead of the silence of hand signals...Kenn's lip curled. *Boots*. They still had a chance.

Kenn waved the boy onto the truck's floorboard and quickly got in behind him, adrenaline flowing in thick waves. Charlie started the engine without being told, and Kenn brought his M16 out as bright red lightning flashed in the far distance.

"They still have the truck!"

"Move in!"

"Get the boy! He's what we want! Take the boy!"

Recognition came, and Kenn grinned coolly, kneeling in the seat. The tail from Fort Defiance he'd thought they had lost a week ago—seven moving targets in the darkness.

"You'll have to take lead instead!" Kenn said as he rose up, throwing off the tarp. He fired twice, following their steps with his well-trained ears.

Charlie held the brake down with his palm and shifted them smoothly into drive, sticking to the set plan.

Men grunted and fired in the wet, cold darkness, and the Marine slid down.

Charlie hit the gas. The truck's tires spun, fishtailing on a patch of ice as it lunged forward, spraying mud and clumps of locoweed.

"Get the bikes! We need his blood!"

"Shoot him!"

All of the men's eyes were vivid in the dark and not right when the lightning and gun flash illuminated them, and their actions were jerky. Desperation made them reckless and they openly charged the truck.

"Now, boy!"

Charlie slammed both hands onto the brake.

As they slid to a wet, muddy stop, Kenn used the enemy's noises to pinpoint their locations, now that they'd been drawn out.

The Marine fired five more deadly shots in the darkness, and then there was only the quiet engine and the damp, cold wind howling by them and the adobe buildings in the distance.

“Boo-yah, baby!”

“Are they dead?”

The boy’s tone wasn’t exactly calm, but Kenn was impressed with the control he had shown during the assault—the boy’s first. The Marine put the truck in park as the teenager shifted into the passenger seat.

“Give us some light and we’ll find out,” Kenn said, knowing they were. Each of them was a kill shot, but he was eager for even the boy’s approval since there was no one else around. He was alone with the sullen teenager, protecting them both without the attention and respect he craved. He would take what he could get.

Charlie used one of the umbrella torches they’d made before leaving the base, the glass tops giving each of the three small candles on the thin wooden board a small shelter from the elements. The boy held it high, taking it all in.

Kenn scanned their surroundings. Shrubs, junipers, patches of mud, tire-busters that he would be careful to avoid, and darkness—more of that than anything else.

Charlie gawked in shocked respect, feeling a bit sick. He surveyed the battlefield, warring emotions of comfort and guilt evident on his face. The seven bodies lay in two half circles, each one a clean shot into dirty camouflage uniforms and black ski masks. Considering the darkness Kenn had been shooting through, it was amazing to Charlie. Not one miss.

After a moment, Kenn sat down on the wet, hard seat, motioning for the boy to put out the light.

“We takin’ their stuff?”

“No. They’re sick. We’ll hit the redline for a click or two, then doze for a bit.”

“They wanted me? That’s why they’ve been following us?”

Kenn saw no reason to lie, and he pulled up his hood, indicating that the child do the same. Both males heard a distant dog barking miserably, but ignored it as another starving pet still chained in someone's yard.

“Yes. Probably thought your blood would heal them. Crazy shit happens now, and women and kids are big targets. Stay close. It'll get worse.”

2

The drab truck ran out of gas an hour later, and Kenn was sorry to leave it. He knew they'd been lucky to discover it at all. He still wasn't sure why the EMPs hadn't knocked it out too, but he assumed it had something to do with where it had been parked. The pulses didn't seem to have traveled well through lead.

Kenn steered the coasting vehicle deep into a thicket of piñons, glad the sky was beginning to lighten. The rain fell steadily, the woods only dark, twisted shapes alongside the faint gray path of concrete as they loaded their things.

“All right, like we talked about—never more than three feet away in any direction. Got it?”

Charlie nodded distractedly, still thinking about the battle that Kenn's military mind had no doubt already forgotten. The boy was having doubts, but kept his mouth shut. Kenn wouldn't understand.

As they entered the city limits of Williamsburg, New Mexico, the sky lightened, and the two males had too much time to dwell on each horribly vivid detail of the landscape. There had never been a time for either of them (or the rest of the country) when even a single dead body had been left to decay on a sidewalk or street. Now there were hundreds, thousands, amid horrifically gruesome Christmas decorations, and if not for the

constant gusts of wind, the smells would have been unbearable, even during winter.

It seemed that every business and home they passed had been destroyed or damaged, most with doors that had been kicked in. Almost nothing they passed was safe to use for shelter. That was another lesson they'd learned after Charlie had almost been stung by a scorpion when they'd stayed in an abandoned house and he'd picked up his canteen for a metallic-tasting drink of piss-warm water. They now examined the ground around their shelters for marks in the dust. The indents implied snakes, scorpions, or spiders had taken over another of man's abandoned houses. Most of these places would remain theirs forever. There weren't enough people left to drive them away.

Relying on their training, the two males had been making camp with no fire and with whatever was handy; wearing gloves and hats, along with extra pants and coats under their uniforms. Going easy with their water, on the fourth day of being AWOL, they had gotten lucky and had found a store that was damaged (that kicked-in door again) but not cleaned out.

Kenn had been relieved, but the feeling hadn't lasted long. They only had a week's worth of food and water, maybe two if they rationed, and the Marine had a feeling they might have to. The lack of rebuilding was a big sign of more bad things to come. They hadn't viewed a single person for the last three days, until tonight, and the rare flashes of light in the darkness never lasted long enough to track. Hard times were here.

The two males pulled their hoods tighter as drizzle started to sprinkle them. Kenn was glad that it wasn't the burning kind. Acid Rain. That was something he'd heard about but scoffed at until he had a drop land in his nose. Then there was chemical rain, which they were getting now. Almost warm, it was flammable—a puddle would sometimes catch fire from a thrown cigarette.

The weather wasn't the worst part of traveling now, but it had definitely slowed them down. They had only come seventy

miles since ramming the dead fence to get out of the abandoned military installation, and they had made many “Let-this-storm-roll-out” stops. The fury of nature came suddenly now, steady downpours of hot drops that made them itch, or full of little black flakes that resembled snow. Then, there would be brilliant, flashing lightning with loud, drumming thunder that promised damage and then nothing but silence—all in the same hour. The only true constant was the wind, and it blew sand and grit into everything.

As the thin, shadowy sun rose in the east, barely visible in the sky, Kenn finally sought shelter, exhaustion insisting. He stopped to scan their environment, wincing at a loud crunch of gravel under the boy’s feet.

“There’s our camp for tonight.”

They were almost out of the city limits now, back to Spanish pueblos and the Rocky Mountains that shadowed deep canyons full of sharp cliffs and rugged mesas. They would need some things before venturing any farther into that wilderness. First on the list was transportation.

Scanning the chaotic lanes of traffic on the hill across from them, Kenn sat on the bottom step of his chosen house’s neat front porch as Charlie began dropping gear. Surely, there was juice in one of those batteries in the cars on the hill. It wouldn’t be any fun to clear the other vehicles out of the way, but they could be on the road by tomorrow afternoon—maybe even reach NORAD by the end of next week.

“Door’s unlocked.” Charlie’s tone was unsure.

Kenn yawned, rubbing at his stubbly, black goatee. He drew his weapon as he strode across the porch, ready to take over any occupants if it was necessary.

The door opened easily to reveal new paint, walls and floors without marks or imprints, no appliances, and most importantly, no footprints in the layer of dust that coated everything. He pointed these things out to the boy, teaching him.

Kenn stepped back and held the 9mm out to the surprised cadet, who usually only touched a gun in class or competition. “Secure the perimeter.”

The thin child took it eagerly but with respect, snapping off a quick salute before disappearing inside.

Kenn broke into a reluctant smile at the careful copy of his own movements when they made camp each night. He didn’t follow, listening to the doors open and shut. A minute later, the tall, thin teenager was back, returning the gun with longing on his face.

“All clear, sir.”

Charlie stepped out into the damp smell of smoke and rot to bring in their things, not waiting to be told. It was the way he had been raised (trained), but it was also to keep Kenny from detecting how much he had thought about pulling the trigger instead. He hated the Marine almost as much as his mom did. One day, when he was older, Kenny would pay for every hit he’d ever delivered.

They climbed the muddy hillside to the interstate a short time later, being careful not to slip or stare inside the cars unless they had to. Most were empty of their owners, but some were not, and Kenn thought he could tell which ones had someone in them by the types of automobiles they were. The newer, classier vehicles tended to be occupied. Running out of gas hadn’t been enough to make those materialistic people abandon their expensive autos. How long had they waited for help to come? A day? A week? In some cases, forever.

“What are we hunting for?”

Kenn stomped thick, reddish-brown earth from his boots as he looked over the endless lanes of wrecked, sideways, and mud-splattered vehicles. “We need new wheels, but beans, bags, and blankets are on the list too.”

The boy proceeded to a nearby car as Kenn checked a beaten-up Dodge truck for power. He registered bullet holes and

suitcases still shoved haphazardly into seats, and stored the information. Kenn found a lot of clothes and personal items, along with a six-pack of bottled water that he was glad to have, but the rest of the search went badly.

It had been less than a month since the war came, and he hadn't expected car batteries to be dead out here too, but each one that he checked was. There was gas and useless keys in the ignitions of most. Doors left hanging open, as well as rusting bullet casings, made him revise his theory. These people had left in a hurry.

"What about a dirt bike?" Charlie asked from a few vehicles away, voice echoing in the unnatural stillness.

Kenn moved his way. "Yes."

"It's new. Still has a sticker."

The Honda's key was in the ignition—as if someone had tried to take it but didn't have time—and when Kenn flipped the key backwards, the lights came on and the gas gauge swung to full.

Kenn pulled the keys out, sliding them into his pocket. "We won't be on foot come..."

He stopped, listening hard. Had he heard something?

Yes. Engines. Still a mile, maybe more, and the Marine inside knew they meant bad news. "Get to the house!"

Kenn grabbed the boy's arm, keeping a tight grip as they ran down the slick, muddy embankment. He wasn't being careful now, just moving.

They hurried across the yard to the porch, and as Charlie began to step up, Kenn roughly pulled him back. "We're muddy. We'll leave prints."

He sat on the bottom step, fingers flying over the laces of his boots, and Charlie jerked his own boots off as the sound of engines grew louder, closer.

"What's going on?"

"Stay below the windows and get your boots back on!" Kenn ordered distractedly as they moved inside and shut the door. The

Marine was already putting on his, and he frowned when the boy only stared at him questioningly.

“But, what’s...”

“Now!”

It was an order, and Charlie did as he was told, face hardening.

“Put our things in that closet and leave room for yourself behind them.”

Kenn turned to the window, hoping none of those vehicles were coming here, to this town, to this house. Gunshots rang out, and he stayed low as the group came over the hill and into sight.

A muddy jeep with three clearly armed men rolled into view first, leading two rusty pickup trucks flying a foreign flag. The men in the pickup trucks held rifles and bottles. Behind them was a blue station wagon with women and children. Next, a U-Haul truck, a used Mustang, two long, filthy white passenger vans, a very nice, gold-flecked convertible, and then bikes—more of those than anything else.

There were roughly a hundred armed men, and Kenn studied them as they rolled closer, adrenaline flying. His well-trained gaze picked out details most people would miss. Foreigners—Mexican—jeeps of armed men, only that one wagon of women...and what was it about those white vans that bothered him so much?

Had there been a flash of blond and silver? Hair and handcuffs? Kenn felt his gut tighten. Slavers. That’s why his stomach was a ball of liquid heat. They had been in the path of these invaders. If the vehicle hadn’t run out of gas, they would probably be in plain sight now. On this desolate stretch and against so many, with no wheels of their own, there wasn’t even a chance. Death had missed them by a quarter tank of fuel.

The large group drove erratically, forcing each other to swerve and fishtail, bumping into one another but easily avoiding the swampy area to the left of the interstate. That made Kenn worry they might be familiar with the area. He could only hope

none of them would notice the new vehicle in the woods, or any of the deep footprints in the hillside.

Suddenly sure these men were responsible for the destruction in this area, Kenn kept his hand by his gun, thinking he would save the last slugs for—

“Why don’t we tell them we’re here? Maybe they’ll offer a ride.”

The teenager’s tone was rebellious, and Kenn frowned, watching the drunken, careless men fire at trees, signs, cars, windows, and anything else that caught their attention—including the sparse houses. Bullets slammed into the home, shattering glass.

Kenn dropped to the dusty floor. “That’s the enemy, boy. Get down!”

Not as experienced as the Marine, now that it had been pointed out, Charlie could feel them for what they were—evil. His affection for Kenn grew despite the anger inside. He needed the short-tempered Marine. He didn’t have to like him.

Kenn marked the slavers’ passage and kept watching, even after they were out of sight and the sounds of their engines were gone. He was still observing when Charlie began dozing against the bullet-riddled wall.

Kenn was worried. There was no way he could challenge or defend against a group of killers that large. He had to hope they would be able to sneak through in the next couple of days without drawing any attention, though they would be on a loud dirt bike. Worried was an understatement.

However, he was also furious. A part of him was protesting letting the foreign army continue their rampage. They didn’t belong here. They were an affront to everything America had stood for. If he had half a dozen men from his base, he might risk his life and try to kill them all.

Better yet, give me two grunts and Marc Brady, Kenn thought, lighting a cigarette. Brady had been team leader for the

last few years and a pain in his ass, but when it came to high-casualty ambushes, there was no one better.

Kenn blew out smoke rings, thinking they would go northwest when they left here, and then circle around to NORAD. It would add a lot of miles but get them away from these men quickly. He didn't want to think the slavers had been following their back trail, but if they were, they would have to come to where they'd lost it—here. Kenn's smile was icy. Maybe he could leave a surprise. He wouldn't know if he killed any of them, but it was still worth doing.

For the next few hours, Kenn worked with the explosives he'd taken from the base, listening hard for the group of dangerous men to return. If that happened, they would all go up together in one big blaze of glory.

The government compound was waiting for them. He'd been going that direction each day. It was the most logical thing to do, but Kenn wasn't sure if he was ready to be back under the rule of the government that had destroyed the world—and then left him behind to die in it—after all the years he had served them, killed for them. He still loved the Corps, would always believe in what it stood for. He just no longer trusted those in charge.

There had been a brief hope in the beginning, after all their outgoing CB calls, that someone might come for them, but he'd waited over a week and only heard survivors begging for help. When the power had gone off (he'd been surprised to have it for almost two weeks), they had left, unable to wait anymore as supplies ran low. Clearly, they were on their own, a Marine and a cadet adrift. What to do?

We'll find a group to travel with, he decided, not looking forward to the boy's reaction. The teenager expected them to go straight to Ohio, to his mother. Kenn sighed, automatically blocking his thoughts even though Charlie was snoring softly. He had never seen anything...different in the boy, but he was always careful. In a few years, the teenager would be the same age his mother had been when they'd met, and her gifts had been strong

then. Angela had denied him access, but this sullen child wouldn't be that strong.

Not that Charlie had any idea what was coming. Talk of magic was forbidden in their house, even the book and movie kind. Kenn had been careful from the very beginning—just in case the power ran in every generation. There was still a chance to control it, and his role of stepfather was driven by that thought. It was part of why he had insisted Charlie become a cadet. More time to create a bond, it also gave Angela time to heal.

Despite his easy touch, Kenn and the teenager weren't exactly comfortable with each other, but Charlie knew who was in charge and they were able to work as a team. It also helped that they both liked to win the annual father-son events hosted at different bases each year. They'd been in Arizona this time, at Fort Defiance for the contests, and they'd cleaned up, winning over half the competitions.

Though they had different last names, Kenn had never let anyone assume he wasn't the child's biological parent. They were both tall and stocky, with the same high-n-tight cut, and bright blue eyes, though the regulation hairdos were a bit too long now. Dressed alike, there was definitely a resemblance. They even had the same way of staring directly at someone while listening or talking, not glancing away. When they averted their gaze, they were lying.

I won't say anything yet, Kenn decided. He wasn't ready to tell Charlie that his mom was likely dead, and they weren't going home to find out.

Leaning uncomfortably against the drafty wall, third-year cadet Charles White had fallen asleep while cleaning the gunk from under his nails. He was dreaming of his mother.

She was telling him how to handle Kenn, but more importantly, she insisted she would find him, no matter where he and Kenn were. They were over twelve hundred miles apart, but his mom was special, different. She could do things that most

people could only dream of, and though no one else knew...so could he.

Chapter Four

The Mother and the Magic

January 18th
Cincinnati, Ohio

1

“I can’t keep them from you much longer,” the preacher warned quietly.

He held the first dirty glass door open and as they moved down the bare, littered hall, his dusty black robes flared out behind them like an evil shroud.

Angela’s wary gaze went over the faded Special Forces tattoo on his wrist, and she told herself she could do this, even if he and the rest had been soldiers. She had to show them that she couldn’t be taken.

“I don’t need your protection, Warren.”

Her stomach churned when his voice lowered another notch in response, becoming urgent.

“You’re wrong, my child. Soon, they will insist you stay, and if you are not under my guardianship, like the others here, I will not be able to help you.”

The tension thickened as they neared the main lounge. She knew Warren’s subtle threats weren’t idle. If they didn’t try to keep her here, he would, probably the next time she came.

“Maybe today,” he confirmed, and the pale female nodded before stepping into the lounge where seven unwashed, tense males waited for them with heavy beards and thick frowns.

“Hello, gentlemen. How goes your day?” Her tone was polite, unafraid compared to her thumping heart, but she wasn’t

encouraged when they only grunted and kept gaping at her like something on a store shelf that was just out of their reach.

“Over here,” Warren gestured, leading her to a blanket-covered child of about ten—his daughter.

Angela’s dislike of the greasy hypocrite eased a little with the love she could feel. He was a weak man, easily tempted she was sure, but he feared losing the flushed girl. It was beating in his thoughts, and Angela was gentle as she pulled the dusty blanket down.

“How long has she been like this?” she asked, shining the penlight around her neck into the unconscious child’s mouth and eyes.

“Five days, a week. It all runs together now.”

“I hear ya,” Angela agreed as she pulled on gloves.

“Is it the radiation sickness?” one of the men behind them questioned loudly.

There was silence in the very dirty but otherwise undamaged administration lobby as they all waited for her to answer. These men were all that remained of the technical college’s teaching staff, though Aaron, the bald man with the constant scowl, had only been a groundskeeper.

“No.”

“Praise the Lord!”

There were murmurs of relief and disbelief that changed to frowns when she started running her hands under the child’s stained clothes.

“What are you doing?” the father demanded, leery as he stepped closer with a worn black Bible now in his beefy hands.

Angela ignored his tone, thinking the slicked brown and gray hair had probably been an attempt to show her he could “clean up.” She wasn’t impressed.

“Where’s her injury?” Angela’s breath streamed out, visible in the cold air.

Warren’s gaze lowered, dropping to her red lips, and his grip on the holy book tightened.

He pointed, and Angela rolled the sick girl over on the dusty couch, exposing the ugly, swollen gash.

“This is causing the fever. The red line coming over her shoulder is a sign of an infection. If those lines get to her heart, she’ll die.”

“You can stop it? Help her?”

Hot gazes lingered on her slender hips and the long black braid that brushed against the floor as she knelt down.

Feeling the increase of testosterone in the room, Angela concentrated on the words instead of her fear. “I have to clean it first to be certain, but I believe so.”

Relief flooded Warren’s face. He was glad he hadn’t waited any longer to seek the (witch!) doctor’s help. Amy was the only family he had left. He would kill himself if she died.

“We’ll try not to let that happen,” Angela unthinkingly responded and had to force herself to keep working as if nothing had happened. He’d just gotten his confirmation.

Warren froze.

She ignored her pounding heart and the sound of glass breaking in one of the rooms above them. “I need some things. Two bowls of hot water, rags, and a sheet.”

Warren exchanged awkward looks with the other men before turning to Aaron. “Get what she needs from my share of the supplies.”

The man moved reluctantly and Warren turned to Angela, willing himself to ignore her pull, to feel only loathing for her strangeness. He could have in the old world. He’d been so strong then! He had been high in the parish before the war, a stoutly religious widower for a decade. It was a long time to go without even the soft caress of a woman’s hand, let alone any intimate contact. Then the war and this woman had come together. Years spent resisting sins of the flesh should have prepared him, but now, when The Judgment had come and gone, leaving his faith crumbled at his feet, this demon had been sent to tempt him...and her lure was stronger than any he’d ever known!

These men might have already forced anyone else to stay here. The medical skills were as valuable as water, but Angela was different. She knew things there was no way she could, unless the Demon of Souls possessed her. All the men, especially Warren, dreamed of claiming her and controlling that unknown power.

Angela kept busy laying out what she needed and avoided making contact with any of the pitifully thin men ogling her every move. She had never seen young males here and suspected that was on purpose, like in the old Mormon colonies where the average marrying age for a girl had been thirteen.

Angela discreetly let the witch inside listen to Warren's thoughts. The big decisions in this group belonged to him. She knew he wanted to keep her here for himself—that his warnings came from hoping she would accept his offer of protection so that he wouldn't have to fight the others for her. The men of the world were now like the animals—in extreme competition for a mate (slave, whore)—and she knew if she encouraged even one of these starving contestants, they would all begin fighting over her. Humankind had fallen backward in evolution to nearly the caveman days, and she needed to be as impersonal as she could.

“I'm giving her three shots. One's for the pain. Don't mix any other dope with it, even if she cries. She's too weak for the stronger stuff. One will help fight the infection, and this last one will bring down the fever. She should probably have a tetanus shot too, but not for a few days.”

She did it quickly, feeling the father wince behind her, but the little girl didn't react at all. “Now, we'll dig that piece of metal out of her shoulder.”

Warren came to help, leaning closer than she was comfortable with.

Angela was glad she was able to force herself to control her flinch. Showing weakness here was a mistake.

“Have you heard anything from your Marine?”

Warren saw the woman tense for a split second, considering her options, and was impressed with the icy control that fell into place, even as he frowned. Did she know her man would be in danger the second he returned? There were already people watching.

“He’s on the road.”

There was only silence in response, and her worry grew.

It only took Angela a couple minutes to pull the small, rough piece of car hood from the child’s bleeding shoulder, clean the wound, and start putting in the neat stitches.

“I’ll leave medicine, but be careful of those lines. If they fade, she’s getting better. If they keep spreading, get her to me right away.”

Warren paled at the needle moving in and out of his daughter’s skin. In the heavy quiet, Angela heard the thoughts of the other men clearly.

That’s it. That’s his weakness.

Aaron was right. We’ll use the girl.

Angela wanted to warn the preacher that he was in danger, not for his sake but for his daughter’s, and it was a struggle to remain silent as she peeled off the gloves and gathered her supplies.

When she turned, Angela didn’t meet his eyes. “Keep her lying down when you can and try to feed her more. You know where I’ll be if you need me.”

Angela felt the tension thicken as she turned toward the door. The two men plotting against the preacher were blocking her way out, had witnessed more in her reaction than she’d wanted them to. As she had the thought, Aaron joined them.

“You’ll be here!” the bald man informed her hatefully, moving closer. “You’re not leaving!”

Angela swallowed bitter fear, but followed the demon’s voice that said to stand pat, to call their bluff. “Move and I’ll hold my tongue.”

Seeing only fear in their body language, Angela realized they were sidekicks with no real kick to them. “Let me by. I already have an owner.”

Aaron’s bitter face twisted at the reminder of her man, the Marine. “Not anymore! You’re mine!”

As he grabbed her arm, the terror was nearly overwhelming, but the years spent in hell allowed Angela to handle herself. These men were threats. Her man was deadly...and not here to stop her from using her gifts.

Closing her eyes, Angela concentrated, and raw power began to hum through the cold lobby of the college.

Aaron’s face changed from anger to terror as he glanced down and found steam rising from where their skin had made contact.

He jerked away, gasping at the sight of red and black blisters forming on his skin. “She burned me!”

He spun toward the other men, who saw nothing but flinched anyway, and Angela headed for the glass doors, heart racing. She kept herself from running only because of the voice whispering that if she showed fear to a dog, it would bite. It was simply in its nature.

“Stop her!” Aaron screamed it at the others.

When the two men came toward her, Angela froze. It wouldn’t take much kick to do her in, but if she let the witch out, used her power, someone might die.

Trust me, the witch whispered from inside her mental cage. *I’ll only help you.*

Scared and unsure, Angela let the demon come forward for the first time in over a decade, but kept a tight hand on the cell door.

The witch locked eyes with Warren. “Defend what you believe to be yours, man of a silent God!”

The command was one the widower couldn’t refuse, and he stepped between Angela and the two men reaching out to take her arms. “She’s mine!”

The two teachers only hesitated for a second, but it was enough time to give Warren the edge. The religious man had survived the jungles of Laos, and he planned his actions, steeling himself to fight for her.

During this drama, Aaron stumbled from the room, slinging his arm around wildly to dislodge the bugs that only he could see.

The two men reached for Angela again, and Warren swung, knocking the rival on the right off his feet. He kneed the moaning man in the face and swung again, ducking a clumsily thrown punch. The second hit landed on the other teacher's temple, knocking him to the dirty floor, where he stayed.

“Mine!”

Breathing rapidly, the preacher turned to Angela, but she cut him off. “Your reward is information. Those two,” she waved a hand at the unconscious men, “and Aaron, plot against you. Be careful. Between them and the cold in here, you’ll be dead inside a month.”

Shoving the witch back, Angela slipped past him and out the door. Raised voices came from the dim lobby behind her, and she moved steadily but kept herself from running down the sloping, cracked pavement to her car. The pain in her gut, she ignored. There would be time to cry later.

Footsteps crunched, and she slowed a little to let Warren catch up, scanning the sickly crabgrass instead of the desperate faces of women and girls watching her exit from the upper windows of the college. The guilt was heavy, but she didn't stop. They needed a hero, and that, she wasn't.

“Thank you. I had no idea.”

She dug through her bag as Warren caught up. “There are still plenty of people left who are willing to sacrifice anyone to get what they want. That hasn't changed.”

The female healer handed over two small bottles of pills, being careful not to touch him. “Instructions are on the label.”

He pocketed the medication and opened the door of her muddy red Tempo, falling into the suitor mode he usually handled her with, so he could...what? Form a new plan? Probably.

“You’ll kill them?” she asked suddenly, hoping to get a genuine answer.

When he shook his greasy head, she knew he was about to lie.

“Vengeance belongs to God. I’ll vote against it.”

Angela said nothing, tensing instead at a distant gunshot before quickly sliding behind the wheel.

Warren saw her reaction as he shut the door and he leaned down. “You would be safe here with us, with me.”

Angela pretended not to hear the personal invitation or the threat, as she snapped on her belt. “I think of it sometimes, but I can’t. My man, he’s strict, like you. He said stay, so I will.”

The leader smiled at what he assumed was a compliment from a well-trained woman, age lines giving him the appearance of an evil cartoon badger. “You’re sure he will come?”

Angela struggled not to frown at Warren’s tone. She’d been right to be so careful. He was planning a murder to get her. “Yes.”

“You will go hunting for him, though, go to meet him?”

She shook her head, the lie and horrified tone falling easily from her heavy heart, “No, never. He said he’d come, and he will!”

There was such firmness in her words that Warren couldn’t hide his disappointment, and Angela looked away from the silent plea. She already had a jailor. She was careful not to wound his pride, however, knowing that could easily push him into trying to force her to stay, and then people would get hurt.

“You’ll bring her over next week for the shot?”

“Yes.”

The wind gusted suddenly through the open windows, the heavy draft catching her long braid, and his fingers were there to

catch it, holding its softness for a brief second before handing it back.

He forced their hands to touch and Angela smiled her thanks, stomach rolling.

She started the engine. She couldn't wait to be gone.

“You're sure she's not got the sickness?”

“Yes, she should be fine in a few days.” Angela lit a cigarette and stared everywhere except into his needy, intimidating face. Aaron had forced her to show that she would defend herself, but instead of the leeriness she'd been hoping for, the vibes from Warren were stronger. Had that been the plan all along? To discover what she was capable of?

“What do I owe you?”

“Nothing,” she answered, sounding calmer than she felt. “That world is gone. Come by next week.”

Angela shifted into gear and rolled slowly away, mind relieved when the preacher echoed her short wave without any signs that her quick exit had offended him. She hated to come down here, hated it that one of these times she might have to fight to get out, but Angela knew that even if they hadn't insisted, she would have come anyway. Her doctor's heart simply wouldn't let her do anything else. She would help everyone she could and pay the price later.

Angela breathed a sigh as the tall brick walls of the weather-beaten dorms fell out of sight in her mirror, but she didn't let her guard down as she drove past reeking slaughterhouses and burnt frames of homes and businesses. There were still other people around here, and they were all a threat to a woman alone.

Her gaze flicked over body after body as she drove, determining the cause of death: *gunshot, knife wound, the sickness, gunshot again*. Death came in many ways, and it wasn't only to the humans. Deer and cats were the most common corpses to represent the losses that the animal population was taking, but there were also squirrels, dogs, and even birds mixed

in. Angela forced her mind away from it all. Maybe it wasn't as bad wherever Charlie was right now.

Very little in the city where pigs fly had survived the riots, and as she drove, Angela heard no sparrows calling, no engines revving, no lawn mowers rumbling, no pets yapping, no voices shouting, and no horns blaring. There was only the occasional scream or gunshot to break the silence, and the destruction that grew worse the closer she got to downtown Cincinnati.

Debris crunched under her tires as she rolled past dark, reeking restaurants full of rotting food, and she winced at the sounds of glass breaking as she neared the library, where shadows shifted inside, trying to learn to fend for themselves. If she got a flat tire, she planned to abandon her car for another. There was no way her body was able to break the lug nuts loose. What she needed was a set of those new tires that would go an extra fifty miles even on a flat. Self-sealing or something, maybe even armor-plated if she could find it.

Her broken heart clenched at the thought, and she felt a tear slide down her cheek. What she needed most was to find the fourteen-year-old son she'd been apart from for months. It was killing her not to be with him, not to be able to hold him, and she wished with all her heart (along with almost everyone else on the planet) that the war had never come.

"Hold on, Charlie," she whispered roughly. "I will come for you!"

Angela tried to push the sadness away, flipping on the heater and defrost. She jumped as lightning forked wildly, the glare almost blinding. She drove a little faster around the telephone poles, burnt-out cars, busted furniture, and rotting corpses, feeling awful that so many people would never have the peace of being laid to rest.

She jumped again as the wind slammed against her car and a barrage of black hail pinged off the hood in nerve-wracking blasts, pulling her attention once more to the weather. The sky was a dim, grayish-brown, thick with layers of dust and smoke.

The storm clouds racing toward her went through the grit easily, and fat drops of rain pelted her hood and windows.

Following her instincts, Angela took refuge under the concrete viaduct as the storm bore down on the riot-ravaged city. It released sheets of black flakes that covered the streets, and torrents of rain that slowly began to wash away another layer of the dirt and blood that the end of the world had left behind.

Angela put the car in park and lit a smoke as the stench of fishy-shit from the nearby mill creek invaded the vehicle. She searched the crumbling, trashy buildings on either side of her, and her hand stayed near the gun between the seats. Now that she was alone again, her courage had deserted her and she was glad she had disobeyed Kenny and gotten a weapon on her last trip out.

You disobeyed Kenny? You're in trouble! You're in trouble! her fear screamed.

Angela nodded, blowing out rings of smoke. The entire world was in trouble now. These last weeks had been full of things she hoped never to tell her man. Kenny wouldn't understand her helping these people. If he had been here, things would have been different, but she'd been alone when the bombs fell, alone when the first desperate survivor had pounded on her door, and she'd made her choice alone.

The suffering was too great for her to deny them what little help she could give. Kenny would have turned them away with intimidating gestures and icy threats, but he was AWOL, and she couldn't sit by and let people die without trying to prevent it. She would face him with the entire list of rules she had broken when he found her, or when she found him, but for now, she wasn't done adding up crimes to be punished for. The two biggest transgressions, one of which he might kill her for, were still to come.

The storm flew by, the threat disappearing as quickly as it had come. Angela eased the car up Queen City's steep, narrow pavement, trying to avoid the big chunks of debris sliding

through the ripples of muddy water. Abandoned vehicles and wrecks had been pulled to the side of this winding hill, looking like lined-up dominoes waiting to be pushed over.

As with the rest of this broken city, Angela saw no signs of life trying to continue like normal as she drove through her own neighborhood, but she could feel people examining her from their barely cracked blinds. She was disappointed by it. She had hoped people would come together, but these survivors wanted nothing to do with her, only desired her to be gone, and she sped up, more than willing to comply.

She understood how they felt. She, too, hated going out; hated leaving the small security of her den, but Warren had cleared this hill so she could make the trip rather than forcing her to live with them. Saying no after that wasn't an option. When they called for her on the CB, she always answered, would have anyway without his threats and innuendos. Her Oath hadn't vanished with the war, but she sighed in relief when her three-story, yellow brick building came into view. Coming out was dangerous.

Angela swept the nearly identical rows of red brick duplexes that surrounded her, their matching mailboxes and light poles beaten, dented from enduring man and nature's fury. It was all the same.

Parking in the rear lot, next to the small flower garden, she sought the tiny grave tucked amid rows of purple violets, and grief enveloped her.

Her tiny, premature son had come in the dark, early morning hours after the war, lungs not ready to work on their own. Wrapped in the red, white, and blue quilt she had brought her first son home in, she had placed her baby in the cold, wet ground herself as an ugly dawn broke. Angela had never felt more pain than when she had covered him with the earth. Despite all her abilities, she hadn't been able to save her own child. Repairing grave damage was possible for her kind, but she couldn't replace what hadn't been given time to grow.

Barely registering the harsh wind gusts, the woman forced herself to go to the grave, to mourn and keep feeling the awful pain so that she could make peace with it. The blackness lurking in her mind wanted to block it and everything else out, but she knew it would take over completely if she let it, and then she would never be with her teenage son again. The darkness was too familiar, too comforting and consuming. She had already spent a decade in it as her life flew by, unable to change the awful mistake she had made by saying yes to Kenny.

The wind swelled, but she paid no attention, broken fingernails digging into the cold skin of her palms as she sank to her knees in front of the unmarked grave.

“My baby,” she whispered, tears spilling from dark lashes.

Four weeks had gone by, but it still felt like yesterday. She had wanted him so much! His father hadn’t, but she had.

Pain tearing through her battered heart, Angela let the darkness have its way for a while, her grief unbearable.

{ L }
{ SEP }

2

Bands of pain were clamping down on her stomach when Angela became aware of her surroundings again, and she eased down the thickly carpeted hallway stairs and unlocked the basement door. She slipped inside the pitch-blackness with a fearlessness that sometimes still surprised her. Angela had been terrified of the dark as a young girl, but she had spent so much time down here since the war that she didn’t need the penlight anymore.

Not reacting fast enough to stop it, the heavy door to the storage area slammed shut behind her, locking automatically. Angela winced at the noise, even though there was no one left here to tell on her and get her punished. Her entire building had emptied out rather quickly when the draft trucks had come through.

Listening intently, Angela scanned for intruders, but the witch was silent. She slowly started climbing over the debris to her hole-up with the same thought she always had: *Hate it here! Can't wait to roll!*

Angela proceeded toward the small wooden room hidden behind plastic-covered mattresses and box springs, sliding inside the warmth with an unconscious sigh of relief. She locked the door, and stepped carefully over the bags and boxes littering the eight-by-six-foot storage room that was her den.

Angela's legs were trembling as she lit the lantern on the floor in the rear corner. She was almost shivering despite the warmth of her blanket-covered area, and her body's reaction confirmed her decision. It would be at least three more weeks before she could leave. Her body wasn't strong enough to make the trip yet.

Angela tightened her grip on her emotions, heart screaming at how long it was taking. She swept the circled date of 2/12 on the calendar, and scowled at it in frustration. Twenty-five more days of not having even a picture on her walls. Warren was watching for her men, and she wouldn't make it easy for him.

Shivering and hurting, Angela pushed off her muddy shoes and socks, then replaced her wet, dirty clothes with clean. She lit the propane stove at her feet, very glad of the extra cylinders she had found with the handy appliance. It, along with a few other useful survival items, had come easily enough from the basement room of a Goodwill store, but she was daunted by the size of the list she'd prepared for her trip. She wasn't sure she would be able to find it all.

"At least I'm not starving," she muttered, thinking of the first few agonizing days after losing her son, when she'd forced herself to use the power and water while they still worked. She had cooked and dehydrated weeks of food, and frozen large chunks of ice that had lasted for days in her coolers when the utilities finally went off for good on New Year's Eve. The hour-long blackouts before that had warned her to hurry.

Cramps exploded in her belly as Angela bent down to pour the boiling water into her mug, and she clenched her teeth.

Suck it up! Her mind tossed out one of Kenny's favorite responses to her discomfort...

Pain, the witch insisted. *He caused us pain.*

Angela settled herself on the knee-high stack of cushions. She had been living down here since burying her baby boy and had to actually force herself not to clean the plush, two-bedroom apartment above her despite how angry Kenn would be to discover it messy. It needed to appear abandoned to anyone who might wander in.

The doctor swallowed two pills, grimacing as they went down awkwardly. Gun in her robe pocket, she set the portable radio/TV on the pillows next to her. She sipped and flipped through stations, trying not to be disappointed when there was only static. She hadn't expected anything else. It was obvious that normal life was gone. For how long, was really the only unknown.

The last sad voice she'd heard had been on B105 last week, telling of hundreds of millions dead and dying, advising people to go into the caves and mountains. Angela had a good plan, but she also knew the witch she had been born with was right about her needing help. She had little chance of making it all the way on her own, no matter how many delusion spells she could cast. It didn't work on everyone, and it was a long trip. Over twelve hundred miles straight through, with detours, it would be more like fifteen hundred or even two thousand miles with no outside energy to feed the witch. She would have to rely on her natural strength.

Sighing, Angela switched the radio to the TV setting. She had hoped to make at least fifty miles a day at first, putting her on base in a month, but after a four-hour trip to get to the local store, which had already been cleaned out, she understood that making even twenty miles a day would be hard. It now came to

roughly three months on the road, and her mother's heart cried out again. *So long and so many of the odds are against me!*

Gets better when you call the boy's real daddy, the witch seduced, sending her memories of cool Harrison nights and the softest, blackest hair she'd ever felt until their son was born.

Angela shut her eyes as pain filled her as if it had happened yesterday. She'd never forgotten how it felt to belong to Marcus Brady.

Call him. He's restless, adrift. He will come, the witch insisted.

The woman huddling in the nicely warming storage room gave the idea serious consideration this time, instead of pushing it away in fear. Marc was also a Marine, had been for a long time, and she had no doubt he could make the trip. More importantly, he owed her.

You can't! fear warned. *Kenny will kill you both!*

Angela stretched carefully, wincing at a bolt of pain in her gut. He would probably try. Kenny would think they had been having an affair all along, even though she hadn't seen Marc in almost fifteen years. There was an undeniable spark between her and Marc, and Kenny would detect it right away.

Not that it mattered. She'd made her choice, and she would face the consequences when the time came. Nothing would keep her from her son, not after all that she had lost, and maybe, just maybe, Kenny could be surprised into making a mistake not only by Marc's presence, but also by how much she had changed. The witch inside was awake. She was a slave no more, and Kenny would find out very quickly that she wouldn't resume her old life of bondage.

First, she had to have time to heal. Angela was scared that even if she managed to leave Ohio without Warren and the others stopping her, she wouldn't be able to handle the trip itself. If surviving in one place was now this hard, how bad would the three-month journey across this broken land be? She needed help, and there was no one else she could call. Marc had to come.

But not yet, she told the witch and the heart that had both jumped eagerly. She would call out to him when she was ready, and that wasn't today.

Angela lit a cigarette and blew out thick smoke rings that stayed intact until they hit the big brown blanket hanging over the thin wooden door. She had been an abused animal in a luxury cage, and it had happened fast. Her gift (*curse, Kenny always called it my curse*) was the end root of their fights: what he wanted her to do with it. After a while, the demon inside had gone to sleep, locked behind a thick steel door to prevent Kenny from using the power to satisfy his own selfish, petty desires.

And Angela had spent a decade in hell because of it. There had only been two things she had kept from him during their long, hard years together—her abilities and the name of her baby's father. Everything else had been under Kenny's unforgiving control each waking moment and many of the sleeping ones too.

Until the war.

Being alone while her world was blown away had ripped off the locks on the witch and the old Angela. The twisted, slotted cell door was barely standing, and the dark, shifting spirit behind that thin shield whispered almost constantly to her now, guiding her.

Angela found it easy to listen; still surprised to look inside and discover the courage she had been forced to lock away. She was suddenly allowed to be her own person again, to make her own choices based on what she wanted and needed, including exploring these things that she could do...and of that, there was a lot.

Her gifts had aged well in storage. Most of it was random, coming and going without control, but she was learning to direct it again, to concentrate and get what she needed—to trust the powers inside. When the demon voice spoke, she listened.

The witch said it was fated for a new, more careful world to replace the old, but when Angela asked if her own small family

would be a part of that peaceful population, there was only darkness.

Chapter Five
Marc and Dog

January 28th
West Virginia

1

“**H**ell...”

Marc knew it was a bad idea as soon as the front tires of his muddy SUV eased out onto the mostly clear suspension bridge. He could feel the way it vibrated in the heavy wind, but the waters had risen while he slept and left only this way out.

The iron grates under the Blazer groaned, their supports completely covered in slushy, menacing debris as he neared halfway...then they gave.

Crack! Rreeenntpp!

The solidness under his wheels tilted suddenly, and one of the two foundations slid enough to pull the bars out of the other bank, rocking the bridge like a child’s racetrack.

The Blazer tilted violently and the guardrail began ripping away with horrible grinding noises, cables snapping like string.

Marc hit the gas, aiming for the end that was now dropping heavily toward the shallow side of the dammed-up Black River.

“Semper Fi!”

Dust and debris flying, the Blazer leapt off the bridge’s lowered side and dropped into the foot of rushing water like a lead ball. It crushed the front bumper and tossed up a spray that drenched both driver and vehicle.

Pulled along with the swift current, Marc rolled the front windows down; surprised the engine hadn’t stalled yet. Slinging his kit over one broad shoulder, the grunt ignored the water

rushing inside and aimed for the steep bank he knew he had no chance of climbing with his vehicle.

Wincing at the cracking sounds of the bridge behind him, the furious yapping of the big animal in the passenger seat confirmed what he already knew. They were in trouble.

“Dog, out!”

Marc shoved his six foot, two hundred twenty-five pound frame through the window an instant after the wolf did. They jumped down into the icy water as the bridge finally collapsed, and the wall of liquid death lunged forward.

Marc scrambled up the slick, muddy bank, taking rope from his kit and working it into a lasso. He threw it as the surging water hit the slowly moving Blazer and rolled it like a White Castle box in the wind.

The thick rope sailed over a charred pole, and Marc hoped it was anchored deep enough into the ground as he quickly tied the rope around his waist. Then the water came thundering like an army, and submerged him.

Unable to breathe or protect himself from all the debris in the nasty liquid that slammed into him mercilessly, Marc controlled the panic. The pole trembled under the pressure of the rushing Black River, wood vibrating against his hip and he used it to shield himself from the bigger chunks. Lungs hurting, Marc drew his knife, ready to cut free if the pole came out of the ground.

The pole shifted suddenly and tilted, and then he could breathe again as the first tall wave rolled by.

Coughing, spitting, and sliding in the gelatinous slop, Marc cut himself free, and moved to safety as quickly as he could. Yet another lesson learned in this harsh new homeland—*bridges are not safe.*

Marc made it to higher ground, shivering in the cold wind as Dog danced in the mud around his ankles. Lungs aching, Marc stumbled away from the crumbling bank. Quickly jerking on his long coat from his kit, he watched the fast-moving water. With the barrier gone, it would now flow downstream and rise up to

spill over weakened banks before seeping into the next town, the way it had been in nearly every other place he'd come through. Nature was quickly reclaiming her property.

Marc took a long glance around as he got his breath back, deciding where he would make camp and wait out the water. The Blue Ridge Mountains were east, rolling peaks of foggy blue under a wide purple and yellow sunset that was marred by angry gray layers that never faded. South was dipping valleys, hills full of tobacco fields, and Virginia white pines. That was where he had come from and those empty, snowbound towns had given him nothing to take hope from.

West was another community whose name he couldn't recall, and the newly released water was already overwhelming it. He saw no one fleeing the filling houses and businesses, though, and grunted unhappily. The Sitrep was bleak. A situation report from the North, then.

Maybe a full click above him, a small white building with a large silver cross beckoned in the dim distance, pristinely perched on top of a large, muddy hill. The building was backdropped by cherry and wild crabapple trees, and again, only the gritty sky spoiled the perfect picture of safety in the wilderness.

Shrugging at the irony—Marc hadn't been in a church since being robbed of his dreams—he strode that way searching for anything that might be trouble. Seeming empty didn't make it so.

Dog, who came almost to his hip, stayed close, occasionally growling his dislike at the now softer rumble of the river.

Head starting to hurt, Marc foraged in his kit for a pain pill, and swept the small town around him. The outskirts of Franklin (identified by the sign on a nearby street corner) looked mostly untainted. Surrounded by neat white homes and white picket fences, his gaze flicked from untouched manger scenes to the Christmas lights that still decorated most of the area. Not much damage. Were there people here?

Marc listened intently but heard only wind. The silence pressed in as if something was wrong, but other than the river trying to kill him, it was the same here as in every small town he had passed through since the war—empty, over.

He scouted the next intersection, attention caught by a charred metro bus still full of rotting corpses, and he was thrown back in time to his escape, to his first brush with the walking dead...and to what he'd encountered when he rolled out from under the bus.

“Help!”

“Oh my God!”

“Aahhh!”

Marc stared in horror at the people stumbling past the bus as he stood up. Soldiers and civilians alike, faces bloody, stumbling blindly...some shooting at random.

“Help!”

“No!”

The screams were deafening and there were other noises too, ones that made him want to sick his guts up, but the gunfire was the clearest to his trained mind.

Marc eased away from the walking corpses who were now firing out of reflex, mowing down others like themselves.

Eyes wide and feet unsteady, Marc scanned for even one other survivor, but found only more breathing dead.

He turned suddenly, sensing movement.

“Uhhh!” Marc threw himself away from the outstretched fingers of a uniformed man tightly gripping a pistol.

He tripped over a bloody pile and landed hard on his ass.

“Please, what happened?”

The soldier's deadened orbs dripped blood. It ran over his lashes and cheeks in small torrents, and Marc hesitated, almost overcome with his first ever case of panic. This wasn't a foreign land—it was America!

“I can hear you breathing, you know,” the Army man stated almost casually.

Marc watched the scarlet drops roll from his dead sockets, creeping down his cheeks to hit the dirt before disappearing—all of it seeming to be happening in slow motion. “W-war...a bomb.”

“But where? North or south?”

Marc considered, aware that a muscle in the blind man’s jaw had begun to twitch erratically while he waited for the answer.

“South.”

“I thought so,” the soldier’s voice was without emotion. “Thank you.”

Calmly, without any indication he was going to, the wounded man raised the gun to his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Blood sprayed wildly, raining across Marc’s face, and he took off running, trying not to scream and not sure if he was succeeding.

Crunchhh!

The sound of the water further destroying the debris it had collected pulled Marc from the flashback, and he wished the images would go away. He had begun moving carefully on foot after that, trekking determinedly to the family home, only to discover no one there despite the funeral being set for that very day. The house had no signs of a hasty retreat, no letters of explanation, and there were no fresh graves at the family plot. What had happened?

Marc swept the city limits of Franklin, drawn to the hills. He lingered on the cemetery, its iron gates surrounded by decaying bodies, few of them wrapped. No one had known what to do with their dead. Neither had Marc. He almost hadn’t come home at all...

“I’m sorry, Marine.” The base commander clapped him on the shoulder sympathetically.

Marc stuffed the legal letter into the garbage can they were standing next to as other men moved by. Drill calls and mess bells echoed throughout the brick halls of the base.

“Thank you, sir.”

His superior regarded him for a long moment, clearly unsure of his man’s mood. “I’ve scheduled your leave for the funeral. Starts ASAP.”

Marc wasn’t sure if he would go, wasn’t sure why he suddenly felt like a little kid afraid of the dark. It was just his mother.

“Thank you, sir,” he repeated automatically.

“She the visitor you refused last month?”

“Yes, sir.”

Marc didn’t offer any details, even though he knew the Base Commander didn’t take a personal interest in just anyone. He had refused Mary’s visit every time she came, hadn’t spoken to her, even by mail, in over a decade, and now that she was dead, he still hated her. Because of what she’d cost him. The last time they’d seen each other was right before his first hitch was up. Thanks to the threat of charges being filed, he hadn’t been allowed to leave the base before then, and that final conversation had been short and cold.

“So, you can come home now,” Mary said as she viewed him.

Marc was silent as he sat stiffly across from her.

“The harlot ran to the heathen city right after you...came here, so she won’t be a temptation, but you’ll have to—”

“No.”

Her age-lined face flew to his and then to the hands on the table that were clenching in anger.

“No, what?”

Marc leaned closer, loathing her. She hadn’t changed. Her glasses were still crooked, her face just as indifferent. He read no regret or even understanding in her cold blue depths, no caring

for the life that she had taken, denied him. “I’m not coming home. Ever.”

Her expression stunned, Mary’s hand fell to the worn Bible in her lap, and Marc stood up. “You put me here, took away what I loved, and now that I’m twenty-one, I don’t need you or have to listen to you. Forget my name. You’re dead to me.”

Crack!

Marc spun, .45 in hand, and the wolf bristled alertly at his side.

The reeking water was destroying more debris that was flowing downstream and Marc shook his head at his jumpiness. He got moving again toward the white church that was a mile away. He had taken the leave to attend his mother’s funeral and instead found himself alone in the place that had never been his home. The only living thing he’d encountered was Dog curled up on the front porch, the blood in his fur still tacky.

As if he knew I was coming. Marc thought of the window the wolf had broken through. The torn-up basement was the only damage he’d found in the whole house. Not even the door had been kicked in, so he didn’t think his family had been taken in the Draft. The fact that they had put Dog in the basement suggested something darker, but he pushed the renegade thoughts away, not feeling the urge to search for any of them. They hadn’t been true family in a long time. If they had found safety and hadn’t wanted him there, so be it. They were the last group of people he would want to survive with anyway.

Guilt and awful loneliness reared its head, reminding him it hadn’t yet gone away, and Marc forced himself to lock down on those thoughts as he taught others to do. For them, it was to keep from being distracted and blowing their mission. He did it now to keep from drowning under a tide of guilt.

Fresh waves of emotion threatened, and Marc forced his mind away again, hating that tiny, ashamed part of him that was glad she had died unhappy. He had spent more than a decade

living that way, and it was only fair his mother should feel some of it, since she was the one responsible.

Marc had wandered a little after discovering nothing at home, but it hadn't taken long for him to become restless and start hunting for people, for his own kind. He had once been sworn to his country, and while he still wore his tag beneath his fatigue shirt and long black leather trench coat, the America he had served was busy dying. It was crushing that there was nothing he could do to stop it. Marc had no real desire to return to his base in New Mexico, either, and now that the future was so grim, he was sure he wouldn't. The whole world was FUBAR. Everything and everyone he had ever known was gone.

Are you sure?

The cold wind pushed against him, mocked him as they proceeded up the last quarter mile of steep hillside at a quick pace. He looked down at the big wolf. "Hell of a start to the day, Dog."

The animal peered up at the sound of Marc's voice, and then resumed smelling the bare, damp ground. The wolf didn't follow any of the scents he picked up, though, and kept heeling as if he were a well-trained pet, though one could tell at first glance that he wasn't.

Where to go next was the most pressing choice now. Marc wasn't worried about losing his supplies and transportation, though he would miss the thick sleeper tonight. The rest of his preferred loadout was in the kit slung over his shoulder. Physically, he could do fine alone. He always had. Mentally, things were more complicated. He didn't like people, didn't need them most of the time, but he did need a goal. The urge to serve his country was still there, and he couldn't do it by himself. He had a good idea where many of the survivors had gone; the heartbreaking notes and letters on cars, on doors, and blowing with the wind were everywhere—and they pulled at him. After the first dozen, Marc had forced himself not to read anymore,

knowing if he did, he would spend the rest of his life trying to reunite these broken families.

Most survivors had gone to ground. Caves and sewers were the most mentioned, but flooding and collapses made that feel like a bad choice. Even if the flooding missed them and the cold didn't freeze or starve them, the poisons now circling the globe were as big a threat below, as above the surface. How long would a contaminated planet allow them to survive no matter where they were?

Marc had slowly traveled northwest, checking places like White Sulphur Springs and the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, hoping to discover recent signs of normal (what a joke!) life, but he no longer expected to find large groups of people trying to rebuild together. It was more than the awful devastation that made him think so—it was what was missing that worried him the most.

The world felt and sounded empty. There were no noises other than the wind and the water, not a single human voice or life continuing in the same tradition, and there was no signs of the bastards who let it all happen, either. The government was still not in attendance, and the people Marc had served for all those years would never sit idly by and let the survivors have control of the topside, poisoned or not.

There should have been emergency broadcasts; signs; flyers; and people taking pictures, measuring, and monitoring, all dressed in little white space suits, and yet there was nothing. There should have been soldiers in jeeps, all with itchy trigger fingers and bullhorns, giving orders and not really helping...but there was only silence.

There should have been aid stations set up, Red Cross units overloaded with patients to be examined, tested, recorded, and left to die. The healthier ones would be kept close enough to force them to beg for handouts, so the scientists could keep studying the effects, and Marc was suddenly sure he couldn't

ever do that, would die first. Not that it mattered now. The government that had killed so many had likely died with them.

“Where to?” He ran a hand over soaked black hair. Where would normal people gather? In stadiums or maybe even malls...

Marc tensed suddenly, some part of him registering the change, a note to the wind that hadn't been there before. Almost as if someone was calling for him, hunting.

“Marcus...”

He swung around, drawing drenched leather as he searched in surprise for whoever he'd let sneak up on him. He frowned when he saw nothing but dogwood flowers and the decaying bodies of two songbirds lying in the yellowish grass. He could have sworn... His heart thumped as his mind matched the face to the voice, coming up with the one he had banished to his dreams so long ago.

“You'll love me forever?” the girl asked as she let go of the blanket, terrified to trust.

The boy grinned as he pushed gently between her long legs. “Just that long. Not a second more.”

The girl smiled happily, leaning up to meet his thrust. As he kissed her, teenage body on fire, the boy knew instinctively nothing in his adult life would ever be this good. She was perfect...his. He would never let her go!

Marc's heart clenched with old longing, and the wolf whined uneasily at his master's pain. It was a wound that time hadn't healed.

2

Finally reaching the small building on the hill, Marc fell into Marine mode as he squared away the small church (empty, thankfully) and tiny shed that was attached. Once satisfied he was alone, he put down alarms. A Marine always carried an

emergency kit, and Marc was aware that his training would make this new world easier for him than for most. He'd been playing wars for years.

Marc exchanged fresh fatigues for his soaked, torn clothes and tied his holsters snugly over his thighs. While he changed, Marc listened, but heard nothing except the river that was already several feet deep around distant maple trees and column-supported buildings. He hadn't thought to miss the sound of another human voice, and it was a surprise to the loner inside.

Changed and warming up, he scanned the water still rushing downstream, evaluating. His breathing was normal, heart in his chest where it belonged, and other than a couple of bruises and scratches, he was unharmed—hadn't even swallowed any of the nasty liquid. He also still had his hat—the string around his neck had kept it from being washed away, and Marc tried hard not to dwell on what could have been. Had he reacted a little slower on the bridge, he would be dead. It was a hard, new world, one where some days were harder than the others were.

He had come one hundred thirty miles in the seven weeks since finding the family home deserted, and the bodies were what bothered him more than even the constant reek of smoke and rot. They were in every place he'd been: stores, stations, cars, and homes. Men, women, kids, elderly—all shocking to glimpse in even one American city, let alone all of them. Marc fought the urge to give them the burials they deserved, knowing that, as with the letters and notes, if he buried even one, he would spend the rest of his life on it.

The realist inside knew that gradually, terribly, Mother Nature would run her course. The cadavers would all disappear into the ground, into dens and burrows, and then into hungry stomachs. But it would always be obvious that a harsh and violent struggle for survival had swept this country from coast to coast. So much death and destruction, even in places that had no actual bomb damage!

Fires were the most common cause of this devastation: town after town reduced to darkened, shadowy frames, the victims of arson. *This new world is a bed pisser's wet dream and a King horror novel, all mixed*, Marc thought.

He hated the helpless feeling it gave him to roll through these places. They reminded him of his nightmares of the walking dead from the bus, and the soldier who'd killed himself. In his dreams, the dead followed him relentlessly with their not so funny, stumbling walk—pushing until the cold ocean waves lapped at his feet, the water the only place left to go.

Marc sighed and lit a Winston with hands that stank of fish rot. Where was he supposed to go? Even the radiation was already showing up. The mice in West Virginia were twice their normal size, and—

Marcus...

He didn't draw his drenched gun this time. There was no one around here. Marc waved a finger at the softly growling wolf to quiet him.

“Is someone there?” he called anyway, feeling foolish. There was a hint of vanilla, sweet and never forgotten, floating by on the wind. “Angie?”

There was only silence, and Marc grinned sadly. He'd been alone too long. He was the last person she would call. There was no...

Marcus! I need you!

The words seemed to go right by his ear this time, searching, making his breath catch.

“Must be going nuts,” he muttered, heart screaming in joyful recognition.

You owe me!

Marc winced at the accusation, the reminder, and stopped denying, understanding that the time he had feared (and longed for!) was here. Angie was finally calling in his marker, and that debt could never be repaid.

Not letting his practical (male) side get in the way, Marc closed his eyes and concentrated as she had taught him so long ago. He was unable to keep from wondering if the water had gotten him, and this was the afterlife with an angel's voice leading him to hell.

You can't go yet. Not until you help me. Help us.

The voice in his mind (*Angie's voice! It's Angie!*) was clear, as if they were on a phone. He found it helped to pretend they were as his headache increased, throbbing at his temples. Was he injured? It would explain this.

Marcus...

"What do you need?"

My life back.

Marc jerked as if slapped, thrown into the past, and the note of desperation in her voice pulled at a place in his heart that he was unable to resist.

I need you. Will you come?

"As quickly as I can." This would be the fastest swoop he'd ever made. In addition, this fast journey over a short amount of time would be done alone, without the support of his team. "Tell me where."

Ohio. Cincinnati.

Marc's heart pounded faster. He had been there once before. "Two weeks, Angie, maybe less."

A relieved blast of energy exploded from her end.

Marc swayed on his feet as her light sank into him, stopping the aching. It had been fifteen years since he'd felt it.

You have to hurry...

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

There was no answer, just a dead line, and though he tried repeatedly, there was only silence.

Marc rubbed the wolf's tense ears, not missing the eagerness in the animal's golden orbs. Clearly, Dog had felt her pull too, and Marc struggled to control the heart that suddenly felt alive again. Angie had called for him!

He had a reason to go on living.

Chapter Six

The Enemy and the Traitor

January 29th
Outside Trinidad, Colorado

1

“Not again.” Rick moved toward the center of the large, reeking camp as he fought against the sharp Colorado wind. “I won’t do it.”

He knew why he’d been called to the boss’s tent. Trinidad, Colorado was big, and the survivors there had the town barricaded with machine guns that were constantly manned. The evil troll wanted him to be the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Again.

Walking steadily, the white man kept to himself, pretending not to understand the lazy Spanish insults from those he passed. The faint noise of crying and begging was nearly overshadowed by the lustful shouts of men and the excited yapping of dogs. *Mexican R & R*, Rick thought.

His pale skin was out of place, his life constantly in danger in the slaver camp, and Rick liked it. The white women here didn’t feel the same. The few being allowed to sit in the open air were chained to their masters, and they observed Rick go by with open contempt on their battered faces. These were the favorite girls, the ones whose bodies would be left on the side of the highway in a week or a month, instead of tonight or tomorrow.

Rick stopped in front of a crooked tent and tapped on the flap before shoving his cold hands into the pockets of his dirty jeans. Most of Cesar’s men were drunk and in a good mood—the church they’d desecrated in Santa Fe four days ago had been full of women and kids who’d gone there for sanctuary—but it wasn’t a

friendly mood. The tremors in Rick's stomach doubled as the first flakes of black snow began to fall. What did these brutal invaders know that he didn't?

Gunshots echoed loudly from the other end of the carelessly sprawled out camp, followed by a young scream. The wind gusted smoke from neglected campfires as men hit, women bled, and the snow clouds rolled over the dark landscape. South was where they'd been. North was where they were going. The firelight of Trinidad was a tempting dim glow through the distant trees.

"Wait." The Mexican leader's cold tone carried to his men, and Rick saw the widening grins of the two dozen or so watching men.

They dressed like Spanish bandits with their crisscrossed belts and wide-brimmed sombrero's. They also acted like them, enjoying any chance to make him squirm. They wanted him to know that only Cesar's orders kept him from the fate of all the other white males they'd found.

Tense but not scared, Rick watched them right back, daring. He might be an outside member, but Rick was also Cesar's personal property and the short, stocky leader would kill anyone who touched what was his. It kept Rick from the horrible death they often threatened, but it didn't stop him from being beaten.

The freed inmate wasn't exactly sure what it was that kept him here. There had been plenty of chances to escape, but Rick hadn't even tried. Maybe it was the lack of rules or how he felt more alive than ever before (like a real man should feel!) as he stayed among these violent killers, keeping his life where no other white men had so far.

Rick sighed, turning from an icy blast of wind. Maybe he had a death wish. He was sure that eventually he would be eliminated, but for now, he was surviving where no one else could, and he straightened his shoulders. They could only kill him once.

He swept lumps in the darkness, seeing jackrabbits, bats, larks, and people. Hell, a quick bullet to the temple or knife to the throat might be easier than what the rest of the world was suffering.

“Come in, Reechar.”

Rick’s attention snapped back to why he had been called, and there was a battle in his mind as he entered, debating his decision. Vaguely glad to be out of sight of the unshaven, dirty slavers who were camped directly on the dark concrete lanes of US 25 as if they owned it, he saw that the tent was the same. Only the bait was different.

The first time Cesar had called him here, Rick had been so relieved to be spared that he’d agreed without thinking. *Salem.*

Time slowed as he remembered...

Rick tightened his grip on the struggling, naked female beneath him, smelling Cesar’s cigar as he leaned in and pinched the girl’s nose shut.

“You wish to live, yes?”

Rick couldn’t stop and he jerked forward, wincing at the scream as he buried his hard flesh in the struggling body under him.

“I know,Americano, and you will.”

The slaver’s blade went against his throat, sharp knife pricking the skin with each stroke, and Rick moaned, scared and on fire.

“If you do what I want.”

Rick nodded carefully, struggling not to slit his own throat as he raped the naked woman Cesar had thrown into his arms. His hand slid around her neck to keep her from screaming again and to get a better grip.

“Wh...whatever you want!” he gasped, hips flashing.

“Squeeze harder,” the slaver ordered. “She breathes too easy.”

That had been in the heat of lust and fear. Now, it would be a morally conscious decision, and Rick wasn't sure which way he would fall, only that he would.

Cesar was on the bed, rolling a thick line of white powder into a blunt paper, something that Rick had never seen anyone do before. He waited just inside the awful-smelling mess, shifty green eyes going over the man in the dirty gray robe who claimed to be the bastard son of Fidel Castro.

Trying not to stare at the naked slave kneeling at her master's booted feet, his gaze swept filthy clothes, a blanket, and scraps of food. Her dog collar and chain purposely prevented the shivering girl from reaching any of the items.

Rick had time to think he liked the look of the heavy metal, and then reality crashed in on him.

"Reechard. It ees time to pay for the second month of life I have decided to give you." The Mexican accent was thick, but understandable.

Rick's stomach dropped the rest of the way. He rubbed his damp palms down dirty jeans, trying to cover his nervousness. "What do you want me to do?"

Slightly distracted, as he was meant to be, Rick tried hard to ignore the naked teenager and failed at it. He could see tears falling, but not the face covered by shiny brown curls.

"*Trinidad, Colorado*," Cesar sneered, making it ugly. "We will be there in a few days. You go with *la salida del sol*."

Although Rick said nothing, knowing not to tell the ruthless slaver he wouldn't leave at sunrise, Cesar peered at him in a warning.

The Mexican's left hand clenched into half a fist; two fingers on that side missing. "Sí?"

Rick dropped his eyes. "I can't do that."

The former janitor's voice was low and apologetic, making his five foot eleven, one hundred ninety pound frame appear much smaller as he stood in the flickering shadows. "I'm sorry. Not again. You'll have to kill me, I guess."

Cesar smiled, revealing a single gold front tooth that flashed in the dim lantern light of the drafty tent. “All in good time, Reecharde.”

Cesar waved a ringed finger, and his slave quickly climbed onto the large pile of blankets behind the ruthless man. She was clearly terrified, tender flesh shaking.

Rick felt a small measure of pity, but it was mostly drowned out by the envy that Cesar Castro Diaz was getting her all to himself when Rick hadn't had a woman since they'd left the prison and taken the first town. Salem, where he'd helped to kill them all.

There was a brief moment in time, a few seconds where Rick's attention was captured by the outside noises, and he thought of how bad and wrong it was here and had been in Arizona and New Mexico—he heard gunshots, a scream, a louder scream, a bigger gunshot...a fading scream. Then everything settled down to the dim quiet of the bait-girl's shallow, fearful breathing and the howling of the storm now starting to beat against the tent around them.

“Reecharde.” It was an ugly tone, hinting at the slight insanity most of Cesar's men suspected, respected.

“I can't. They're my own people.”

The Mexican's eyes narrowed and a blue vein began to stand out on his forehead. He pointed with his deformed hand. “Me salvó la vida! I spared your life! You will give me what I want!”

Rick kept his mouth shut and waited for the offer, sure there would be one. Why else had he been allowed to live, except to serve? He was a slave, like the women, only in a harder way.

Against his will, his gaze crawled over the freshly washed teenager again, though he knew it might get him in more trouble. He had never had one that young!

Cesar, whose Mexican nickname was Hijo de la Muerte (Son of Death), waved a hand at the scared girl, “Arrodillarse.”

She immediately rolled over and pushed herself up, trembling as her breasts hung low.

Rick felt his mouth go dry, body twitching in response.

“You want her, sí?”

He nodded once, carefully. This female and all the leader’s young harem was off limits to everyone, with no exceptions.

“You will have her for doing what I want.”

Rick fell.

2

Cesar Diaz was a flesh peddler and wanted guerilla captain before the war. When all hell broke loose, he was already on his way to southern Arizona to rescue family being held in American detention centers. Raised at the knee of a dictator, Cesar has always hated America. He often dreamed of filling the United States with as many of his bastards as he could, hoping to leave it an occupied land. With the war, the border patrols vanished, and America was invaded.

Cesar does not have camp laws, doctors, or plans for organization, and he has no intentions of forming or finding these basics of society. He rules with brute force, and in his world, the strongest live and the weakest die, as they were meant to. When the war gave him the opportunity, he chose to spend his life conquering America. He has the full support of his men, most of whom he released from prisons and detention centers. That’s also where he found Rick, cowering in a broom closet after opening the front gates to let them in. The thirty-five-year-old ward of the state had been a janitor doing community service for attempted sexual assault on a teenager at the movie theater where he worked.

Cesar wanted to kill Rick, but his cousin José, one of those he’d come to release, told him of Rick giving extra supplies to the prisoners and reporting abuse by guards. Cesar decided to

spare him, feeling a debt, and he repaid it cruelly—by turning Rick into a traitor to his country.

Cesar's men aren't loyal, trusting, or trustworthy, but as a leader, Cesar is smart. To keep them in line, he makes sure his men have everything they want: freedom and adventure, whiskey and guns, and females—some of them not even old enough to have hair anywhere but their heads. It is all he has promised them and more.

This large group of hardened criminals is slowly traveling north, clearing towns along Interstate 25. They are emptying stores, burning businesses and homes, and, when they feel like it, entire neighborhoods of scared, defenseless survivors. Word is spreading from fleeing refugees, and communities are fleeing their homes together.

Most of the small groups in the slavers' path are doomed to fall easily, but some of those ill-fated survivors have barricaded their cities to make a stand. They will lose and pay the ultimate price, but like so many in this country's violent history, they will die fighting—as American heroes.

Chapter Seven

The Hero

Safe Haven Refugee Camp

Utah

1

The end of the world has given us a harsh, merciless existence, where nature tries hard to push humankind to the very brink of extinction. Everything is against us, between us...untold miles of lawless, apocalyptic roads wait for our feet, and the future, cold and dark, offers little comfort. Without CHANGE, there will be no peace...only Survivors. And I am determined to be one of them.

1/1/2013

It's been almost two weeks since the war, and I still can't believe my luck. Joe, a senior Greenpeace member, showed up late and heard me trying to dig my way out. There were no other survivors of the secret meeting. Why was I spared? I deserve to be under that house. My dreams always start with me in that basement, not sure if I'll live. Maybe I'll find answers there.

We're holed up in a barn with a tin roof, waiting out the storms, and I wonder if my companion hears any of what I dream about. It doesn't matter. Not much does now except making it to Little Rock. My grief for America is almost unbearable.

Adrian sighed, taking a swig from his canteen. The first depressing weeks had been strange, full of hard days of backbreaking labor and eerie nights of broken dreams where he

was in charge of a small group of survivors, fighting with everything he had to keep them alive and free. Instead of fading as his concussion and ribs healed, the images had gotten stronger, clearer.

There were glimpses of a bright future and horrible Ground Zeroes, and he had found himself thinking about it almost constantly when he was awake. He'd quickly understood how to do it, how to set up the foundation for a new democracy—sensing even then that the people he'd gather would have nothing but their lives—and the guilt of it, of knowing he might have prevented it all, would hold him after the twenty-hour days began to wear him down.

I was right, Adrian thought. He was well into one of those days now, the third this week.

1/4/2013

We hit Nellis today, and there's nothing left.

More worrisome, I think maybe I'm sick. I'm seeing things Joe doesn't, hearing voices. I find odd colors in new places; stare at people who glow like neon bulbs from dark and empty windows. There are words in the trees and movies in the gritty clouds, puddles with reflections... I may be having a breakdown.

It's barely a scratch on what I deserve.

1/5/2013

It's getting worse. The people we're discovering, the awful, pain-filled refugees still trying to find each other, haunt me.

They fall to their knees at my feet, beg me with tears and outstretched hands to help, to save them, and then I blink, and realize they never even looked at us! What the hell is happening to me? A side effect of one of the experiments? Am I in a coma somewhere and this is all one of my horrid nightmares? How I wish that were true. I'd gladly trade my life for America's.

I share the blame for all the pain and death. I should have revealed who I was when there might have been a chance to stop it all. The need to atone is consuming, overwhelming, and I can't make enough progress each day to be satisfied. The worry is endless.

1/7/2013

The dreams are slowly convincing me I'm not crazy, demanding I take action. I remember each scene in such vivid detail when I wake! Even in the clear light of day, they feel right to me.

I owe the whole world a debt, but to my country, I owe everything that I am...even the one waiting for me in Arkansas. My mother was right all along. I have to try to save America.

I've decided to start in the morning, when we reach Las Vegas. That infamous skyline is dark now, but in the city that never sleeps, there are people. I know. I can feel them.

Adrian crushed out his smoke, thinking he'd been right and wrong on that one. He'd found refugees who were grateful for his help, but he had also found Tonya, who killed Joe.

Adrian flipped the page. Too bad he couldn't prove it. The topless dancer had immediately pounced on who she thought was in charge, while Adrian was just starting to realize the job belonged to him. By the time Tonya had understood the goodhearted alcoholic firefighter was only interested in drinking, screwing, and forgetting, she was openly sleeping in his bed and fetching his bottles.

Adrian had wanted to kick her out for helping Joe become a drunk, but even one life lost on his watch was more than he could allow. So he had thrown himself into caring for his small, shell-shocked herd, hoping Joe would eventually recognize her for the scheming bitch that she was.

They had set out for a base in Montana, Adrian's words of the secret bunker there easy to believe. He was the shepherd now. That was why he'd been allowed to live. It was his duty to rebuild the world.

1/11/2013

Other than myself, there are only thirty people here so far.

Most of them are elderly men, and I doubt half will survive. Their injuries are so bad that I can't help them in any way, other than providing drugs to dull the pain and a comforting hand to hold while they die. Each death kills something inside me.

I wonder if I've sacrificed family for these dead strangers, but I can't walk away. They need me too, and other than a little "listening," I'll put it out of my thoughts and go on. I haven't abandoned him. I'm very late.

1/12/2013

We sleep in vans and buses, not enough workers for tents yet, but I have an idea for two common room setups. When the new man, Doug, recovers, that'll be his first chore.

Doug's important to me. I just don't know how yet. I found him by accident, or maybe by fate leading me?

He was trapped under a collapsed concrete bridge in a national forest near the Nevada state line. Small packs of coyotes were keeping him from escaping the crushed car and shallow water, and it's amazing he survived so long despite his huge size. Retired Army, he's one of my kind, but a little too old for what I need the most.

Doug said a tremor took out the bridge while he was crossing it, and that made me decide to keep track of those things too. If the temperatures continue to drop—and this is wintertime, so they should—then we won't make it to Montana before we have to

hole up somewhere. That thought keeps me awake at night, even when the guilt isn't burning into me. Where?

1/13/2013

Damn, I'm tired. These people are depending on me for everything, and I'm encouraging it—showing them I can handle the weight—but between standing guard at night on third shift, running rescue and supply runs during the day, and helping with camp setups and breakdowns, I'm beat. I have to get the help, the magic that my dreams hinted of last night. Will fate send me what I need?

1/15/2013

Things are becoming so much clearer! My help is out there, but where? If we're all descended from the same bloodline, doesn't that mean they can hear my calls for help?

We've spent the last two days in a mall, snowed in. The black flakes fell for almost twenty-four hours and left over five feet of nasty slush. I kept everyone inside until it was mostly melted. It felt wrong, as if we might be sickened by contact, and I do wonder if Mother Nature might be helping humankind's extinction along. It's a crazy thought, but in this new hell, anything is possible.

1/20/2013

We heard foreign voices on a military channel yesterday, and I moved the camp—ordered it. No one argued, and that makes it official for me. I'm the boss. I know they were scared—the voices were calling for everyone to surrender to the Mexican draft—but for me, it's real now.

I'm in charge of forty-eight terrified, hurting refugees, and I've started wearing a radio so that I can listen for trouble from that side too. Gangs are attacking towns in New Mexico and

Colorado. The stories are awful, and many of my people are now survivors of two wars. The threat of the guerillas is a serious one that will require a harsh plan and a lot of defensive work that these people will have to learn and help with.

They've had an easy ride so far, but soon that will have to change. The first mandatory meeting is coming up. Guess I'll find out then if I've done enough for them to get their support and cooperation.

1/25/2013

They've agreed to all the things I wanted. We even have a name now: Safe Haven.

We set up the two big tents along with a center bonfire in a big metal pool, and we celebrated by barbecuing the chickens Doug found on a nearby farm. Tomorrow, I'll show them the mess truck a few of us quietly put together. It has it all, including a hot water heater, and since we have a cafeteria cook now, Hilda, we'll have regular meals soon.

We also have more heaters and supplies on the way. Kyle and Neil found an undamaged sports store. I'm damn glad to have those two men. They've both volunteered for the private and the public police force I'm starting, and I've decided to split them up so I can have them each lead their own team. Kyle started first and I'm encouraged, feel okay about sometimes leaving the camp in his hands on third shift.

These men will be trained not as everyday guards or even Marines, but as *soldiers* in my army. The Eagles. There will be no names that can separate them once I've finished.

1/26/2013

My leadership is official, and I know some of them are waiting for me to become like the politicians of the past, but I won't use my authority unless I have to. I plan to keep giving

them back some of what was stolen, and slowly, things will come together. I envision a better time of it in the future and look forward to the help my dreams keep hinting of. Five or six more like me will take us to better places.

Adrian paused again, this time to listen to the wind, not sure if... He rolled his eyes at the obvious shadow outside his flap. That would be Dale. He could tell by how the shadowy hips wore a tool belt without tools. The rookie was trying to pass his first level test and didn't know he had already failed. The police force was very new. This group of nine men was only the second to try, and it wasn't promising, but they were moving fast out of need.

Adrian frowned. It was a necessity that had been driven home by Tonya. She and Joe had been a couple, but the drunken man who was considered his unofficial second in command had fallen further into hell the farther they'd traveled. To his credit, Joe had stubbornly ignored Tonya when she encouraged him to fight for the leadership she and everyone else saw Adrian earning, but it hadn't mattered.

"Too late by then," Adrian sighed.

He was in charge, and Tonya hated it, mainly because Adrian wouldn't give her the time of day, let alone any power. She had turned a hero into a drunkard, slept around on Joe in her quest for power, and tried to manipulate all of them, not understanding that loyalty had to be earned, not stolen.

While Adrian had been busy with keeping them all alive, she had been plotting. Joe wasn't going to get her what she wanted, and instead of breaking it off with him and moving on, she'd convinced one of her lovers to stage a fight over her while Adrian was out of camp on a supply run. Her motive? Adrian still wasn't sure. Had she really thought the camp would give Joe's place to her lover?

Adrian's mind flashed to the death, and his grip on the notebook tightened.

Adrian knew by the unlit bonfire that something was wrong. How many have I lost?

Adrian followed the loud male voice to the largest tent, detecting blood splatters and other signs of a fight. When he stepped inside the dim canvas, his arrival was noticed instantly.

“There’s The Man!” Caleb, a greasy, blood-streaked biker, growled. He waved his knife toward the corner, where a reddish heap lay in the shadows. “One down, one to go!”

Adrian’s heart clenched with sorrow for arriving too late to save the man who had saved him. Then the anger, the rage, was flooding every space of his being. His people, his once-again terrified and cowering sheep, were all huddled in the rear of the tent, watching fearfully. Not about to challenge the lone killer, but clearly expecting him to.

Fury as he’d never known filled Adrian. How dare someone try to steal his flock! He drew his 9mm before any of them knew it was coming.

Bang!

The biker fell to the floor.

“You have been found guilty, and I sentence you to death!” Adrian roared over Caleb’s moans.

He grabbed the murderer by his jacket and brutally dragged him out of the tent, leaving a wide, bloody smear in the dirt and grass.

He roughly handcuffed the screaming man to the door of Joe’s lime-green convertible and stormed to a nearby supply truck, tossing the keys into the dirt out of the killer’s reach.

“You can set him free when he’s dead,” Adrian snapped as he stepped into the truck.

His mind raced furiously, knowing Tonya had done this—Caleb was one of her lovers: he’d witnessed them himself. She would pay!

Minutes later, Adrian stepped out of the tent with Joe's stiffening body over one broad shoulder, a shovel and a bottle of Jack Daniels in his other hand. His people had stayed with him as he dug the grave and got drunk, waiting with faces that begged him to say he forgave them for not stopping it.

Point man when it happened, Neil had been the most ashamed. No one had wanted to get involved, and Adrian's voice was hard as he finished sinking the cross into the thick, ugly dirt.

"I'm getting tired, and there are survivors out there who still care enough to try again. If you guys can't get it together enough to at least do what's right, then I'll find another group to help and you'll be on your own again."

Adrian shut the notebook, thinking the panic on their faces had been enough to tell him he had their support, their loyalty. Except for Tonya. Never one to follow blindly, her twisted logic had become clear when she'd arrived at Joe's tent, where Adrian was getting drunk. She had begged him not to be banished, and he let her stay because of one simple sentence.

"If I had known Caleb was nuts, I woulda told someone!"

That had stopped him. He too had missed it, had let in a remorseless killer.

Because of Tonya's lust for power, two men were dead and he couldn't even punish her publicly due to his own strict rules concerning the treatment of women. Therefore, Adrian had devised his own line of justice, and tonight would be the climax. After weeks of subtle flirting and making promises with his eyes, he was going to let her seduce him.

The savior and the whore.

The rest of the camp, having no idea of the game being played, had already begun to regard her as slightly crazy when she spoke of their relationship. Her frustration when he wouldn't confirm her claims was pleasing.

Tonya had been hiding ambitions of running this camp and having real authority. The power she had longed for with Joe was

nothing compared to a position as Adrian's mate. In this war-torn land, she would be a queen, not a dumb chippy who'd been selling her body to get where she wanted to be. Adrian knew the way her mind worked. She was sure that all she had to do was get him in bed. Every man who had ever slept with her had probably become her puppet, from teachers to bosses. He was to be her crowning—

Scratch...scratch...

Adrian grinned, setting the notebook aside. Revenge was best served cold and he'd waited for that reason. He could have had her the same day as Joe's murder if he wanted. She was that callous.

"Come in."

Tonya ducked inside carefully, reading him, his mood. When he smiled and leaned over to blow out the candle, she started pushing off her boots.

Barely lit by the shadows of the center fire, she didn't witness his smile merge into a greedy leer of lust and hatred. He was just as callous. She was about to learn that.

Tonya was in ecstasy already. Half an hour from now, she would be Adrian's legal mate! She went to him eagerly in the darkness, determined to make sure he enjoyed himself. When he met her, hands jerking her close, she melted against him.

"Ooh...I've wanted ya so badly," Tonya moaned, pressing closer to his hard male body in the dark tent as the cold Utah wind beat against the camouflage vinyl.

Her light Southern accent was fake but sexy, and Adrian's body throbbed with need.

Tonya groaned in delight as his mouth slanted over hers, his hands roughly roaming her soft body, discovering that she wore no panties to slow him down. He grabbed a handful of thick red curls and ground his hardness against her belly, thinking her pale skin and green eyes, combined with that Irish hair, easily made her the sexiest woman here.

Adrian pushed the camp whore down by her shoulder, pulling at her dress, and as she slid to her knees, her fingers went obediently to the buckle of his jeans. Her hands were like silk, and when her hot mouth closed over him, he arched forward, the sucking sensation incredible.

Her head began an aggressive up and down movement that sent heat rolling into his toes, and then he pushed her back, followed her down onto the cold, canvas floor.

Shoving forward before she was settled, he kissed her deeply; loving it that her gasps were not faked like some women that he'd been with. He moved inside her, shallowly at first, quick and light, and she climaxed fast, nails raking lightly down his shoulder, body tightening, pulsing, and exploding. Adrian thrust harder, dog tag clinking against the chain.

Tonya let her hands roam his hard, tanned skin and soft blond spikes. "We'll be good together. I'll be a good mate to ya," she promised, moaning as he started long, hard strokes that slid her up on the floor and drew a surprising rush of wetness. Very few men could pull two from her.

Adrian tangled his rough hands in her thick, red curls and pushed in as deep as he could get, on fire as he observed the triumph and need melt together in her glowing green orbs.

"Finally mine!" she growled, giving him a chill, and she pulled him down to kiss his full, sexy mouth.

Coming up for air, Adrian smiled cruelly, leaning his weight into each rubbing-thrust. "Oh no, Baby. This is a one-time deal. Enjoy it."

His breathing was harsh and he swelled, almost snapping when she understood, but her body refused to listen, slender hips keeping perfect rhythm as he rutted between her long legs.

"Bastard!"

On the edge, Tonya pulled him down for another hot kiss that shoved her into a world of rivers and light, but she began to struggle almost immediately, and he let her. The pain in her expression was a bigger turn-on than her mouth. Adrian ground

their lips together, kissing her, touching her, mocking her as he thrust roughly.

Used to being the one who was cold and in control, Tonya was horrified to feel her traitorous body responding again, wanting his touch, no matter the intent. She twisted, almost rolling them over.

Adrian dropped his full weight on her, making her cry out.

“Be still!” he growled harshly, hips now pounding into hers. “You’ve begged for it enough!”

Her fists slammed into his shoulders, and he lowered his head to avoid telling marks on his face, enjoying the fight she couldn’t win. When her nails raked down his spine, drawing blood this time, he shoved forward, grunting.

A final “Uhh!” and he was on his knees in a quick movement, squirting on her thigh as she scrambled to get away.

Adrian was up a second after her, very aware that this was the moment she might be her most dangerous. He bent over to pull up his jeans, unable to keep from grinning in satisfaction.

A thick medical book sailed over him, slapped the side of the tent and slid down the canvas wall in front of him.

He laughed, fishing in his pockets for a smoke.

Tonya had jerked her dress over wild curls and was pulling on a calf-high black boot, tears of rage blurring her vision. “You’ll pay for this! I’ll tell!”

Her fake accent was gone, and she snarled when his confident smile remained in place, full of remorseless pleasure.

“You’re a whore. They already know that.”

“Even you can’t get away with rape!” she sputtered, clumsily pulling on her other boot.

Adrian shrugged, studying her carefully. “Don’t know of any rape conviction where the woman got two orgasms before she started complaining.”

“If they knew what kind of man you honestly are, they wouldn’t follow you anywhere!”

Tonya stomped from the tent with sticky thighs and Adrian's mocking voice followed her out into the cold, windy air.

"But they don't know, Red, and from you, they'd never believe."

Adrian returned to his notebook with a smirking expression that few in camp would have recognized. There might be a skirmish or two left, but the war between him and Tonya was over. She was an outcast, the camp treating her the same way he did, and tomorrow, when she claimed they were sleeping together, he would deny such a nasty lie. It would drive her crazy that this time she was telling the truth and no one would believe her.

Adrian's smile faded. His leadership hadn't been questioned once after Joe's death, but later, when Neil had told him his quick, brutal execution of the killer had gotten him the camp's final approval, Adrian had been required to stop himself from telling the Arizona State Trooper how morally wrong it was to earn respect by taking a life. It was a hard, new world, and they were all adjusting as best they could.

Sure would be easier with a few more of the good men from my dreams, Adrian thought, pulling on his boots. Just a few. He had a couple of go-to guys who showed promise, but frankly, he needed a lot more than those here could give.

Just after midnight now, it had been seven weeks since the war, and they were spending four days in the heavily wooded Fish Lake National Forest. Camped below Milford, Utah, Safe Haven was waiting for a small group of men to get back from a supply run to a nearby food warehouse. The storms had slowed them down.

As always, Adrian's relentless mind was on where to call home for the winter. They'd already checked a long list of places. When they broke camp in the morning, they would continue north, toward the base in Montana, but he already knew what they'd find there: nothing. His followers were searching for the authority; Adrian was directing them to the bunker under the

compound, but if he kept picking up survivors regularly, there was no way that small shelter would hold them all. They would figure that out before he got them there. It was another layer of heavy stress.

The choice of their destination had been left entirely up to him, the camp indicating at the meeting that they had faith in his decisions. Though that had been the plan all along, it was still a large burden.

“It’s like sheep,” he muttered. He knew they were scared and lost, but Adrian was unable to imagine a situation where he would give over control of his own life so easily. They had no problem with being told where to sit and stand, and while it made things a lot easier, it showed him how weak they were and how much had to be done. He would push harder and do more for them.

They didn’t even have a doctor yet, and that they needed desperately. Especially him, now that he’d been with Tonya. The sated blond grinned at the delicious memory. It was wrong, bad, and damn, he’d enjoyed it! Revenge had been better than cold. It had been fiery.

2

Pulling on a heavy jacket with a fading eagle on the back, Adrian stepped out into the cold, windy darkness, grateful for the almost inviting smell of the salty wind. Even with a hint of shit, it was still heaven compared to the reeking odors of smoke, decay, and blood that now hung over the towns and cities.

Eager to make his nightly rounds of the perimeter sentries, Adrian still took time to listen, hearing the soft murmur of voices and rustling of flaps. It told him his herd wasn’t settled yet, and he knew he wouldn’t return to his own rack until they were.

He swept the sentries first. Listening for the others, he heard the almost constant crunch of booted steps as the Eagles prowled, sweeping the darkness. Adrian was sure few, if any, of

his new army would slack off. He had chosen most of them because they seemed to understand it might be only one man's dreams, but it was America's future. They were nine-man teams of safety, of security, and he was teaching them as fast as he could.

Adrian scanned the area again, spotting Dale again but none of the other new trainees. The other two were doing well. This new group of rookies was currently in the middle of individual challenges, and he allowed himself a rare, brief flash of pride at having made it this far with them. It was their final test to be full Level One Eagles in his army, and only his approval on this would pass them. He wasn't just training a police force and the men involved were aware of that. Hopefully, it would be a long time before the main camp discovered it, though. Suspicions were running very high, thanks to dear old dad and his Freemason pals.

Missing being able to view the moon and stars, Adrian ignored the glittering green eyes that watched him, burned holes into him from the female side of the tents. He slid a bright red bandana into his front pocket, leaving the ends dangling. Was the radio quiet? It hadn't been last night, and understanding the words through the loud, violent storms raging around them had been nearly impossible. The screams had been clear enough, and it bothered him that he couldn't help.

There were other groups around. They heard people regularly on the CB pleading for help, and occasionally they spotted campfires. Those close enough he sought out quietly, leaving on supply runs with a few of the more promising guards and returning with survivors. Only those with him knew that he had planned it that way, down to the very last detail. They were part of *his* herd and he wanted them all.

Adrian moved quietly to the north end of the half-mile wide camp, listening for any sound of the rookies following him. He wished he had ten more alert-minded men to put on sentry duty at night. Hell, another five observant bodies would help, would

let him get four and a half hours of sleep a night instead of the three he was averaging as he struggled to get everything done—to keep his end of the deal. It was a strange, dangerous life, and while he didn't baby the refugees, he did try to distract their attention from some of the things that might have caused rebellion—like training his army. He gave them soccer and football games, poker nights, and shooting contests, knowing that eventually they'd start feeling like Americans again. Once that happened, they would wake up to the unpleasant reality that it was going to be a very long trip, and they had to work together. It was slow going, with only a few exceptions.

The guard on the north end of the dimly lit parking area was Doug, now fully recovered from his trial under the bridge. With red hair and a red vest under a raggedy green jacket, the six-foot-four Army veteran was hard to miss even in a crowd, but he was nowhere to be seen as Adrian stepped between the new and old, rusty and shiny, beat-up, or muddy vehicles. Doug may have been years out of service due to a small injury that had left him with a limp, but he was a great comfort to have around during this time of chaos.

“Anything moving?” The blond leader was sure he had been heard despite the unguarded appearance of the dusty parking area, and he swept the tattered flags flapping in the heavy wind from nearly every antenna and door handle. That had been Kyle's doing, he was sure.

“Same as last night. Just the wind, my feet, and Tonya.”

Despite the clear lineage, there was no Irish accent in Doug's low voice, and Adrian watched him unfold from behind a small, blue Mustang.

The big man lit a cigar and gave the boss a look but said nothing as he moved closer, leaving big boot prints in the gravel. Adrian had saved his life and taken him in, given him work that made him feel useful, but they both knew Doug wasn't really a part of these people yet. He wasn't comfortable enough to joke, let alone question, and so he didn't.

“Where was she going?”

Doug stretched his wide shoulders, scanning the dark shapes of sickly fir trees that lined the taped off area. He kept his left hand in his pocket, the nerves jumpy, twitching slightly. He wasn't sure if the hard leader would pull him off duty for it or not, but he wasn't taking the chance. “Her tent, I think. She pissed again?”

Adrian met Doug's gaze with a small smile of male satisfaction that the big man would recognize. “Isn't she always?”

Doug grinned, nodded, and kept a tight leash on his mouth. Adrian knew his story. Doug had only joined the service to keep from being just another Irish potato farmer in Idaho, but once in, he'd found a way of life and a moral code that had allowed him to keep his hope. The same was true of Adrian, who still had enough hope to save the world. Doug had witnessed Tonya coming from Adrian's tent, but Doug wasn't about to begrudge him a piece of ass that many in camp had already had. Adrian was sacrificing everything, trying to save some of this country. Doug, who had given most of his own life for the very same thing, had a lot of respect for Safe Haven's leader. It made Doug willing to overlook anything that might interfere with the dream. Like the camp finding out Adrian was screwing the woman they all suspected was a black widow, or at least an accomplice. Information like that was dangerous and he would guard it.

Adrian slipped out of camp through the parking area, hating the pitch-blackness that surrounded them on all sides. As he proceeded toward the men guarding the rear of the camp, he stalked through the tape as an intruder would. These men were bouncers, factory workers, hardware store owners, and drive-thru employees, and they were on drag, the area farthest from the safe haven he'd tried to create. They were the wire, the only warning system, and it put them in the most danger. Because of that and the many, many other things he had foreseen, Adrian had been working hard with them (some more than others, like Kyle and

Neil), and this was the first test of their alertness. He planned on many more in the future. It was essential—

Click.

Adrian stilled at the sound of a gun's safety being flipped off, and he was pleased when the same noise came from behind him. The trees were only vague outlines and shadows that shifted continuously with the wind.

“This is a US military refugee camp. State your business!” an icy voice barked.

Adrian heard the faint, static-ridden crunch of a hand-held radio. The sentry had let the other men know they had a problem, as he had been taught.

“Mister, I've got a clear shot, and I will take it unless you state your business immediately!”

“Stand down, Neil.”

The sigh was audible, “Damn, Adrian! I was close.”

The state trooper slid the Beretta into his holster as he stepped from behind a nearby tree, night vision goggles coming down.

As Neil flipped on the penlight around his neck, dimly illuminating the thick fir trees he'd chosen to take cover in, Adrian pinned him with a searching stare. “Would you have fired if I hadn't spoken up?”

Neil nodded right away, tall, thin shadow not quite leaning against the tree as the wind blew harder. “Affirmative. We can't take chances now.”

Footsteps crunched heavily from two directions and arrived at roughly the same time, telling Adrian they had been where they were supposed to be.

“What's wrong?”

“You okay?”

Neil waited for Adrian to address the arriving guards. When he didn't, the cop did, keying his walkie-talkie so the others could hear too.

“Disregard, false alarm. Resume your posts.”

The two men went without question or complaint, nodding to Adrian, and he thought they were probably glad to have something to keep them awake. He had put the right man in charge of this shift, though. That was clear.

The trooper, who everyone called Neil, wasn't your average cop, and despite his young age (not quite thirty), Adrian was aware that people had begun to wonder if Neil was being examined for second in command. He wasn't. He didn't have the special spark that Adrian was searching for, but the trooper was still valuable and it hurt no one to let the camp assume so. It only made Neil, who knew better, feel proud. They had talked about it briefly, exchanged two or three sentences, but the cop understood that Adrian was holding that place for someone else, someone they hadn't found yet.

Adrian noted the man's respect; he waited for the boss to begin. "Hearing anything?"

"Negative. Lights again, though. Campfires," Neil answered. He glanced around, hunting for the trainees who were shadowing Adrian. He didn't see them, but Neil was sure they were there. He and Kyle had only recently passed their own level tests.

Adrian's mind went straight to the slavers. "How many tonight?"

"Two northwest. Same ones we've spotted all week, following us. Kyle thinks they'll make contact tomorrow, and I agree."

"Why's that?"

Neil frowned, settling his cover more firmly on as thick flurries rained down on them. "The other campfire, the one northeast; it's big and more than causing a disturbance. That'll push the smaller groups our way out of fear."

Adrian was glad they'd found the equipment shed at Pine Valley untouched. They now had a lot of weapons and defensive choices that most survivors wouldn't. "That's exactly what I hope will happen. How many?"

Neil was worried. "Can't tell yet."

“The ones we heard yesterday, screaming for all Americans to die?”

“Yeah... I’m almost sure they’re bigger than us.”

Adrian wasn’t surprised. The bad would always gather faster than the good and would always outnumber them too, if things continued as they were. “You think you can find a few more men? Double the guard?”

The trooper examined his watch. “After the check?”

“Yes.”

When Neil offered him the walkie-talkie, Adrian refused it, thinking the brown hat the cop insisted on wearing fit surprisingly well with the solid black uniforms Adrian had put together for everyone, including himself. His jeans and the eagle on the rear of his jacket were necessary concessions. Later, it would be dangerous to announce who he was so openly, but for now, he needed to be easily picked out of a crowd for the comfort and the calmness of his herd.

“I’m not here.”

Neil keyed the mike. “Check-in time. Let’s try to remember how to count. Point is clear.”

Adrian smothered a grin at the tone, glad the cop wasn’t as tight assed as his words often suggested. Getting each shift of men to talk in the right order, with the right wording, was frustrating, especially for Neil. He was used to the smooth organization of a police radio. He was also the end of five generations of officers, making it doubly annoying whenever someone called out of order, or worse, forgot their area number.

“Area two, nothing here.” That was Kyle at the communications center.

“Area three, clear.” Doug, at the parking area.

“Four, clear.” Chris, at the Mess tent.

There was silence as everyone waited for Danny, the sentry on the water tankers. When he didn’t check in, Neil frowned. Wasn’t there anything that guy could do right?

“Check in now, area five!”

Silence again...then the handset crackled. "Five, sorry. All's fine here."

The voice was groggy and Neil automatically handed the set to Adrian, knowing this was his chore.

"Area five, is my cat in the barn?"

The voice that answered was clearly embarrassed. "No sir! Nature call."

"Copy. Five is clear. Next?"

The check-in continued as Adrian handed the set back to the trooper.

"Think he fell asleep again?" Neil's voice was annoyed.

"Probably. Call in his relief when you get the extra men and have Danny put lime dust around the johns before he can have a bottle. We shouldn't get into the habit of being careless."

Neil ran a hand through thick brown curls. "Most of the men said okay to the mountains, if we can't find anything better along the way."

Adrian understood their reluctance. He too wanted to rebuild on top of the earth, not inside it.

Neil wondered suddenly what Adrian's shadows thought of all the conversations they were overhearing, thinking of his own test, and his own revelations about their supposedly altruistic leader.

"I should be doing more," Neil blurted.

"To help you, I mean," he clarified when Adrian stared. "Is there something more I can do?"

Adrian studied Neil's narrow face as the cold wind blew a light dusting of ashy flurries over their boots. "There's something else you feel you should be doing for me?"

Neil didn't drop his eyes, even though he wanted to. "I have some ideas—mostly about the guards...and security."

Adrian's face split into a grin, and he clapped the surprised man on the shoulder. "It took you long enough to ask. I've always thought to have you as my chief of security when you're ready and things are rolling."

They were the words every man in camp wanted to hear. A position by Adrian, one that commanded authority and proved to the camp (to the boss) that you were useful.

“It’ll probably be only ninth or tenth in the final chain of command, but for a while, it will be third or fourth and you’ll always be in the loop. My word on that.”

Neil felt careful gratitude and a small flare of guilt. He was so much more now than he had been before the war. In this awful new world, he was finally serving. “Is this the official offer?”

“No, that comes later. For now, work hard and learn.” Adrian hesitated and then continued. “Also, keep your eyes open for anyone you think I should talk to or might have overlooked.”

Neil studied him thoughtfully for a long minute. “You mean people like you.”

It wasn’t a question, and Adrian frowned, hoping he hadn’t offended the cop. “Like me?”

“It’s hard to explain. Something draws people to you. I’ll know it when I see it.”

“Your loyalty means a great deal to me,” Adrian said with feeling. “You’ve been by my side almost since the beginning, and all the responsibility you’re hoping for will happen. You have my word on that, too.”

Neil nodded, proud and eager for the time to come. “I recognize the sacrifices you’re making, how hard you work. We all do, and we’re grateful you stuck with us when everyone else split.”

A little uncomfortable (his guilt was whispering insults) Adrian opened his mouth and was disappointed with what came out.

“We’ll make it. God will help us find our way now.”

Neil tensed. His face darkened as he turned away. “Why wouldn’t he help us before we got lost?”

Adrian took his time going back. He skirted the small, nervous herd of mule deer huddled together for warmth, encouraged to discover them. Except for the amount of debris rolling with the wind, it was normal here. Plastic bags, fast food wrappers, bits of paper, mildewed clothes—it was the same garbage that had always littered America, but the amounts of it had grown drastically because litter patrols and trash removal were gone like everything else. There wasn't a single aspect of American life that the war hadn't touched, changed. Still, other than the debris that made odd noises in the wind and the occasional rotting fox or rabbit, it was as if nothing bad had happened here, and that was the whole point of his choosing preserves and parks. How could his people heal if they were constantly being reminded of all they'd suffered and lost?

Back in the heart of camp now, Adrian moved quietly, hearing snores and tents flapping in the cold breeze. He was glad not to detect a single soul passed out around the bonfire. They were all inside, finally adjusting to being under canvas.

Adrian nodded to Jeremy, the man now guarding the water tankers instead of Danny. It pleased him that the new sentry on the hundred-gallon, portable tankers was wearing the entire black outfit, but he didn't stop to talk.

Aware of the two shadows that came with him as he got a cup of coffee from the deserted Mess, Adrian headed for the tow truck they had converted into Safe Haven's communications center. The guard here was his most promising man.

A former captain in the infamous Genovese mob family, Kyle had also dressed in the suggested black gear, even down to the cap over his short, curly black hair. Again, Adrian was more than happy he had changed Kyle's mind, convincing the man to make a clean break instead of trying to go to New York for any of his family who might have survived. Adrian hadn't been sure of the mobster at first, but he was now.

“Hear anything?”

Kyle frowned. “Nothing but static, boss. Storm whacked the antenna good.”

“Did Mitch pass the test?”

The stocky sentry frowned, hand resting lightly on the handle of his Glock. “Yep. Only one who did.”

“I want him on the radio full time come morning. Tell him to get comfortable there.”

Kyle swept the landscape around them as he confirmed, “You know it.”

Content for the moment that all in their kingdom was secure, the mobster took the opportunity to share his thoughts. “Something’s coming. Feel it in the wind.”

Adrian had the same worries. “Good or bad?”

“It’s hard to tell. A little of both?”

Before Kyle could add anything, Adrian spun. The movement was so fast; his hand was there before the action had been registered.

Adrian let go of the fingers that had been about to rob him of the dangling bandana in his front pocket.

“Damn!”

“Pass.”

The Eagle, a plumber from Oregon, swallowed his surprise and snapped off a smart salute before vanishing into the darkness.

Kyle grinned, thinking of his own level test a few days ago. “Daryl thought he had you.”

“That’s how he failed. Rushed the end and made a noise as he tried for it.”

Kyle lit a cheroot with a calloused hand, waiting to see if Adrian had anything else for him.

“Chris also passed. Dale needs to do it again.”

Kyle wrote it down, not questioning. Adrian was a sharp judge of character, and Kyle already trusted him completely.

“I’ll be in my tent,” Adrian said.

Kyle watched him go, thinking these people were lucky to have the natural-born leader. The blond man was hitting on all eight, knew what was coming, and was preparing to handle it. Because of him, most of these people would probably live. If they finally got some of the help that Adrian had all of his top men on the lookout for, there might even be a chance at more than just surviving.

Chapter Eight
Right Place, Right Kind

February 1st
Utah

1

Charlie saw them first and knew instinctively that they were who Kenny was looking for.

It was only three o'clock, but the blanket of sky crap, as Charlie called it, made it feel like dusk. Five long days of traveling in the gritty wind had given them both red, squinted eyes and rough, scratchy skin on their faces and hands. The bike had been left in northern Arizona. Empty of fuel and with no refills in sight, the Honda was now another rusting pile of metal on the side of a road.

After that, things had gone downhill fast. It had rained nearly every day since the war, but Kenn refuse to consider trying to sterilize and drink it, worried it would still make them sick. As a result, they had run out of clean water this morning and towns around here were nonexistent. This was the Southern Badlands, the Black Rock Desert, and they were in trouble.

Kenn knew there had to be at least a gas station somewhere, but with the sand blowing so thickly, he couldn't see much beyond the occasional dead car or body. He had chosen not to leave the main road because of that. Utah was a huge place, and there would be no rescue party sent after them if they got lost.

Kenn hadn't located a home or business of any kind since dawn yesterday, only the faint, gritty shadow of mountains to the east, north, and west. There was occasionally still a vehicle, the battery dead and the paint faded, with few windows and with

inches of dust inside, but there weren't any structures. There were only layers of sand.

Kenn's eyes swung east, toward home, but his mind was on NORAD. There had been smoke from that direction almost continuously, and he'd advanced them further west to check the Dugway Proving Ground. Overall, 257 was a surprisingly desolate stretch of highway. It was depressing, and Kenn forced his sore feet to keep moving and his scratchy orbs to keep searching.

Brought up in a wealthy family where he had been the clown and party favorite, being totally on his own was new to Kenn. Even in the Corps, there had been his fellow Marines to seek admiration from and to depend on. The feeling of isolation was not welcome. It also didn't help that Charlie still wasn't talking to him unless he had to. Their direction wasn't due east and the teenager didn't want to hear about slavers or detours. He wanted his mom.

Charlie was staying a couple of feet behind the wide-shouldered Marine, sheltered from some of the stinging sand as he looked through Kenn's powerful binoculars. He wasn't searching for anything, was just bored, sleepy, and very tired of walking. There was nothing to view except the big ants that Kenny wouldn't waste their ammunition on, and no sounds beyond the wind and crunch of their boot steps.

He swung around to investigate behind them and a flash of silver caught his attention. His jaw dropped and a spiteful wave of wind sent harsh, stinging sand into his open mouth.

He began to cough and spit, doubled over.

When Kenn put a hand on his arm, Charlie thrust the binoculars at him. "People!" he choked out, pointing. "It's... headlights...right? Lots of them."

Kenn tensed, studying hard. A long line of people, but were they survivors or slavers?

Guess we'll find out, he thought, studying the large convoy of semis, cars, and trucks now turning toward them.

Lights flashed from the lead rig and then from each vehicle as they were spotted.

Kenn felt his heart warm a little at the familiar American greeting, but it didn't ease the worry in his gut. "Stay by me, boy. Do what I do."

"Yes, sir."

The two weary travelers waited tensely, Kenn automatically trying to estimate the convoy's number. Not that it mattered. They couldn't fight so many, and there was no place to take cover, but he drew his gun anyway as the vehicles got closer, letting the weapon hang along his side.

Thick sand blew harder as all the vehicles except the leading rig slowed and stopped. The red, white, and blue tractor-trailer came forward, and Kenn got ready to fight.

The semi stopped smoothly next to them, and as the driver's window went down, Kenn stepped in front of Charlie and lifted his gun to his hip. The barrel was still pointed at the dusty ground, but with his finger on the trigger, it was a clear warning.

The driver's big hand was on the wheel and when the left hand finished with the window, it joined the right.

"Do you intend to use that weapon, *soldier*?"

The voice was a cold bark, and years of training made both males square their shoulders. The correct response fell automatically from Kenn's mouth, despite the insulting title.

"A *Marine* never draws without intent. That would be a mistake."

"And what's wrong with that, grunt?" The hard tone allowed no hesitation.

"Because the United States Marine Corps does not make mistakes!" Kenn and Charlie answered together.

Kenn snapped his mouth shut, studying the driver. Short, golden blond hair; black, mirrored sunglasses; white T-shirt; and

yes, there was the single dog tag. He had been found by one of his own.

“So where ya headed?”

This tone was friendly, open, but Kenn understood that the first, sharp edge of command he had greeted them with was his real voice.

“Northeast.”

“Looking for family?”

Kenn shrugged, not glancing away as the wind pushed more sand toward them. “Something like that.”

“He your son?”

Always working on how he appeared to others, Kenn used a protective tone. “He might as well be. I’m Kenn. He’s Charlie. We’re from Fort Defiance.”

The driver took off his glasses and peered at Kenn with beautiful pale blue eyes.

“I’m Adrian.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “Those are my people, and they’re from everywhere. We have room as long as you follow the rules and pull your weight.”

The tone was casual, but that startling gaze was hard, assessing.

Kenn put away his gun, voice firm. “For a while, but he stays with me and we leave together when I say. He’s my people.”

“We’re Americans, Marine. No one is here against their will.”

Trying not to flush at the scorn in the response, Kenn stayed quiet.

Adrian picked up his mike and told someone to come get them. “We’ll make camp in about an hour and Neil will get you settled.”

“Thanks. We could use some R&R.”

Adrian smiled. “Don’t thank me yet. After a full week of working with us, you may want to be alone again.”

Kenn was encouraged. Work meant organization, authority, and planning. All the things he was looking for in the people they would join.

A small gray minivan pulled up next to the semi, the side door already open, and Kenn automatically snapped a quick salute to Adrian. Not waiting for it to be returned, he waved Charlie in and climbed aboard, sliding the door shut.

The males were very grateful to be in any shelter, but this one was warm, comfortable, and moving. Kenn sank down with a groan of relief even as he swept the three nicely armed men observing him. One was roughly the size of a tank, and the other two wore the weapons and tools of military men, though they clearly weren't.

Neil noticed the reaction, mind already racing as he reversed the minivan to third in line. "It's not like that. If he thought you were a threat, he would have split you two up. You'd be alone with him."

Kenn was introduced to Doug, Kyle, and Neil and he gave them only a first name in return, with no details. Their leader knew he was military. These people could figure it out for themselves.

All three men instinctively knew that there was important work waiting for Kenn; serious deeds that would benefit them all. They also sensed there was something not quite right, not completely true, about the new man.

"The boss has you with us. It means he probably already has a job in mind for you," Kyle stated from the front passenger seat, turning to stare at the 9mm on Kenn's hip.

When their eyes met, the Eagle thought they would probably never drink from the same bottle. There was something hinky about the new guy.

Kenn frowned at the stocky sentry with the tanned skin and black curls. "Like what? We just met."

All three men hesitated, shrugging, and Kenn sensed it was respect keeping their mouths closed. Those were the boss man's questions and these were his highest men.

"Could be anything," Neil said finally. He ran a hand over shoulder-length brown hair in a way that implied disappointment and a little bitterness. "Mechanic, baby sitter, it's hard to tell. He sees things in people, discovers their talents." Neil paused, examining him in the mirror in a way that was polite but not friendly. "Hell, he might think you should be one of us."

Kenn took the cigarette that was offered and handed the bottle of water to the boy relaxing next to him, aware of the red-vested giant watching the teenager. Maybe wondering what stories Charlie might tell if he was alone? Kenn would make sure that didn't happen for a while.

"Sounds like a club," Kenn provoked lightly, testing the water. His comment drew a warning from the Irishman in the swivel seat in front of them.

"It is. We're his chain of command and we support him—completely," Doug stated.

Kenn smiled easily, not intimidated. "I'd like to be able to do that too. We owe him our lives now. Sell me."

Adrian shifted into gear and got his convoy moving. They were going to Delta for people who had called on the CB this morning, and then he planned to spend a few days in Oak Creek National Forest. The dust and wind were horrible for driving. The sand got into everything as it gusted against their battered vehicles, and he wanted to wait until it settled some before heading out again.

His thoughts went to his newest additions as he drove, mind replaying the meeting. Their uniforms hadn't mattered. He had known the man and boy for what they were the second he saw their shadowy outlines, and he didn't think it was only coincidence that they were Marines. The few he was hunting for would have that special spark. With their bloodline, how could

they not? Atlantis and Mary Magdalene might be long gone, but their descendants were not.

Kenn would likely turn out to be one of his circle, Adrian could feel that, but instead of being elated to finally have found his first, he was worried. There was a sinking feeling that Kenn might also be a weak link, and that was dangerous because the first of his circle would be the one he depended on the most. The bond of bringing these people through the wilderness was one that would need to be strong enough to hold them all together. It was the foundation, and if there was a crack, a weak brick, the whole thing could fall.

Head starting to ache from peering through the grit, Adrian sighed. It didn't matter right now. The man was desperately needed, no question there, and he didn't have the luxury of "cherry-picking" his help. Besides, Kenn had put the boy behind him instead of in front. That said enough about his character.

Didn't it?

2

The ride was a slow but quiet one. Kenn and Charlie dozed most of the way. Kenn was impressed from the minute they stopped to make camp. The feeling only grew as he watched them set it all up, recognizing the equipment and techniques. There was no denying the feeling of longing, the old edge of excitement and glory that he'd been missing. Not just a fellow grunt, Adrian had been a military leader, and Kenn was about to serve him.

Tents were erected, campers and trucks guided into place, and yellow caution tape wound around the entire perimeter. People ran for bathrooms, animals were let out, supplies unpacked, and through it all, there was Neil—talking, directing, solving, and supervising. Kenn knew instinctively it was a perk of leadership to have that job, commanding this authority during the moves, and was only a little surprised to already feel himself

wanting it. He had definitely found his own kind in Adrian, and it took only a couple of minutes for him to understand by the actions of the guards that the blond leader had no Executive officer. His right side was empty and they were all vying for the place of XO.

Kenn's sharp gaze found Adrian directing the camp members in the parking area, and his eyes narrowed, feet already moving. Was someone sneaking through the cars?

He was at the leader's side seconds later, drawing frowns from the men around them, but instead of saying anything, he chose to handle it himself, hoping to earn points.

When the shadow tried to slip a hand between the metal bodies of the cars, Kenn locked it in a tight grip, 9mm pointed at the infiltrator.

Adrian was pleased. "Easy. He's one of ours."

Realizing it was a test or challenge of some type that he'd interrupted, Kenn leered as he let go. "Boo-ya!"

Adrian swept the surprised men, most of whom hadn't noted the rookie at all because of the blowing sand. "Training lesson number eight—sometimes, no matter how or what you plan for, fate throws in a wild card and you do the best you can to survive."

Adrian gave Jeremy a motion. "Pass. Help them set up the targets and we'll discover if our new man knows how to use the weapon on his hip."

Kenn took the hint, holstering as Jeremy threw him a sharp glare and stomped off.

"Maybe I could help with a drill or something," Kenn offered.

Adrian's tone was full of warning. "That and more, but you'll have to work for it. Nothing's free in this new world, and certainly not in Safe Haven."

"I've always earned my way before, and I expect to now."

"Welcome aboard, grunt. Let's get to work."

Kenn grinned as he fell in on Adrian's right, aware of the camp watching him openly, whispering, wondering who he was. *Finally!* The attention he craved.

Charlie hid his frown and stayed close to Kenn. It felt good here, but it wasn't home, and he had a strong sense that the Marine would want to stay and never go back. These were Kenny's type of people, the teenager could feel that, and he wanted his mom even more.

She said she was coming soon, but he couldn't help his doubts. He'd heard her calls to someone named Markus, was sure Kenny had too, though he had pretended to be asleep, and Charlie was afraid for her. He and Kenn were Marines, and they had been in big trouble more than once—been lucky to escape. She would never make it alone. She needed help that could not only get her here, but would fight for her when she arrived. Kenny was a true badass and not just anyone would be able to handle him.

Chapter Nine
Mercy and Death

Ground Hogs' Day
NORAD Road, Colorado

1

Any hopes Samantha had of finding help at Cheyenne Mountain were gone before she got there. The smoke she had sort of been following all morning rolled up from behind the hills in thick, black waves that signaled fresh devastation. Then, there were those wide-winged birds circling menacingly in the sky above Colorado Spring. Something was wrong.

Sam had built it up in her mind that the government had been ready for decades. All she had to do was get there, persuade one sentry to check her name and her prints, and she would be safe inside the protective bunker. Ignoring the voice that repeatedly asked why she was more worthy of protection than the dead she had passed along the way, Sam had pushed herself relentlessly, making eight to twelve miles a day on foot. She longed to drive (she was sure some of the vehicles she passed wouldn't have been damaged by the EMPs), but she couldn't handle any attention she might attract.

The dreams of safety and authority had been the only thing keeping her going for the last four frightening weeks. Alone and mostly defenseless, Samantha was moving through a new, unknown world that tried hard every day to break her.

This kind of existence went against how she'd been raised. Her sheltered childhood and wealthy parents allowed her to stay above all the human misery she was witnessing daily now, and it was heartbreaking. So many times she had thought of gathering

supplies and hiding somewhere, but the hope of real safety at the compound had kept her moving.

She'd been through Rawlings, where rats as big as a loaf of bread were starting to take over, and through Table Rock, where she'd been chased out of a barn by an animal that looked like a cat and acted like a rabid raccoon.

This morning, she had bleached her yellow locks to kill the lice that were now immune to pesticide products. She wasn't sure where she had picked them up, thought it was likely from the dead soldier when she'd taken his gun and ammo. In all reality, the tough little bugs were the least of her worries.

To distract herself, she'd been hunting for a groundhog, only a little interested in knowing if another six weeks of winter was in the future. She needed a break from the flashes of murdering Henry, from the fear that Melvin was tracking her, but mostly, from the terror she felt at the thought of not finding any help.

Bracing against the stiff, gritty wind that was trying to shove her off her feet, Samantha shifted her battered kit onto her other shoulder, stepping carefully over broken glass and wide cracks in the rough, weedy pavement.

Ahead, there was a lump in the street.

With the sole of her boot flapping at each step, Samantha drew in a ragged breath and forced herself to keep going. When she passed the uniformed man, who had been shot in the head, she wiped away a stray tear, telling herself it didn't matter if they were all dead. There would be something in there that she could use, maybe even a radio that she could listen to for some idea of where to try next.

Longing for the warmth of the sun she could just make out behind the thick layer of debris covering the sky, the storm tracker instinctively stayed to the left as she came to the top of a hill.

Glad for her goggles in the heavy, reeking smoke that swirled over the top of the road in waves, she moved between the trees so she wouldn't be outlined by the sky. Kneeling, Sam

peered down at the place she would have been, where she would have died, if not for the chopper crashing.

Buried inside the Cheyenne Mountain complex, the tunnel to the government's once impenetrable compound was open, releasing pillars of thick, black smoke. It drew Samantha repeatedly as she scanned the devastated shack city that was spread out into the distance. There was no sign of survivors.

The refugee camp that was spread across the two lane road was a sad, pathetic mix of moldy box homes covered in plastic, boards and wood of every kind formed haphazard living quarters. There was also a crowded cemetery at the far corner, telling her that these people had come here after the war. These were most likely the families of those who'd been taken in the draft, and they had been here ever since, slowly dying on the indifferent doorstep of safety. Had anyone been let in?

Almost able to hear the hum of flies swarming the dead, Sam swept row after row of destroyed cooking, sleeping, and laundry areas in horror. There was even a junkyard of cars, stripped of everything usable or tradable, with more than a few of the vehicles used as shelters.

She raised her goggles, unable to stop the tears. No. Not one of them. These people had been desperate, dying. They would have overrun the guards the second the door was opened.

This was something the government had planned to do nothing about, and those who were running things inside had probably observed the slaughter with relief. Well, probably until one compassionate soldier or unwilling "draftee" had been unable to watch people, maybe even his own family, be murdered, and the compound had been breached.

Sam settled deep in the cover of the flower-dotted brush, sheltered from the sharp wind while she waited for the fires to finish burning out. It could have happened that way. Then again, these people might have been the bait to get the inside doors open. That also had a ring of truth to it, and she examined the battle scene with new understanding.

Blackened, smoldering piles of debris highlighted dead bodies lined up near the compound's entrance, mostly men with gunshot wounds. The women and girls were gone, obviously taken. Samantha pushed away the thought of how bad their lives must be now.

She wasn't sure if she spotted anything moving or not. Her view was blocked by mountain slopes of constantly swaying spruce trees, but from this vantage point, she might be able to spot their campfires tonight.

The thick layer of clouds threatened rain or worse by morning, so she set up her small shelter—a painstakingly woven roof made of rubber bands around straw and leaves, all lashed over a wooden frame. Tomorrow she would go down. She was dreading it, but hoped there would be little bits of food and maybe, just maybe, the location of another compound.

2

Early the next morning, with the smoke mostly gone, Sam went to discover what remained of the facility.

She had a hard time forcing her feet to pass through the blackened, bloody entrance to the bunker. She tried not to stare at the dead, but again, she couldn't help crying for them as she advanced over hands outstretched for mercy that hadn't come. Another two hundred lives, gone.

Footsteps echoing eerily, Samantha slowly entered the tall tunnel with nervous movements as sharp, glittering pieces of glass crunched loudly under her boots. Thin clouds of smoke still lingered above her, and snapping flies tried unsuccessfully to invade her long trench coat and gloves as she traveled. Despite the season, there wasn't any snow on the ground here right now and all the rotting corpses had created the perfect environment for bugs of all sorts.

The red lights that signaled a generator in use comforted her as the dim daylight faded from view. She wasn't sure she could

have come in without it. The feeling made her think of the King novel where the guy walked through a tunnel crammed with cars full of dead bodies—in the pitch black, with only a lighter. Not her and not for any reason.

She had a gun, a Taser that may or may not work, two knives, and a can of mace, but she didn't feel any safer as she wound deeper, ears straining for any sounds. This new world was full of death and destruction, and there was more of that down here in these long, dark, concrete halls. As she picked through each room, Sam kept a hand on her weapon, thinking the downside of the red lights was that she could see the horrors.

Blood smears and bullet casings were hard to avoid slipping on as she trekked through the dead men in uniform that littered the hall. She flipped her belt light to high as she stepped into the first room. It was obviously a security area, the four stiff bodies and blood splatter making her leave quickly.

The next three rooms held more of the same. There were no corpses, but the spray on the walls showed that there had been. She wondered why the bodies here had been removed, but the rest hadn't. A trap for troops just making it to the complex?

Catching a faint hint of gasoline, Sam traveled by open doors marked "Utilities" and "Lavatories," knowing they wouldn't hold anything she needed. The tunnel she was in quickly dead-ended into a spacious bunk area with bodies in the beds. They wore clothes that were an even mix of military uniforms and Capitol Hill casual.

Not sure if she could make herself go into the room despite the lights, Samantha went back to the stairs, thinking she would search that area last. There had to be three dozen corpses in that big room and she didn't want them between her and the outside for any length of time.

Certain the main compound would be deeper, Sam chose the door marked "Sub-basements E–M." Moving into the bowels of the Cheyenne Mountain operations center, she could hear water gushing like falls beating down.

The next level was “K,” marked “Water.” She stepped through the doorway, but only stayed for a minute. The reservoir was there, but the reek of gasoline told her the attackers had filled their own supply and then ruined what they couldn’t carry, so that no one else could use it.

There was damage on the stairs too, torn pieces of signs and posters, more bullet casings. Sam eased further down the narrow metal steps, wincing when her sole flapped loudly. She went through each door she found, coming right out of most—the fire damage and reek of corpses was simply too much.

On the wall next to the door labeled only as “M” was a charred and broken hand scanner, and Sam knew she was in the right place. Open, riddled with gunshots, the door hung crookedly on the frame and looked as though it had fared the best. The room itself was destroyed—broken furniture, bodies, glass, and bloody papers littering the thin red carpet. She scanned the room, but saw no other exits, no other doors. Surely, there was more than this?

Climbing the stairs to the previous floor, Samantha noticed another door in the shadows of the wall, another melted hand scanner. When the door wouldn’t open, she frowned. Survivors who had locked themselves in? What should she do?

Sam peered down, saw that the floor was blackened, as if it had been burned. Her stomach lurched as she realized what odor was lurking under the harsh smell of smoke.

The storm tracker stumbled up the metal stairs, trying not to gag. After that, it was a struggle to make herself open the next door, let alone explore the two or three tunnels off each one. She found closets, storage areas, and a lot of offices and strategy rooms, but the damage was complete. The tacky blood was so thick on some floors that the Seal was no longer visible.

Samantha found a lounge that had been stripped of everything, two burnt-out cafeterias, laundry rooms without a sheet or blanket, and three medical bays that were heavily damaged. Not even a box of bandages had been spared. The men

who had done this had made sure that anyone who survived would find nothing to keep them alive.

Back on the ground floor, she was drawn to a small painting of President Clinton. It hung askew, revealing another dark shadow. Set into the stone, it was a “throw room.” It was a secure area where the Secret Service could literally toss a person so they’d be safe while the agents guarded the hatch, the only way in or out. This one had a bloody handprint on the rail that she avoided as she hefted herself into the four-by-four opening. It clearly hadn’t held.

The hole dumped her out onto a thick mat in a narrow hall with seven doors. She listened intently before opening each one but heard nothing. Although constructed with comfort in mind, the presidential retreat contained no little treasures with which to line her pockets. Nothing had survived, and the smells had her covering her mouth as she explored the site of her country’s last stand.

The sixth door was a secondary war room: computers were destroyed, communications equipment was lying broken on the carpet, and bodies of uniformed men that Samantha vaguely recognized were draped across chairs and desks. The blood puddles and spatters were impossible to avoid as she checked stacks of papers and books. None of the intact electronics responded to her fingers.

Samantha realized that the dark red writing on the walls wasn’t marker, and eased out of the room with her stomach in a knot. There was nothing here.

Scratch...

Sam spun, fingers fumbling for her gun. She stopped when she saw the big rat, thinking if not for the noise, she would try to kill it anyway to keep it from doing what the insects were doing.

The last door led to a small lavatory. When she saw no bodies, not even blood smears, she allowed herself to use one of the dusty, cobwebbed stalls, thinking peeing had never been so

bittersweet. Even taking paper from the almost empty roll hurt and it was a struggle not to cry. It was all gone.

A shadow, dark and small, suddenly dropped from the ceiling above her, landing on her bare knee.

“Damn!” She slapped at the mutated freak as it ran upward, missing its extra legs. It was fast, and she gritted her teeth as the arachnid bit her, sending a rush of pain up her leg that shot straight into her spine.

Sam squashed the fleeing spider against her jeans, grinding the mutation into little pieces, and she wiped the remains down the dusty stall wall with a smirk of short-lived satisfaction.

“Serves you right!”

She wiped the bite with the last of the paper on the roll, a bit uneasy at how sore the wound already was, and then put it from her mind. She would check the lounge she had passed on the ground floor, and then get the hell out of this mausoleum.

3

The climb out of the bunker took her longer and made her even more anxious as Sam half waited for someone (a zombie) to jump out of one of the doors she was passing. She breathed a sigh of relief when the faint, dim glow of daylight came into view at the other end of the tunnel. *One more room and then I'm out of here!*

Sam stepped into the smoky, vomit-smelling vending machine room, spying unbroken glass. She ran to the three tall dispensers eagerly, but every ring was empty.

She slapped her hand against the dirty glass in frustration. “Damn it!”

“Help...”

Sam jumped, fumbled for her gun with shaking hands.

“Yes, please.”

Samantha drew in air, glad her bladder was empty. She raised her belt light for a better view at the man dying on the brown-and-white striped sofa.

“Please.”

There was total awareness in those dead eyes, and Sam wished her peripheral vision would disappear. The gore and blood was everywhere, and she breathed through her mouth to keep from gagging. As she stepped closer, trying not to gape at his emaciated body, she realized it was a white sofa. The brown was his blood and his rotting body that had begun to dry into the material. He had the sickness.

“Please...help me.”

The pitiful whisper made the man seem more human

“What can I do?”

“Kill me,” came the immediate answer.

Before she could tell him no, her hand raised her gun.

She couldn't do it, though, and the man moaned. A wet, liquid sound, she heard the grinding of his jaws as he coughed violently. Scarlet flew from his mouth, ejecting one of his teeth, and reddish drops of agony rolled down his distorted face.

“Please!” he begged.

She raised the gun again as his gasps for air filled the room. His body was no longer responding to his commands, the radiation destroying him from the inside out. She pushed past her horror to talk, voice shaky.

“Where else can I go?”

He struggled to answer. “Only a base...in Cheyenne still taking calls. All gone...faulty air valves.”

“What about the Essex?”

“No! Ground...Zero. Evac'd after the hit... No transportation made for...radiation.”

His eyes had begun to run with reddish-green liquid in thick clots, but she could still see the hell in them.

“There must be some place. What about all the joint chiefs and secretaries?”

“Breached... Burned alive...wouldn’t touch me.”

Samantha’s mind went to the only locked door and the smell of gasoline she’d noticed, and she shook away the horrible images. At least their struggles were over now.

“What about the men who did this?”

The dying man on the gory couch heaved, coughing, and Sam retreated as thick blood and puss sprayed from his grossly swelled lips.

“Mexican...guerrillas...came during the...storm. Hit Fort Carson first. Attacked the refugees...and took females. Doors opened, malfunction...retaliation for the war.”

Sam couldn’t think of anything else to ask, and the man raised a finger, skin sliding nauseatingly to the side of the bone.

“Please...do it now. Don’t know...anything else.”

She tried to smile as she raised the gun. “I’m Samantha Moore.”

“Pat... Mi...Michaels.”

She smiled in horrified recognition of the former press secretary, and when he shut his eyes and tried to nod, she pulled the trigger.

The shot echoed, and his body jumped like Melvin’s had when she had hit him with the Taser, and then Sam was running, steps echoing, mocking her flight. She had no idea where she would go, only that she shouldn’t have come here. These were not her people anymore.

Chapter Ten
Hard Goodbyes

February 6th
Ohio

1

She needed help.

It had taken Angela a while to convince herself that calling Marc was what had to be done to get her son back. The voice of fear was constantly warning of punishments, but now that she'd called, it was also a struggle to keep from doing it again. She hated being alone, hated being scared.

Angela was dreading the journey she was about to make, but most of all, she worried about the edge of panic in her dreams that said it would all be much worse than her life with Kenny, if that was possible. Her nightmares said she would face dangers that made the Marine seem like an amusement park ride, and if not for the deep love in her heart, she wouldn't go.

The woman frowned at her thoughts. None of her fears mattered. Only her boy did, and she could wait no longer to leave. The circled day on her calendar was still over a week away, but she was going now and needed to know where Marc was. She had to be sure he was really coming this time. Without his help, her plans stood little chance.

She wasn't looking forward to telling him her story, planned to put it off as long as she could, but the odds were against her making it alone. And then there was Kenny. He wouldn't just hand her son over and let them go. Between her Marine and the terrain, she would definitely need help, and Marc was the only one she had left to turn to.

“*You can’t!*” her fear shouted, telling her Kenny would kill her for it, and the door in her mind stayed firmly shut.

Angela stood stiffly in the dark hallway of her apartment building, fear preventing her from making the call. Once she did this, once she left, there was no giving up. The urge to go inside and keep waiting was incredibly strong, but her heart took control.

“I’ll kill him if I have to! He won’t keep us apart!”

The rush of angry energy blew her fear away, and the door in her mind swung open. Her breathing became shallow, hair rising with static, and power ran through the mud-tracked hall as the witch gathered the energy needed to find the mental doors that would cover hundreds of miles. Her eyes fluttered shut as the memories washed over her, strengthening the connection.

Jet-black hair, long, feathered, and soft on her fingers as their mouths touched. He was the only man she had ever loved and she called for him now, releasing a powerful vibration that rattled like an earthquake.

Marc!

His hands had been light, gentle magic as they crossed forbidden lines.

Marcus!

He had loved her and left, and she had never recovered.

Marc!

I’m here, Angie.

He sounded older, used, and she winced at the pain of having him in her head. It reminded her of when it had been just them against the world.

“Are you still coming?”

Fear of the past made her hold her breath; fear that whispered, “*No,*” that she would be alone forever.

Yes. I should be in Cincinnati in less than a week.

Angela let out the breath. Five to seven days away. She had been afraid he wouldn’t come and was still worried he wouldn’t care once he found out what she wanted. She didn’t know what

kind of person he had become, and she was depending on a debt that was very old.

Will you tell me what's going on? I picked up a few things, but I can be better prepared if I know more.

But you do know what kind of person he is or you wouldn't have called him, the old Angela, the one the war had almost freed, stated flatly from her twisted cell door. Tell him what he needs to know.

Angie?

"I'm here, Brady." She could almost feel him wince this time, and it surprised her to discover she didn't enjoy it. She owed him much worse.

Can you tell me?

The caution in his voice allowed the old Angela to open the door between them a little wider and the words fell with a simple awkwardness that made her cry huge, silent tears.

"My...son is somewhere in the middle of the country. I need you to get me there and help me steal him, if it comes to that. I'm leaving now. We can join up on the road."

There wasn't even a thoughtful pause after her request.

It's bad out here, Angie. I wish you'd wait for me.

She could feel him immediately wanting to take it back, but her rage was quick, harsh. "I tried that already!"

She was suddenly sixteen again, hurt, betrayed, and alone, with no one but Kenny to turn to. She slammed the door on Marc's incoming protests, but the old Angela was stronger now and she was forced to listen to the muffled apologies and explanations he labored to push at her. She heard the words and his remorse, but no matter what he said, Angela refused to answer.

In the dawn's early light, Angela approached the shiny black Blazer waiting in the secluded garage. Her anxious gaze swept the extra tires on the luggage rack, the rear area neatly crammed with boxes, and of course, the tiny grave she had spent time at

almost every day since the war. Leaving her baby boy behind was hard, and she had to force her grief down. She couldn't abandon the living child to stay and mourn the dead one.

Angela wiped away her tears and finished her comparison of the contents to the long list in her hand. Did she have everything?

After another minute, she put the paper in the mailbox, along with an envelope in plastic and the door keys from around her neck. It would have to be enough.

She swept her Tempo, making sure the wind and weather hadn't dislodged her notes. She had also written on Charlie's bedroom wall and left the keys in the ignition of her car—just in case. Her quiet, respectful son was becoming angry and impatient, and if he slipped off on his own (*and survived! Please, let him survive!*), she would change course to intercept him.

She had no delusions about the world they were in now, and she made sure he would know the truth if he came back here. The real truth, not that bullshit she had been forced to tell him for the last decade. There had been a great love, a hard choice, a lie, and a deal of convenience, but really, none of that mattered now. What did matter was telling him how to survive if he found himself alone. The notes would do that, would hopefully keep him alive until his father could come for him.

Noticing the light, ashy flurries starting to fall, Angela got the last bag from the hallway. As she stepped out the door, she saw a woman reflected in the glass that she wasn't sure she knew. She looked so much stronger than she felt, and she slid into the driver's seat with a thin smile. She was changing again.

"Going somewhere?" Warren's cold voice outside the open door was unexpected.

Angela flinched, but didn't draw the gun her hand was resting on as she listened. How hard would she have to fight? Could a good bluff set her free? She hadn't heard them come, hadn't felt a warning. Probably, they had been here all along, letting her do the work of loading supplies.

The men were lined up across the bare, muddy courtyard in front of her building, cutting off any path of escape. They watched her openly this time, hunger in their leers and smirks, and they were quiet too, another bad sign. She recognized the outline of vests under thick layers of clothing. Her heart skipped a beat. They had come prepared.

Or so they think, the demon inside comforted. *Hold your ground.*

“He’s close. I have to go.”

Warren’s beaten face and slumped shoulders told her that the chain of command at the college had likely changed, making this a more dangerous confrontation. Talking her way out suddenly seemed very unlikely as she stared into his feverish zealot’s face.

“If you try to run, they’ll open fire. Get out.”

Angela slowly slid to her feet, scanning the six men spread out behind Aaron, each with a firearm aimed not at the Blazer, but at her.

She sneered at Warren with a baiting tone, seeing he still had the bible under his arm. “No longer under your protection, preacher?”

“No one is.”

It was confirmation, and yet none of the others stepped up to do the speaking, to take control. When Warren shut the door and turned to her, she noticed they stayed well back, even Aaron. He was probably the only one who would shoot her. The others wanted her alive. Aaron wanted her dead for humiliating him.

“Let me go. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

There were nervous looks exchanged between the half dozen would-be captors, instead of the scorn she had been hoping for, and it told her that they had probably already discussed the possibilities of getting hurt and were determined to follow through.

Her anger flared to life. She would have to fight her way out.

Angela slipped back to let the witch have a little more control. She had to fight—she didn’t have to kill. *And I won’t!*

Her reminder to the witch seemed to be a cue for the scruffy males, and they advanced toward her together, eyes grim, faces leery.

The witch whispered the words and Angela muttered, hands casting them out: “Poison! Blindness! Disease!”

Their reaction was instant.

“I can’t see... I can’t see!”

“Skin’s on fire! Someone put me out! The bugs!”

“Help me, Man!”

It was awful, powerful magic that had them tripping, landing hard on the cold, dirty ground, but Warren wasn’t fooled by the vivid bluff. He put a hand out to grab her and jerked away as lightning flew into a tree in the courtyard next to them, shaking the ground.

The oak exploded, raining down wooden shrapnel in warning, but Warren ignored it. He snatched her by her sweater, jerked her up against his hard, thin body. “Surrender yourself to me, witch!”

Her face became a snarl of hatred. “I belong to no man!”

Lightning crashed again, close, and she pushed him away with a strength he wasn’t expecting. When he tried to grab her again, the witch whispered two words and Angela felt power flowing through her, something alive and hungry.

She shut her eyes as her newest gift was revealed. “Fire! Ice!”

Lightning cracked for a third time, striking the truck Warren had arrived in, and it exploded, twisted metal raining over their battlefield.

Warren and Aaron ducked, but the witch didn’t flinch and Angela wasn’t hit.

The sky opened up a second later and chunks of hail, black and heavy, began pelting them. The four men whose names she had never known recovered too quickly, but they fled in fear, not thinking to use the guns they’d brought.

The witch held out a hand, where flames now danced along her fingertips, and the two remaining men stopped, expressions confirming they were in over their heads and knew it.

“If you push me, I will kill you,” the demon’s voice was cold, without weakness.

When Aaron raised his gun, finger tightening on the trigger, the witch surged forward to laugh at him. “You think that’ll work on the likes of me? The woman may die, but I am immortal!”

The witch shoved forward, demon face merging with Angela’s and the man went pale at the sight of glowing red orbs and hungry white fangs.

Horns sprouted from the sides of her face, her long, crooked mouth opened to reveal razor sharp, needlelike teeth. When the demon’s forked tongue lashed out at him, Aaron ran. He didn’t glance back.

The witch remained, resisting Angela’s attempts to get her under control, but the preacher showed no fear even though he was now facing her alone.

“You are not strong enough to override her morals. She is a doctor. She will not let you kill me,” he countered, sure of his answer.

The witch grinned, red eyes changing, becoming reptilian. “You know so little. Doctors kill often. They just don’t murder. This would be self-defense.”

Leaning on faith, Warren grabbed her arm again, Bible still in his hand. “I am the Lord’s prophet and I see you, Demon of Souls! Surrender yourself to me in the name of the Father, the Son...aaahhhh!”

The witch released the ball of flames before Angela could stop her, and the fire leapt hungrily up the preacher’s bare hands and face. He slapped at himself frantically.

Angela shoved the demon back before she could hit him with a final, consuming blast. *Stop! It’s enough.*

Never! Never be enough! the witch roared, furious at the attempted theft of her freedom.

Angela glowered at Warren, ignoring his pain as he tried to put the fire out. “You have offended us, preacher, and the demon wants your soul as payment,” she stated harshly as he yanked off his smoking jacket. Fear and hatred filled his face.

“She’ll settle for your death.” Angela held out a hand, where tiny flames were again flowing in her palm, growing, shaping into a ball. “Does it have to be today?”

Warren wanted to push anyway, she could feel it, and Angela let the witch’s red eyes blend once again with her own. “Last warning...”

The religious fanatic spun away, tattered book falling to the muddy ground.

Angela sucked air into lungs that burned from holding her breath. She’d won. She was free! Her scream of triumph echoed as they fled.

More confident now that she had another defense to depend on (flames and ice, fire and brimstone—how fitting!), Angela moved toward her Blazer, reasonably sure Warren wouldn’t die and content that the others wouldn’t follow her, even if he wanted them to. If he came for her later, it would be only him and maybe Aaron.

Two against one is much better odds, she thought.

Above, fate laughed.

Angela pulled the Blazer’s door shut as Warren vanished behind the thick, rolling black smoke billowing from his burning truck. When his faint outline was gone, the witch retreated fully to allow Angela an untainted view of the empty home—prison cell—she had lived in for the last fourteen years.

All she felt was relief. She was finally free, and she wouldn’t wait another second to go.

Locking the doors, Angela pushed the wall of grief and guilt away as she stared at the tiny grave. Shadows darted and smoke rolled as she started the engine and shifted into drive. She felt

sad and excited, but mostly scared, even with the gun at her side. Her kind was not meant to be alone.

With a last sigh of misery and excitement, she pulled her sunglasses over teary eyes and drove away. Empty and full mailboxes waved a final, hard goodbye in her mirror.

2

It was a long day for Angela. The slow going made her grit her teeth in frustration and then curse aloud as she spent the entire morning creeping west. She squeezed through wherever she could, gently pushing dog houses, a dumpster, furniture, and cars aside, and it pained her to see whole blocks still decorated for the holiday.

The pavement everywhere was cracked, full of weeds and potholes, and she found herself listening for the hit that would give her the first flat tire of her journey. She began to ease through muddy yards to avoid the glass that littered the streets, and then berated herself for only making two miles in four hours. More than once, she found her way completely blocked and had to drive through fences, wincing at every snap of wood, plastic, and bone.

Angela felt too exposed as she traveled through the riot-ravaged areas that she had known before the war. Everything was so different, so dangerous, that she would never have recognized the towns if she hadn't been there before. Doubts about her ability to make the trip hit her hardest as she passed through Cheviot, Ohio. It scared her, shook her up more than dealing with Warren, and her dreams were filled with it when she finally slept.

Angela tried to steel herself as she entered the city limits, assuming it would be as bad as her own neighborhood, but it was worse. She cried as she drove, tears blurring the awful scene but not enough. The medical salve under her nose pushed back the stench, but again, not enough, and the gritty wind gusted harder.

Half of the buildings were gone, burned down to charred, blackened frames. Those that did remain had no windows, no doors. The main street was crammed with abandoned cars and wrecks, but the corpses made her heart ache. There were so many! Had no one in this small city found safety?

Angela wiped at her face, steering carefully around the blackened shell of an Army transport truck, the driver's uniformed body still rotting inside. She sucked in a horrified breath as she cleared the vehicle, now able to see what remained of the small municipal building.

Only the tall pillars still stood, the wide field of rubble behind it unrecognizable, and the tears came harder at the sight of so many who had represented authority decaying on those charred stone steps. Police, soldiers, and citizens lay in a tangled heap, the scene gruesome.

Fishtailing suddenly on the ice, Angela hit the brakes too sharply and slid on the slushy side street. Her front tires slammed into the curb hard enough to throw her against the seat, and the scare allowed her to get control of herself. She wiped her eyes again, concentrating on the quiet rumble of her engine, and after a moment, she felt better.

She started to reverse, but something changed in the air suddenly, was different, and she turned off the heater to listen as she swept the area intently. She'd heard something.

Not a threat, the witch informed her, settling back. *Just more starving people.*

They were close, watching. Angela could feel it, and she put the Blazer in park. She climbed into the rear seat, ignoring the greed inside that was insisting she couldn't spare anything. *Yes, I can.*

A few minutes later, she gently dropped two bags out the open window and then got moving again, hoping it would help. She had included a note with a list of stores that still had nonperishable food left, but in her heart, she knew she had only

delayed the inevitable, and she hated the guilt she was feeling for leaving them here to die.

But they can search the stores. The old Angela didn't understand. *Why will they die?*

Because they're sheep, the witch answered sleepily. *Without a shepherd, they'll stay out in the cold and freeze to death. They've lost their strength. Those who cannot find hope will not survive.*

Those words pulled at Angela, echoed in her bitter heart. Kenny had obviously found his reason to fight—Charlie's dreams were full of the people they'd joined. She knew they were going to Montana, and it made her stomach burn to wonder what kind of sorry bastard was now in charge of her child. She didn't trust Kenny's judgment at all, and she paid little attention to her son's inexperienced impressions. No one Kenn approved of could be good.

Being cautious, Angela drove slowly past long gravel driveways surrounded with pine trees and knee-high shrubs gone wild from lack of care. The houses on the outskirts gave her no comfort as she left the ghost town behind. They were sprawling beasts with paint-chipped porches and untended lawns, their fields ready to be planted. Their two-car garages would likely hold one white or red Ford Crown Victoria and one midnight blue 1966 Starfire or some other unknown treasure that would now wait forever for its owner to lovingly restore it, the most common hobby in this area. There were no signs of normal life, or any other life, here.

Angela took her first break around four, pulling behind a faded billboard that warned buzzed driving was still drunk driving, and she smirked at the irony as she lit a joint. It didn't matter now. Probably hadn't before, as much as the government had made out. Like every plant in nature, marijuana had its purposes. Right now it was keeping her calm, steadying her resolve, and she was glad she'd found the big garbage bag in one

of her neighbors' apartments. She was terrified, but there was no way she could ever turn back and live with herself, knew it for sure as she sat on the warm hood, sweater pulled tight. Her first-born son was out here somewhere in this hell, and she would find him or die trying.

3

Angela made camp her first night in an unturned cornfield lined with patches of black ice and small, dirty snow drifts. It was about half a mile from the jammed-up lanes of Interstate 74. The brown, brittle stalks didn't quite come up to the roof, but when she threw a wide, dark tarp over the top of the car, scattering slushy snow on it, the vehicle blended in. She immediately felt better as darkness rolled over the broken land.

Angela went to the area she had driven through, straightening rows until the path was normal again, gaze darting nervously at every small sound and shift of shadows. She didn't detect any insects or other wildlife, not even ants crawling over the dirt as she set up camp. She did hear a robin, but was unable to pinpoint its location by the weak call. Things were no better here than what she'd left behind.

Only getting out what she needed for dinner, Angela moved quickly and quietly, listening hard. Nursing a smashed thumb and a sore finger that she'd pulled a large splinter from after making her fire and hanging the tarp (nailing things and lighting them up were what her Marine was good at), she left the rear hatch open. With the ends of the wide tarp hanging down to the ground, she was almost completely shielded from the road.

The sandwiches were gone quickly, as was the light, and she sat on the tailgate, surrounded by pillows, sipping a hot cup of chamomile, and relaxing. The warmth of the heater pushed back a little of the loneliness, and she drank her tea, watching the last of a vivid green sunset.

She hadn't heard anyone on the CB, just gunshots in the distance that made her drive faster, and she hadn't expected to, but not seeing any people, at least not any alive, had bothered her too. When she filled in a page on her journal from now on, she would include how many people she saw on the way and what each town was like. She wasn't sure why she wanted to do it, but instinct said she should, and so she would. In this new world, instincts were a defense that had to be used.

Though she'd only come eight miles, it was a start. Enough to drive it home that once she found Charlie; there would be a price to pay for leaving when her man had made it clear he wanted her to stay and wait for him no matter what. Until the war, she had never even considered disobeying Kenny. They had a deal, and he got mean when she broke the rules. He would be pissed about her leaving—but about her calling Marc, Kenny would be furious—and blood would be spilled, likely hers.

Kenny would never believe anything she offered as an explanation, and she would have to warn Marc that it might come down to real violence. It was only fair he knew what he was getting into... Where was he now?

You can open the door, the witch tried to seduce, but Angie didn't. Not because it was wrong, but because a part of her was too excited, couldn't wait to see him again. What if she still had feelings?

Not only would it complicate everything, but also it had to be a mortal sin to long for one man while still firmly attached to another.

Angela told herself she was eager because it meant getting to her son, and was finally able to sleep.

Her dreams were not easy, though. She was haunted with visions of her son, gone forever, and of her being left to spend eternity searching the new American wastelands for him. Morning's arrival was a relief.

Chapter Eleven
Dangerous Secrets
February 10th

1

“**A**ngie!”

Marc snapped out of the nightmare abruptly. He focused on steamed-up windows, and felt sweat rolling down his neck and spine in small torrents.

He flipped off the heat and shut his eyes again.

He could still see how Angie’s long, brittle hair had flared in the dust, how the blood-smearred footprints dragged out behind her as she walked the broken landscape, searching for her son while the radiation victims from his bus escape—the walking dead—followed on her heels. Was it only a dream or perhaps a vision, a warning? No way to know for sure, but it made him uneasy.

Marc snapped his seatbelt on over his long black coat, telling himself it didn’t matter. Wherever she was, he would find her.

He glanced over his shoulder and grinned at the animal curled up on the neatly packed rear seat. “How’s it hangin’, Dog?”

The big timber wolf ducked his snout under a wide paw and groaned.

Marc grunted agreement, wishing the sun would hurry up and rise so he could make better time and also because he was sick of the damp, cold air that always hinted of snow. Not yet. No snow until he found her.

“I hear ya, Dog. Few more days and we’ll take a break—get some hot food and extra sleep.”

As if he understood, and Marc wasn't sure he didn't, the blackish-red and gray animal rolled over and stared at his master upside down with piercing gold eyes full of patience.

Marc yawned again, wanting a shave and shower, but he swallowed a pill instead, needing to be alert to drive. He was exhausted. He had made two hundred fifty miles in eleven days, with over half of it in just the last five. He'd even been eating while he traveled and had only pulled over when he couldn't stay awake any longer.

Marc had calculated that Angie was roughly a hundred miles ahead of him, and he had pushed hard to get here. As a result, he wasn't completely sure where in southwest Ohio he had stopped. The roads here were unbelievable, and intersections required hours to get through in some places. It had taken him a full day to get across the suspension bridge from Kentucky. Would have been faster if he'd left his vehicle behind, but Marc wouldn't do that without having another lined up. He rolled down the window to view the foggy street sign.

The first thing he noticed was the billboard above him wishing the city of Cincinnati a happy, prosperous New Year.

"Some great joke," he muttered, seeing a muddy, rusting CSX rail yard under inches of sludge. The dark trestles were barely visible through the fog, and even the graffiti he could see (Die Milton! Hondo eats draft ballz. Px2012) looked like it had been there for years instead of eight weeks.

Nothing moved on the dirty suspension bridge swaying precariously behind him, just the same wind and rain-blown debris that was everywhere. Ahead were the burned frames of two Hum-vees with a charred Wright Patterson logo on the sides. Both had crashed into a stand of dead and dying pines.

It was bad here, maybe contaminated, and Marc was glad Angie had left, even as he worried about her being alone. Clearly, it had become too dangerous to stay.

Sighing, Marc consulted the map. Where was he? His heart leapt as he figured out his location. Close. Very close to the place where Angie had left ghosts of her life.

A short ten minutes later, Marc rolled up Queen City Hill, seeing but not worried about the cleared lanes. It had probably happened in the first weeks after the war, when some cities had actually tried to return to normal...then the power had gone off.

Marc wondered again why he was here. Angie had a man. Why wasn't he helping get their son back? Had her husband run out on her? Maybe he'd been taken in the draft, along with the boy. That made sense.

Maybe he's dead, Marc's heart whispered the alternative eagerly.

Marc shoved the thought away with revulsion as he braked gently in front of the brick apartment building. He had been here a decade ago, but hadn't possessed the courage, or the callousness, to knock. She'd had a completely new life by then and he had realized that it didn't include him. He had no right to disrupt her happiness.

Marc had returned to duty and thrown himself into his career. By saving, fixing, and impressing, he'd eventually ended up in MARSOC, where they used his brains as well as his brawn. But he had never married, was unable to make himself settle for another female. He'd never regretted loving Angie, only that he'd let them be caught before they could run.

"She's not here now. Place is empty," Marc muttered, not sure why he had come. Chasing ghosts was always a bad idea, but here he was, drawn into the past again against his will.

He had spent his adult life trying to convince himself that it hadn't meant much, that she hadn't been the one and Marc was filled with sudden, familiar shame. He'd taken advantage of her, had known it was wrong but had been unable to resist, and oh God, hadn't every orgasm since paled in comparison?

He owed her a debt, and there was little that she could ask for that he wouldn't give. After all, she was family.

I want to know what type of life she's had, Marc thought. That's why I came—recon. I don't want to face her in the dark.

He left the engine running and Dog watching anxiously. He didn't lock the door, though the remote entry was in his pocket. Anyone who tried to enter the Blazer would get a big surprise.

Marc jogged through the drizzle to the front of the building, only vaguely noticing the burnt shape of a truck that was more recent and an oak tree that had obviously been hit by something harsh. His mind dismissed it as yet another battle scene.

Opening the cracked door, Marc slid his coat behind his gun handles without even thinking about it.

The hallway was dark and smelled like burnt sugar. Two sheets of paper on the carpeted floor caught his attention and Marc knew instinctively who had written them.

I'll settle for whatever is in those pages, he decided, snapping on his penlight and picking them up from the mud-tracked carpet. He didn't really want to go inside the home that another man had shared with Angie, where some lucky bastard had lived the life Marc had dreamed about every night since being ripped from her side.

Marc read the letters with a sharp-edged curiosity that missed little.

Charlie, lock yourself inside and be as quiet as you can. Do it right now!

If you're reading this, either we missed each other or I didn't survive the trip. I'm terrified of that, of leaving you on your own. I wish I could be with you! I love you and miss you so much it feels like there's a knife in my gut.

I have a big secret to tell you, one that was supposed to wait until you were grown and out of the house. Kenny is not your dad. I know you've suspected, but I couldn't tell you before, and I'm sure you understand why.

Your dad is Marcus Charles Brady.

Our family was bible-strict Christian and when your dad and I fell for each other, only cousins by marriage; it was too close for people to accept. We hid it for a long time, but feelings like that can't be fought.

We didn't plan on it, we were swept away. We had decided to leave when I was older, but fate didn't give us time. A bit after your dad was sent away, I realized you were coming. And I wanted you more than anything.

I didn't tell anyone, just ran as fast as I could. They had legal control until I was of age, and since I was only sixteen, they could have taken you. Worse, I'll always believe they would have made me get an abortion. I ran, and... Kenny found me.

How it happened is my own personal hell—you already feel too much of my pain—and I won't share that. Kenny and I made a deal that said you and I would become his obedient family. It seemed like the best I could do at the time. I know now that it was the wrong choice. How could I not know, when I can feel it in your looks? He has been our master.

Yet, after all that's happened, he has chosen not to come back. That only leaves one person you can trust—your real dad. You have to call Marc, and you know what I mean by that. He'll come once he knows it's true. I'm so sorry that I never told Marc, never gave him the chance to be your father. He had no idea you existed, or he would have come for us. I know it in my...

There was more, but Marc let it go. Anger, guilt, and joy warred in his heart. They had a son. They made a baby! She should have told him! He would have come back a happy man.

Really? His heart was cruel. You wouldn't have felt like a trapped criminal, sure that it was wrong?

Marc let out a harsh sound. That's exactly how it would have felt then, but it didn't matter. He hadn't knocked, and she'd been forced to survive on her own.

"I should have talked to her that day," Marc said aloud.

“Yes,” another voice answered with a deep satisfaction. “You should have.”

Understanding instantly that this man had been here all along, waiting for her—their!—son, Marc spun as he drew.

“You must be the sinner she talks about in the letter. Her *lover*,” Warren sneered, pain lacing his words.

Marc took in the charred skin and furious face, and instantly connected him to the wrecks outside. “You’re why she couldn’t wait for me.”

Marc was suddenly sure this man had forced Angie to defend herself and the rage was nearly overwhelming.

Warren scowled at the confirmation of their relationship, raising his own gun as he moved out of the dark corner where he’d been lurking. “My daughter and my leadership are long gone because of your witch. Will she come back for you?”

Marc’s face darkened. “She’s not who you should worry about.”

They moved at the same time, but only one shot lit the darkness as the Colt barked loudly in a flash of justice and death.

Warren’s weapon dropped to the carpeted floor, blood blooming on his chest. A second later, the broken preacher dropped to his knees, expression almost relieved as scarlet ran in small streams from a corner of his mouth.

Marc stared down at the shuddering man for whom death was fast approaching.

When Warren’s mouth opened but no sound came out, Marc understood anyway.

“She’s not here to serve any man. She’s special.”

“A demon!” Warren choked out.

Marc’s sympathy vanished and he watched the man take his last breath while either thunder or gunfire cracked violently in the distance.

“Look at yourself. You have no right to judge.”

After pulling Warren's cooling corpse out into the wet morning and around the corner of the building, Marc put the letter back together on the glass door, where he was sure it had originally been.

He returned to his warm vehicle, giving the anxious wolf a quick rub of comfort. He flipped on the wipers to clear the heavy layer of rain now thumping down on them. He wiped the stinking liquid from his hands and face as he drove away.

Concentrating the way she had taught him so long ago, Marc called out as the riot-ravaged streets of Cincinnati rolled by. He had to know she was okay. "*Angie!*"

He hit the brakes as a child's weather-faded ball rolled across the street, its color that of the dirty pavement, and he slowly rolled on as the wet wind gusted against the muddy car.

"Angie!"

I'm here.

Her tone was cool, unreadable.

"Where? I just left Queen City Hill."

Angela hesitated, knowing by his tone that he had read the letter that was meant for their son. How long had he known where she lived?

About ten miles north of Greensburg, Indiana, she finally sent.

"I understand why you didn't tell me, but I wish you had. I'm thrilled. I never thought to have a child."

Did his words mean anything to her? Did she still have feelings for him?

She sent a clear warning. *He's mine. Parentage doesn't matter.*

Marc didn't respond, though he wanted to. If she sensed the things floating through his mind, she would disappear. The idea hit him again, and he felt himself grinning. He had a son! It was a reason to have hope, a goal, and his heart was lighter than it had been since the war. He would now serve his child...and maybe that child's mother.

“I ran into a friend of yours here. Had some burns.”

Marc could feel her scowling at the words and he was aware of Dog observing alertly.

Warren. He's dead? Angela asked.

Now, Marc was the one frowning. Something else she should have mentioned...though she hadn't known Marc would go there. “Yes.”

I'm sorry. Killing wasn't what I wanted. I had hoped he was no longer a threat.

“It was his choice.”

There was silence between them for a moment, broken by the drumming rain and the squeak of his wipers, but the connection, the bond between them, was strong. It allowed him to hear stray noises—a clink, a snap, a grunt of effort. She was breaking camp. She didn't want him around yet.

“Where are you holed up at?”

He could feel her wondering how he knew she wasn't on the road, and though suspicion laced her answer, she didn't ask. That meant she didn't know how much he was picking up. Good. More time to recon without being evaluated in return.

I'm in a cornfield off highway 3.

“You could probably stay there and take a break for the holiday. It wouldn't take me long to catch up,” he sent the option carefully this time, knowing instinctively not to mention Valentine's Day by name.

No.

He was glad when she didn't sound mad, but he frowned at how set her tone was.

“You okay?” he asked, still feeling that old need to protect her.

I'm fine.

“Okay... I can't wait to see you.”

The words were perfectly normal for the situation, but there was no mistaking his eagerness.

Marc felt another cold warning rush out to slap at him.

Nothing's changed for us, Brady. Don't think it has.

"I don't, but I had reasons, Angie."

I don't care. It doesn't matter. Only my son does.

Marc wished he could view her face, so he would know if it was true. He couldn't say that and mean it, and it stung to think that she could.

Angela let go of the connection, and Marc didn't bother saying anything else as he steered around bodies of people, dogs, and other corpses he couldn't identify through the rain. She wasn't ready to deal with him yet—probably hated him, despite what she had written to soothe their child. He would have to let her have the lead when it came to settling the past. If he pushed, she would slip away, and if he wanted to get to know his child, he definitely needed her along.

If? A big grin filled Marc's face. There was no if. He would track her down, but as long as he made it clear that he wouldn't interfere with her personally, things should be okay. She would have her missing child, and he would only ask for time with the son he hadn't known existed.

Marc was a little surprised by how much he wanted the boy, by how much his heart liked it that their love had created a new life. He was grateful for this chance to be bonded to someone again.

Marc ignored the part of him that was quietly hoping to have peace at last; sure she still had no welcome for him. Not that it mattered. Angie had called, and he would go to her as fast as he could.

3

In Indiana, Angie got into the driver's seat of her Blazer, emotions chaotic. Why did Marc have to tell her that he was happy about having a child? Hadn't she longed to hear that so many times? The pain was fresh and she dealt with it.

If Marc was in Cincinnati now, then he was a week behind her, and Angela wanted to keep that distance a bit longer. She had to be able to look back after this was all over and know she had gotten the journey started.

Also, she still had no idea how to ask Marc for what she needed. Only a fool would agree.

Chapter Twelve
The Doctor
February 11th
Rawlins, Wyoming

1

“**Y**ou don’t know who to call, even if you fix it.”

Johnathan Harmon, MD, flinched at the sound of his wife’s voice echoing loudly across the dim, carpetless living room.

He put a hand to his chest, trying to get his breath.

“Sorry,” she added.

John smiled at her, thinking she had finally gained a little weight in the month they’d spent hiding in their home. Anne was probably half of his two hundred forty pounds, with hair still mostly brown instead of his salt and pepper. She was beautiful for fifty-eight. He hadn’t been as lucky.

“You did that a’purpose,” he accused with a grin in his voice.

Anne’s brown eyes flashing concern above fine age lines and she set the large afghan she was knitting on the recliner’s matching end table. “I had to. You’re so sad.”

John stared through the only window in the large two-story farmhouse that they hadn’t covered in layers of thick plastic. Stalling, he took off his glasses and laid them on the device that he didn’t know how to repair.

John frowned at the Discovery Channel special going on in their muddy yard. Their neighbor’s dog had collapsed and died near the barn yesterday. The collie’s beautiful coat was bloody from a gunshot, and the carcass was now a carpet of swarming, mutated ants. Their bloated bodies twitched in effort and obvious communication as they struggled to relocate the food.

Backdropped by a view of the Rocky Mountains that was hazy from the layer of grit in the darkening sky, the foraging ants were each the size of a quarter. They were the biggest John had seen around here yet, bodies constantly changing from all the contaminated carrion they were ingesting. All the nests were getting regular doses of contaminated Miracle-Gro from the chemicals, and John hated to think about what it was doing to the snakes and spiders. Once Nature finished cleaning up, leaving only bones, these predators would change to other food sources, like people, and though only time would tell, John was sure their bites would be poisonous. The death toll from this manmade hell wouldn't end for a century or more. Everything had changed. It had been thirty-eight years since he and Anne were in the army, medics at the same MASH unit, but he had to remember what had kept him alive then, so they could use it now.

“We have to pack up and go. The weather's not as bad now that almost two months have passed. We've cleaned out the reserves we had.”

John was sure he had caught her off guard with his words. He didn't know yet where they would end up, or if they would even be able to make the trip. It definitely wouldn't be a blow off. He only knew that their hometown of Rawlins—the place they had both been born—was no longer safe, and even if it were, the temperatures were still falling. They couldn't stay here much longer or they'd stay forever.

The lonely echo of his wife's shoes on the bare floor made John wonder what the footsteps sounded like as they floated down to the dark, flooded tunnels of their barricaded basement. Was it a dinner bell to those open dark ways and everything that might now be calling that nasty area home? They heard noises sometimes, and were never sure if it was the moment that they would have to defend themselves. They never went down there. They also didn't take down the boards he had sealed the door with, only hammered the nails in regularly, but they did occasionally tense and glance that way. John was glad Anne

knew how to use both the shotgun and the rifle he kept by her chair. Not that a firearm would be very effective against sewer rats.

“But why should we go, Johnnie? We get along here.”

“We’ve seen no signs of anyone coming to save us... And, because of the basement.”

Scratch...sniff...sniff.

As if to prove his point, they heard the curious, hungry rodents clearly. The sewer grates at the other end of the treeless land kept out the bigger problems, but the rat populations had come in by the hundreds after the war and he and his wife had had to seal off the unused parts of their home. The rodents were big, much too wide to get under the floors, but their pups would be small enough.

John expected to witness them in great numbers soon, considering they could have a litter each month.

“Where would we go? Other than those men with the guns, we ain’t seen a healthy person in nigh on two weeks.”

John forced his hand away from his aching stomach, gaze still on the yard. He wished that ugly green twilight sun would finish setting and hide the view, so Anne wouldn’t get upset.

“Johnnie?”

The thought of leaving their home obviously hadn’t occurred to her, was terrifying, and though he felt it too, the fear wasn’t strong enough to get John to change his mind. She had to do things his way now. Her life depended on it.

“To NORAD, for starters. We’ll surrender to the draft,” the graying sawbones said firmly, although he was almost sure they would find little at the Colorado complex.

“What if it’s all like here, or worse?”

She was referring to the dead pets, dead police, dead crops, and of course, dead friends and neighbors they had known all their lives. He knew the horrors were still fresh for her; especially the memory of passing the neighbor’s wrecked truck on the two-lane dirt road to their farm. Both doors were open,

and they'd seen the bullet holes in the windshield as they returned from their burning office to avoid the panic gripping their town, their country. Anne had wanted to stop, but there hadn't been a real reason to. The elderly couple was dead, brains blown all over the road.

"We'll have to do some searching. Other healthy survivors are out there. I know it doesn't feel that way when you look out the window, but there are. We have to find them." He winced at his reference to the window.

"But we're old, they won't want us. Shouldn't we stay here?"

"That, my dear Anne, is exactly what most people will do, and they will die. What the weather and disease don't take, the gangs and starvation will. All these threats are lessened when humanity comes together. Despite the flaws, we are not better off without society."

When she leaned toward him, tan slacks rustling, John gently surrounded her with his strong arms, hoping she wouldn't notice his racing pulse. "You're a nurse, I'm a doctor. It's wrong of us to hide and deny them our help. They need us now more than ever."

He kissed her wrinkled cheek. "Our age will make us more valuable because of all our experience."

John now played his trump card without guilt, knowing her inability to get pregnant (which he believed to be his fault) would keep her from arguing more. Suddenly sorry he had never talked to her about adopting, John ignored the pain in his gut to say, "There are a lot of kids out there too, Anna, kids who are alone and hurting. They need us. Trust me, my sweet, I do this for you."

"I do, Johnnie. You know that. I always have."

John grit his teeth against a burning wave of pain that settled deep into his guts. "Good. We'll leave this week."

Anne turned her head, and John tensed, expecting a bad reaction as her eyes landed on the gruesome scene outside.

She shuddered, and he opened his mouth to comfort her, but she spoke first.

“I never did like that damned dog. It barked too much.”

Anne returned to her knitting, leaving him with a shocked look on his lightly bearded face. Even after all these years, she was still capable of surprising him, and he was happier than he could say that they had survived the actual war together. There was no one he would rather be with.

2

A while later, John was still at the window, big ants (and their dinner) gone, the freezing rain falling in yet another round. His mind was still on his wife, on the half-truths he'd told her. He never lied, but he often left things out and this time it was something huge. He would tell her soon, though. She had a right to know that this next year together would probably be their last.

John sighed. He had to get her to some kind of safety, and he had to do it now. He knew she would refuse to budge if he told her why they were really going.

Movement in the dimness caught John's attention, mostly because there was so little of it now, and he watched a shadow limp across their driveway, keeping to the line of dying bushes around the edge of the long porch. He and Anne had seen a lot of radiation victims right after the war, most in the early stages where travel was still possible, and John tensed, expecting one of the walking dead.

Tall and thin with dirty curls under goggles, the young woman wore a muddy coat that came to the tops of her boots. Should he call to her? She looked healthy other than the slight limp—normal.

Before John could decide, she turned toward the window.

Her mouth opened in fear, panicked feet slipping on muddy debris, and then she was gone, disappearing into the hazy darkness.

John started to go to the door anyway and had to sit back down, grimacing at another sharp lance of burning pain. He rubbed his swollen stomach, wishing the pills would hurry. He needed a lab that still had power so he could run some basic tests. It would be easier to plan his wife's future if he knew how long he had to live before the cancer killed him.

John sighed again. He would insist, something he didn't usually do, and they would leave in the next few days. He wouldn't stop until he found someone to protect his sweet, gentle mate. Anne would never last in this hard, new world alone.

Glancing away from a missed ornament, a gaudy, grinning reindeer lying under the couch, Anne tied the last knot of string on the blanket and then began to put away her supplies.

She didn't scan her husband again—didn't need to see him to know he was in pain and gunny sacking to keep her from finding out. He could try to distract her with talk of kids all he wanted—she did feel a bit of regret that she had never been able to bear him a son and hadn't wanted to take one in that wasn't theirs—but it didn't keep her from noticing things. Something was wrong.

His eating and sleeping habits had changed drastically, and she had seen the empty pill bottles in the trash. He was protecting her, like he always did with the bad things, and while she would do what he wanted and pretend that she didn't have a clue, Anne knew. He was sick and hunting for a place to leave her.

John wanted to be alone when he died, had said it many times. He claimed it would hurt too much to say goodbye, and while she would do anything for him, she simply couldn't allow that. Leaving him alone to die would be a betrayal of their life together, and now, after all that had happened, any betrayal of life was wrong. When they went, it would be together.

“Go faster, John! Faster!”

“Hold on!”

The horrified doctor swung the wagon into the dark woods that lined the road and killed the engine a few yards in, glad for the heavy fog and cover of night.

“Get down! Low as you can!”

The elderly couple shoved themselves into the floorboard as best they could. The hurting man stifled a groan at the cramped position, glasses sliding from his face as the engines grew closer.

Pop-Pop!

Sscreechhh!

Headlights flashed their way, and they tried to get lower, the gunshots and engines upon them as the storm rolled overhead.

“I love you, Johnnie. Have since we was kids.”

A cold hand locked onto his hairy wrist through the sleeve of his plaid shirt, and John covered it with his own shaking fingers, afraid he might wet himself despite all his efforts not to.

“And I adore you, my sweet.”

The large group of cars began to fly by, and the couple froze, listening to the shots and wincing at each whine and ricochet.

Drunken shouts echoed, along with thuds of metal hitting, scraping. Rain thumped on the roof, a tire squealed, and a bullet pinged off their bumper, making them both jump. As their grip on each other tightened, the couple knew the fog was all that was keeping them from certain, painful death.

Long minutes later, the gang was out of sight, their noises fading to silence. Terrified it was a trick, that they’d been spotted, John kept them still for another fifteen minutes, only moving when the bands of pain around his gut caused tears to slip from beneath his eyes against his will.

Driving without lights, John took them west on 40, away from the gang. They would still go to Cheyenne Mountain. They would just take a different path.

They had been on the road for five days now, and John had been careful to use ways that didn't require much physical labor. They weren't spring chickens, and he wasn't taking any more chances than he had to. So far, they were a bit stiff and a little sore, but had agreed they both felt more alert than they had in years.

“How long will this add?”

John slid his glasses into place. “Couple hours. We have to get off these frontage roads, but we'll still make Routt Ridge by dawn.”

Anne nodded, wrinkled fingers turning on the heat and defroster before digging into the bag behind his seat. “Here, take these.”

She dropped two white pills into his wrinkled hand and held out an open mason jar of clear liquid. John took them gratefully. His gut was on fire, blood in his veins pounding in time with his pain.

Anne flipped on the CB and went back to checking channels. He was her man, her love, and she wouldn't let him suffer. She had a good idea now what was wrong, had been a nurse long enough to read the signs that he couldn't hide on this journey, and it was a secret between them no more.

John scanned the foggy landscape, able to see faint outlines of dude ranches and hunting lodges. Other than those, and the occasional farm or dead vehicle in the road, there was almost nothing around here. It had been isolated before. Now, it was desolate.

Wind howling through the shadowy darkness, they traveled steadily through the foggy drizzle for the next four hours.

4

John made good time, but when he saw the next set of bodies and cars that were still smoking, he worried over it. This had been a group of travelers, or maybe a large family and the gang

had killed them all. The trail was indeed leading straight to NORAD. Had the gang been there too?

The old man lurking inside winced as another bump jarred him against the sharp spring sticking out of the seat, and John shifted, trying to avoid it as the wagon chugged along the smoldering streets of Granby, Colorado.

He hoped Anne would stay asleep despite the rough ride, and he tried to take it easy. The gentle snoring coming from the blanket-filled passenger seat gave him hope she might sleep through this particular stretch of road. One glance out the foggy window and she would know they were in danger again.

Signs of a battle littered the area, and the winners had marked their victory with devastation. Homes were in flames—even the pine trees on front lawns were burning, their cheery Christmas lights melting onto their branches—cars were rammed through buildings, and lifeless bodies, even horses, lay where they'd been shot. The blood hadn't dried yet, and the doctor was horrified to detect their tires leaving bloody tracks, but he could do nothing about it. The puddles were unavoidable.

Even with the windows up, the smell was revolting: blood, shit, and charred skin. When he lowered the glass, stopping to listen for survivors, he heard only wind and crackling flames, nothing else. The equality state was no longer that. Now, only the strongest would survive.

And those with them, John thought, scanning his wife before sending his attention back to the dangerous road in front of them. He and Anne had been that type in their youth, but now he could only hope to find someone who would protect her.

Pushing away the worry, John tried to concentrate on the debris-laden road but found his eyes flicking off the horror to peer at the sky. He hated it that there was no moon and no stars, just grit and thick, nasty smelling smoke.

Like a damned episode of the Twilight Zone, he complained silently, grateful that the pills were now easing the agony.

John continued to survey for signs of survivors, but the gang had been thorough, and after a long minute, he drove on. Granby was a cemetery without a marker.

5

Dawn was starting to break as they cleared the city limits, the dusty sky barely hinting at light, and while John knew he couldn't go another full day without sleep, they weren't stopping near here, not even for a stretch. Those men might—

“Want me to drive?” Anne asked, making him jump. “I’ve got my glasses.”

He smiled tightly as he loosened the belt over his swollen abdomen. “Yes, but not yet. We’ll switch after brunch, and I’ll snooze in your warm spot.”

She smiled back as she adjusted her silk shawl tighter over her sweater, then shut her eyes and lay on the pillow against the locked door. Instead of giving him hell about not telling her he was sick, she hadn't even mentioned it, just adjusted to care for him as they traveled. She was handling the trip well. Had she too been a little bored, a little restless?

Hell of a way to have an adventure, he thought. A bite to the wind said they would be running the heater all day. John was glad to have the cans of gas on the luggage rack. Three hours at a station with a foot pump had given him a nasty backache, but they were good for two weeks of driving, and he hoped to discover a safe place long before it ran out.

Along with the gang they had hidden from, there had also been other dangers on this trip, like the radiation victim that had snuck up on them in the fog three days ago and almost got the door open before John could get the wagon into drive.

Talk about taking some years off my life, John thought with a touch of bitterness. The weather was also hard to drive in, but at least the acid rain would force the walking dead to hole up somewhere and start dying. With the open sores and lack of

reasoning skills, the zombies would go to ground and not come up.

The doctor inched along without lights toward the government compound, casting his eyes over the tarp in the rear of the wagon that hid their belongings—the last remnants of their life together. He desperately wanted to find a group of people like themselves...different. John knew they were out there, gathering somewhere; he could feel the pull of their calls but saw no one, and the old Ford kept on chugging.

6

An hour after dawn barely lit the sky, the rain and fog had both lightened, and the wagon sat on Routt Ridge. The older couple waited silently, but their hope was gone, the billowing smoke undeniable. Their safety was in flames.

Surveying the surrounding area, John watched ants taking the poison bait balls he'd thrown out of the window when they'd first stopped. The ants here were bigger, but their hill was enormous—two feet high and as wide—with a snakeskin and the bones of lizards scattered around it. The order of nature had been reversed, and even here, the smells of smoke, rot, and mildew lingered under the fresh scent of clean air and pine trees.

“Check again. Maybe we’ll hear survivors.”

Anne did it slowly, but they heard nothing until the last station. John put a gentle hand on his wife’s wrist to keep her from changing the channel. “Wait.”

A second later, the radio lit up with heavy static and a man’s determined words.

“Safe Haven... Red Cross... Welcome all survivors follow...clear means closer...”

They lost it, the radio going to full static, and John looked over Routt Ridge, not needing to witness the horrors in the bunker to know they were there.

“Whatever you think, Johnnie.”

Anne's voice was shaky, but there was confidence on her aged face—confidence in him.

He hesitated, considered. They could at least check them out from a distance. With NORAD gone, there was nowhere else John could think of. If that complex had fallen, and those pillars of black smoke said that it had, then no place was safe.

John headed them west, sure they couldn't have heard the transmission if the new people were south. The mountains wouldn't allow the waves to carry that well on his cheap radio. He would narrow it down by the clarity of the calls, and they would determine if this so-called Safe Haven was aptly named.

John believed leaving their home was the right thing to do. They had started seeing rats the day before, and his last memory of the home they'd shared for so long was of hanging the "Warning! Rodents!" sign on the front door.

They would probably be sick by now if they'd stayed. He had waited as long as he could. John knew the group they ended up with probably wouldn't be what he was hoping for, but if his beloved wife would be safe and have a guaranteed place after he was gone, he would offer his services in exchange.

If that didn't work, he would beg.

Chapter Thirteen
Guns and Magic

February 14th, 2013
Indiana

1

Using simple hand signals, the Kelly brothers slowly snuck toward the dim campfire and the woman covered in a quilt who was sleeping behind it. The area around them was heavily wooded. The Morgan Monroe State Forest was remote even before the war, and there was no glare of moonlight off bald scalps to give them away as they stalked the female.

The brothers had come far east of their main group to take revenge on the man who'd put them in prison. After those two bloody days, the brothers had resumed their travels, ferreting out survivors. They'd found girls and their mothers huddled in basements after the draft had taken their men, but the waves of energy this lone woman was sending out had called to them.

They had followed from a distance to make sure she was alone, and when the woman had stopped to change the tire—her third in four days—they'd made their plans, knowing she would have to rest again afterward. Now she was asleep and they would wait no longer.

Dean and Dillan had been dishonorably discharged from the Army for the murder of a Korean civilian, and they expected no trouble from one woman. They were spies, assassins who excelled at front line infiltrations, and there was only the sound of the cold, Indiana wind howling through the trees as they slipped from rough trunk to yellow grass. Their movements were

so alike, they appeared to be only one six-foot, two hundred twenty-pound threat, instead of two.

Exhausted, Angela was dreaming of murder, rape, and sadistic torture. The men in her nightmare were giving no mercy as their knives continued to flash across the girl's naked body.

"They'll throw us out for this," one of the men worried, sinking his blade deep into a soft, dead breast.

His twin nodded, marking a bruised thigh with an ugly symbol. "We're not going back. Come on. Her daughter's up."

Angela snapped awake as the alarms in her head blared, told her she had let danger get too close to run from. She jerked her gun from its holster and shakily searched the darkness beyond the dim firelight. The groves of trees that she had eased her Blazer into were the only things in sight. There were no sounds, not even a cricket—just the wind and the popping of her small, unevenly rocked fire.

His cover was good. She found the intruder only by his fast, lustful thoughts, layers of slime overlapping. Angela pointed her gun in his direction, not sure if she could shoot a person, though the witch was telling her to defend herself first and ask questions later.

Use the fire!

The demon ordered it, but Angela couldn't. The intruder hadn't done anything wrong, though she knew his lean, sinewy body was ready to react. She could feel it.

"Don't make me shoot you," she warned, hating her shaky tone. The flag-draped blanket fell unnoticed to the damp dirt as she stood.

"I'm hungry. Got any food?"

Obviously a lie, the words fell awkwardly, tone devoid of feeling. It gave her a chill of terror when he took a small step closer.

She raised the weapon, flipping off the safety. “Don’t! I will shoot you!”

Energy, fear, and adrenaline raced through Angela, and she called for a defense other than her gun. She wasn’t good enough with it.

A door appeared in her mind, one that carried a feeling of death. She put a hand on the knob and still hesitated, not wanting to take a life.

“What’s your name? Pretty bitch?”

His simple, awful words made her understand that the smoke and mirrors she had used on Warren wouldn’t deter this seasoned hunter. She opened the mental door, not looking at what had been chosen as she prepared to do battle for her life. Nothing would keep her from her son!

The witch whispered again, revealing secrets, and her eyes widened in fear. “Where’s your brother?”

The witch took great pleasure in the surprise that spread across his hairless face, and Angela darted a quick glance at her Blazer while he was distracted. It was too far away, and that sucked because it was a presidential model.

“How do you know that?” the man demanded menacingly, moving forward through the cool, moonless darkness.

Dean. His name is Dean. Angela felt a great wave of heat, of force, jump from her chest to form a thin shield between them.

The shield was visible only for a second, but Dean noticed and stopped.

“Be gone, killer. You have no welcome here!” Angela forked her hands at him.

The burned-out fire flared to life, and the crackling flames reached for the surprised man. The mercenary took an unconscious step backward, revealing the second brother and the barrel of his gun.

“Drop it, bitch!” The second man—Dillan—wasn’t sure why his brother had hesitated. It had never happened before, and he

couldn't think of anything that would cause it now. Dillan believed they feared nothing. "You shoot, you die slow."

The witch waited no longer, surging forward, and Angela stepped through the thick mental door, white energy oozing around her.

You accept without question? a voice thundered in her head.
I do.

Arcing as it rushed out, power flew from her chest, violent in its passage. It slammed against the brothers as it traveled, knocking them to the ground.

Angela's breathing was harsh as silence fell, the thin shield vanishing as the fire sank down to a dim glow.

"Whhhoooo!"

The wolf's call was close, as if it was responding to her cry for help.

Dean gaped at his twin with worry. "What is she?"

Dillan frowned at his brother's spooked tone. He hadn't seen the shield or the fire, and had already passed off being knocked down to the gusting wind.

"Ours, and we'll have her here and now! You go first." Dillan spat, reminding his brother of who they were.

Both men missed the shadows moving closer as they shared an evil leer and then suddenly spun, rushing at her.

Angela threw herself toward the Blazer, firing wildly.

The twins dropped low and kept moving. Then, the dry click of her gun echoed, and they stood up, openly closing in for the kill.

"Fire! Ice!"

The flames blazed between them again, but died just as fast. Her energy was spent, and the brothers leapt at the same time, ignoring the bits of hail falling on them.

Crack! Crack!

Only Dillan made it across the short flames as bullets flew through the air. An unseen predator padded into the circle of light as Dean hit the tall grass beyond the fire, clutching his leg.

Dillan grabbed for Angela's arm, no doubt meaning to use her as a shield against whoever was shooting at them, but powerful jaws sank into his wrist.

Angela saw pain flash across Dillan's face as he let go of her, the bullets forgotten as blood sprayed violently.

"Aaaahh... Dean!"

The timber wolf shook its head and Dillan punched the creature with hard, serious blows that had no effect.

Angela winced, retreating further as bones crunched between the wolf's teeth.

"Kill it! Dean!"

Dean stayed quiet, hands searching for the gun he'd lost when the unexpected slug had slammed into his leg, but his gaze was fixed on the shadows. He was hunting for the walking dead man who had done this.

"Dean! Shoot it!"

The wolf jerked the hurt man to his knees, blood covering his muzzle.

When the beast let go, baring sharp, red teeth, Dillan scrambled to get away.

"He'll go for your throat if you move again," Angela forwarded a thought from the beautiful predator's mind, and the twin stilled, holding his mauled arm.

Angela quickly retrieved the gun she had dropped, and the injured man glowered at her with a hatred that gave her another deep chill of fear. Her death was in those remorseless eyes, and it was ugly.

"This isn't over!" Dillan snarled, almost crying tears of rage.

Angela paled, but before she could respond, a voice rang out in commanding fury.

"Yes, it is! You're both dead!"

Marc stepped from behind her muddy Blazer, Colt aimed where the other man had fallen out of sight. He advanced purposely in that direction; content the wolf had things under

control. There was no hesitating, no doubt about what had to be done.

“Marc.” Feeling their deaths in his mind, Angela stopped him, despite the witch warning her not to interfere with the defense she had chosen. “I’m not hurt. Let’s go.”

Marc didn’t turn. “It’s a bad idea.”

“I know,” she agreed, heart thumping at the sound of his voice.

Marc gave in reluctantly, slowly fading into the shadowy darkness by her vehicle to provide cover without being such a clear target. “Go on, then. I’ll catch up.”

Angela moved fast, grabbing her things, and was glad when the wolf stayed between her and the furious man on the ground. The doctor inside wanted to help, wanted to try to make peace—but his hatred! She knew even if she could change the way the brothers saw her, they would always loathe her for this surprise defeat. She would only be healing them so that they could continue to hunt her.

They will anyway, the voice behind the now shut door warned. *Better to let your new man kill them.*

No killing, Angela denied. *And Marc isn’t my man.*

“We’ll come for you, bitch!” Dillan was slowly sitting, clothes tacky with blood.

The menacing wolf snarled, telling Angela to stay away. If she stepped too close, if Dillan got even a hand on her, the man would snap her neck with his good arm. She caught that image too, and was careful not to get within his reach.

“You’ll look over your shoulder forever, witch!” Dean shouted from the tall grass, still searching for his gun. “You’ll bleed rivers while we have you!”

Evil laughter floated on the wind, giving Angela another chill despite Marc’s presence.

When she raised a brow, Marc sighed heavily, cold gaze returning to the snake in the high grass. “You already know what I think.”

Angela studied her conscience for a brief second, but she had lived by the old rules for a long time. “Let’s just go.”

Dillan was in agony, mangled wrist excruciating. He was horrified to find himself relieved by her decision.

For the first time since they were teenagers, the twins had underestimated their prey, might even need help. It was humbling for men who had engaged entire military units alone, but especially for Dillan, who was the more aggressive. This humiliating defeat would never be forgotten.

She opened the door, but was hesitant to leave Marc alone with the two killers.

“Now. Take Dog, if he’ll go.”

Marc’s words held a tone of command that she recognized and responded to, even as she frowned. Angela motioned to the wolf and was a bit surprised by how clear the mental answer was from the beautiful animal.

“Man is your guardian. I am his.”

The wolf pushed against her leg, able to sense his master’s impatience.

Angela climbed into the Blazer, closing the door. The powerful engine fired up and she slid the window down to stare at the mad man on the ground. “That should be a fatal injury now. Will you die?”

“Who are you?!” Dillan demanded with hatred.

The witch smiled, hunger glinting. “You’ve called enough of my names. Stay clear of me and mine.”

The Blazer was out of sight a few seconds later.

When both man and beast started to retreat, Dean and Dillan began to hurl insults, hoping to trap Marc, and use him to draw Angela back.

“Look at the railbird run!”

“Coward! Can’t you finish the job?” Dean yelled, gun now in hand.

Dillan was furious. He didn't care that he was an easy target if Marc chose to fight. "Hell won't be far enough for you to run!" he shouted, standing awkwardly as his brother came to his side.

"We will have her." Dean confirmed ruthlessly. "You can't protect her forever!"

Marc stayed silent, aware of their tactics (hadn't Warren thought to do the same thing?) but also sure they meant every word they screamed. Unlike the bitter man from her hallway, these two could back it up.

Out of sight now, Marc wound through tall oaks and high bushes, leaving muddy prints in the grass. The wolf kept pace, and the big animal was inside the second he opened the door of his own vehicle. Dog headed for his place in the rear.

Marc slid in and started the engine, and the radio immediately lit up, making them both flinch from the unfamiliar sound.

"You there, Brady?"

He shifted and hit the gas as he keyed the mike. "Be in your mirror in a click. Kill your lights and stay close."

The bright red and white tattles disappeared. "I will."

Marc only slowed a little as he went around her on the gravel road, pleased she had left room for him to take the lead. When she fell in tight behind him, he let his training and knowledge of the area take over, eager to lose the brothers and be alone with her.

Glad that the ground here was dry but not dusty enough to leave tracks, he swung them onto an old dirt path that would eventually bring them out well away from the vengeful threats they were leaving alive.

Ignoring his gut that said doing this was a disastrous mistake, Marc lit a smoke and lowered the window a little. Angie hadn't wanted it, and the last thing he needed was for her to think he was a hardened killer...even though he was.

Marc sighed. The damp air rolling in warned of rain soon, a lot of it, and he told himself to relax. Between the twins' injuries

and the weather, he and Angie should be able to get at least a good night's sleep before they had to begin doing sentry duty.

Moving quickly, they rolled down streets and dirt roads that Angela didn't have time to examine on her map before they were taking a different one. She kept her doors locked and attention on the *Born Free & Die that Way!* bumper sticker that she could only read when he hit his brakes. They traveled through the thick, silent darkness and her stomach filled with butterflies, pulse racing. He was here. Marc had finally come!

Marc kept one eye on the winding dirt road and one on the vehicle in his mirror, glad she copied his actions exactly as they rolled around downed trees, crushed cars, and wireless telephone poles—damage that he was almost sure had been caused by an earthquake. She was following him as he had followed her, trusting the choices he made, as he had trusted her choices when he'd followed her trail. It occurred to him again, that some of her decisions had been risky and reckless. Finding her had been easy because she was not taking the easiest or most reasonable path, only the quickest—like the water crossing in Geneva. They'd both been lucky that bridge had held.

Marc wanted to pick up the mike and tell her how happy he was that she'd called, but he resisted. This was not the time or place, and not only because of anyone who might be listening. He had to get himself under control first.

His mind flashed to the image of her bathed in firelight, no longer the innocent young girl of his dreams but a full, rounded woman, and he felt the pain keenly. Slender curves, a pale, flawless face, midnight black hair...it was suddenly easy to remember how silky it had felt under his trembling young fingers.

One single, unforgettable weekend fifteen long years ago, and he had never gotten close to it again. The occasional barrack bait he'd succumbed to had been blue-eyed with long dark hair, and he had loved them all in the dark. Searching for what he'd lost, he was always unsatisfied and regretful when it was over.

Being with Angie for only these few minutes had already reminded Marc of that, of how lonely he'd been, and unless he could hide it, she would know too. He'd never gotten over her.

2

Nerves began to settle onto Angela as the miles slowly passed, and she found herself hoping he would keep going all night. She was more than grateful for the rescue, but she had expected to have at least one more day to figure out what to say to him. What she needed was dangerous, and she was crazy to think she could guilt him into it with something that had happened so long ago. It would never hold him through all they would face.

Then tell him the basics and let him make his own choices, the witch advised her, and Angela agreed. That's exactly what she would do, and hope the rest took care of itself.

Her dreams had kept some things alive in her memory—like the feathered black hair, that sexy blue gaze, and his full, pouty lips—but she had forgotten about his hard, tanned skin and the way a couple days' stubble was so attractive on him. Marc was like a modern day cowboy now, with wider shoulders and lean hips inside dusty jeans and scuffed boots. He wore a wide-brimmed, faded black hat, and of course, there was the outline of a dog tag beneath his shirt and black trench coat. He also sported a gun on each hip, crisscrossed belts accenting the great shape he was in.

Her Brady was all grown up, and she hoped (feared) that what had once been between them would make him help her when anyone else would refuse. They had been true friends once, lovers...maybe even soul mates. She was counting on those feelings and his sense of honor, but also worrying about how to protect her heart. She would have to be careful not to even accidentally encourage or imply anything that she had no

intentions of restarting. The past was done. They couldn't go back.

By 2:00am, storm clouds, thick and white, were rolling overhead, and Angela was ready to stop, too tired to worry about talking. She wiped at her blurry eyes as they rolled onto yet another weed-dotted gravel road, and a street sign flashed by too fast in the darkness.

They went past small, empty-feeling buildings that she recognized as restrooms and showers. She assumed this was a campground of some kind, or maybe even the rear of the state forest she had been in. They were on a dirt path, and Marc's brake lights stayed lit as he came to a stop in front of a wide log house with a two-car garage that boasted a single, dark second-floor window. A caretaker's home, maybe? Garbage littered the area, and the trees were more spaced out, spots still cleared for tents and campsites, but only oddly colored weeds grew in those neat rock circles. It was spooky, and she jumped when the radio lit up.

"I need to check it out. Stay close, okay?"

"Yes." Angela shut off her engine but didn't get out. She wanted to watch him, wanted to see if the Marine took over the man the way it did with Kenny, but she (and the witch) also needed to know where her enemies were. She shut her burning eyes, searching for the evil twins that she had stopped Marc from killing.

3

Dillan and Dean were acting as if they hadn't been bested, bloated egos unable to accept the fact that one woman and man had hurt them so badly, but inside they were humiliated, furious, and on the hunt. They were familiar with black magic, understood what possessing the witch could do for them, but it was the humiliation that would keep them following.

They were tracking the couple with their lights out, blood-soaked pants and jackets sticking to the seats of their jeep, and the two identical Blazers were easy to see as their brake lights flashed like red beacons in the darkness. Not disconnecting those bulbs was a huge mistake. It was understandable, considering the circumstances, but it was also enough to get them trapped.

Without speaking about it, the brothers accepted that this woman was different and required a more careful approach.

“You have gas left?” Dean asked, staying low as Dillan observed their prey through the binoculars. They had followed separate trails for the first two days of tracking the woman, being careful not to lose her, until tonight, when they’d come together for the attack.

“Two gallons, you?”

Dean smothered a cry, fingers digging deep into his thigh for the bullet. “Four. Wait until they’re asleep and send them both to hell?”

Dillan’s face was a mask of hatred as he rewrapped his mauled wrist. “Just don’t shoot unless you have to. I wanna hear her scream while she burns.”

4

Marc frowned as he came out of the garage. She hadn’t emerged from the Blazer that was even the exact same shade of mud-splattered black as his own. Able to feel the hum of raw energy, he stopped himself from reaching for the handle, knowing instinctively that she was hunting for the brothers.

When she opened the door, Marc stepped closer, thinking she didn’t look thirty years old. He, on the other hand, knew he was five years older than that by the age lines and grey hair starting to show up in his mirror. His birthday had been eight days before the war, and Marc suddenly wished he had celebrated it this time.

“Everything okay?”

Angela shrugged, slowly coming out of the zone. “For now, I think, but they’ll come for us... For me.”

Her voice doesn't sound right, Marc thought.

Angela didn't tell him she had seen only darkness in the future. She slowly eased out of the Blazer, trying not to wince at the pain in her gut.

As she moved, Marc saw she had a Therma-Care patch stuck to her seat. What a great idea.

He scanned the .357 on her hip. Her random firing at the twins told him that she didn't know what she was doing with the six-shooter. It was probably too big for her hands, chosen because it was pretty. Marc sighed inwardly. She'd be better off with his old piece of shit...though really, the M9 in the bottom of his kit didn't fit that old USMC nickname. He'd had more respect than that.

“We'll both make some real distance in the next few days and lose them for good.”

Angela shivered as the fog cleared, hoping he was right. The two men were dangerous, and she should have let Marc take care of them...Marc. They were together again.

She peered up, becoming aware of a thickness between them.

Marc couldn't help staring at her in stunned happiness, moving closer. He felt like he was in one of his dreams, and he didn't register the fear on her face as his arms came up, nor the rigid body he wrapped them around with a groan of longing. “God, I've missed...”

“Let go of me!”

Marc retreated from the fear in her voice as if burned. Angie was afraid of him?

“Not at all,” she lied, hoping he hadn't noticed her hand plunging toward her gun. “I don't like to be touched.”

Since when? His eyes narrowed with questions he knew she wouldn't answer yet.

“Is it okay to go in?” She buttoned up her long black sweater and then slung two big duffle bags over her shoulder.

“Yes. Window’s covered, so our lights won’t be seen.”

Angela hit her rear latch button and shut her door, not looking at the decaying bodies of two wood thrushes near her tire, or the man she’d dreamed about almost nightly for years. During the day, she’d been careful to keep Kenny from picking anything up, but the dreams were hers and she’d used them to remember.

“Get what you need, and I’ll take it in.”

“I’ve got it.”

Marc wasn’t surprised that she refused and stepped by him. The waves of anger now coming from her stiff form were hard to mistake. He went to get his own gear, stealing little glances, and he could feel her doing the same.

When she stepped into the dark garage without hesitation, it surprised him. The Angie he had known was very afraid of the dark, terrified even.

This isn’t her, the voice inside advised. *Go slowly.*

As Marc stepped in behind her, Angela quickly switched to the far side of the small, mostly empty room, the pen light on the chain around her neck shining dimly. He watched her fire up a lantern and put it in the corner, and he knew she was aware of him standing in the doorway, staring. She looked...tense.

“Figured we’d use the loft. It’s a good vantage point,” Marc said matter-of-factly.

Angela slid her bags back over one shoulder without argument.

Marc was unable to keep his gaze from her ass as she deftly climbed the ladder and disappeared into the darker shadows of the second floor. She came down less than a minute later, and he said nothing about her cushioned movements as they brought their vehicles inside without talking. Was she in pain? Injured?

Angela backed her muddy SUV in first, while Marc held the garage door. When they switched places, he rolled by her with a silly wave and smile that reminded her of the past, when he had been willing to try anything to pull a laugh from her.

Instantly sad, Angela headed to the loft and set up the heater. Having emotions sucked.

Angela sighed in relief as the red glow came on and began to warm her fingers. She had chosen the far rear corner, the side that was bare, dusty planks. She was making her bed as Marc came up the stairs.

Knowing from her life with a Marine that he would want the spot closest to the door, she unrolled her bag in the far corner, thinking one of them had to say something soon to cut the tension. It was awkward, sad. Once they had been so—

“Where did you find a heater? I kept finding the cylinders, but no actual base.”

His tone was impressed, and Angela tried unsuccessfully to pretend it wasn't relief filling her at the sound of another human voice. “The basement of a Goodwill. It's great to have.”

Marc was studying her, she could feel him hunting for clues to why she had called, and she began to set up the Coleman stove he had brought in, still not sure how to begin that conversation. Outside, the rain fell heavily, drowning out the hard new world on the other side of their four walls.

Marc had taken off the long leather coat, and she was drawn to his thick arms against her will as he dug out his own bedroll. He did indeed put it between her and the ladder, and they both avoided the boxes, bags, tarp-covered bike frames, and tall mirror layered in thick dust that littered the other side of the wide room. There were a million things that she wanted to say. Where to start?

“Want some hot chocolate?”

“That sounds good.”

She handled his stove with an ease that told him she knew what she was doing, and Marc kept quiet, wishing she would meet his stare for more than a second at a time. What was her problem? Was it so bad that she didn't think he would help? The urge to ask questions was hard to resist, even for him, but he knew she was tired. He could read it on her pale face. If she said

she'd rather wait until morning to talk, he would agree, but he'd never be able to sleep.

Angela lit the Coleman, a twin of the one sitting in the rear of her Blazer. When she'd seen him taking his inside, she had left her own packed, and it made her think about their vehicles. They hadn't just picked the same camping equipment. Of all the cars and trucks in the country, they had chosen the same one, even year and make. Was that a coincidence?

“Can you use that gun on your hip?”

Angela increased the fire on the small pot of water, thinking again that he was like a cowboy from the Old West with his silver crisscrossed gun belts and matching ivory-handled weapons.

“I can load it and pull the trigger. Does that count?” she asked, dumping the packets into the mugs.

Marc noticed she bagged the garbage instead of leaving it. “Not really. You use it before tonight?”

“No. I didn't want to attract attention. Guess I did that anyway, but I had a flat and the flashlight wasn't enough.”

She turned to him then, trying hard to hide the pain and misery she had felt these past years.

His dread of her story increased.

“Thanks for coming. There's no one else I can ask.”

Marc instinctively wanted to comfort her, wanted to insist that she could count on him, and stopped himself. “I'll help if I can. It's the best I can do.”

“Hope you feel that way later,” Angela murmured, dumping in the hot water and stirring. When she brought their cups over, she set his down and quickly retreated despite his hand reaching out.

She balanced on each foot to slide her shoes off, feeling his attention. Settling herself on her bedroll, Angela pulled the blanket over her lap before easing out of her sweater to reveal a simple white T-shirt with a flag on the front. The jeans now hidden under the quilt were unfastened around her aching guts,

had been for hours while she drove. She had been pushing herself, and now she was paying for it.

Lips tightening at the attempt to hide her pain, Marc also settled on the floor. He busied his hands with cleaning one of his Colts, but his attention stayed mostly on her and the small details that his years of experience allowed him to see.

There was a pretty (small) diamond ring on a chain around her slender neck, a claim of ownership that she obviously still felt, or she wouldn't be wearing it. She was thinner than he thought she should be—probably only one hundred twenty pounds—and her nose was crooked, though that was barely noticeable. He also spotted the slight shadow of what was probably a nasty scar showing from under the edge of her wrinkled shirt.

She looked scared, sick maybe, and instead of the guilt or anger he had expected her to use, Marc sensed only sadness, and felt that old concern rise up—stronger. He wisely kept his mouth shut, though, sure that anything he said would be met with scorn or sarcasm. This was her show until he agreed, and he hadn't done that yet.

Their eyes locked, began to melt the ice wall between them, and hers flinched away. There was joy and pain in that brief glance, and once again, Marc admitted there was little she could ask for, that he wouldn't give.

Angela took a deep breath and then picked another question to stall. "So, are you really a Marine or do you just like being a moving target?"

Marc grinned, a bit surprised that she knew he was military and what branch. Most civilians didn't, and he wondered what had given him away.

"Been doing it a long time. Saw no reason to change," he stated carefully, slowing his hands on the gun. This was obviously going to take a while.

"What's your rank?"

"I was a sergeant."

She stared at him curiously. “Why only an E5?”

He was surprised again by her knowledge, and he shrugged, starting to worry. Was her man military too? “I disobeyed a direct order too many times. Lost rank.”

“When did you enlist?” She hated herself for being unable to stop the old Angela from asking, but couldn’t deny the need to know.

Marc snorted and noticed she jumped. She’d been attacked. She had every reason to be a little twitchy.

“I didn’t *enlist*,” he replied with heavy sarcasm. “It was either put in my time or go to prison for statutory rape. I’ve been a jarhead for fifteen years.”

Her expression was guarded. Fifteen years. Right after they were caught in her bedroom.

“The first year was bad, but I learned not to draw fire, and I made a life. I do...did things that most people can’t even imagine.”

“Sounds like you’ve enjoyed it.”

“For the most part, yes. It was good, knowing I was making a difference.” Marc tried to get her to meet his eye. “What about you, Angie? Have you been okay?”

The question was abrupt and she lowered her eyes. “It’s had good days and bad days.”

Simple. Marc studied the bags beneath her long, dark lashes, the broken, jagged fingernails, and the unhealthy color of her pale skin. Too simple.

“More bad than good, right? Otherwise, you wouldn’t have called me.”

She nodded, but didn’t give any details, and Marc felt guilt roll over him as if she was screaming. “I’m sorry. I made a mistake.”

Angela lit a smoke, a flash of annoyance streaking across her mind. Did he regret loving her or not coming for her? “I don’t need your apology, just your help.”

“I will if I can,” he repeated. “Tell me.”

She let out a deep sigh that told him he wouldn't like any of it, and, as with the note, he read between her words and missed little.

"I left some things out of the letter. Important to you and me, but it's nothing my son needs to feel bad for."

Marc waved a hand, understanding what she wanted from him. "This stays between us. My word."

The wind gusted, moving things around outside and she flinched again. Dog continued pacing in front of the door, noticing her tension, Marc assumed. It was hard to miss.

Angela inhaled and blew out a thick cloud of smoke. "We've been living with a man named Kenny for the last fourteen years. We met at the hospital where I gave birth. He was there for rehab on his arm. I had talked my way into a job as a lab assistant, running packages between floors to pay for my medical classes. He seemed normal enough, safe, dependable, and I ended up telling him everything one night on my break."

She paused and sucked in a breath. "He acted horrified that I was a single, underage mother on the run, living in a sleazy hotel, working ten-hour shifts, and spending another six hours, four days a week, in classes. Was scandalized that I had to have the hotel manager's drunken sister and teenage daughter babysit."

"And the concerned Samaritan offered you a deal you couldn't refuse."

She nodded again, and the hate in her depths left no doubt. He had been forced to leave her, and she had been hurt. Marc braced himself. "What was the deal?"

She met his eyes with pain that he knew wasn't faked.

"Me. I had to accept him as my...owner, until my son is nineteen."

"Nineteen?"

Angela crushed out her butt and opened a flat black case to pull out a thick, neatly rolled blunt. Outside, the wind howled in warning, but neither of them noticed.

“He said the extra year was his bonus for being such a good citizen. He never let me forget he was caring for someone’s bastard.”

Fury filled Marc, but he couldn’t say anything in his own defense. After all, it was true.

“What do you need me for?” He couldn’t help the defensiveness in his voice.

Angela lit the weed, inhaled before answering. When she passed it, he noted how careful she was not to touch him at all.

“Help me get my son back. Clearly I’m not cut out for the trek.”

“So, just for the trip?”

“No, probably not. Kenny’s also a Marine. My son is a cadet. They’re together now, in western Utah, and Kenn can be...harsh when he doesn’t get his way.”

His worry confirmed, Marc didn’t respond, busy running over what that confrontation might be like. She wanted him to challenge a fellow Marine. He could do it, but only for the right reasons.

“When he gets like that, I can’t handle him alone. I need you to stay close once we find them, while we talk. Maybe we’ll work things out.”

Marc heard a mix of emotions in her words, but doubt was the clearest. “You don’t think so?”

She took the smoldering blunt, and again made sure they didn’t touch, drawing a deeper frown from Marc. Where was *his* Angie?

“No. Kenny doesn’t know what a compromise is. He’s never had to before, and unless the war changed him, he’ll fight to keep what he considers his. I still owe him six years.”

Marc knew trouble when he heard it. “So, I get you there, and what? Protect you so that you can tell your man you don’t love him anymore?”

Her eyes blazed, and he knew it was at the accusing tone more than the words.

“It was never love! We made an unfair deal, and he’s had over a decade of my life that I can’t get back! You don’t know, so don’t sit there and think I’m playing games. Kenny will be furious that I’ve left Ohio, and he won’t care about my reasons or needs. When he finds out I want to change the terms of our deal, that maybe I want complete freedom, he’ll do whatever it takes to hold me. Unless he’s changed.”

“And you hope he has?” Marc asked slowly, not wanting to know, and yet needing to. When she hesitated, his heart stirred. There was room there...and it was still wrong.

“We were a family for a long time, and if he can stop—” Angela caught herself quickly. “If he can compromise, I might be willing to resume our old life.”

“And if he won’t?” Marc took the tiny blunt and stubbed it out. When she met his eye again, there was no mistaking the fear, but there was also determination that reminded him of the old Angie, of his Angie.

“I’ll grab Charlie and go north. Kenny would never expect a weak woman who speaks a little bit of Spanish to pick Canada.”

Marc let out a frustrated sigh. She wasn’t telling him everything. “We could do that anyway.”

“No. I have to give him the chance.”

“So, I take you there and hang around until you make up your mind, and then maybe take you north. What’s the catch?”

Angela sighed ruefully. “There’s more than one, but the biggest is that Charlie doesn’t know for sure Kenny is not his father. I’ve never been able to tell him, but he’ll figure it out, and then Kenny will know. Once my Marine realizes who you are, he’ll never agree to anything. You may have to fight for both of us.”

Marc said nothing, waiting, and she let out a worried noise that called to him.

“He’ll be madder than I’ve ever made him, and maybe it’ll come to blood.”

“Surely you’re exaggerating?”

“No, I’m not. He’ll recognize you for the threat you are and try to run you off or hurt you. It’s only fair you know what you’re getting into.”

Marc felt a fresh tremor of unease at the tone. “Then why take the chance the boy will get caught in the cross fire? We’ll grab him and go.”

“No, Brady. I would have been sent home, and they would have taken my baby. Kenny saved me from that. We made a deal. Eighteen full years no matter what, and while I can’t keep that promise now, I at least owe him the chance to accept that things have changed and keep the family he had, on different terms.”

Marc studied her, not liking it. If her man was that possessive, there was bound to be ugliness that he wanted no part of. “What you’re asking is unfair. I can’t even spend time with my son. It’s a bad deal now too.”

The storm had broken while they talked, rain thumping roughly on the roof as the wind gusted, slamming things around. She stared at him with an expression that said she didn’t think she could do it on her own.

“You won’t help me?”

The crushing disappointment in her voice had him looking away, sure if he held her gaze, he would give in.

“I’ll think on it, but probably not. I can’t be your show of force and maybe even your attack dog because you can’t live up to a decade-old promise and are too honest to skip out on it, even after all that’s happened. I certainly won’t challenge a fellow Marine for those reasons.”

Angela held in hot tears. “I understand. I’ll go my own way come morning... I’m sorry, Brady, for all of it.”

She lay down with her back to him, trying not to cry. She couldn’t bring herself to tell him the awful truths about how bad her life had been. He had to realize on his own how much she needed him.

Marc wanted to talk more. He wanted to convince her that she didn't have to stay with a man she didn't love, that even after all these years he was still waiting. But he also loathed the idea of being a Jody. No real Marine let himself become the guy who stole a fellow grunt's girl while they were away.

Marc blew out a sigh of frustration, frown growing when the small sound made her flinch. What was he supposed to do?

Whatever she asks! his heart reproached miserably, already aching at the thought of being split from her again so soon. His emotions insisted she was the real thing, a true damsel in distress, and he went over her words and reactions repeatedly, searching for clues to what he was missing. What hadn't she told him?

5

A short time later, Angela jerked out of a deep sleep, the first she'd had since leaving Cincinnati. Weak alarm bells blared for the second time in the same night, and she pushed herself up, but the door in her mind refused to swing open. She was too tired.

Marc woke the second she sat up, heart thumping at the sight of his dream woman with sleep still on her.

"We have to get out of here," she said.

He pulled on his boots, not hesitating, and the clink of his dog tag caught her ear as he stood up to fasten the jeans he'd discreetly loosened. The sexy strip of hair that ran from his flat, tanned stomach to his groin kept her attention, and she snatched in a surprised breath at the clear chill of desire that went through her. It had been a long time since she'd felt anything even close to passion.

"What is it?"

Angela tore her eyes away as she grabbed her blankets, sweater, and the heater. "I can't tell. Big and fast, whatever it is."

She moved toward the ladder, leaving the rest of her things. She could hear Dog whining impatiently in the darkness below.

Whatever it was, the wolf felt it too. Angela quickly climbed down, going for the door.

“Oh, my God!”

That brought Marc from gathering their things, and he stopped in the doorway behind her, stunned.

Thick, orange flames licked up the porch rails of the house, and the tree line was ablaze in every direction. Even the air was burning; fat drops of acid rain catching fire as they hit a burning branch or rail. It was as if the sky was on fire from the ground up, tiny sparks moving into the night like fire following gasoline.

The rear of the garage was also sending up smoke, telling Marc that direction wasn't safe either, and he searched for an exit.

Angie was still frozen, and Marc gave her a nudge as a wave of thick, black smoke gusted toward them. He noticed that she cringed away from him, even in a moment of danger.

“Back the way we came, and stay on my ass!” he called over the growing roar of the blaze.

They were rolling a few seconds later, tires traveling over hot, smoldering branches and limbs that had already fallen. The smoke grew steadily thicker, making it harder and harder to see as they went by smoking cabins and tall, flaming trees that threw hot showers of sparks on their vehicles. Neither noticed the bullets that all barely missed the tires they were aimed at. They slammed into the ground with hard, quiet thuds that couldn't be heard over the crackling, popping rumble of the fire around them.

Smoke rolled across the road in thick waves, flames blocking their way in places, and Marc was forced to lead them in and out of trees that had become horrible, giant torches.

Dead limbs fell, thumping to the ground in geysers of flaming debris, and Angela followed him tensely, heart in her throat. They'd almost burned! It was hot and smoky, her neck and face sweaty, cheeks streaked with soot, and Angela tried to

keep her attention on his bumper instead of the flames. How close to death they'd been!

Marc took them back the way they'd come, but instinct told him this wasn't a natural fire. When the flames continued to get heavier, he turned them again, going west as sweat poured off him in small torrents.

The flames rose suddenly in a thick wall, and he keyed the mike. "Hit the gas! We'll go right through!"

They plunged into the fire at high speed, the heat rising, and then they were through, coming out unharmed on the other side.

The temperature was instantly cooler, and the path Marc picked went downhill steeply, winding into more coolness with long, bone-jarring bumps. The flames hadn't been through this brown and green terrain yet. Maybe they had gotten out in time. Because of Angie.

They could still view the flames in their mirrors, though, and Marc went for White Creek, where they detected animals following the current. He eased them down into the half foot of casually flowing water. He rolled slowly down the middle of the creek, hunting for the dirt path he'd only been on twice. It was nearly inaccessible to anything but a bike or jeep, and it would take the fire a long time to spread up the hill.

Spotting it, he headed them gently that way, being careful not to crush animals still darting into the water for safety.

"Remember how we used to ride dirt bikes behind Daniel's house?"

"Yes."

"This is trickier. Stay a few lengths behind and remember that an uncontrolled slide doesn't happen unless you hit the brakes too hard."

Angela had to grin at his tone. It said he was eager for the next thrill, like when they were young. The fun they'd had together was something she hadn't allowed herself to think about in a long time. She hadn't been able to deal with the crushing pain and anger without Kenny sensing it and reacting badly

(violently). It still hit her at odd times that she was now free to think about anything she wanted.

“You lead, I’ll follow.”

Since when? Marc shifted gears as adrenaline raced through him, and he could almost feel her catch his mutter and smile.

He went up the steep hill with an easy burst of speed, and Angela counted to five before following, glad when he didn’t seem to have any trouble with the dark path.

His Blazer fishtailed as it hit the top, brake lights flashing briefly before he suddenly dropped out of sight.

Heart in her throat, Angela hit the gas harder as she neared the top and only tapped the brakes as she started to drop into thin air.

She saw Marc halfway up the next incline, and then she had her hands full as gravity pulled hard. She landed on a narrow path that shot downward at an awful left tilt and the Blazer slid heavily, thick gobs of mud spraying the trees.

Her hands worked the wheel, foot on the gas, and she just made the curve, shooting up the hill where Marc was disappearing.

Her Blazer slid to the right again when she made it to the top, and Angela winced as she scraped branches and trees, forcing her foot away from the brakes. She used loose hands on the wheel to keep the teetering vehicle on the edge of control and was able to make the turn.

Angela brought it gently away from the steep side, proud of herself, and jumped when his thoughts came flying at her.

It gets bad from here. I’ll tell you which way to aim for.

She heard him clearly in her head, the worry but also the excitement, and was suddenly sure Marc would never let her go on alone. His sense of honor would be the excuse he gave himself, but it would really be the connection between them, the old hunger and restless need. Their lives, *her life*, had been in grave danger twice, in the same eight hours, and the Marc she had known would never—

She stopped the thought, not ready for the pain that would come with completing it. This trek would be easier on both of them if she remembered that the old Marc was probably gone. It would be best not to get her hopes up.

6

The twins had come up, and then down, the steep miner's road much more slowly than Angela and Marc. They were barely able to make the muddy, hairpin curves.

As they reached the summit of the last dark, treacherous hill, Dillan pointed at two sets of brake lights disappearing into the foggy valley below. They watched for a long moment, but saw nothing else.

“Still going west.”

“Meeting someone?”

“Cesar, if she goes far enough. He's in that area by now.”

“She won't be able to handle all those men.”

“Neither can we. Have to share.”

“No.”

“Exactly. We'll follow but hang back, let them think we died or gave up. Our chance will come.”

Dean dug through his kit for two capsules, glad to be traveling in the same vehicle together again. He'd missed his brother's warmth. “Start out again at daylight?”

“Yeah. We know which direction she's going. We'll camp high before dusk each night and keep track by their lights or fires. They'll relax, and we'll take 'em off guard.”

“We need a strong tranquilizer.”

Dillan's face was full of bloodlust. “And sharper knives. I want it to last.”

7

Angela and Marc didn't stop until almost noon. They were both bleary-eyed and exhausted as they sat on opposite corners of their tailgates with the tuna sandwiches and coffee she had made. Marc had gassed their vehicles while she cooked.

The layer of grit in the sky appeared thicker despite the heavy rain the night before, and Angela tried to avoid looking at the suburbs of identical condominiums that were crammed together across from the field. It sickened her to see how many yards and windows had corpses of starved pets. Most of them appeared to still be hoping for the masters who had left them to such an awful fate.

“We have to come to some terms before we go any further together.”

A sweet smile of relief lit her tired face and made Marc suck air into lungs that felt too small. It was no wonder that he'd never gotten over her. No one else hit him this hard.

Marc watched her happiness cool, and knew instinctively that she was waiting to determine if she could pay the price he was about to demand.

“First and most important, I'll teach you some basic defense and how to use a gun.”

Marc knelt down by her bumper and worked with his small tool kit while they talked.

Angela nodded, frowning at the thought of being close enough to him (to any man!) long enough to learn something like that. “Okay, to both.”

“Good. We'll plan routes together and share the chores. I'll keep my distance as best I can and still protect you,” Marc said as he removed the brake lightbulb and placed it in the bag with the ones from his vehicle. “In return, I'll need more than an introduction. It can wait until you decide about your man, but then they'll both have to be told so that I can spend time with my son.”

Angela frowned again. The things he wanted were reasonable, but there was great fear in her heart. “Agreed. Anything else?”

“Yes. I need to know things about your life. We can leave that for when you’re ready, but on the way, I’d like you to tell me about...Charlie. Everything I missed. Bedtime stories, any pictures you have?”

She gave him a small smile that didn’t reach her cold eyes, and he wondered what about his words she hadn’t liked. All of it?

Angela gave him another nod, a thin smile. “Is that it? Good. Now, I have conditions. First and most important, we will travel every day. I’m in a hurry, and I want that clear up front. Second, you’re in charge, but when I say to change direction, we do it. We’ll use the maps, but I’m tracking him too, and I trust me.”

Marc thought she sounded like a mother bear protecting her cub. To a man who hadn’t had anything but guilt and loneliness for a long time even before the war, it was attractive. “Agreed, next?”

“Next is last. When we get there, do as I ask and abide by my choice. I want no violence if it can be helped.”

“You’ll see that I get time with Charlie, even if we have to sneak?”

Her voice was shaky. “Yes. You’ll protect us from Kenny, even if it comes to blood?”

The open fear in her expression hurt him. “With my life, baby.”

The answer fell easily despite the years between them. When she only nodded again, Marc caught the fact that she didn’t tell him that it wouldn’t come to that. What was he walking into?

“Then I agree.”

Mindful about keeping his distance (still stinging from it) Marc didn’t put out his hand until she did hers. He recognized her reluctance, saw her almost draw back before placing her small fingers against his.

Lightning flashed, forking into thick clouds that rolled across the sky as the lovers touched. Electricity sparked, threatening to sweep them into the past.

Marc let go. He was a man of his word.

For Angela, the silence after the crash was deafening, but she didn't apologize for the small theft of some of his healthy energy. She was almost sure he hadn't noticed anyway. Her oddness was something that she planned to rely on now, and he would have to get used to it. Kenny couldn't, hadn't even been able to consider accepting her for what she was without using it for his own gain. Would Marc be different?

She stood up, began cleaning their lunch mess. Only time would tell.

"Come on, Sir Lancelot. I'd like to make another three by dark."

Marc snapped a stiff salute and Angela glanced away before he could see the disappointment. Had a tiny part of her lonely heart been hoping that one of his conditions might be another chance with her if she decided not to stay with Kenny?

She shut and locked her car door, swallowing the bitter pain. That was exactly what the old Angela had been waiting for, and it was a struggle not to cry as she shifted into gear.

8

They traveled until it began to get dark. The rain had finally cleared, leaving only the damp, reeking wind as they rolled over dead wires still attached to downed poles and around hundreds of trees that had their tops sheared off. It was sad and monotonous, and despite her need to hurry, Angela was glad when Marc finally called her on the radio. She was beat.

"Ready?"

"Yes. You pick, I'll cook."

"Deal. That long driveway on your right."

Carefully easing up the muddy driveway that was full of cracks and weeds, Angela quickly saw the benefits of his choice. Thick trees blocked them from view on one side as far as the eye could see and a cornfield did the same on the rest of the property that surrounded the small farmhouse.

A few of the big windows were broken, but the home looked otherwise undamaged, and Marc drove toward the small carport, hoping there was room for two. He had honestly expected Angie to be driving something flashy and unusable. Her obvious seriousness about making this trip was something of a relief, as well as a worry. It spoke of someone who wasn't exaggerating.

Marc stopped, watching her slowly ease her vehicle into the hard dirt row of corn, snapping a surprising few of the knee-high stalks. Obviously, she'd done it a few times.

Closing his mouth on the correction he had started to give, Marc waited to determine what she had in mind.

Angela pulled out a rolled-up camouflage tarp, and when she tossed it over her Blazer, pulling gently on the stiff ends, the muddy vehicle disappeared. Marc felt the Marine inside stir in respect at her resourcefulness. Fresh recruits tried hard for eight weeks to impress him, usually without success, and she had done it in less than a day.

"There should be room for both of us." She had crawled under the tarp and the radio made him jump.

"Copy."

Angela stood on her roof, holding the tarp up so that he could pull in.

Marc concentrated on what he was doing, instead of her. He put the car in park and killed the engine, watched her step casually across his hood and jump down. She tugged the tarp until he had to flip on his inside light to see by.

Wearing gloves and a heavier coat, Angela was driving thick steel pegs into the corners of the large tarp when he emerged, and Marc went to secure the house, Dog at his side. His movements were careful, thorough, but his mind stayed with the

woman he could hear working. She was an asset in this new world; he had realized that already. She was strong, smart, and a possible target for every man who spotted her. That was what had stopped him from leaving. Marc was sure the fire in the woods had been set.

He'd found something on the corner of his tailgate that could be the trim from a bullet. The brothers had tried to fry her in her sleep, and when she'd woken too soon, they had started shooting. The smoke had ruined their aim and saved Angela's life. Amid the cracking tree branches and roar of the flames, Marc hadn't even known they were under attack. She wouldn't stand a chance without him, and he had loved her too much to let her go on this suicide mission unprotected.

Loved? his heart questioned scornfully.

Marc pushed it away. They would stay on the side roads and be careful with shooting lessons that would draw attention.

One glimpse of her and we'll be under attack again, he thought.

An hour later, they were settled in their bedrolls on the floor, eating and trying not to stare at each other.

"You don't wear any insignia. What branch of the Marines were you in?"

Marc was dwelling on her story of finding fresh meat in the basement of a lavish home that she'd passed in Edinburgh. Drawn by the lights in the windows, she had found the generator still running. There had obviously been people there recently, but she said she hadn't run into anyone while exploring the big house. What courage that must have taken!

"Brady?"

"The one with no name."

His words made her frown. Hadn't Kenny said about the same thing a few years ago, when she asked about the last advancement? She sighed, peering at the bedroll between her and the blanket-covered doorway as the wind howled outside. Kenny

was going to be so pissed that she couldn't even predict what he might do. Was Marc equal to that?

“Like The Unit?”

Marc peered up at her. “You watched that BS?”

“Every Tuesday, no matter what.”

Her bitter tone made his smile fade, and Marc waited for more, but there was only silence. He could feel her wanting to ask if he was that good and admired her control when she didn't.

“Yes,” he finally said, answering her unspoken question.

“You're sure?” she asked gravely.

He nodded, not quite thinking about the harshest things he'd done, but she could feel the darkness, the dirty stain on his soul, and was comforted.

“Him too. He's got four years in now.”

Marc's face was shuttered. “Most men don't do it that long. It's dangerous work.”

She heard it, felt there was more, and let herself ask, “How long for you?”

“Eight. I had my own team.”

Angela knew he was heartbroken over the personal losses, could hear it in his tone, but she couldn't bring herself to mouth the usual pleasantries that the old world would have required. He was mourning a great life. She'd barely had one to lose. She'd clung to her sons and now, one was rotting underground and the other was lost in the wilderness.

Belly content for the first time in a while, Marc flipped through the pictures she had set by his plate. He was glad she hadn't pushed him on why he'd stayed in so long. That question required trust, and they didn't have any yet.

“Why didn't you call me, Angie? I would have come and taken responsibility.”

She pushed away her half-finished burger and corn. “I wanted more back then. I wanted all of you or nothing.”

She lit a smoke. “Besides, they wouldn’t have left us alone, and you know it. Between their religious crap and your shame, we didn’t stand a chance.”

“Didn’t I deserve to help make that choice?” he asked quietly.

Angela took the cigarette from her mouth with shaky hands she knew he saw. There was probably little that he didn’t notice. “Yes. We both deserved to be happy, but it was taken away. I found out about the baby, and I was alone. I made hard choices that were wrong sometimes, but we’ve always been together and no one has ever told him that he’s going to hell because of our sins against God.”

Marc winced, fading in time to the confrontation with his mother.

“She’s your family! How could you?” his mother shouted.

“Not by blood!”

Slap! “By God!”

“That was a long time ago.” Angela’s voice held a tremor.

“A lot of hurt between then and now,” he agreed.

“We made our choices. What’s done is done.” She yawned tiredly and stood up, still surprised to discover that his obvious pain and regret didn’t please her. She really did owe him much worse for the way he’d abandoned her. She headed for the doorway, pulling on her jacket.

When he followed, Angie said nothing but felt immediately better that he was taking her request for protection seriously.

“So, where all have you been since the war?” she asked.

She went to her Blazer, and he hung back, thinking her waist was still so small that he could span it with both hands. He shoved them into his pockets instead, remembering a time when he’d been free to do that and a lot more.

“I was in Virginia when the bombs fell, going home for a funeral.”

“Whose?”

“My mother’s.”

Angela started to offer her sympathy, and he held up a hand. “Don’t bother. I went home to bury the past, not her. She’s been dead to me for a long time.”

He lit a Winston, casual tone not changing. “After Roanoke, I traveled northeast for a couple weeks, but it was all worse. There were already mutations in West Virginia, and after that, I changed directions. I’ve been to about twenty other bases, offices, and centers. There’s nothing.”

Hearing it only made Angela a bit sadder than she’d already been. That world was gone, and eventually they (she) would stop expecting its return.

Angela got another duffle bag from the rear seat and disappeared behind a tree, liking it that he waved the wolf after her. This was why she needed him. He would teach her to be strong, and protect her while she learned.

And what happens when he runs out of things to teach? the witch asked ominously.

Angela wasn’t in any state to search that far ahead, and didn’t answer.

They were quickly back inside the tepid warmth of the faded, drafty farmhouse, both of them avoiding looking at the happy faces of the family who had lived here, smiling from the walls around them.

“How much gas do you have?” Marc pushed the heater closer to the window so the draft would carry it farther into the room.

“Only quarter of a tank, but I have two ten-gallon cans in the rear.”

“Great. I’ve got about the same. We should be okay for a few days.”

Marc spent a minute at the window, scanning the landscape around their vehicles. He had chosen this room because it was

the closest one to their wheels that had a window for a quick escape. Marc wondered if he should point that out to her. How much did she want to learn while they traveled?

“Have you seen anyone rebuilding? Any place for people to go?” Angela asked, suddenly wondering if his home had included a wife. The pain was almost staggering.

“No, and I’ve been looking. It’s always the same. Things are bad and getting worse.”

She didn’t say anything. After ten days out in this horrible new world, she had seen too much to believe that this was the normal recovery time after a global tragedy. Clearly, the government was gone and its people were on their own.

“So, he’s a HAC-RAM?”

Angela smiled at the thought of her son, and the beauty of it made Marc stare. Enough of those could blind a man from even seeing other women.

“He has been for three years. Have a child, raise a Marine, was one of Kenny’s better ideas. They were in New Mexico at an annual competition when the war came. They never miss it, and usually bring home a box of trophies. From the outside, he’s the perfect dad.”

Angela settled herself on the couch, rubbing at her face, and Marc forced his mouth shut. He was going slowly so that he didn’t miss any clues and was already seeing things that bothered him. The jumpiness and hand flinching toward her gun at every sound could be attributed to her being attacked by the brothers, but there was also the way she hesitated to walk close or look him in the eye. No physical contact was a given, but her cold reaction to his hug had been unexpected, uncalled for. What had—

“Where’d you get the wolf?”

“Dog?” Marc smiled awkwardly, not sure how much of his thoughts she was picking up. “He was part of a pack before we met up. Rangers caught him after a kid was taken.”

“They were gonna put him down?”

“Yeah. My buddy had a farm with room and once there, Dog settled in and we made friends.”

“He obeys well for still being mostly wild. It’s good that you didn’t take that from him.”

Marc lit a smoke, thinking most people didn’t realize that fact when they heard the story. “I only changed him where I had to. He went on base with me, on missions a few times. It saved my ass more than once to have him along.”

“It sounds like you’ve lived the ideal bachelor’s life.” Angela hated herself for being too weak to resist and was aware he knew the answer mattered.

Marc didn’t hesitate. “There was never anyone for me after you. You’re a tough act to follow.”

The old Angela did enjoy the hurt in his voice this time, and she slapped out at him with sharp claws not quite fully extended. “Hell, Brady. Thought you would have a supermodel by now. I never figured you for a swinging-single.”

Marc smiled uncertainly, shrugging, but his heart screamed ambush at her almost accusing tone. “I wasn’t that either. Too many strange ones out there. I had one fast date with a girl who had a nose ring and three-inch black fingernails. Strange.”

Angela opened her mouth before she could censor the words and was appalled by the jealousy that spewed out. “Did she have long black curls and pale white skin like all the others? Did you see my face when you exploded inside her?”

Marc sucked in a breath, hurting face covered in the truth.

Angela stood up, sorry and afraid. “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I said that.”

“After everything you’ve been through, I guess you owe me a few.” Marc stood too, reeling from the blow that she already knew he wasn’t over her. He frowned when he caught her flinch.

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

The note of real fear was unmistakable, and he slowed his actions, put his back to her so that she couldn’t witness the rage on his face. She was afraid of him, terrified.

“Better to let it out, honey. The sooner we clear the air, the sooner you’ll trust me again.”

“But I do,” she protested.

Marc moved toward the door, but his sharp gaze was on her and he recognized the relief on her face when he kept going.

“I called you, didn’t I?” she argued tiredly as his hand went to the knob.

“Yes, but you’re not sure if you can trust me. It’s a problem we’ll have to work on.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m fine,” Angela insisted, worrying that he was about to leave.

“Then why do you go for your gun every time I move?”

He watched her slide trembling hands into her pockets. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Marc waved at the wolf, voice hard, “Stay. Guard her.”

The animal immediately lay down in the doorway, and Marc shut the door, leaving Angela relieved, confused, and sorry she hadn’t controlled her reactions better.

Marc traveled the perimeter, furious. Angie was scared, and not that childish shit women did over mice and spiders. It was real fear of being hurt, and he hated the people who had taught her that. He was hoping her life hadn’t been as bad as observing her implied, but every minute they spent together said it had been worse. The fear she was carrying was not from being attacked by the twins. It wasn’t new. She was terrified of men, and that only came from being hurt by one.

What if she has been abused? his heart demanded. What if it’s as she says? What if he comes for her and finds out she’s not alone?

“Then I’ll fight for her.”

The words were instinctive and Marc now thought he’d probably end up doing that anyway. It was ingrained.

If she chooses not to be with her Marine anymore, his conscience threw in the condition, but Marc lashed out in bitter anger.

“To hell with her man! She was mine first!”

9

Swallowed by her coat and hat, Angela emerged as he came up the steps, and sweet vanilla filled his nose as they passed. Marc shoved his hands into his pockets again to keep from reaching out for her. They’d been apart for so long and he’d missed her so much!

Angela heard him as if he had spoken, and she forced herself to stop as the stiff wind blew her curls around wildly. He was doing her a great service, and she didn’t want him to be upset.

“It wasn’t meant to be, Marc, but we’ll be friends again, in time. That’s something, right?”

He wanted to tell her she was wrong. They had been soul mates. “You’ll be safe with me,” came out unexpectedly instead. Marc was glad that he had reassured her when she flashed the first honest smile he’d seen.

“I know it deep down, but...” Angela shrugged, not wanting to expect more than he was willing to give.

Marc understood. “But it helps you to hear it, and you’ll probably need me to do it again.”

She flushed, brows drawing together. He had recognized her needs so quickly. Why couldn’t Kenny have been half the man Marc was? She moved to the Blazer, aware of him like she’d known she would be. Some things never changed.

When she stepped out of the Blazer, she wasn’t surprised to see the wolf sitting on the porch.

“Hi, Dog. I’m Angie.”

The big animal immediately held up a paw, and Marc grinned as Angela’s laughter rang out. He watched her bend

down to shake without hesitation. Most people were too scared. He observed from the impenetrable darkness of the doorway, heart thumping when she pulled her shirt to the side to adjust a lacy, white bra strap. The desire changed as his gaze went to the jagged knife scar on her shoulder, instantly knowing that's what it was. It was rough, ugly, and out of place on her pale skin.

A hard knot of rage formed in Marc's gut as his mind played a video of her being held down, struggling and screaming, while someone carved what looked to be a grotesque letter K into her flesh. Wasn't her man named Kenny?

Stop it! Marc told himself sternly. There were many possibilities, like a car wreck, shrapnel, falling on something, bobbing when she should have weaved, and still, he knew what he knew. Marc moved silently back to their den, busy counting the ways he would make her man pay if he was the one responsible.

Five minutes later, Angela still hadn't come in, and Marc went back out, though Dog was with her. Marc didn't like it that there was no noise.

Angie was in the farthest, darkest corner of the porch, and if not for the sounds of her pen scratching on the paper, Marc thought he would have missed her. How could she write in total darkness?

"Something about the way my eyes work. What's the temperature?"

Using his lighter, Marc checked the small stick-on disc he had watched her put up earlier. "Either thirty or twenty-eight. Can't tell which."

"Thanks."

"Sure." he lit a smoke, staring into the thick shadows around them. "I need to ask you something."

Angela shut her notebook. "Shoot."

“Was calling me a way to make him realize you don’t need him, so that you can get what you want? Are you using me against him?”

Angela flipped on her penlight as she stepped toward the rail, letting him detect the truth on her face. “Not in the way you’re thinking. He isn’t coming for me, but he intends to keep my son. I have to show him that I not only survive on my own, I thrive.”

“Why isn’t he coming for you?”

Fathomless grief flashed, and Marc drew in a sharp breath at the pain he read. Something awful had caused it, something she wasn’t going to tell him yet.

“I’m a burden.”

“You’re not a burden. Look how well you’ve survived.”

“I was never allowed to be this person. He sees only what he’s created.” Angela peered at him, and the bags under her eyes were almost like bruises, they were so dark.

“He heard the calls too and knows I’m on my way. He doesn’t think I’ll make it and doesn’t expect me to bring help that he can’t handle, so yes. I am using you, but only in the ways you’ve agreed to.”

Marc knew she wanted to be done with it for now, and he pointed at the small black discs he had set out. “Those are motion and heat sensor alarms.”

He picked up a rock and a stick, tossed them in different directions, and almost immediately, two different tones chimed loudly from his wristwatch.

Marc quickly hit a button to give them silence, holding his arm up for her to witness the sequence, and Angela controlled her flinch at the movement.

“Different sound for each breach tells how many intruders. Red buttons turn it off, green arms it.”

“You learn that in the Corps?”

“That and a few other things.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“Survival stuff mostly. I was always good at planning for trouble. It’ll come in handier now, I suspect.”

He sounded wide-awake and she frowned. “Aren’t you tired?”

“I’m a Marine, honey. This is par for the course,” he stated, but didn’t tell her he’d only gotten a short snooze before their escape from the fire. His mind had been too busy racing to sleep, and he had taken a pill after lunch.

They were both quiet for a minute, scanning, listening. There were no lights or noises in the darkness around them, no insects or rodents in the brush, and Angela shivered. The world was dying. Would they too?

Shaking off the morbid thoughts, Angela followed Marc into the warmth of their den.

When he took off his coat, thick arms flexing, her gaze was again drawn to his muscular body.

“I grew up, didn’t I?” He grinned, hoping for a laugh.

“Yes.”

Angela slid into her blankets, thinking it was all going to be so much harder than she’d expected. She tossed the black case toward his feet and observed for anger in case the throw made him jump. “Light the big one, will ya?”

Marc leaned against an end table as he fired it up. His gun belts were under his pillow, boots nearby, and the sweet pot curled thickly around them as they smoked all of it without speaking. Neither of them cared for the tension, but it was a step down from what Angela had lived with each day.

“In the morning, before we leave, I’d like to start showing you how to use that gun.”

She was unbraiding long curls that he longed to touch.

“Okay. Will you tell me about some of your missions another night?” she asked, smothering another yawn.

“You mean about the places I’ve come through since the war?”

“No, about your time in the Corps.”

“Pick a city, state, or country.”

“New Orleans.”

“Before or after Katrina?”

She heard the change in his voice and chose, “During.”

“Okay.”

She shivered at a strong draft, and Marc pushed the heater closer to her with his foot, very aware that the connection, the spark that had always been between them, was still waiting.

“So what’s the first thing I should know about guns?”

“Don’t have one, if you don’t know how to use it.”

Angela understood the answer had been drilled into him, but still found his tone smug. She met his eye warily. “The second?”

“When its life or death, like now, rule one means shit.”

Marc grinned again, and she had to give him a tiny return smile, head starting to thump. “So, what will you do with me first?”

His glance went to her mouth, and Marc forced himself to investigate the floor as the wind howled through the dead cornstalks around the farmhouse. “We’ll work on target practice each morning for a few minutes before we leave, so we’re not as likely to be tracked by the noise.”

“That’s smart.”

He stifled a groan of relief, dog tag clinking as he lay down on his side, facing her.

“Won’t matter if someone’s nearby,” he warned, staring at the ebony curls resting on the blankets. Would her hair still feel like silk against his skin?

Angela’s nostrils flared, as if she had smelled the thought, and the fear lurking on her face made him roll onto his back. He was enjoying the buzz, the heat on his feet, and most of all, the sights, sounds, and smells of her that were invading his senses, reminding him of pleasures long gone. She too had grown up.

Yes, I have, she thought, easing down as the mild cramps of her sore stomach continued hurting her. *Enough not to encourage what I’ll never be free to give.*

“Night, Brady.” She shut her eyes and felt him reach that cold, dark place in her heart with a single, beautiful, fiery blast of heat.

“Night, honey. See you in the morning.”

“Yes, you will.” The old, familiar, hurtful response came from her lips as if no years had gone by, and it was hard not to let the tears escape. Marc was here, and every wall that had stood between them before was still there, only now they were twice as tall. It would be a long time before they were even friends again.

Marc lay with his hands under his head until her even breathing told him that she was asleep, and then he eased onto his side, letting his eyes go where they wanted. She was achingly beautiful and still more courageous than any female he’d ever known. How was he going to do this? Fifteen years had gone by without communication, but Marc had never put her out of his heart. There was no way he could make it a thousand miles without telling her the truth. He’d come for another chance at their love. He would agree to any deal she offered.

Chapter Fourteen
No Pain, No gain

February 15th
Devils Head, Colorado

1

“Damned spider wasn’t even the size of my fingernail,” Samantha muttered bitterly.

She was about to cause herself a lot of pain because of it, though. Her leg was bad. The wound was hard and swollen, black in the center with angry red lines of infection aiming for her heart.

Green Falls and Woodland Park, Colorado had both been looted, like every other place she had come through, but their pharmacies had been surprisingly intact. Sam had tried all the antibiotics she found on the spider bite, giving each a couple of days take effect. Though they had clearly slowed down the infection that had eventually made walking impossible, it was now life or death. She would have to do surgery on herself.

Sam was holed up in the Devil’s Head Hunting Lodge, taking shelter in one of the large, rustic cabins. There were old, uncomfortable furnishings around a beautiful stone fireplace, an outhouse in the rear, and huge glass windows in the front that gave her a view of dwarf birch trees with black moss climbing the smooth trunks.

The other walls were decorated with a buck, a bear, an angry bobcat, and a calendar still on December. Isolated and alone, she was about to try treating herself so she could recover while waiting out the powerful blizzard that she could feel approaching.

Terrified of passing out and bleeding to death, Samantha let her mind go where it wanted. The thick layer of dust on the floor said no one had been here since all hell had broken out. There weren't even the bloody smears that she was sadly becoming used to. There also weren't any bodies, not even a stray cat, and that too, worried her. It said there were probably a number of predators around here that were keeping the carrion cleaned up.

Her stomach dipped at that thought, and when she shut her eyes, she saw the doomed man on the sofa again, heard the single shot. The compound was fifty miles behind her, but Pat's grotesque face was a daily companion.

"Won't last as long as he did if you don't do this, Sammi," she muttered.

She could only hope that this drastic action would succeed. The bandages and other supplies were spread out next to her, flames were roaring in the fireplace at her booted feet, and Sam pulled her cap down tighter over her long braid. It was time to shoot, Luke, or give up the gun.

Samantha, who had once created useful technology for the government and saved the life of the president, picked up the hot knife. There was a second one smoldering in the fire, and she tried not to think of how much more it would hurt. There was a shoelace tied around her upper thigh, cutting off the circulation, and she clenched her teeth as she pinched up the flesh around the nasty-smelling wound. Thick, yellow clots ran out and rolled down her thigh.

"Don't need someone to ride the river with," she told herself. The leg of her sweat pants was cut away from the thigh to the knee, so if she passed out, she wouldn't freeze to death. "It's do or die time, Sammi."

The steel in her spine stiffened into an iron bar and after a quick prayer that she had no real faith in; Sam drew in a deep breath and pushed the knife into her leg.

It sank into her flesh as if it were butter. She screamed as pain like she'd never known raced up her leg. White and yellow

pus shot out, followed by scarlet streams, and she cut again, hoarse cry never completely stopping as a chunk of her leg slid to the sticky floor.

Stomach and teeth clenched, the sobbing woman forced her shaking hands to drop the knife and grab the full, open bottle of rubbing alcohol.

Sam dumped it over the heavily bleeding wound and snatched up the second knife with her other hand before the agony could overwhelm her. Tears blurring her vision, she shoved the red-hot end over the gaping hole.

Her lungs burned before she stopped screaming.

After using the iron twice more to be sure she had closed the odd, deep wound; Sam could feel her heart thudding in her chest, but nothing else except the flames that had become her leg. She dropped the bloody metal into the fire, grasping the syringe of morphine with jerking fingers.

Crying tears of misery, she only gave herself half of the liquid and was grateful when the pain immediately sank down into a nasty monster that she could tolerate. The morphine was powerful, consuming, and she was unprepared for the strength of the liquid gold as it made her thoughts swim.

When she was sure she had herself under control, she shot a generous dose of antibiotics into her thigh and then sat still, trying to stay awake. She was afraid of the wound breaking open, terrified of her dreams. Melvin and Henry were with her most nights, often joined by the press secretary from the bunker, and while she knew it was her mind sorting through it all, she couldn't help being afraid.

While traveling over the broken landscape, brief flares of light in the darkness had come sporadically, and made her go still until they were gone. With NORAD destroyed, Samantha had found no reason to keep searching for the government. She didn't know what she would do yet, but if the surgery succeeded, she might be in Cheyenne by April Fools' Day.

Pain came in thick waves, stealing her breath and Sam thought of her Seattle office with longing. She had spent more time there than in the condominium she'd received from her parents. She hadn't been a public member of the weather service, only a computer message they had been told to listen to, no matter what their own data said. She'd been well treated, office full of luxuries designed to keep her distracted.

"Prize rat in a cushy run," she slurred, crying again, ashamed of her life. She'd been part of the problem. Some of this was her fault.

Miserable and exhausted, her eyes shut. The pain and drugs were too much. Sam slumped against the bed of cushions and pillows she'd made as the darkness swallowed her.

Outside, the snow began to fall.

2

Wwhhhoooo!

Sam was moaning in agony before her eyes were even open, hands automatically going to her wound.

She screamed as clumsy fingers found the raw, angry flesh of her leg and she jerked awake, groaning as the room spun. Taking shallow, rapid breaths, she gave herself the rest of the morphine in the syringe without sitting up, slamming the needle into her other thigh. Her empty stomach churned, and she gagged. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and Sam concentrated only on holding in her guts as the pain sank down.

After a moment, she pried her eyes open. Cleanup had to be done. It had been an animal outside that had woken her. The mess was already drawing predators, even though she could hear the wind and snow beating against the cabin. Her dream flashed through her mind, the latest vision. A blizzard, and places on the edge of the storm would experience sudden temperature drops. The war's death count was about to climb.

As if to prove her point, the storm outside picked up, freezing rain slamming against the windows, and she jumped at a blur in the corner. Squinting, her blurry vision told her it wasn't a threat. It was a mouse, and it appeared normal. It was the first good thing she'd observed in weeks.

Samantha forced herself to use the bedpan, leg flaring up to shout at each jar and wobble. She gently cleaned herself with alcohol pads, relieved to discover the dark red lines lighter, and then forced herself to drink a cup of water and eat a pack of stale peanut butter crackers. She also tossed one into the corner for the mouse to find later.

She already missed the fire, shivering and hating the dark, but she wasn't up to the effort required to relight it. For now, she had a big stack of blankets and a couple of flashlights nearby, and that would have to be enough.

Leg screaming, Sam took another half syringe of morphine, eyes closing in bliss. She tugged the covers over herself with numb hands. She would rest a while and then she'd be okay.

She told herself that repeatedly, needing the comfort now that loneliness had caught up with her on her solitary journey. Sam had finally come to hate the constant silence that was their world now. She needed to be with people again, and as soon as she was able, she would be on her way to Cheyenne. Even if the people at the base were gone, there was an EPA approved weather shelter there. She would check it out and stock it for the winter, make it her hideout. She couldn't resist hoping there would already be other survivors there, but knew it was too much to ask. Likely, there would be only more pain and death.

Chapter Fifteen
Birds of a Feather

February 16th
Near Roosevelt, Utah

1

“Harrison to Eagle One. Twelve o’clock, high.”

Adrian glanced up from the roadmap he had splayed across the steering wheel, and narrowed in on the enormous black cloud coming over the distant hill toward them. It was like a badly trained platoon, spreading an evil shadow over the land.

Adrian leaned forward. “What the hell is...? Shit! Convoy, halt! Put it in park, and get down as low as you can!”

Doing about 35mph, Adrian slammed both feet down, reaching for the trailer brake. Pulling the curved handle, he applied the clutch as he downshifted through half the gears and then tugged the rear controls harder. The semi shuddered, grinding as the tires locked up, and thick white smoke rolled from the hind wheels.

Left hand straining to keep the heavily loaded truck straight, he let go of the chicken-stick, using the pedals again, and the semi slowly shuddered to a stop. “Neil, Kyle, get that truck of turkeys away from us!”

“What is it?”

Adrian groaned as their birds clucked loudly, responding to the faint echoes. “Everybody stay down! Fate sent another wild card!”

The sickly flying birds flew straight for the convoy, an enormous flock of possible contamination. Adrian had enough

time to wonder what species they had been—picking out blackened wings and dead eyes—before the flock arrived.

Birds slammed into them, shattering windows, banging off doors and hoods with awful thuds that sent blood and guts flying as the blind victims came in for a landing. They squelched against trees, ripped apart on sharp, bare juniper branches, and hit the ground with wet, sickening thuds. The gusting wind blew them down faster than the Eagles could shoot. The flock was uncountable.

Adrian knew the sounds of their guns wouldn't be enough to carry through the din of the birds calling, screams, glass cracking, and awful, wet thuds. A fire of some kind? Stereos?

Now holding his spare vest over the cracked, gore-splattered windshield, Adrian spotted Kenn coming from his truck. He knew instantly that the Marine was about to work his bolt and make himself look good doing it. *About damn time!*

That's exactly what Kenn was thinking as he quickly climbed onto the roof of the school bus. Birds were diving in for sightless landings all around him, and he blew the air horn he'd taken from his glove box. The kids next to him had their windows down and were being pecked and scratched by the incoming birds. Sick birds and Kenn knew Adrian would be relieved that only a couple had gotten through so far. The lower half of the glass was taking the brunt of the aerial assault.

Kenn blew birds out of the sky before they could get into an open window, rotating and blasting the piercing air horn. People were amazed when the flock immediately began to divert from their straight-at-the-ground course. He knew what they were thinking: how had he known that would work?

Kenn smirked. Birds were extra sensitive to high-pitched noises, like whistles and horns. It cut through the din.

The Eagles followed Kenn's lead, able to do so because the guards carried the loud horns in case the weather knocked out their radios. The flock circled the camp in groups, dipping and

spinning. Some stayed high, but most were confused, not sure where to go, and their bodies dropped from the sky like rain.

The guns began to take their toll, the ground littered with carnage, and the rest of the flock finally understood, returning to higher ground in ragged stagers. Neat lines had also become a thing of the past for the animal populations.

Now, the guns were louder than the cries of the sick birds and they flew by instead of trying to land. They called anxiously to each other to keep from getting lost.

A minute later, they were out of sight, but their calls echoed for a long time through the gritty February sky.

“We’ll call it a day,” Adrian informed his people. “Man on point, take over.”

“Yes, sir!”

Kenn jumped from the bus, jeans and army jacket splattered with blood. He rotated, evaluating, and then gestured to Kyle. He would cover things in the order he knew Adrian would have and enjoy it that the mobster wouldn’t be able to argue. For some reason, Kenn still found Kyle to be a rival, and though he had some hopes of swaying the Italian to his side, he couldn’t stop himself from showing the man where his place was.

“Have Neil do a perimeter over in that onion field. Set it up and get them inside it. Send someone to the bus with first aid kits, and then set up a couple of showers and wash areas over here so we don’t contaminate our campsite. Make the wire tight and short.” Kenn peered at his wrist while Kyle scribbled it down. “Almost lunch. Tell Hilda to scrub the tuna sandwiches, though. There’s no way anyone will eat that shit now. Also, have Doug handle the reporter. She’s taking pictures again. When all that’s done, we’ll need new vehicles. You and your team handle it personally.”

Deeply tanned hands clenched in anger, Kyle swallowed a nasty remark and got busy. He did indeed have a beef with Adrian’s new suit, but now was not the time.

Hours later, Adrian groaned as he lowered his six foot one, two hundred thirty pound sore body to the dark bank of Duchesne Creek, not caring that mud began soaking into his dusty jeans. Both his knees popped, and his head ached from the fumes of all the cars they'd stripped, gas tanks they'd emptied. It had been a twenty-hour day for him already, but it wasn't over. This area was ugly, full of death and devoid of normal life. Even the mutating ants wouldn't live here, and that frightened him. Would spending a day or two on this ground make his people sick?

Adrian sighed. They had to have a break soon, but not tomorrow or the next day. He had settled for making camp under the retractable awning of an apple orchard (long since stripped, with the owner's body rotting on the front walk). After satisfying himself that Kenn knew how he wanted things, Adrian had come here to steal a few minutes alone in the darkness, worrying.

Inhaling softly, the tired leader tensed at a ripple from the slow-moving creek. Something was still alive in that reeking liquid and he tried to take hope from it, moving his hand away from his gun. They were only about fifteen miles from Roosevelt, Utah, and horrible, unspeakable things had happened there. It was bad enough to make Adrian consider backtracking despite all the extra miles it would add.

This land was broken, rotting, and muddy. The roads were unbelievable, impassable without the tow trucks. Bridges had collapsed or washed away, and nearly every street was crammed full of vehicles, most empty of their drivers. Adrian assumed it was from people fleeing California and Washington. They had witnessed entire distant hills of mud collapse in the last few days, the thick, reddish ooze swallowing homes and highways, and the weather was the cause. It rained each morning now, and the saturated ground simply couldn't hold any more. Barely above freezing most nights, the cold sleet was the color of ashes and

added more weight to the muddy hills, more chemicals to the land.

He had people wearing extra layers to avoid contact with the precipitation, sure it was full of toxins, and Adrian was almost positive they were on the edge of some type of ground zero here. Besides the possible dangers, the views were hard to ignore and impossible not to feel. Twisted, burned metal, crushed cars and building walls lay over the ground like grave markers. There were charred shoes, flattened fire hydrants, and of course, bones. Human and animal bones were mixed and scattered across the sagebrush land like a jigsaw puzzle that had been shoved off a table.

Where had all this damage come from? The nearest ground zero was in California, too far to have caused this, and even his military mind couldn't come up with another reason. This had to be the edge of a bomb zone, one that had come after communications fell, and he would add it to the map he was keeping.

Lightning flashed in the distance. The vivid reds and golds had his eye, but Adrian's mind was on his people and their broken country. How much of his beloved homeland was like this? Most? Would they really be forced into the caves to survive, blown back hundreds of years in evolution?

"What new life can there be if we have to live it inside the rotting shell of the old one?" he muttered.

Adrian tensed again, this time at the soft crunch of a boot. His hand dropped to his hip again, despite being sure that no one had gotten past the guards. There were three full shifts of men on the perimeter, and he could feel them protecting him too, even though he wasn't specifically training them to do it. They were following Kenn's lead.

"Adrian?"

"Down here." Adrian called. Maybe the future wouldn't be as bad as what he was expecting. Safe Haven hadn't chosen a final place to settle yet, but Adrian was certain the mountains

would be winner of the vote when the time came. And he already had doubts about being able to make such a place safe for even a month, let alone for the nuclear winter he still feared was coming. The first one would be the hardest.

Following the guards' eyes, Kenn eased across the muddy hill and sat down, handing over a mug of hot coffee. Like Adrian, he didn't notice or care that mud was seeping into his clothes. It didn't matter anymore.

"How are they?"

The tone was that of a commander asking about his troops after a hard day.

Kenn's answer was simple, honest. "Tired and down, same as you."

Adrian didn't offer any excuses that would only be obvious lies. It was impossible to pretend that everything was fine when they were rolling over the unburied bones of their fellow citizens.

"We'll be better when we're away from here," Kenn stated, taking a sheet of paper from his pocket. He'd been thrilled to discover "Man on Point" on his schedule this morning, and when the birds had hit them (coincidence or fate?) he'd come through with full marks. Before the sick flyers, though, there had been surprise from the Eagles. Now, Kenn had more pals than he needed and had chosen to keep these current favorites at arm's length for the moment. Adrian was the only one he gave a damn about.

"Sitrep, whenever you're ready," Adrian guided, relighting the joint he'd been ignoring with his worried thoughts.

"Perimeter is good, no serious injuries, radio is quiet, and everyone is accounted for. The pictures from Cheyenne Mountain are in your tent."

Adrian was sure they would be worse than those from Salt Lake City had been. "Anything?"

"No."

When he didn't ask for details, Kenn didn't offer them, thinking their leader was depressed enough already. Adrian didn't need to hear about the fry-room at NORAD they had forced open, but Kenn was sure Adrian would have recognized the clever way it had been done. Someone among the slavers had military knowledge and that didn't bode well. Kenn planned to give Adrian *the full*, in the report he had been asked to deliver nightly about various issues and setups.

"Neil get 'em yet?"

"No."

Adrian was unhappy the state trooper hadn't gotten to go, but it had been Kenn's mission and he hadn't intervened. To make it up a bit, Adrian would let Neil experience the awful photos before the camp did. The people here didn't have access to all the pictures he and the Eagles took, but the big places still gave people hope. He had to show them some of the photos or they would go off on their own to check and maybe not return. Some did anyway. Adrian was never offended, only relieved when they returned. He needed them all.

"We have two new arrivals that weren't with the group following us. Wanted to know if we had any use for a doctor."

Adrian's happily surprised laugh was music to his ears. Kenn loved this feeling of pleasing the blond leader. "I knew you'd like that. John and Anne Harmon are husband and wife of almost forty years, had their own office. They were going to NORAD, but they had witnessed the smoke. Then, they heard Mitch on the CB and chose to come find out if we're good or bad. They'd like to trade their medical skills for a place with us."

"Damn, that's great! It's exactly what we need. Give 'em a couple days to settle in and then put them to work."

Kenn was still grinning. "Too late. He noticed Zack's arm and insisted on cleaning and stitching it right then, along with any other injuries. Neil is setting him up in the corner near the livestock. Right now, they're examining the scratches some of the kids got. He says the birds were likely American Gulls."

“Give them one of the biggest tents and have a red cross painted on it,” Adrian instructed. “The doctor’s name should be in red, white, and blue—Safe Haven colors.”

Adrian made a mental note to have a talk with the doctor in the next week. With that eager attitude, he would probably be well liked. That was one of the reasons Kenn was settling in so fast. People were realizing that his only goal was to give whatever was needed, and only those closest to Adrian still had any objections.

Not that they would go against his wishes after the meeting tomorrow night. Adrian intended to make it clear where the Marine belonged, and it would help that Kenn never stole his thunder, didn’t want it. His willingness to be only support had earned him respect. Then, there was his quick reaction to the birds. Giving Kenn Point had been a great idea at the perfect time.

“You wanna do this later?”

Adrian huffed at himself in the windy darkness. “I’m easily distracted tonight. Go on.”

Adrian wondered if the Marine still planned to go to Ohio. Kenn hadn’t mentioned leaving since that first day, didn’t have much to say about his old life at all (something most people here liked, but not Adrian), and he was very busy carving out a place for himself. Again, though, there was the feeling of something being not quite right, and it was stronger now than when Kenn had first arrived. Was it because Kenn thought no one had noticed?

“...and both women are on livestock duty, like you wanted. Water is down to three tankers; toilet paper, twelve cases. We changed four flats, two windshields, and exchanged ten vehicles for the others Kyle’s team found. The tires came from the reserve.”

Adrian had known they would be into the reserve this week, and it made his stomach burn. Their transportation was nearly as important as the food, but water was priority one. If they

couldn't keep moving and finding supplies, they would die, but their reserve wasn't growing.

"What's the biggest problem?" he asked tiredly, already knowing. Even with the carpool law that he had insisted on, they used a lot of fuel.

"Gas. We're down to the reserves on it, too, after we fill up tomorrow."

The reserve of gas was a tenth of what they had found and it would only hold them for two days' travel, at best. They should have more by now, but people were scared to leave camp. Some might not like it, but that was also about to change.

"We'll get farther from here and drain the tanks on every car, tractor, and lawn mower that we come across. At some point, we'll get lucky and find a station with something still in it."

"We could try 191."

Adrian glanced over curiously. "That's a highway crammed with dead traffic."

Kenn was eager to score bonus points to go with the full set of marks he'd earned earlier. "Exactly. Dead vehicles, like box-trucks and semis still full of food and water. Maybe even a fuel tanker or two."

Adrian clapped him on the shoulder as the wind gusted again, carrying a chill they both felt and ignored. "You're just full of good shit today."

Kenn soaked up the praise, ready to volunteer, but stopped himself before he could. He waited to discover if it would be offered. He had made good progress with the camp. Not as much as he wanted, but it would always come down to this man's opinion in the end.

"You'd like to go? Be in charge?"

Kenn nodded once, trying to be cool about it.

The lightning storm to the west hadn't died down, and they both stared, human souls more afraid than in awe. Things with nature were bad now, wrong. "Sure, when?"

“Leave in the morning, early. Catch up by mess, day after tomorrow. I’ll arrange it and have Eagles meet you by the trucks. Anything else for me?”

“Nothing but Tonya. She wants to meet you in her tent.”

“Yeah, that’ll happen.”

Kenn kept quiet, brow puckering a little at the quickly-thrown sarcasm. Tonya insisted, to anyone who would listen, that she and their leader were sleeping together, but Adrian would cut people dead for even hinting it. Most had decided she was lying, chasing what she couldn’t have. Not Kenn. Adrian and Tonya might not be a legal couple, but he didn’t think Safe Haven’s Commander was refusing that pogue bait when no one was around.

“Kenn.”

He glanced up guiltily to see Adrian’s thoughtful attention on him. “You got a thing for redheads?”

Kenn dropped his own baby-blues, shrugging, “When they look like her, who doesn’t?”

Adrian chuckled, liking the honest answer. He wanted to trust Kenn, as much as Kenn obviously wanted to be trusted.

“She definitely gets a man’s attention, but she’ll do whatever she has to as long as it will get her what she wants.”

“What does she want?” Kenn questioned curiously. He wasn’t sure why he was asking and was surprised–happy–to receive the same honesty he’d given.

“For me to either be her legal mate or get out of this job, so she can put someone else in my place and have power through them. She doesn’t care which, and she’s as much as said so to my face.”

Kenn laughed, despite wanting to do and say all the right things. “She’s got guts, takes care of herself. That kind of woman was rare before the war.”

Adrian didn’t like the tone, but let it go. “Tonya’s strong and we need that, but we’re weaker with her too, because she uses

that strength for selfish reasons. She would have to do a world of changing for anyone to accept her here. It would be a hard sell.”

Kenn took the warning to heart, but didn't say anything more on the subject.

Adrian stood up, scanning the lights, sights, and sounds of his people. A neatly organized camp, fires driving back the darkness, dogs yapping for dinner, echoes of doors closing, calm voices and steady footsteps. Normal as it got now. Kenn had done a good job.

“We'll need to add safety glass to our lists. I don't like how easily a flock of birds put us in danger,”

Kenn said what his boss was thinking. “Be too easy for a bullet.”

Adrian was more than pleased. Finally, some of the born help was here. “I'll do rounds in about an hour. Wanna come along?”

“You know it.”

3

Adrian strode to his tent, eager to have a little time to himself.

Kenn's mind stayed on Tonya as he joined the dozen members setting up base around the huge bonfire. Many times his eyes had been drawn to the sullen woman, and he wondered where she was now, and who she was with.

Tonya was selfish, greedy, and a troublemaker, and he recognized her streak of meanness, but she was also strong, smart, and determined to have Adrian. The people here hated the idea, but Tonya was openly hostile to anyone who spoke against it. She had even earned a day of hard labor for a slapping contest with Big Billy, a three hundred pound schoolteacher from Oregon. She had won, hands down. Tonya wasn't afraid of anything, and that had earned Kenn's respect, something women didn't get much of from him.

Kenn responded politely to the greetings and congratulations of those around the flames that the cold wind was teasing, but he stood by himself. He hoped this fuel trip would secure his place in Adrian's chain of command. Kyle and Neil were tied for second, with Doug in third, but in Kenn's selfish mind, they weren't Marines.

Kenn didn't think it would take long to get what he wanted, just more hard work. No one openly held the XO position here and he'd found himself longing for it. Then the birds had come and helped him.

Kenn passed on the bottles and joints going around the fire as the wind blew a fresh chill over them, noticing the lantern was out in the tent he shared with Charlie. *Good.* As Kenn grew closer to Adrian, the time he spent around the teenager reminded him more and more of the secrets he was keeping, of how unworthy he was to hold the place at Adrian's side.

Kenn stared moodily into the dark, unable to pick out any of the surrounding mountains. His mind returned to Tonya, wondering if a redhead was slipping into a blond man's tent right now. She wanted Adrian in a way that was almost an obsession. His name was always on her pouty lips, and Kenn felt a sharp connection with her because of it. There was just something about the man that silently seduced. Not that it was a sexual thing for Kenn. He didn't consider himself a closet-case. He just needed to be near Adrian and the authority he represented.

Others felt it. Kyle and Neil did, and Doug too, but Tonya was the only one to pursue Adrian shamelessly and she was often humiliated by him and the camp as a punishment for it.

Kenn spied a flash of flame red and subtly watched Tonya come through the crowd of slightly drunk and unfriendly people with an air of haughty contempt that he admired.

Everyone shifted aside, whispering, staring at her, and she held her chin high, glaring directly at some of them when the whispers became too loud.

Each time, the person fell silent, aware that Tonya would back up her words with actions.

Kenn felt a bolt of desire for her. The skintight, black slacks caressed her long legs and her red net top made men consider breaking rules. It also caused the women here to hate her for making them feel plain, second best, and Kenn studied her from under lowered lashes.

He was disappointed when she slipped into her tent, and he almost had to force himself to stay where he was as the conversations resumed. These people had mostly accepted him, but they were still waiting for him to cross even the smallest line and be denied the position he was aiming (campaigning) for. He couldn't make time openly with Tonya or any other woman yet, not until there had been a proper mourning period. Kenn wouldn't ruin his chances here on a piece of ass, no matter how hot. It would be a betrayal of Adrian, but worse, of the wife back in Ohio that he'd spoken of. That would be unforgivable, thanks to Adrian's strict but simple moral code: Do what you want and be shunned, or do the accepted thing and be welcomed. Both types of people lived here, but only one held any power, and being a cut above the rest was also a lure for the controlling soul that Kenn's father had given him.

"You wanna hit this, man?"

Zack, a truck driver that the new doctor had patched up, was holding out a thick blunt. The man was unarmed, alone, and carried himself like a fellow controller.

Arm in a white sling, the driver smelled new. It took a while for that to fade, and Kenn assessed him. Like Adrian, he would also need a right hand. Was this it?

"Sure, thanks." Kenn hit it hard, keeping it for a long moment, waiting, and wasn't disappointed.

"I hear you handle the big man's shit and your own. Interested in some backup?"

Kenn handed over the smoldering blunt, stubbing out the part of the cherry that had fallen and landed in the trampled needle grass at their feet. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

Zack’s green eyes darkened. It was clear to Kenn that the prematurely graying trucker was used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted it.

“And in the meantime?”

Kenn shrugged and turned away. “Anyone who wanted to watch my six would have to be an Eagle and in charge of his own team. That’s a deal breaker.”

Kenn was in his sleeping bag three hours later, cold, uncomfortable, and sure that his past was catching up to him. He could feel Angela hunting for her boy at night, searching the vast darkness for their location, and he was livid that she wouldn’t answer him, even though he knew she’d heard him calling to her. He was no stranger to what she could do. Kenn had done his homework before dating (trapping) her, but he couldn’t accept it with her in control. She couldn’t come here, not ever.

She’s already on her way, his mind insisted brutally. When she arrives, she’ll not only rock your boat, she’ll sink it. When Adrian finds out what kind of man you were before, how you dishonored the Corps repeatedly, you’ll be banished.

The voice was cruel, and Kenn hated Angela at that moment for the tiny worm of fear that was growing deep in his heart. If she made it to Safe Haven, he would lose everything.

4

Monthly meetings were mandatory for everyone except those on sentry duty, and after dinner, Adrian called his people together. It was held in the Mess, and Kenn was impressed with the tarp roof that gave extra room, the snacks and drinks, and the neat orderliness of it.

All the seats were taken as Adrian came under the awning, and another dozen men lined the corners of the gathering. These, Kenn knew now, were off-duty guards who were being trained to do their jobs even when not on a shift. Adrian explained it as civic service and from what Kenn had experienced here so far, it was succeeding, but it didn't hurt that it also gained Adrian's respect. That was something everyone wanted. What these people didn't know was that it was a Corps standard.

The big crowd waited for Adrian to get himself a cup of coffee and a few of the cookies. He had a thick red notebook under his arm, and he made his way to the table in the center of the crowd instead of the one in front that had been left empty for him.

Kenn recognized the bonding moment as a clever political move, but he also recognized the danger. He instinctively kept his hand near his hip and noticed that a few of the others (Kyle, Neil, and Doug) eased closer to the boss.

Adrian remained standing as he got started, meeting their tense glances to calm them down, but he could smell the reeking rot of bodies in the towns around them, even over the odors of cooking and port-o-lets. This was still cold weather. What would it be like in July?

"This is the third meeting of Safe Haven Refugee Camp. We have ninety-one people."

There was a pleased ripple at that, safety in numbers mentioned in the crowd. Few of them realized it was President's Day. Those who did know the date didn't care. That world was gone. Safe Haven didn't need a president. It had Adrian.

"We also now have a doctor!"

There was a big cheer at that, and most people scanned the neatly organized mess, but not the Eagles, Kenn observed. Their attention stayed on their surroundings, doing their duty.

"We'll sort out a schedule. For now, sign the sheet Neil has, and put your problem on it if you can. The doctor will use it to decide who needs to come in first."

There was quiet chatter as the tall trooper passed the first clipboard.

Before Adrian could continue, an eager voice rang out from behind Kenn.

“You gonna run those tests now? The ones to see if anyone here’s sick?”

Adrian chose his words carefully as people gaped. “I’d like to, yes, but...”

“And we’re gonna kick ‘em out right? Just like we voted on?” Tony, a low-fare grease monkey, interrupted again.

Adrian frowned at the short, balding mechanic. “We won’t be so nasty, but yes. They’ll be asked to leave.”

People were talking quietly to each other, some sulking, some agreeing, and the drunkard sat down, satisfied.

Smothering a curse, Adrian turned the page. That hadn’t encouraged people to be checked out. “Our new crew of guards has passed into Level Two, and that means we need another twenty men to try out for Level One. Neil will pass around that sheet too, and I’ll let you know in a couple days. Also, our reserves aren’t growing, and I understand that’s because no one feels safe. While I can’t take away all the danger, I can give you some protection. Eagle Four and his team are hereby on loan to protect any supply mission of six or more people that has been approved a day in advance. They get their orders from me, though, and will not endanger their lives unless it’s worth it,” Adrian warned. “If they say no, it’s not safe, you pick a different site. If something does go wrong, the priority is to get everyone to camp. Next, schedule switches will no longer be handled by me. Kenn and Kyle will cover all changes. I’ll still make out the original and give a final approval.”

Adrian paused to light a stale smoke, and Kenn was almost positive that he was judging the reactions of the camp. They seemed fine with his choices, though there were a few words being exchanged between some of the Eagles over the order of the names. How important was that?

“As of tomorrow, there will be a third meal. The appliances Kenn and Doug hooked up run great, so from now on we get three squares, Monday through Friday. Saturday and Sunday will remain the same—lunch and dinner, with the truck open for coffee, toast, and cereal. A through L will be served the new meal first, M through Z thirty-five minutes later, shift to start at noon.”

He flipped another page, giving Kenn a motion of recognition that the Marine soaked up like a thirsty desert.

“Effective immediately, everyone is on full water rations.”

The cheer was much louder this time, and Adrian gestured toward his new right-hand. “Thank Kenn. His idea of searching trucks on the highway was great, and now we’re good as long as we find one a week.”

Kenn was being slapped on the shoulders and congratulated, but he didn’t miss the gleam of satisfaction in Adrian’s pale eyes as he witnessed his new man being accepted.

“We also have four new loads of clothes, shoes, blankets, and a lot of other gear we’ve been low on or out of. The trucks will be open right after this meeting, with M through Z going first and A through L twenty minutes later.” He paused. “We also have the photos from the Essex bunker and NORAD. They’re bad, and they blow the idea of finding help there. With this odd weather holding in some warmth, I say we keep hunting. If we haven’t found anything by the fourth of July, then we should go on and pick a place to try rebuilding on our own.”

“You mean in the mountains?” someone called out.

Kenn noticed the people here never really settled down, even though there were guards everywhere. *Tense sheep*, he thought, *waiting for the dog’s bite*.

Adrian was clearly reluctant and had to raise his voice a bit to be heard as the wind ran through camp, causing the tents to flap louder. “Yes. The bunker under the base in Montana won’t hold us all, but this country is full of tunnels, caves, and equipment to make them livable. I hope for something above, but

if we had to, we could take a big set of caves and block them off, make it work temporarily.”

He waved a dismissive hand, demeanor calmer than his stomach as they muttered among themselves. “It’s something to think about. We’ll have a final vote on that in July. For now, we’ll stay here tomorrow and have our contest, then leave the next morning. Where? We’re picking that tonight, along with voting on some new rules.”

Adrian met suddenly nervous people with calm, reasonable words. “We have a lot of people here now, and we pick up more nearly every day. That’s great, exactly what we want, but it also means we need more volunteers. With no law that says they have to, people aren’t pulling their weight. The current rules say everyone has to help, but I’d like to be more specific. We need each person here to pull three shifts on sentry duty and one shift on any other chore of their choice. We all want things to be better, right?”

He waited for a reaction, their half-hearted agreement, faces a mix of trust and suspicion, and then continued. “Before, “better” was earning the finer things, the luxuries, but now, “better” means working to survive, to keep what we’ve got—this second chance. These things have to be done, and we have to be the people to do them. There is no one else.”

His tone had become scolding, and Kenn was impressed, sure there would be extra hands for at least the next week. No one liked Adrian disappointed or unhappy.

“I’d like to have more of us taking the gun classes. There’s a large group of guerillas moving up Interstate 25, as most of you know, and we need to be able to defend ourselves.”

“Do you think we’ll be attacked?” the reporter, Cynthia “Shark-Bitch” Quest, asked. She was sweating heavily because she’d insisted on squeezing into the front with the elderly, so she wouldn’t miss a single word or reaction.

Adrian shrugged, expression unreadable even though he knew her from before the war. She hadn’t placed him yet, might

not if fate was on his side, but he hadn't even considered refusing her entry, or worse, getting rid of her. And that was the difference between him and his father, why he was worthy to lead these people.

"I hope not, but it is a part of why we need more hands for guard duty. And, that reminds me. People are getting out of their cars in new places way too soon. Many times, the Eagles haven't cleared or roped off the area yet, and I'm telling you now, someone will end up getting hurt because of it."

Adrian proceeded to the beaded doorway of the Mess, to the cook. Hilda was a plump-faced German woman they'd picked up in central Nevada, another one he wasn't sure about yet. Like the reporter—Adrian didn't know where she fit into his plans for their future, but he had little doubt they both did. And if one of these two alert females discovered his secret, it was fate. They wouldn't, though. He had faith. At least, not until these people were able to survive without him. Then, it would be open season.

"Can I get a Bud?"

The big-shouldered cook did it immediately, and Adrian made a mental note to talk to her later as he turned back to his audience. If Hilda wanted labor that kept her out of view, he had that, but he wouldn't let her waste that sharp intelligence on serving trays.

"This area is bad, dangerous. We all feel it. We can't stay long without getting sick. After the contest, I'd like to make some real miles and get away from here now that we know NORAD's fate."

There was no real response except darkening faces at the mention of the compound that many of them had hoped would be standing and willing to take in survivors, but the muttering was continuous. The large group wasn't even completely silent while Adrian was talking.

Adrian took the towel-wrapped bottle with a nod. "Okay, any new business?"

“Yes.” Alex Ford, a young math teacher from Montana, stood up nervously. “Are we gonna... I mean... Can we celebrate the holidays? Some of the kids have asked and we’re not sure what to tell them.”

The well-dressed bald man sat down, and Adrian appeared to be considering, but this was easy. It was one of the things he had covered in his notebook over a month ago.

“Just the ones that matter, I think. The Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, New Years, for sure. Memorial Day.”

“What about Easter and Christmas?” Cynthia asked, hurriedly hand copying as much of the meeting as she could.

“Not as a whole camp. Hardly anyone believed in them, just used them as an excuse to indulge or buy off loved ones, rather than spending real time with them. I won’t even get into the money and stores, and what it did to our lives. Each person can do what they want, and I won’t be upset by kids hunting eggs or dressing up for Halloween, but I won’t let a few force it on everyone else.”

There were shrugs and scowls, again about evenly split, and Adrian took a moment to open his beer and take a healthy swallow. He was wisely giving his people a minute to settle in with the idea that even the holidays had changed for them.

“Guess we might all like Halloween a little more if one of you guys could do some magic.” His common joke drew chuckles, but he didn’t tell them how much he wished it was true. “All right, anyone else have new business?”

“I have some suggestions.”

The doctor’s voice was respectful, and Adrian waved a hand, liking the hard intelligence he read in the short, rounded man’s face. New and just out of a self-imposed quarantine, John had already made friends.

Adrian gestured with his bottle. “Suggest away.”

The aged healer stood up, sending a strong, menthol whiff of Ben-Gay over the gathered crowd.

“There should be more fruit and juice for everyone, along with daily vitamins. We’re being exposed to a lot of poisons, especially in places like this, and the antioxidants in the fruits and juice will boost our immune systems.”

Silence greeted his words, and John went on carefully, hoping he wasn’t about to step on anyone’s toes. “I’ve only been here a couple days, but I’ve been a doctor for a long time. I can tell you what illnesses we’ll face in the coming months and how to prevent some of them.”

Adrian gave him a barely perceptible gesture, aware and pleased at the man’s use of “we.”

“What kinds of things can we expect if we ignore your suggestions?”

“Scurvy, rashes, nasty colds, weak immune systems that will let the sniffles last for weeks instead of days. Migraines, vomiting and diarrhea that lasts for weeks at a time. The list gets bad after that. We’re absorbing the chemicals that fell with the bombs and those that were released in accidents right after the war. Once enough builds up, we’ll start getting sick, and dying.”

The crowd stirred uneasily, but Adrian did nothing to calm them, as most were expecting. *All of you need a reality check*, Adrian thought, remembering idiots catching rainwater on their tongues the last time it stormed. Just to discover if it would still burn. They knew less than nothing.

John noted Adrian’s motion and recognized the unspoken order. Adrian wanted to scare them. That was easy. He would use the truth.

“Our biggest threat is the radiation,” John continued. “It’s usually ninety percent fatal at high doses, but it’s the low doses we have to worry about. It’s a slow death that finds each person’s weak link. It wakes up dormant genes, like cancer and MS, and since exposure kills the immune system, we’ll be attacked from the inside. The immune system is the army, and though the radiation can’t be stopped, it can be slowed by an

army that's strong. For us, it could mean only thirty percent will die, instead of seventy."

"But the bombs came months ago and the toxics soaked into the ground. Why are we worryin'? We ain't even seen any radiation vics," a slender, older woman in the front stated.

People immediately responded.

"I did."

"We have."

John held up a hand, and Adrian was pleased when the crowd's talk fell off to mostly silence.

"Those who were exposed during the war are gone now. Our threats are coming from the weather dropping it on us and from the radioactive debris still on the ground where we sleep and need to grow food. It takes a long time for the toxics, as you call them, to go away. You know that layer of smog when its daylight, makes it feel like dusk all the time? It's the toxins and dust. Until that dissipates, we're not safe. Near the bomb zones, that'll take thirty years or more."

The crowd muttered and murmured, whispering and worrying. Adrian finished his beer and smoke before he spoke, pleased with the doctor. He would have no trouble getting a good day's travel out of them now.

"So, you want responsibility for our health? Want to care for us? The right to add to our laws, once voted on, comes with it," Adrian offered and warned.

The doctor was aware of what was going on and was surprised that it was being offered so soon. "Not the laws part. I'm no politician, but yes to the rest. My Oath didn't die with my country."

"Well said. You've got my vote, but it's theirs that matters," Adrian stated, waving a hand at the listening people. "All those in favor of putting the doctor's suggestions on the ballot?"

John slid his glasses back on as he sat down.

Adrian casually held up his own hand, and both men were secretly relieved that nearly everyone else did too.

“So be it.” Adrian held up a sheet of paper. “The bottom is blank. Fill it in as advice. A-D-V-I-C-E. Okay, any other new business?”

No one spoke, and Adrian motioned for Neil to pass around the pens and papers. Neil was emotionless, even while he was grinning and saying all the right things. Something was going on with Kenn and Adrian. Neil could feel it, and what came to mind was the reason his mirth didn’t reach his eyes.

“All right, last thing. Members of the moral board need to stay after the vote. We have a possible violation to judge.”

Kenn, and everyone else, wondered what unspoken rule had been broken. The big ones went to trials that were witnessed by the whole camp, or so he’d heard. There hadn’t been one since Kenn had been here, hadn’t even been a case of thievery, but the moral code was strict too. There had been one moral vote since he’d joined Safe Haven and the stalker was no longer a member here.

“Which rule?” Roger Sawyer, the current foreman, asked.

“None directly, and that’s why we’re doing a closed hearing. I won’t ruin an innocent man’s chances for a new life here.” He said it for ear candy and it worked, but Adrian was sure the man would be gone before he did rounds tonight. Leon and the words “not guilty” hadn’t been on speaking terms in a long time.

Roger grinned, and while Adrian hated that gleam of eagerness in the ex-Pinkerton detective, he understood the deep need to punish those who were even the smallest bit responsible for all they had suffered.

Adrian waited until Kenn dropped his vote into the metal lockbox, and then joined him at a small, empty table in the rear. The rest of the camp was crowded around the front tables to witness the votes being counted.

“That was some of the slickest shit I’ve ever heard,” Kenn’s stated lowly, admiring.

“Maybe you’ll MC for me sometime.”

Kenn laughed, happy with the words. “I’m not a public speaker.”

Adrian let it go, sure the Marine would be, and there would be no one better. “How about coming by my tent an hour after everything’s done? We’ll have a beer and a conversation.”

“Sure,” Kenn agreed casually, heart rate picking up. This was it. “Should I bring anything?”

“Just your stamina. I’m gonna need to be drunk when this night’s work is over.”

5

The vote went Adrian’s way on all of the issues and as the crowd slowly broke up; their faces showed that they were confident that their guardian was doing his job. Their calm gazes also said they would find out what rule had been broken.

In a short time, the mess was mostly empty, the camp quieting down as everyone settled in for the night. Kenn wanted to stay, longed to be on the inside, but he caught Adrian’s eye instead of waiting until he was asked to leave.

“I volunteered for a double on sentry duty tomorrow, so I’m gonna hit the showers, then the rack. Call me if you need anything.” Kenn assumed he hadn’t been here long enough to be trusted and was showing humility that he didn’t remotely feel.

Adrian took the opportunity, telling them all that Kenn’s status had changed. It had been talked about openly since the encounter with the birds three days ago, but there would be some surprises when the camp found out how high up he was about to be placed.

“Hang around, will ya? I need someone on my right.”

There was a ring of magic to the words, and Kenn kept the triumph out of his voice by sheer will. “You know it.”

Adrian gave Neil a nod before motioning to the thirteen men and women waiting together. Neil left with a scowl on his face. It

was as he and Kyle feared. That coveted position was being given to Kenn.

“We’ve set up a hooch near the parking area. Follow Doug. He’s the one with the red vest and shoulders so wide that we could land a plane on them. Let’s get this over with as quickly as possible.”

The mood turned somber, but Kenn couldn’t help the swagger in his stride as he walked on the boss man’s right. They followed the board members, who had no trouble catching up to Doug. His limp was the only reason Kenn didn’t consider him competition.

Big-nosed, deeply tanned Kyle was on Adrian’s left and Kenn wondered what the stocky goon thought about those words, smirking to himself. Probably hated it, but he could eat shit and die. Nothing he could do but suck it up. It made Kenn feel like laughing. He and Kyle hadn’t spoken a word to each other in two full days, since the first gun class he’d taught where they’d both said too much, barely avoiding a fight. Now Kenn was about to be given authority, and he planned to rub it in every chance he got.

“Stay on this guy. He has a nasty temper, and I’m sure this type of proceeding isn’t new to him,” Adrian warned.

Kenn hid a disappointment at the words. They were chasers for a prisoner?

“The punishment might be new,” Kyle stated, pulling his black cap tighter over his dark curls.

Adrian didn’t smile. “True. Don’t let him intimidate the girls. They’re already afraid he might sneak back and hurt them in retaliation.”

Kenn saw them exchange a glance that said the violator wouldn’t be able to return because he would be dead. Jealousy flared up in Kenn, made him push a little, test his new place before it was official. “Can I ask or should I wait?”

Kyle listened openly. A refusal would mean they had read too much into Adrian’s words. Kenn might not be empty clothes,

the birds proved that, but there was still something wrong with him.

“Sexual assault, threats against women and kids, and physical assault. Those are all death penalty crimes here, and he knows it.”

Sorry about your luck, Kenn thought, gloating silently, but he immediately brought the inner Marine out when they slipped into the big tent and spotted the defendant’s huge, tattooed body. Leon was easily three hundred pounds.

As he and Kyle strode to each side of the sullen biker, they exchanged a look that said *truce*, for Adrian’s sake. They would do this together and be hard from the beginning. It wouldn’t take much for this to get out of control—the pierced suspect wasn’t even handcuffed—and both men were aware of how little they liked Adrian being around this guy. Anything could go wrong once the verdict was in.

Nothing did though, and less than an hour later, a sedated Leon was being escorted out of the tape by men who had orders to kill him and piss on his body—a request from one of the victims.

Adrian wandered afterwards, worrying over the orders he had given. He walked in the darkest shadows around the flapping tents, occasionally listening to his people. Leon wouldn’t be missed. He had contributed almost nothing, but the loss of life still made Adrian feel like a failure as a leader.

Not that he would change his mind. He could still call Kyle, but he knew the mobster didn’t want the biker to get a stay of execution after what they’d listened to him admit, and he wouldn’t. The entire world was better off without Leon. Right or wrong, Adrian had made a leader’s choice, based on what was best for everyone here. It was how he made all of his decisions now. It was the only way his people would survive.

Adrian's feet carried him to the medical tent, but he hesitated to go in despite knowing he needed to invite the doctor onto the payroll. Doctors were notoriously temperamental, and this one, having been here only a short time, couldn't be pleased with this night's labor. It had taken nearly a dozen men to hold Leon down, and though John had done what was asked without protest, the hypocrisy of it had to be fresh in his mind.

Headlights flashed, and Adrian shifted deeper into the shadows as Tonya rolled into camp in a very red, very new convertible that was clearly not easy on gas like they had voted for at the last meeting.

She parked in front of her tent, making him grumble at the second rule violation. As she disappeared inside the deluxe vinyl structure, he scribbled a note in his book, wondering which sucker had helped her put it up. Tonya would gas her own car all this week and maybe the doctor's idea about a mandatory quarantine zone would work. She could be...

"...new place, Anne. A hard new world, where everything has an uglier price."

Adrian didn't budge as the husband and wife talked about what had happened, unknowingly approaching his hiding place while they cleaned up the large two-sided tent.

"But, it's barbaric, Johnnie! Branding him like an animal! It's...it's barbaric!"

"What else is there? No jails, no drugs, no mental help, and really, those things never worked on men like that anyway."

Adrian heard her frustrated sigh and understood that criminal justice was an old discussion between them.

"He couldn't let him go, Anne. He had to make sure that everyone who meets that monster will understand what he really is."

The husband's voice was patient, still teaching after all their years of marriage, and he had Adrian's complete attention.

"It isn't right! We heal. We don't hurt! This isn't how America's supposed to be!"

John gave a harsh snort that made Adrian tense.

“This is exactly how it should have been, and maybe we wouldn’t have destroyed ourselves.”

“But the whole word?”

“It’ll keep him from easily hiding or removing it.”

“It’ll get him killed and you’re responsible. You did it.”

“This is a good place, and I’ll do what I have to so that we can stay, but this sin I’ll pay for willingly. It’s the only way now, and let me tell you a secret, my dear sweet wife. I won’t carry the burden alone. That young man feels it a lot more than he shows. He values life, all life. It’s in the way he cares for his people, for his farm of exotic humans. I’ll give him my help in any way he needs, and I hope you will too. He’s the few, the good, and I suspect we were allowed to survive because he needs us.”

Definitely right to offer John a place on the council, Adrian thought, moving away. That old man had his head on straight. Adrian had used it at the meeting and heard it just now, but he had witnessed it during the punishment too. John had handled not only himself, but also Anne and the Eagles around him with a calm sense of leadership. Because of that, the branding hadn’t been as ugly as the members of the voting board had expected. Most of them would sleep tonight.

It only eased Adrian’s mind a little, though, that he now had at least two of the six or seven he’d been promised in his dreams. He spent a lot of time worrying over the rest. Had he passed them somewhere? He hoped not, because he and his grunts couldn’t keep doing all the work. Eventually, they would miss something that endangered these people and cost them the right to lead.

Adrian wasn’t as excited as he wanted to be, though his first was here and he was about to offer him the place that every man in this camp wanted. The weight of this leadership was heavier than anything Adrian had ever carried before the war, and he was starting to feel a bit winded.

Life was good.

Kenn was sitting in an uncomfortable folding chair in the center of Adrian's perfectly neat tent. He wished more people were out to walk by and witness the moment. The flap was open, the dim lantern light flickered gently in the soft, midnight breeze, and Kenn couldn't imagine being more content anywhere else.

"Here ya go. Try this. I made it myself."

Adrian handed him a cool metal cup, along with a cigar, and Kenn noticed the five o'clock shadow and bloodshot eyes. Clearly, their leader had already gotten a head start.

Kenn smelled his cup, liking the vanilla more than he would ever admit and took a large swallow. It burned its way down to his gut despite the sweet aftertaste, and he sucked in a breath, coughing.

The two men shared a leer.

"Good?"

Kenn nodded, noting the patriotic designs on the cups. With Adrian, everything was about America.

Adrian studied Kenn, countenance unreadable, and the tension thickened.

Kenn forced himself to stay still, sensing if he was too eager now, he might lose it all before it was even his.

"Do you have any idea why I asked you here?"

Kenn shook his head, instinctively knowing this was all part of the ritual of being brought in. "Have I done something wrong?"

"Just the opposite. The guys tell me you like to stay busy."

Kenn emptied his cup, set it on the small folding table as the potent alcohol burned its way to his gut.

"There's a lot to be done," he gasped out, making Adrian snicker again.

"Ain't that the truth. How long have you been here now?"

"Fifteen days."

The quick answer made Adrian grimace. “You’ve done doubles on guard duty, taught two gun classes for the Eagles, helped find supplies, set up, broke down, and gassed up vehicles. There’s been something every day, all on top of your regular schedule. Busy two weeks.”

Kenn shrugged. “Unleaded is my new cologne.”

“Smells like a hard worker, someone with ambition searching for a mountain to climb.”

“I’ve got a lot to offer.”

“And I want it.” Adrian handed Kenn a thick black notebook with a silver pen in the ring. “Others recognize it. Many people have hinted that you should be invited onto the payroll.”

“But?”

“It’s not up to some or most of them. It has to be unanimous and that depends on you.”

Kenn met Adrian’s pointed look with one of his own. “I’m working on it.”

Adrian finished lighting his cigar before responding, “Not fast enough, but I can’t wait any longer. We have to get these people ready to defend their freedom.”

Kenn asked himself if he could start out as a lowly drill instructor.

When he glanced up to say that wouldn’t hold him for long, Adrian added what was missing, with careful wording that Kenn overlooked.

“I have important work for you. You’ll be higher than any other here now will. Together, we’ll save some of what matters.” Adrian raised a brow, questioning, “If you have the time?”

“You make the schedules. I have the time if you say I do.”

Adrian glared coldly. “This is no game. Be sure.”

“I’d never treat it that way.” Kenn sounded horrified.

Adrian knew that, but the warning came with the offer. “Things will start slow, but it won’t stay that way. Effective immediately, you have that place at my right that you were already asking for when we found you. You’ll always be my

second in command and more aware than anyone else, in my plans deeper. I'm offering you what the Corps couldn't...your purpose. The reason you were born, why you survived."

"What's the catch?"

"You're mine." Adrian's harsh tone said no going back would be allowed. "Be the anything and everything that I need to keep these people alive. I make every choice based on what's best for the entire camp and nothing else takes priority, not even me. I'll do anything to keep us together, and I will expect your complete and immediate support, no matter the chore or situation."

Kenn didn't even consider refusing, holding out a hand. "You have a deal."

Adrian shook with his new XO, thinking the first one had come into his web, but there would be many more.

Chapter Sixteen

Dreams and Schemes

1

There were people everywhere, and it was a joy to behold.

They were here to pay their respects to the man who had made their new lives possible, and groups were streaming in from all corners of the globe in an endless succession of happiness and grief. Hundreds, then thousands more, were still on the way.

The founder of Safe Haven may be near the end of his time, but the vision he had created would survive forever. With his strength of mind, the son of a traitor had given them peace, honor, and safety. There were no jails, nor any need for them, no hunger, no pollution or dying planet trying to kill them first. The methods he had used to achieve such a utopia were often brutal, but forty-seven years after the war of 2012, America was flourishing, spreading into the wilderness again. Even the years they had spent in foreign lands had been ones of happiness and light—because of Adrian and his Eagles.

In the heart of Safe Haven City, surrounded by rolling farms and playing children, they gathered, waiting. Adrian would talk to them all one last time, and they would listen well to any final words he had for them.

Glowing with fulfillment, he only spoke for a moment, and then there was a cheer as he stepped proudly from their lives. It swelled from the arched walls around the stage and grew into a noise heard over more miles than anything since the great eruption of Yellowstone in 2013. It was a celebration of the hope

that he had given them, the second chance to get it right, and they would honor Adrian's memory by keeping America in their hearts. It was his last wish.

2

In the early morning hours, the happy dream faded, allowing restless minds to sleep easier, but along Interstate 25, a Mexican with hate in his heart snapped awake with a scream of rage that brought men running to him.

"I will never let them rebuild! That bright Safe Haven future will never exist!" Cesar vowed, delivering a brutal kick to the girl chained at his feet. He would sacrifice every son and daughter he owned to prevent it!

He screamed for his cousin as his filthy foot hit the girl chained to the center pole again. "Get up! There is work!"

3

A short time later, a plump woman rode out on one of the few horses. The cries of her two young children reassured Cesar that she would do as he wanted. She would be missed here for her cooking skills, but at Safe Haven, she would be an invaluable tool waiting for his use.

Cesar's army was drunk on their successful invasion of the hated Americans, but the wise guerilla captain sensed confidence and courage wouldn't be enough to defeat the group of survivors from his dream. The blond man had been hard, and Cesar recognized the future battle. When it came, he would be ready and none of them would stand in his way.

There was a feeling of importance to the woman disappearing into the fog and Cesar stared until she was out of sight. Maria might be the key to that battle.

Shoving the toddlers away from his leg, Cesar summoned one of his slaves to care for them. When his sons were older,

they would also be sacrifices for the cause, as his other children had been over the years.

The evil slave trader let out a battle cry that was echoed by his men.

“Muerte a Estados Unidos!”

“Muerte a Estados Unidos!”

Death to America.

Chapter Seventeen
A Hard New World

February 21st
Devils Head, Colorado

1

The wolves hadn't left. Cold and hungry, they were determined not to let man regain control, and even a lone female was a threat to this new awareness. Mother Nature, having recognized the chance for a different outcome, was uniting species all over the world—most of them natural enemies—and her army was relentless.

Arroooooooooo!

Samantha's eyes flew open and she froze, listening intently.

After a minute, she told herself to relax, that she had more pressing problems than wolves or coyotes outside.

The pain in her leg was agony, and her hands and feet were so cold that she couldn't feel anything in them but pain. It was dark and drafty in the cabin, the flames long out, and she forced herself to scoot over to the fireplace.

Sam clenched her teeth at every jar of her leg against the hard floor, knowing she needed heat, but all she could think about was how much she wanted to shoot up. It was the same craving that made her drool when she woke in the darkness with only the flaring misery to comfort her. So, she made herself wait. She would not come out of the war an addict.

It was frigid in the hunting lodge, but the woman was thankful that the front glass windows had survived the cold wave

with only small cracks. The thick line of birch and evergreens in front of the cabin had taken the brunt.

And the birds, she thought, shuddering.

Sam hadn't realized the birds were there until she watched them freeze. The larks were huddled on an upper branch for warmth, and it had been awful to witness. She could still make out the faint yellow hue of their snow-covered bodies. It was a mirror of her own fate, had the windows not held.

It was better now; enough that she could even go to the outhouse, and while Sam was glad the freeze had let up; there was still plenty of nasty weather that she would have to travel. The feeling of wrongness invading this place said it wasn't safe here anymore. She needed to get moving.

Adapting to the thick, groggy feeling of the morphine upon waking each day, she slowly stacked some of her dwindling supply of wood into the charred pit.

Finished, she surveyed the dark corner and found the crackers gone. She had noticed the animal cage in the SUV as she'd come up the driveway to the hunting lodge, but it hadn't registered and she had mistaken the ferret for a mouse in her fear of doing self-surgery. The brown and white fur had hung sadly from its narrow frame, and she'd been feeding it whenever she ate, leaving water out. If it would come to her, maybe she would have a companion.

Shivering now, Samantha squirted the lighter fluid gently and struck a match, having to use three before the fire finally roared to life, singeing her fingertips. Vaguely thinking she had never smelled worse in her life, Sam pulled the blanket tighter around her thin shoulders, huddling as close to the heat as she could get.

Needing to know how her wound was doing, she gently pried off the bandage, trying not to disturb the newly forming scabs. It was still ugly, but clearly improving and she could even put a little weight on it now. Her shaking hands replaced the mostly clean material, thinking it had hurt more—

Arrrooooooo!

Samantha froze at the sight of red, malevolent orbs glaring through the front window.

She stared for a long moment, evaluating her situation. It had been three days. It was blizzard cold, the snow was still falling, and the wolves were out there...stalking her.

Sccccraatch. Sssscchh.

Paws at the small gap under the front door got her moving, but her gaze stayed on the window, where more hungry snouts had appeared. She was in trouble, and once again, there would be no rescue except for the one she could provide.

Sam squared her shoulders, feeling the helpless anger that always rose when she thought of the old world now. Fine, if they wanted a war with humans, she would give them a taste of what they were in for.

The first thing the storm tracker did was give herself a light dose of liquid gold and use the bedpan, glad her leg felt stronger. She would need that. She dressed as fast as she could, knowing the layered shirts would help protect her from bites and scratches. The sweatpants went on over the jeans for the same reason. After tying her dirty blonde braid up, she strapped the gun around her hips, wishing it had more than two bullets in it.

Samantha chose to make her stand in the corner, to the left of the stone fireplace, and she was crying hard tears by the time she had tumbled the cumbersome desk onto its side, pulling it in like a wall.

After stowing all her things behind it, she filled half a dozen syringes with morphine, leaving the caps off, and added them to the knives already in the wide pockets of her trench coat. They made a comforting clink. When the wolves came, it would be through the windows already weakened by the first strong wave of the blizzard, and it would get cold in here fast.

“Sure could use a solid,” Sam muttered hoarsely, aware that this was probably where her luck would run out. “If I’ve got any credit, I’d like to use it now, please.”

Sam took a little more of the morphine she feared she would crave forever, recapping the needle with shaking fingers. She had already survived worse. Wolves, no matter how determined, were nothing compared to Melvin and Henry, both drunk and wanting sex. She would survive.

Scratch. Paw. Sniff.

Sam counted two shadows under the door, four pairs of eyes at the window. Six animals, and probably a few others hanging back, waiting. *But not for much longer*, she thought, almost able to feel their hunger, their hatred, as they watched her through the frosted glass.

The storm had piled up a foot of thick snow, giving the wolves a ledge up, and she glared as she put the torches near the fire, not sure why she'd made them. The fire poles were a last—

Smaaaaaash!

The front glass shattered under a huge black wolf that landed on its side. Sharp pieces of glass flew across the floor, and snow, dark and dirty, flew through the jagged hole.

Snarling at her before it gained its feet, the wolf padded her way, promising death.

Crack! Thud. Ccrrssshhh!

The second window failed. Snow and wolves streamed through the gaping opening.

Hungry fangs bared, claws digging into the floor, the wolves prowled toward her.

Sam waited for them with her heart in her throat. They had to get close enough for her meager weapons to be effective.

Craassshhh!

A third window exploded under the weight of a large white wolf. The animal didn't slow as it hit the wooden floor, using it to jump again instead, fangs bared in anticipation.

Sam reacted fast, jerking needles from her pocket. She slammed two syringes into the white wolf's furry chest as it came down on her.

Grunting, she pushed the double dose in, cringing away from the heavy, reeking weight.

A second wolf lunged with its leader, and was hit with the first animal's convulsing body. It knocked them both into the corner of the desk. The heavy marble slid against Sam's good leg, shoving her backward and away from their snaps.

Pictures crashing to the floor behind her, Sam ignored the stabs of pain. She quickly glanced up to find a lanky wolf flying through the air, and two others about to launch.

She fired the last two bullets in her gun, only one of them connecting, and then the third animal was flying toward her, snapping viciously.

Sam leaned into the wolf's lunge, knife from her pocket impaling, ripping upward.

Yiiipe!

She let the bloody blade fall as she grabbed the Taser she'd found refill packs for, and shocked the wolf she'd missed with the gun. She hit it in the muzzle as it went for her injured limb.

The wolf fell, whining loudly.

She kicked the animal that had recovered from hitting the desk's sharp corner with her good leg, seeing blood trickling from its ear.

Iippe! Iippe!

Her boot crunched against its ribs, and the wolf yelped horribly. Then, all of the animals were fleeing, retreating before the injured prey that had taken out half of their pack.

Sam rotated in time to witness the remaining three wolves jump through the snowy window, disappearing into the cold drifts of slush with their tails tucked between their legs. Bloody paw prints marked their path of retreat, drops and sprays of scarlet scattered over the floor. Their howls of mourning as they vanished into the storm were haunting.

Samantha lowered her arms, struggling not to puke at the blood on her hands, but when the white wolf at her feet twitched, she plunged her last knife deep into its thick chest.

Scratch...

Sam swung around, shoulders relaxing when she spotted the ferret. Not thinking it odd for the pet to be out despite all the noise, she didn't notice the restless twitch of its tail, nor the fact that it was charging her until it was too close to do anything but stomp.

She hit it with her injured leg as it lunged for her ankle, saliva dripping from its sharp, little fangs. The ferret's body crunched under her boot, guts and blood squeezing out as stabbing pain shot up her thigh.

Furious, Sam ground the ferret into the bloody floor, taking bitter satisfaction in every snap, crack, and dark splatter. "Slam you too!"

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Sam went to wash and gather her things. She would go now, ready or not. It truly was survival of the fittest, and those who didn't listen to the warnings and prepare for nature's worst would die.

Chapter Eighteen

The Castaway

12/21/2012

The Pacific Ocean

1

“Let me go!”

The dark-haired females struggled against each other, but they went mostly unnoticed in the mayhem that had taken control of the cruise ship.

“Keep going! We have to get below!” Kendle spotted a group of crewmen running down the crowded deck, grabbing wildly at unsuspecting women.

Ducking, she roughly spun her twin sister from their reach. Everything was OC now.

“Stop!”

Kendle shoved the girl again as she tried to go back the way they’d come, one eye on the horribly fascinating tidal wave eating up the ocean as it raced toward the boat, and one terrified eye on the younger and bloodier girl in front of her.

“We gotta help dad!” Dawn screamed, skin on fire.

Kendle shook her head, noises buzzing together unpleasantly as they stumbled along the debris-covered deck. They were being jostled by other panicked holiday passengers, many of them bleeding, having to stop and vomit.

Tears blurred her vision, and Kendle wiped a hand across her face, not surprised by the red smear.

“Move, Kendle!”

“Fall back!”

Dawn took a swing at her famous survivalist sister for the first time in her life, missing, and Kendle's thin control over her own emotions snapped. Her terror (the first she'd felt in many years) flew out uncensored as the roar of the ocean grew louder, the screams more frantic. "He's dead, Dawn! You saw his eyes explode!"

Dawn screamed again, this time in horrified denial, and Kendle shoved her harder, sending the rebellious teenager tumbling down the dark stairwell. Ready to mix it up to keep her alive, Kendle quickly followed, wishing for her camera crew. She hated to be without them.

Kendle yanked the dazed girl up. "Hang on to this rail. Supposed to be unsinkable, but if it flips, I hope—"

"Flips?!"

Kendle locked her arms around the suddenly gutless teenager and the banister, the already-damaged wooden planks under their bare feet groaning in protest as the ocean under them swelled, roared.

"Hang ooonnn!"

The seven-story wall of water slammed into the side of the Carnival Cruise Liner like it wasn't even there, not flipping the ship, but rolling it repeatedly like dead wood.

The eighty-foot wave then thundered across the open ocean to engulf the small island state of Hawaii.

2

Kendle

Two months later

"Go away. Please, God. Make it go away."

Kendle swallowed a groan as the shark fin rose out of the water and ran along the side of the faded speedboat. It had been stalking her for the last few days, almost certainly drawn by the

blood in her urine, and today it had begun nudging her floating home until only her screams drove it off.

The great white shark was big. Twenty feet long at least, it acted as if it hadn't been in contact with a boat before. Kendle was sure the simple shot of a flare would get rid of it, but she had no flares, no gun, no knife, no gas, and no radio. She was adrift on a dead stranger's boat somewhere in the Pacific Ocean—the sole survivor of a passenger manifest that had numbered over a thousand.

The shark was circling the boat again, and the red-skinned woman braced herself to follow through with the plan she'd made. Fight or die had served her well in the past and it would now too.

Bump!

The boat rocked and her grip tightened.

Bump. Bump!

More violent this time, it produced an awful creak of waterlogged wood that got Kendle up on her knees. Her boat wouldn't take much more, and she would likely only get one shot. She needed to get closer.

Kendle scooted to the side of the boat, not feeling the splinters digging into her clothes and skin. Her attention was focused on the shark streamlining toward her for another hit, this one likely an attack. It had also sensed the water-weakened wood.

The great white came in high on the water, the hunter moving in for its meal... Didn't they usually hit from beneath?

“Aaaahhh!” Boat dipping precariously, Kendle swung the claw hammer with all her strength and buried the hammer in the shark.

Liquid squirted, and the surprised predator jerked downward, yanking the weapon from her grip.

It disappeared beneath the murky waves, tail thrashing against the battered boat. Was it enough?

Kendle searched intently, relaxing a little more with each second that passed. She'd lost her fishing hammer but had kept her life and boat, and that was a fair trade as far as she was concerned.

Kendle shifted, keeping her attention on the waves as the adrenaline rush faded. It was gone.

Gone like her world. She had no idea where she was. The gas had run out a long time ago, and she was alone, at the ocean's mercy. She searched the waves as they swelled and dipped around her, finding nothing but debris and endless water. Forcing herself to ignore the waiting tears, she got out her strings and began to tie a square of net to fish.

"Fifty days and nights," she muttered, cracked lips aching, skin a constant bruise from the gentlest touch. In all that time, she hadn't seen anyone, not a ship in the distance, not even a plane in the sky. Surely, they had found the liner by now, counted bodies, and started a search for survivors. Hadn't they? Shouldn't she have at least spotted a plane, one of those big 747s? They wouldn't be able to pick her out, of course, but knowing she wasn't alone would be a comfort.

Fingers aching as she tied off the ends, Kendle flexed her hand a couple of times before starting on the next side, making small, tight squares that would trap anything bigger than a marker. She let her mind wander as she labored on the net, each piece a different color or type of material. She was almost out of anything to drink and she was hoping to catch a bottle of water.

Kendle croaked a bitter laugh, thinking of the saying about water being everywhere but there not being a drop to drink. "Definitely fits."

Her throat was raw from trying to scream the shark away, and at that thought, she stared around wildly, searching for a great white with a hammer in its head and revenge in its heart. Instead, murky waves, the unnatural, vivid green sunset, and the dark layer of clouds now ever-present in the sky were her only companions.

Below was another world, but it was one she was terrified of now, full of foreign creatures that brushed against her wooden home and stole her breath. Where were the planes, the rescue ships? The land?

“It was a Carnival Cruise Liner, for God sakes!” she blurted in frustrated fear, turning as if to discover the Coast Guard pulling alongside. “Front page news! Wealthy stars go missing, massive search ensues!”

Someone should be hunting for all those citizens, all those lifeboats. And what was with the ocean? While she was grateful—it had certainly kept her alive—she could only worry about an explosion that had been big enough to literally litter an ocean with debris.

Just about anything she could think of was floating in the salty waves—bottles, cans, cups, clothes, jugs. It was like a constantly moving store shelf of surprises (some awful, like the hand she’d pulled up, still inside the leather glove), and she was constantly scanning, trying to find more each day than she used. She currently had three weeks’ worth of food, divided evenly into the corners of the boat for balance, but her stomach clenched painfully at the thought of being on the ocean long enough to consume it all. Where was the land?

Kendle used thick knots to tie the net to the remaining guardrail on the faded orange and white speedboat, finishing as a wave broke over the side and soaked her from shoulders to toes in cold saltwater.

Her vision faded a bit, blurring, and she was thrown backward in time to the storm that had taken her sister just days after they’d snuck off the doomed cruise ship.

“Hold on!”

“Help me!” the terrified girl screamed again, nails drawing blood from Kendle’s wrist. The weight of the rail that had ripped away from the boat was pulling her down toward the angry sea,

where the rest of their group, also still anchored to the heavy metal, was fighting for every breath.

“Dawn!”

Their wet fingers slipped, and the screaming teenager was yanked off the boat as Kendle jerked frantically on the rope around her other wrist, unable to get free to follow.

“Dawn!”

Bam!

Kendle screamed as the speedboat was hit hard from underneath, rising out of the water. It tossed her against the steering wheel and stars burst across her vision. Her hands found the wide, wooden spokes as the craft plunged down.

It slapped up sprays of water and she barely kept herself from flying out, arm wrenching painfully.

Bump, splash. Bump!

The boat rocked violently from the hits, and she held on to the wheel, heart thudding at every creak of waterlogged wood.

Thud. Splash!

Her shark was back. She saw the fin, watched it roll over, and realized her net was wrapped around the shark’s streamlined body.

It was trapped. If it dove, she would go under too.

Do something! her mind screamed, and she approached the wildly thrashing animal, fingers going for the net.

No time! the panic denied, water sloshing into the shallow boat as the shark tried to roll itself free. *Kill it!*

How?

The claw hammer was still buried in the shark’s eye, the long handle being pried loose by the ropes of her net, and she grabbed the biggest can she had.

Kendle hefted it up, trying to wait for the right moment.

The Great White suddenly plunged downward, pulling the boat with it, and as water poured, she swung, slamming the heavy can down on top of the hammer to drive it in deeper.

A sound of agony was ripped from the shark. More a vibration than a noise, the cry was one of a fatal wound, and Kendle shoved herself back against the side of the boat to rebalance, shivering.

She had killed a shark.

That was something she hadn't done before, when she couldn't wait to face nature's challenges.

After a minute, the shark stopped moving, blood leaking out into the softly lapping waves, and Kendle forced herself toward the corpse, spine and shoulder on fire. She ripped the hammer out of the animal, the tearing sound making her gag, but she didn't stop, swinging the slimy weapon right back into the shark's meaty area.

She ripped out a big chunk, coughing and retching. When her thumbnail tore off, she didn't notice her blood mixing with that of the shark.

Kendle wrapped the meat in a towel, and then untied the carcass, not sure if she had taken it to eat or to simply know the shark was dead. She felt the tears rise again and didn't stop them this time.

The boat and the sisters had barely survived the rollover—being right by the stairs had saved them—but after three days of looters, fights, illnesses spreading, and drunken pounding on the door, Kendle had chosen to get off the crippled ship before they were dragged from their staterooms. Others had been—they'd listened in horror—and on the fourth morning after the tidal wave, she and Dawn had crept out to one of the three remaining lifeboats.

There had been five men already there and the girls had gone with them willingly. It had to be better than the rapes and murders on the boat that had started when the captain admitted he had no idea how to fix the ship and get them home. He'd said he didn't even know for sure where they were, and then barricaded himself in the wheelhouse.

One day after the seven of them jumped ship; they found the speedboat, its owner appearing much like the bodies they'd left on the doomed cruise liner. When the engine fired up, they'd all been crying, hugging. It hadn't lasted long. The boat's radio, compasses, and lights were out, the fuel used up before daylight, and the speed runner had come to a heartbreakingly slow stop with no land in sight.

"Lost two in the first week," she croaked, hating the sound of her rough voice, but needing to hear it just the same. "Didn't even know their names."

The third to go had either fallen in or jumped, and was hit by something Dawn had sworn was the roof of a house. He hadn't come up, and the loss hadn't registered.

There had been little conversation after that. Talking required awareness and no one wanted that until there was hope to go with it. They had survived by fishing garbage out of the ocean, slowly adjusting to life on a world that was never still.

Kendle had been marking the boat each morning since the storm that had taken the rest of her companions. It wasn't the longest stretch she'd done—that would be her eighty-eight days spent hiking from one end of the Colorado to the other—but it was the first time she was totally without backup. She had no phone, no camera crew with access to the outside world.

"On my own for real this time." Kendle's skin felt hot as she turned to stare at the chunk of shark meat. "'Cept for you."

She laughed again and when it became sobs, she rocked herself gently for comfort. She would get through this the same way she had all the other trials. One day at a time.

The sun vanished slowly, leaving eerie, beautiful trails of green and orange that threw strange shadows over the deep, dark waves, and Kendle huddled in the middle of the boat while she dozed. She was miserable and heartbroken as the fading sun left her with only her sense of hearing and smell, both of which checked in and recorded lapping water but nothing more.

Maybe the land was gone. Maybe that was why she was finding so much of the world in the water. A war? Hell, maybe an asteroid had hit and flooded the earth. If so, she hoped the waters receded soon and set her ark on a mountain before she went mad. Out here, she was defenseless.

Chapter Nineteen
Cabin Fever

February 23rd
Illinois

1

“No, please. No more bodies. There’s no more room for them!”

Angela’s words brought Marc instantly awake, and he rose up on one elbow to peer at her tear-stained cheeks in the dim lantern light. Dog was also observing her as she cried in her sleep.

“Angie?”

There was no answer. She was having another nightmare. It wasn’t the first time she had woken him this way, and though he hadn’t said anything, it bothered Marc that he couldn’t protect her in her dreams. Any small part of him that had been wondering if she was exaggerating so she could play two ends against the middle was gone. Their first week together had revealed what she hadn’t told him, and he was furious.

How could anyone treat her badly? She’d been affectionate, passionate, and he loathed her man for changing that. He’d never felt hate so strongly.

“It’s how he was raised. He didn’t know any other way to deal with someone like me,” Angela answered his thoughts.

Marc jumped and gave her an awkward smile, having to pry his gaze from the long dark curls messed sexily over her shoulder. “You would have made a good Marine,” he stated, not wanting to hear her defend someone who had obviously hurt her so much.

Angela sat up, pulling the thick quilt tighter. She scanned pictures of foreign, seductive landscapes and the dark, dirty windows instead of looking at him. “Not me. I don’t kill. I won’t.”

He grimaced at her argumentative tone, wondering if it was the dream or something she had picked up from him.

“You okay?” he asked carefully. Her face was pale in the orange glow of the propane heater.

“I will be. Rough night.”

Marc grunted. Five or six this week. “Wanna talk about it?”

Angela tried to imagine telling him about her life of rape and assault, and total, unforgiving control. She shut her eyes against the shame and betrayal she thought she had come to terms with long ago.

“No. How about you tell me something from your life I don’t know. Shouldn’t be hard.”

He ignored the tone. “Like what? After the war? Before?”

“Tell me something from our past, the answer to one of the questions we used to ask each other.”

“Why?” Marc asked. His mind was again screaming ambush from the almost resentfully spoken words. He could almost hear her telling herself to let it go, to preserve the careful peace they’d been sharing, and couldn’t allow it. “The truth is all that’s left now. Tell me why.”

She opened her eyes, and he was only a little surprised by the coldness of her gaze.

“Because I need to know what was more important than the way we felt. I need to understand why. What was worth more than the love you left behind and forgot about?”

Marc pulled in a wounded breath, reeling from the blow. “I’ve never said it was worth it, and I never forgot you!”

“Clearly it was, or you would have at least had the decency to tell me where we stood!” Her words fell like chips of frosted glass. “You weighed the old life against the new one and if you ever looked back, I never knew. Last thing I heard was ‘I’ll find

you.’ And don’t give me that ‘it was for the best’ crap, because it wasn’t.”

“I wouldn’t. I did a lot, helped a lot of people, but I’ve never considered it a fair trade. For the most part, it’s been lonely...cold. I’ve spent the last decade aware that I made a mistake.”

She shrugged, not interested in his apologies and too angry and hurt to be afraid of arguing with him. Their breakup and her life with Kenny was all she could think about at night, and the pain in his voice was finally a balm to the old Angela.

“Tell me something I don’t know about your life,” she repeated tonelessly.

“I don’t... Okay. You remember how we wanted matching tattoos? I have four now. Three can be shown in public.”

That caught her off guard, and he spied a flash of the old Angie, his Angie, in her response.

“I’m public. Let’s see ‘em.”

Not expecting that, he reluctantly pushed up his camouflage sleeve to reveal a simple, thin green band around his thick arm, its edges artfully spiked. The other sleeve hid a neat Marine emblem, an eagle on top of the earth. She lingered on his muscles as she wondered against her will where the politically incorrect one was. Ass?

“And the third?”

Amused at the hesitation, she threw a rare grin. “Come on. You said three were politically correct.”

Marc stared at her. It had been so long! He was immediately sorry her already swinging mood was about to take a hit. He uncovered slowly, hating the fear on her face when his hands went to the buckle of his dusty jeans. He only slid the waistband over his hip a couple of inches as he rolled toward her.

“I know those. Those are Recon wings. Kenny has the same—” she stopped, heart clenching as she read it. Kenny had the traditional “Mother” in the center of his. Marc had “Angie Forever.”

Their eyes met, locked, and memories swirled between them, old and powerful.

“You’ll love me forever?” the girl asked softly, terrified to trust.

The boy kissed her tenderly as his hips pushed between her long legs. “Just that long. Not a second more.”

She smiled, leaning into his thrust.

Marc turned away with a heavy heart. That moment had been a very long time ago, but right now, it felt like yesterday. He had to fight with himself not to go to her, not to tell her how he felt or that he had come for her. It had been too late then, and it was too late now.

The big timber wolf stretched, yawning widely before following his master, and Angela examined Marc’s big shoulders as he lit the stove. Her name on his tanned hip flashed through her mind, and she slammed her eyes shut. She was sure it had been done when he was fresh into the Corps and still pissed at his mother for putting him there. If their love had meant so much, he would have come for her, right? He hadn’t, and in the years that had passed, he’d changed.

The boy she’d loved had been her willing slave on most things, her ally and best friend. This new man was closed off, adept at keeping to himself, and she missed their intimacy, hated the circumstances preventing them from having it again. *It’s for the best*, her fear whispered. *What if friendship wasn’t enough?*

Angie gave the old dream only a brief glance before shoving it behind the doors. Kenny would never let her go. The question didn’t matter.

Relieved when her even breathing told him she’d fallen back to sleep, Marc was certain any of the things he might have said would only have caused more tension. They were mostly avoiding the old wounds, concentrating on sorting out an efficient travel routine. In that way, he knew he’d pleased her.

They'd made one hundred twenty-seven miles in the week since leaving the wounded brothers behind, compared to the one hundred twenty Angie had made in nine days alone, and they rotated the cooking and cleanup chores. She had expected to do all the work despite the agreement, and it bothered Marc to see her staring, wondering if she could still trust him or if he was up to something. She was jumpy, always staring over her shoulder or reaching for the comfort of her gun. She never asked if they were safe, wouldn't have believed him anyway, he guessed, and he'd begun doing things to make her feel better, like walking the perimeter often and always using the motion alarms. Marc was determined to show her that he could keep her alive, that she could count on him.

He also kept his distance and kept his mouth shut, sure that when she relaxed a little more, she would realize he was still the same man who had taken her virginity with sweetness and care. Feeling himself stir at that hot, shadowy memory, Marc motioned the wolf to stay, pulled on his coat, and stepped out into the cold Illinois air.

They were camped in a large, one-room log cabin deep in the Eagle Creek Recreation area, this particular building chosen for its complete lack of Christmas decorations. The area he had chosen was on the farthest edge of the resort complex, away from the main clubhouse and lavish apartments. He'd shunned the golfing side, choosing instead to hole up deep in the campground. It was almost serene here, no damage visible thanks to the thick forest around them, and he was glad they had finally cleared the St. Louis quake zone.

The cabin had no yard to speak of, just dense willow and oak trees that hung thickly over the rustic rails. Marc hefted himself into the canopy, wanting to see what (who) was around them, but even with his scope, the leaves were too thick to pick out the shapes of the wealthier resort area. Only the shadows of blackened foliage told him that Angie's words of a huge fire were true. Not that he'd doubted her.

Frowning, Marc stayed in the tree. Their first week together had been smooth. Even crossing the ugly, swollen Mississippi River had been easy, by using an out-of-the-way dam. He tried to do things for her, but she was stubborn, always insisting on the hardest path. The tone of her voice begged for another mile each time he asked if she was ready to stop for the night, and he always gave in. As a result, she was exhausted, and he was tired, so much that they weren't unpacking anything but their bedrolls and the heater most nights. Marc sighed again. She needed a break. Soon, they both would.

2

Angela awoke abruptly, instantly sure that other than the wolf, she was alone in the chilly room. She concentrated, worried Brady had tired of babysitting her and left, but she found him outside and tried to relax. Between the fear of Kenny's reaction hanging over her like a noose and her dreams of the twins, she was freaking out a little. She knew Marc was noticing it and was grateful for the things he did to make her feel better, but there would be hell to pay once Kenny—

Something's coming.

A door appeared in her mind, pulling, and she immediately twisted the knob. The twins?

An icy wind blew her hair around as she stopped in the doorway, knowing not to go further, and she shivered as she peered into another world.

This landscape was blanketed by a thick blizzard and dotted with the shadowy forms of people, but only one of them—a dirty blonde with a nasty limp—actually appeared alive as she plowed determinedly through the knee-high drifts. She came toward where Angela stood on the threshold, the edges of her dirty trench coat dragging over the deep snow to leave a clear trail.

This world was solid white except for the people; even the trees were bent, covered in ice. Angela thought she saw a pack of

dogs in the far distance, but she wasn't sure. The other people paid no attention to the open door, but the blonde limped straight toward her, frozen eyelashes glistening like jewels.

It's coming. Get ready.

There was a radar map in the woman's eyes, like a reflection of an old weather broadcast. Angela's heart raced as she realized that she and Marc weren't the only ones in the path of the massive winter storm moving in from the south. Her son was in danger, along with all the people he had joined at Safe Haven.

A strong wind pushed against her as the door slammed shut, echoing, and Angela jerked upright, eyes flying open. She would wait until the snow was falling before she sent the warning—Kenny would never believe her otherwise—but it was coming, and they would all have to get ready.

Fear raced through Angela. She had to call Kenny. He was about to find out the first rule she had broken. He would know for sure that she was on her way.

3

A bit later, Angela went to the porch, wolf disappearing into the trees. She found Marc instantly, though she couldn't see him from the doorway.

When she came into view, Marc asked, "You sense me?"

She frowned, not comfortable talking to him about the things she could do. "I'm not sure."

He dropped down. "You all right?"

"Not really, but I'll be better when we're rolling again."

She lit a smoke, preparing herself to take a chance. Would he believe her?

"What's wrong?"

"There's a bad storm coming. A winter storm," she said quietly, waiting for the questions.

"Snow?"

She didn't look at him. "A lot of it, and I think it's going to get colder. I've got a roll of plastic."

Marc smiled, showing sexy white teeth. "I've got a staple gun and duct tape."

His unquestioning acceptance brought her eyes up, and they stared at each other. Both of them could feel that old connection wanting to grow again. He glanced away before she could.

"What smells so good?" he asked.

"Omelets. It's all rehydrated or powdered, though, so don't expect much."

Powdered eggs suck, Marc thought.

Angela continued cooking with a chuckle of agreement, not searching for his thoughts but not blocking them either.

"Can I do anything?" He followed her slowly, mindful about keeping his distance.

"Yes. Teach me some defensive stuff today after lunch."

"Sure. We'll start with the basics and go from there."

"I need something I can use now."

Her insistent response bothered him. "I know quick ways, but they're for Marines. Not pretty," he warned.

She shrugged, brushing a stray curl behind her ear as she shut off the stove. "Pretty doesn't matter. Only results do."

"Remember you said that."

Angela frowned at the second warning, but didn't ask for details or change her mind as she handed him a plate and sat down on the far end of the couch. "I will. Let's eat."

Angela wrote in her journal during the meal and then bundled up and slipped out the door without a word, leaving Marc to worry as he gestured for the wolf to follow her. Where was the carefree young girl who had insisted they build a clubhouse in the middle of a snowstorm? Where was the innocent enchantress that he had eased into womanhood, and how could he get her back? There had to be a way.

When he stepped out, Marc was surprised by how much gear she already had on the porch. Obviously, she was serious about the storm, and he kept his eyes from lingering on the rounded ass sticking from the rear of her Blazer each time she retrieved something else. He carried her things inside instead.

Coming for the last load, he noticed the temperature. It had dropped nearly five degrees in less than two hours. That definitely wasn't normal, and it confirmed her warning. Again, not that he'd really doubted. Her gift had always been a part of their lives, one of the reasons his mother had been so against him spending time with her, but it didn't bother him anymore now than it had then. It was useful, and he had little to hide. Marc had often wondered what it would be like to experience things the way she did, but he didn't envy her abilities. He knew the terrible price she paid for them.

“Need some help?”

Angela hadn't known he was right behind her, and Marc noted the hand flinching downward before she stopped herself. “I've got it.”

Her tone was sharp, and he backed off, stepping through thick Bermuda grass as he went to get his own things. She was trying to keep the wall between them, and he would respect her wishes...for now.

It only took them half an hour to improve the cabin's temperature, using large sheets of plastic to enclose the area around the couch. They worked together in silence, Angela anticipating his needs as she had when they were kids.

Once finished, they dug out warmer clothes, and Marc tossed a plastic-wrapped pouch on her bedroll. “Thermal blanket. Used to be a part of my sniper gear.”

Trying not to frown at the word sniper, she tossed a similar package on the couch. “He left some of his things behind this year.”

Their similarity, from supplies to transportation, made them both sad. What a great team they would have made. It also had Marc more uneasy about the future. Her man also had sniper training. *Great.*

4

Angela tried to calm herself down. She knew Marc wouldn't hurt her, but she still flinched as the door opened and he came in from doing a walk of the perimeter.

“Ready for your first lesson?”

She nervously rubbed sweaty palms down her jeans. “In here?”

He motioned at the small area, aware of how uncomfortable she was. “Warmer in here, more room out there. You pick.”

“Outside,” she chose, hoping the cold might distract her from her fear of being touched, of being hurt. She was already shaking. Stopping at the foot of the steps, she drew in a deep, calming breath.

Marc took off his gun belts and set them on the porch that was lined in scraggly patches of weeds trying to grow, with little success. He examined the fear on her face as he stalked toward her.

“We can start out slower.”

“I can do this.”

Marc began to circle her. “I believe that too. Just remember to think.”

She nodded, and he rushed her.

Marc swung a leg behind her knee and gently took them to the ground. Not letting his weight fall on her, he tried not to think of her as a woman, but as a cadet to be trained.

Fear bursting through her mind like a rocket, Angela struggled thoughtlessly.

Marc clenched his teeth in an effort to stay soft. She felt good!

“Rubbin’ that body against a man won’t make him stop, honey.”

Angela froze, cheeks bright red. “I don’t want—”

“You can’t talk your way out, either. You have to think and then act. Lock your ankles together and try to throw me off.”

She did as he said—heart pounding, mind screaming.

“You have to get in control of it, Angie. Being scared makes you human, but you have to think too. Your hands should be trying to find a weapon, while your legs keep trying to throw him off. Your gun, his knife, a rock—anything in reach—and don’t waste your time yelling. It’ll only tire you out.”

Angela sucked in air, closing her eyes against the fear in her heart.

“He’ll be saying things, pawing at you, but surprise is *your* weapon. Distract him and then bite, punch, kick, whatever it takes, but don’t let him roll you over.”

It was hard to concentrate when she wanted him off her.

Marc raised a brow. “Make me.”

She surprised him with an almost gentle hit to the chin, and they struggled against each other, Marc using only pressure, no pain. The fear was intense, preventing his body from responding.

After a full minute, he let her roll him over and off.

She was on her feet in an instant, hair wild, eyes flashing.

“Lesson two. When a man corners a woman, he waits to see if she’s a runner or a fighter. Your body language will tell him how to prepare for you, and again, surprise is your weapon. Keep your hands at your sides. Make him think you’ve frozen, and when he moves in, cup your hands into a fist and bring them up at the same time as your knee. Pound his nuts into his stomach and run for a weapon or your car. If you miss, you’ll be on the ground again. Ready?”

She was glad he had given her the warning this time, but couldn’t help freezing when he rushed her. They were on the ground a second later.

“Lock those ankles, Angie. Use your knees! You can’t hurt me, but I could hurt you, if I were a bad man. You need to pretend that I am.”

She answered him with a harder hit to the chin that sent tiny stars of vivid shades across his vision.

He let her roll him over again.

Angela quickly gained her feet for a second time, and Marc did a quick scan as he got up. *Clear.*

“Very good. Ready?” He moved in before she could respond.

Angela remembered to drop her hands, but she was afraid to hit him, terrified that he would return the favor, as Kenny had so many times.

Marc tripped her easily, taking them down again. This time, her arms were pinned by his chest and the heavy weight of his body. “Don’t roll over and don’t unlock those ankles!”

Angela twisted her hips to loosen her hands and flung a handful of dust half-heartedly in his direction. Her knee brushed his groin, and again, he let her roll free.

She got up a bit slower this time, almost winded as she tried to remember his instructions through the fear.

Marc realized he was going to have to use a different method to circumvent her terror of men. She had to handle him as a stranger.

He retreated a bit, ignoring the heart that didn’t want her to be afraid of him for any reason or length of time. She froze when he got close, obviously afraid of what would happen afterward if she hurt him, which she couldn’t. He needed to reach that place inside that came out when survival was on the line, so she would remember how to handle herself when it counted.

“Not going to the ground means the difference between rape and escape. You have to stop me by any means necessary.”

Angela frowned, retreating as he advanced. “I can’t attack you.”

“I’m gonna make it so you can. Remember to think.” Marc sent a very male gaze over her with clear want, letting the animal side out a bit, and saw fresh terror.

“Pretty bitch,” he growled, mimicking the brothers’ menacing tone almost perfectly. He hated her reaction but didn’t stop, forcing her to deal with it. “How ‘bout a kiss? Been alone a long time.”

She was still moving carefully away, and he was glad she was observing his face and not his hands or body. At least she knew that much.

He rushed her suddenly, and Angela brought her hands and knee up together. Neither said a word, Marc only letting his body strain against hers.

It took him a full minute to get her off her feet this time, Marc not trying, of course, and once on the ground, he kept her there, showing her where to hit, scratch, kick, and punch.

A few minutes later, Angela knew she was done, and stilled. She shut her eyes so Marc wouldn’t recognize how afraid she was that he wouldn’t stop.

“Done now... Let...me up.”

To her great relief, his weight was gone an instant later. There was no way she could have stopped him, and she knew he felt her shaking when she allowed him to pull her to her feet. She let go quickly and put some distance between them, stomach muscles now aching, pinching.

“You okay?”

Her words were breathy. “Good...exercise even...if I don’t...learn anything.”

“You will.”

Their eyes met, sparked, and hers darted away, making his brow pucker. He had provoked real fear in order to teach, but it had taken so little!

“I’ll work on it, Brady. Again...tomorrow?”

He was surprised she wanted to. “Absolutely. You did great. Next time, I’ll teach you ways to keep anyone from getting close enough to grab you.”

She nodded, sweating despite the chill in the gusting wind. She didn’t notice the wolf curling up on the porch, but Marc did and was glad. He was never completely sure the animal would return.

“Cool...Guns now?”

He considered. He had shown her proper cleaning and hand positions, and they’d done some dry fire exercises, but she needed to practice, and that made a lot of noise. It would draw attention they weren’t ready to handle. “Not until we leave here. For today, we’ll use something quieter.”

Pulse and respiration ragged, she only motioned agreement as they headed in, unwilling to ask him for more. She needed to get used to caring for herself. Wasn’t that why she’d called him, to teach her?

“You mean that?”

Angela was surprised that he was picking things up from her. The expression on his face said he hadn’t been expecting it either, and the moment hung between them like a flame in the darkness. Back in the old days, they had been open to each other in every way.

“Yes. Will you?”

He glanced away, thinking her eyes were still the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Pretty cars and expensive jewels had nothing on Angie’s baby-blues.

“Absolutely. In fact...” He dug in his kit. “I found this in Mattoon.”

He handed her a small, purple gift bag from his kit. It held an orange dart gun with half a dozen darts and a paper target. She saw the benefits even as she laughed at the toy.

“I’ll treasure it always,” Angela joked as he taped the target to the wall. She loaded the bright orange weapon and began to practice, concentrating.

Marc stayed in a rear corner, occasionally offering direction and trying not to sniff his hands. They reeked of her scent.

He kept a groan to himself. Damn, he had it bad.

When Angela looked around a bit later, the wolf was at the door, gray ears up, reddish-black nose down, observing contentedly. Marc had settled on the couch to clean his guns, and she felt peace and bitterness warring in her heart. This is how it should have been for them...and it had been stolen.

5

After a quiet meal of beans and Bambi, they settled in to wait out the storm. It wasn't quite dark yet, and they were surprised upon moving outside. Not surprised to step out into cold, white darkness, but almost shocked by the amount of snow that had already fallen. It was still coming down in thick sheets, with at least six inches of the dirty grey flakes covering everything. The wind swirled the falling moisture into tiny tornadoes that raced across the cornfield to slam apart against the broken stalks and their tarp-covered vehicles.

The pair split up wordlessly, Marc waving the wolf after her as she stepped behind a large, ice-covered tree and out of his sight. The wind howled, growing stronger, and sheets of falling snow whipped violently, producing a whiteout effect that the flashlights around their necks barely penetrated. Making a fast round of the perimeter, Marc uncovered alarms, and then joined her on the porch, careful to keep his distance.

Angela didn't meet his observant eyes, didn't want him to know how scared she was. *I have to warn Kenny this is coming*, she thought, but only said, "I'll be out here for a few minutes."

Marc heard both statements. He wanted to stay and listen, but gently shut the door instead, jealousy burning in his heart.

He could feel it a moment later, a powerful wave of warning that vibrated in his teeth as it rushed over miles and miles of

broken ground. He was hit with the urge to interrupt, to make his presence as her protector known, but that would give away the element of surprise, and the Marine inside held him in check. Longing to hear what was being said, Marc began to clean his guns. *Again.*

Angela slammed the door in her mind, trying to stop crying and shaking. Kenny was so mad!

His anger had slapped her, terrified her, and she wiped at her face as she rotated toward the warm den. He wanted her to go back to Ohio, said he would come get her when he was ready, but she could hear him wishing she would die there or anywhere along the way. Under the layers of fear, she was furious and more determined than ever. She would never give up. Never!

Marc saw her face as she and Dog came in, and acid burned in his gut. Her man couldn't reach her physically, but he could emotionally, and he had.

“You okay?”

Her face was tear-streaked, beautiful black hair flecked with dirty snow.

“No, but I can't fix it from here. Montana by the end of March sound right?”

That was exactly what he had figured when she'd told him where her man was going. “Yes, quicker if we do some night traveling too.”

Angela sat on the couch and pulled the quilt around her shoulders, unable to stop hearing the threats, the ugliness. Kenny had been angry from the start, but he had spun out of control quickly, suddenly screaming. Heart now skipping rapidly in fear, she paled further. Had he spotted something he shouldn't have when she'd shown him the storm? Icy terror sank deep into her heart. Did Kenny know she wasn't alone?

Angela flinched as Marc pushed the heater closer to her, kneeling down to increase the output.

Not mentioning it, he wished there was something he could do to make her feel better. When he looked up, she was staring with a desperate glare in her depths.

“Tell me you’ll support me, no matter what. Tell me the code, the Corps, and everything else comes second.”

Marc smiled bitterly, answering without hesitation, “Wasn’t it always that way? According to our family, I went against them and God to have you, and there was never a second that I wouldn’t have come if you’d called.” He sighed. “Obviously, there still isn’t.”

Angela gave him a shaky smile. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Marc clamped down on another attempt to get her to change her mind. “Me too. Fifteen years was a long time.”

Angela shuddered, closing her mouth on the hell she’d been through. Only the future mattered, and that was Kenny. He was a violent man, and finding her and Marc together might be enough to send him over the edge. Especially if he snuck up on them and spied anything, like the sparks. Blood would spill then, and her boy’s parentage wouldn’t be an issue anymore.

6

The frustrated twins watched the couple, both unhappy with the fighting lesson they had witnessed through shared binoculars.

The snow had Dean and Dillan pinned down in a thermal tent. They were unable to get any closer because of the wolf and the tracks they were too injured to cover. Forced to wait until the storm broke and their wounds healed, the brothers were studying every move of the man and woman as they plotted their revenge.

Shooting them was talked about, as was an open ambush during the next fighting lesson, but neither plan was put into action. In their conditions—both of their wounds angry and leaking—they couldn’t be sure of victory. The evil twins wouldn’t underestimate their prey again, and chose to hunker down to wait for their moment of triumph.

Angela's dreams were worse than usual, and she jerked awake to discover Marc already sitting up, staring at her in concern.

"Is there a problem?"

"Just in my brain," she answered, keeping the thick quilt around her shoulders as she stumbled to the door.

Not bothering with shoes, she slipped outside, and Marc waved the wolf after her and got up.

She was jumpy, more so now than the night they'd been reunited, and she never slept for more than a few hours without her nightmares interrupting. It made him a little more nervous and a lot more pissed with each passing day. Her man was definitely going to be taught a lesson. How hard it would be, was the only unknown.

Marc slid his guns onto his hips with a feeling of completeness he knew not to put much faith in. Being good with a gun wasn't nearly enough now. It took listening to everything around you, but mostly to your gut. His was telling him that this mess was all his fault and the time had come to fix it. He was a United States Marine, and it was his duty to open the door to her cage.

Shivering, Angela sat in the rear seat of her Blazer, the open door letting the wind swirl dark flakes inside. Her mind was awash with the past—her man's violence, mixed with childhood demons and the horror of experiencing the war up close—and she wished she didn't have to sleep. She would never have an unbroken night's rest again until she was with her son.

The arms of the man, your new guardian, would ease these things. His heart is pure.

Angela frowned at the wolf. She had little doubt it would succeed, but Marc would never offer, and she couldn't imagine asking. It went against everything she'd had beaten into her.

This man is not the same. He is yours.

She shook her head. “Not anymore. That was a long time ago.”

Then why does it feel like it was yesterday? the old Angela questioned.

Her heart sobbed, giving the answer that Kenny could never be allowed to discover.

Because I still love him. I never stopped.

Chapter Twenty
Once a Liar...

February 24th
Wyoming, near Kemmerer

1

Kenn listened to the early morning chatter at the boss's center table with only half an ear—something he usually never did. He was busy searching for a way to tell Adrian about the coming storm. He had no doubts, had seen the deep snow drifts around the tarp-covered outlines of two vehicles (two!), but how could he convince Adrian without telling him about Angela?

Lie, his mind whispered, and Kenn glanced up guiltily to find everyone staring at him.

“Sorry, what?” he sputtered.

Adrian frowned. “Supply list.”

Kenn handed it to him from the stack on the table, being careful not to let the stiff wind rip it from his fingers. “Here ya go.”

Adrian scanned it and turned to Neil. “Who’s going with you?”

The cop handed him a smaller sheet of paper as a bird’s wild call echoed, and they all studied the grit-covered sky. Tension gripped the crowd in the mess, but when the bird wasn’t spotted, normal noises slowly resumed. Wind blew tarps, dishes clinked, footsteps crunched, vehicles lined up for a full days travel—Adrian told himself he was just jumpy.

“There are the names and some other details. Do you want...”

Kenn let their conversation fade away from him again, mind clearly not on the meeting.

Adrian sighed, banging his cup down hard on the picnic table. Everyone jumped.

“Is there something I should know?” Adrian demanded of Kenn.

“Yeah,” Kenn confirmed quickly, relieved. “It’s gonna snow tonight, and we’ll be caught out in the open unless we get ready.” Kenn waited, dreading the questions that would force him to lie to Adrian.

“Snow?”

Kenn set his cup down and squared his shoulders. “From the south, at least a foot by midnight, maybe more. We need to hole up somewhere.”

Kyle, Doug, and Neil were gawking at him with open mouths, but Adrian’s tone was thoughtful.

“What do you suggest?”

“We passed a mall in Green River and a roller rink in Rock Springs, but really, Kemmerer’s only a few miles away. It has a bowling alley with a mall across the street. We’ll hook up heat, maybe even get a few lanes going,” Kenn stated casually, ignoring the glowering sentries. Adrian’s opinion was the only one that mattered.

“You’re sure?”

“I must be,” Kenn said. “I’m risking my new place here on it, right?”

Adrian cocked an eyebrow and told him flatly, “Yes, you are. The bowling alley in Kemmerer?”

“Yeah, Sage Lanes. It could snow for a week, and we’d be okay there,” Kenn said, still seeing the snow-covered vehicles in his mind. Not one, but two. Angie wasn’t alone.

The other three men wanted to question, but didn’t, because they also knew it was Adrian’s decision. They could feel him weighing it, even as all five of them paused to watch money—a large number of tens—go blowing by with the gusty Wyoming

wind. Two of them still felt the urge to gather it up, despite its uselessness.

Adrian glanced around. They had a great view of the Rocky Mountains, where grizzly bear and elk were no doubt hiding from the survivors, but down here in the basin, there were bodies of lizards and gophers scattered among the mesquite shrubs and cactus. There were barbed wire fences, rows of unplowed fields, and garbage littering the area, but as for civilization, there were only the distant outlines of two farms, and they were boarded, as if they'd been condemned before the war had come. No other shelters. They were exposed here, and if Kenn was right about the snow, they were in danger.

“Notebooks open. Plans have changed.”

They did it reluctantly.

A Gulf war veteran, a state trooper, and a mobster getting a taste of crow, Kenn thought.

“We’ll need all three generators, a full fuel truck, the big tool chest, and a crew for bathroom setups, since those scheduled for here already did theirs.” He gestured to Kenn as the wind blew a fresh wave of recent decay over their table. “You’ll do the hookups?”

Kenn nodded, and Adrian lit a smoke. “Good. Go spend some time on the radio. Tell Mitch and Matt I want them.”

Kenn moved right away, figuring “he heard it while monitoring the CB” would be his excuse. While he was glad he hadn’t had to lie to Adrian yet, he knew the questions would come, and he would need to have an answer ready.

The camp around them was now murmuring and Adrian gave his closest men understanding, sure their beards hid suspicion and dislike. “I know you don’t trust him, and that’s all right as long as you trust me. Do you?”

“Of course” came the unanimous answers, but all three uniformed men were indeed hiding disapproval under stubble and blank looks. They didn’t even like Kenn, let alone trust him.

“Good. We’ll see what happens, and in the meantime, a day in a bowling alley with heat and real electric sounds good. You guys gonna be on my team?”

There were boasts and grins, Adrian in the thick of it, and his inscrutable face never hinted at how much he wanted (needed!) the Marine to be proven right. It would cement Kenn’s place here, but more than that, the ability to predict foul weather coming their way would be invaluable. It was a skill he hadn’t suspected the man of having.

The camp had no problem with getting a break from the expected hours of traveling, and nearly all the Eagles cracked jokes about the calm skies and temperatures that were currently above freezing. Kenn only told them to wait and see, but inside he was terrified of being wrong. He knew Angela wasn’t trying to trick him, but what if the storm had gone past or dissipated? His face hurt from forcing himself to laugh at the remarks, and through it all, he could feel Adrian’s thoughtful blue gaze on him, watching and waiting.

2

A small town, Kemmerer appeared to be empty. The roads were surprisingly clear of abandoned traffic, but there was heavy damage from looters, and even the animal population hadn’t been spared. The town’s dog pound was the site of a horrific battle that made Adrian drive faster past the decaying canine and human cadavers that littered the brick complex.

Like the other towns they’d been through, Kemmerer held bodies, dozens of rotting, gruesome corpses, and Adrian was glad that none of them showed obvious signs of radiation sickness. The town itself housed burnt frames, broken windows, and looted stores, but no wrecked military vehicles and no kicked-in doors. Riots, not the Draft, had conquered this American town.

The parking lot at Sage Lanes was deserted when they pulled in, and Adrian steered into the hard breeze as he keyed his mike. “Back the mess truck up near the door. Supply trucks in the rear. Double the sentries. Eagles Ten, Seven, and Twelve, secure our site. Eagle Three, escort and assist Kenn. Everyone else, stand by.”

Adrian stepped inside with a frown, sweeping arcades, cleaning machines, rows of welded-down tables and hard swivel chairs behind racks of balls. The maroon carpet, its fine layer of dust devoid of footprints, led to separate bar and food areas, their wooden counters and brick walls covered with glittery signs and unopened party favors.

Tired of the heartbreaking reminders of a world gone by, Adrian’s sharp gaze picked out mouse droppings on the bar and a ceiling full of New Year’s confetti, and he sighed as calls of “all clear” echoed.

“It’ll do. Set us up.”

3

Kenn set the mousetrap in the corner, and had to hitch up his jeans as he stood. They were no longer too tight. He spotted Doug and Neil moving toward the basement door, about to do a second security sweep. The limping redhead in the green army jacket was shaking long, wild hair in response to the tall, thin trooper, and Kenn caught Zack’s attention.

Reading him easily (the career trucker now wore the clothes of a rookie Eagle trying to make Level One) Zack trotted quickly across the wide, dusty room. “Hey! Neil, wait up. I got a question about yesterday’s lesson.”

Satisfied there would be no unauthorized plotting done with the rookie’s nosey eyes on them, Kenn ran a hand over his neck-length black hair. “Next?”

It took them nearly an hour to get everything inside and set up. Dozens of lanterns gave the spacious room a dim, flickering light and a harsh odor that Adrian knew wouldn't mix well with the other smells they would create. He hung smoke detectors, air-fresheners, and signs requesting that the bathroom doors be kept shut, then marched to the basement while the camp ate lunch and picked out their sleeping areas—women and kids away from the doors and windows.

Adrian gestured at Kyle, and the stocky Eagle fell in step. The two men stayed alert as they traveled down the long, dark hall, flashlights on their belts casting eerie shadows.

“You been outside since we got here?”

“Few minutes ago. Might be snow coming in. Temperature's dropping fast.” Kyle wasn't exactly gunning for the Marine, but he would never trust him, never be one of his many supporters. He liked it that Kenn had been behind the 8 ball, even if only for a few hours. “Don't think it'll hold till dark.”

“It won't matter if Kenn can get the power and heat on.”

Adrian's words were still hanging in the chilly air when a deep rumble started under their feet, rattling the whole building. It grew steadily louder, drawing yells as dust flew from vents, and then it changed to a long, loud hiss that died out gradually.

There were a few seconds of tense silence and Adrian waited in the darkness with his hand on his holster as he listened to the unease of his herd.

The rumbling came again, much quieter this time, and the two males got moving when the dusty bulbs flickered halfheartedly then glowed, bright and beautiful. They now had electricity.

A hearty cheer spread through the bowling alley, echoing to Kenn and Neil, who had heard voices in the dark and drawn their guns. No one else was allowed down here. Relaxing when Adrian and Kyle came into view, Kenn flipped a switch as he

holstered, killing the lights and drawing a loud moan of protest from upstairs.

“What about heat?”

Kenn smothered a curse, wiping stinging sweat from his eye. “Our cords aren’t strong enough. We need something heavy duty. After that, should be a matter of bleeding out the system. We’ll have to make sure all the outside vents and ducts stay clear.”

To Kenn’s pleasure, Adrian wrote it down and the other two guards watched jealously.

“We passed a big laundromat on the way in. Wouldn’t they have the industrials?”

Kenn was glad it had been Kyle and not Neil who made the suggestion. He and the mobster got along better now—handling Leon together had helped—but he couldn’t make peace with Neil at all, and he had officially given up trying.

“Good. Give them the lights back and go get what we need. The space heaters will hold us a bit longer.”

Kenn got another cheer when he flipped the switch.

Though they were happier as they went up the hall together under neon bulbs for the first time in nine weeks, it was an odd feeling. None of them spoke until they got to the loading docks where the trucks were neatly lined up.

The sentries tensed when they noted the four men come out of the dock doors and immediately scanned the landscape harder, paying more attention. Kenn’s words had indeed drawn them to an awareness of their unique positions in his army, but it was Adrian’s guidance, his strong leadership, they were protecting, and in doing so, they were securing their own places in this hard new world. Kenn had guards on Adrian almost all the time now. Even the new guy, Seth, was doing it, without being an Eagle.

The guards were all relieved when Adrian went back inside where it was safer. To these men, their leader was invaluable. He was the last of his kind, and no one could take his place.

By dark, Adrian's herd was being fed, and those finished were taking their shot on the twenty-five lanes that Kenn and Doug had managed to get working. Beautiful, warm heat was gushing out of the vents while snow fell heavily outside, and nearly everyone who had cracked a joke had now given Kenn apologetic words and claps on the back for saving them. If they had been caught out in the open, even a little snow and cold might have cost them lives. There were many questions, but the story of hearing it on the radio had already spread, and Kenn was glad not to have to repeat it. One lie was already going to be too much.

Adrian, Kenn, Kyle, Doug, and Neil were sitting at a round table on the top deck of the bowling alley. The Eagles were watching, laughing, and letting the camp have their fill first, but the leader's attention was on his right-hand man.

Kenn was playing with a new deck of cards, fanning them out in different shapes and scooping them up like a professional. His face was pale, uncomfortable, and at that moment, Adrian found it hard to accept that the Marine might be special. Loyal and hardworking? Yes. Psychic? No, and it wasn't because Adrian didn't believe in it. He did, deeply, and while he longed for one of his circle to have such a gift, he couldn't place it with Kenn.

Then how did he know? Adrian asked himself the important question, and the blunt, quick answer made him grimace. Kenn was in contact with someone not in this camp, and he was either lying or about to.

Almost as if Neil had caught the thought, he turned to Kenn, unable to hold it in any longer, "So come on. How'd you know?"

Neil's question had the attention of the entire table and Kenn dropped his head. "I'd rather not say."

"Why? You're the hero now," Neil insisted.

"You won't believe me," Kenn answered.

There was a thick silence as everyone stared at Adrian, and Kenn understood his moment of betrayal had come when those sharp eyes turned to him, searching.

Kenn sucked in a breath. “I feel things... Sometimes,” he said carefully.

It was the answer Adrian wanted, the magic he’d been hunting for, but it fell awkwardly from the Marine’s lips. He was right. None of them believed it.

“Oh.”

“Okay.”

No one questioned it. That was Adrian’s chore, and the leader said nothing yet, still evaluating.

“Who’s ready to bowl?” Kenn asked cheerfully, hoping to distract them.

Everyone except for Adrian agreed and rose.

“You guys go on. I’ll catch up after I make rounds.”

Kenn opened his mouth to offer his company and snapped it shut, sensing Adrian’s unease. Let the boss man have some time to consider how big an advantage it would be to have a bad weather alarm that was never wrong. With that skill on his list, he’d never lose his place here.

Until the real deal comes, his mind reminded, and Kenn pushed it away. She wouldn’t make it this far west even with help. There was no way one of her weak-ass hospital friends would be able to keep two people alive through a thousand miles of this hell. She might even be dead now.

Happy with the image, Kenn went to be admired by his followers.

5

Adrian did continue to think about it—not about how great it would be, but about the lie that he’d just been told. He stood inside the glass doors as the snow fell harder, feeling the guards scanning him as his mind sorted it. Clearly, it wasn’t true. Kenn

was in contact with someone, and he didn't want that someone here. That was the only answer that made sense. Why?

Because they know the old Kenny, he guessed, unease growing. They knew whatever Neil suspected, and Kenn was leaving them out there to die, rather than bring them to safety and deal with it. Adrian's face darkened. If that were true, he would have to change his plans for their future. By his own actions, Kenn would be unworthy. The one Adrian left leadership to needed to value life the way that he did.

The thick, dark flakes fell harder, and Adrian pushed Kenn from his mind for the moment as he swept what there was to see of the town around them. Pleased to discover his Eagles doing Recon nearby, taking pictures and widening the perimeter as they'd been taught, he concentrated. A foot or more. Were they prepared for that?

No. Livestock trucks would have to be heated and covered; water and main supply trucks would have to be brought around front. Warmer clothes and shoes dug out, shovels too. Mind racing, Adrian went back inside and began putting his people to work.

As Adrian got them moving, he noticed Kenn's boy, Charlie, hanging around. When they were alone for a moment, the leader stepped over to him, thinking Charlie needed to eat more and have some fun.

"You okay?"

The teenager nodded but said nothing, and Adrian lowered his voice. "You sure? I'm all yours right now."

"No big deal. Just bored."

Charlie's expression said differently, though. Dark circles under the teenager's eyes showed he wasn't sleeping well, but Adrian was encouraged that he wasn't constantly standing at attention anymore.

"Sounds like you need a job."

Charlie agreed right away and Adrian wondered if he should give him make-work or something that mattered.

“Something that matters?” Charlie asked.

“Everything matters now, son. I’ll change your schedule when I do the next set. In the meantime, how about some snow shoveling? We need to keep a clear path to the trucks.”

There was no reluctance in Charlie’s response. “Sure. Now?”

“No. We have to get some supplies first. You can beat me up at a game like your dad will, I’m sure,” Adrian joked. He chose not to openly question the slight grimace that came over the boy’s face.

“Sure. Can I be on your team?”

“Absolutely. Lane 17, in half an hour. Bring coffee.”

Charlie shoved his hands into the deep pockets of the baggy, hooded shirt he wore over dusty jeans and left Adrian alone in the dim hallway outside the main office.

Adrian was almost certain Charlie had wanted to scream something at him. That Kenn wasn’t his dad? Adrian yawned and stepped into the cool darkness. It was yet another sign something wasn’t right with his XO, and it didn’t occur to Adrian until later to replay their conversation and listen to the way Charlie had read his mind.

Adrian moved inside the stale darkness of the office, but before he could flip on the light, a voice with a fake southern drawl mocked him.

“Avoidin’ people is bad for ya image.”

Adrian rotated quickly with an annoyed scowl.

Tonya retreated at his glare of distaste.

“Not if they’re bad news.”

The sexily-dressed redhead gave him a knowing smile. “Wasn’t what ya were sayin’ when ya were between my legs.”

His body was tempted, the office pitch black, but his face was emotionless, and he gave back her mocking tone. “Musta dreamed it. Never happened.”

Tonya gave him a sexy smirk, but her voice was unsure. “We’re alone. Ya can’t deny it ta me.”

Adrian gave her a tight smile and sneered confidently, “Yes, I can. Prove it.”

He gave the door a gentle shove with his boot and couldn’t resist a parting blow, voice full of contempt. “Find someone else to spread those legs for. I’m busy.”

“Maybe I will,” Tonya muttered, accent dying as she returned to her sleeping bag near the basement door. “And maybe you’ll be surprised by who.”

Adrian was more worried about Tonya than he’d let on and was glad no one had heard their short exchange. He knew she was currently searching for a way to pay him back, “hell hath no fury” and all that, but even more, her kind had been a bitch before the war, and that hadn’t changed much. Adrian tensed at the creak of steps outside the barely open door.

“Can I talk to you?”

Adrian flipped the switch, waved him in. The small room had only a chair and a messy desk, a single filing cabinet in the corner, and a layer of dust on the floor that they were leaving tracks in. Good thing he hadn’t taken Tonya up on her offer. Those heeled black boots she wore left unmistakable prints and his Eagles were getting sharper. “What’s on your mind?”

“Kenn.”

Adrian brushed absently at the layer of dust and sat on a corner of the cluttered desk. “As in, how did he know?”

Neil was full of suspicion. “Exactly.”

The leader nodded a second time. He’d already gone down this road with himself. The camp would believe Kenn had heard it on the radio, though, and that was what mattered. They would never hear Kenn’s real answer. “How do you think he knew?”

Neil shrugged, restless hands twisting his hat. “I don’t have a clue, and that bothers me. He saved our ass, that’s for sure, and now these people love him, but…” Neil paused before pushing on carefully. “Something isn’t right about Kenn.”

Adrian lit a smoke, waiting, and Neil stared at the man he respected more than anyone he'd ever known, hoping he wasn't about to make a big mistake. "I know he's your choice, and you have my complete support, but him, I plan to keep track of. You should know that."

"Good."

Neil blinked. "What?"

Adrian stood up to clap him on the shoulder. "Didn't expect that, did you?"

The trooper's normally stern face was confused. "No. I thought I'd be in trouble."

"I expected no less. I want to be told about the smallest thing that catches your attention, Eagle. The smallest thing."

"You know it."

"He knows what?"

Neither man flinched, but both were caught off guard and turned with nearly identical frowns. What was it with women and lurking in doorways?

"You need something?" Adrian demanded.

Cynthia's shrewd brown eyes lost some of their eagerness at his bark, and she agreed quickly. "Yes. Sorry. The door was open."

Adrian flipped from pissed to bored in seconds. He stared at the Asian American reporter with a cold smile. "Yes, it was. What can I do for you, Ms. Quest?"

Cynthia thought better of asking Neil to get the hell out. "I have some questions."

"There's a surprise," came Adrian's response.

The dry tone made the normally unshakable reporter flush and hesitate, unsure if she should go on. He was a hard man to read.

"What, Cynthia? Tell me your deepest desires."

The words hung in the dusty room, and now she was the one caught off guard, unable to give him anything except the honesty his tone insisted on. The truth flew out of her mouth like a bullet.

“You. What kind of monster were you before? What are you atoning for?”

Cynthia missed Adrian’s flinch, horrified to hear those private words spoken, the ones she wanted known the least, but Neil noticed it, felt the change in the man at his side.

Neil scowled darkly, automatically protecting his boss. “None of that old shit matters anymore, in case you haven’t noticed. Only our survival does. You should wake up before you piss off the wrong person and find yourself on the outs. See ya later, boss.”

Cynthia flinched aside as the angry trooper shoved by her, and there was a tense silence where Adrian let her squirm for a long moment.

“You have questions?” he asked finally.

Glad he was willing to pretend she hadn’t crossed the line when they both knew she had, Cynthia took a small step inside the dusty office. “Yes. I’d like to volunteer to teach a class when you get them going.”

Adrian’s cool eyes never left hers, and she could feel his pull, woman’s body softening under his gaze. “Maybe a teacher’s aide or something?”

Adrian opened his notebook and wrote it down, and Cynthia stood there stiffly. She was hard too, an old dirt-digger, but she wasn’t immune to his spell any more than Kenn or Neil. Just like them, she wanted to be by Adrian, wanted to be useful.

“What class?”

The reporter controlled herself tightly, itching to ask, demand, trick, trap, and badger until he broke, but she knew he wouldn’t, even if she didn’t care about being banished, which she did. He wasn’t like the others, wasn’t part of *before*, as far as she knew, and treating him as if he was wouldn’t work. “I’m quick at basic math and I have a Pulitzer Prize for my writing. That should be worth something, right? My contribution to your New America.”

Instead of correcting her wording as he might have done with nearly anyone else, Adrian used the moment to pay back a little of what she'd given him. "And what do you get out of it? How are you benefited?" he mimicked her accusing tone perfectly.

She flushed. "The chance to teach a journalism class once we get settled somewhere."

"You realize that's a public vote because of the material?"

Cynthia bitterly shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket. "Why do you think I came to you? With your support, they'd agree to almost anything."

He didn't confirm or deny but was pleased she knew it. Cynthia had been a White House reporter before the war, a dangerously good one, and while she had only been here a few weeks, she already understood how things worked. Then, there was Tonya. She'd been with him since Nevada and still had no clue how to legally get what she wanted.

"Deal. And maybe I'll have things that are more important for you later. If you're interested?"

Cynthia agreed right away, surprised, suspicious, and he smiled at her, one of his genuinely beautiful moments that made her heart thump. There wasn't a man in camp who could compare.

"Anything else?"

"Yes. I'd like to go to the mall across the street. I'm out of supplies."

"Alone?"

Cynthia hesitated again, not wanting to tell him she hadn't made any friends yet. She did have the eye of one of his sentries, Jeremy, but she said nothing. Jeremy was on duty outside. He would never leave his post.

"No one wants to walk in a blizzard for notebooks and pens," he guessed aloud. Then he surprised her again. "It's nasty out there. I might be able to find you an escort."

Adrian watched her quickly hide the relief, and was glad to know the Ice Queen could feel fear too. They had found her

sleeping in a school bus, and she hadn't hesitated to speak her mind even then, alone, with only one bullet left in the gun that she clearly hadn't known how to use.

"That would be great. I'll be ready when they are."

He glanced at his wrist, thinking she wore too much perfume. The room now reeked of flowers that she'd probably never smelled in reality. "The truck leaves in ten minutes. Kenn and the Eagles are going out to collect our reserves. You'll be expected to help and do what you're told."

"No problem. Thank you."

"Anything else?"

"No. See you later."

Cynthia left quickly, glad she'd heard good words about her future here, but disappointed that she hadn't gotten anything new. She still had no clue about who he had been before and that question ate at her some nights. If it were the last thing she did, she would find out.

Adrian made a mental note to reward Neil for the unknowing distraction, but she wasn't going to give up because of a warning or even a mysterious possible offer somewhere down the line. Cynthia was going to keep digging and he would have to be careful, because that female *was* smart enough to figure out his puzzle if given enough pieces.

Hearing footsteps near the door again, Adrian glanced up with a frown. One of the new men, Seth Daniels, appeared.

"We think something's happening outside. It sounds wrong."

Adrian immediately got up, reaching for his jacket.

Seth shifted aside to let him through. "I guess you know I was an undercover cop, before. I'd make a good Eagle."

"I'll get back to you on that," Adrian answered as they went up the dim hall.

Seth nodded and dropped back to allow him the lead. "I'll be here."

As they neared the front glass doors of the alley, Adrian stopped, listening to the noises growing louder, closer.

Crunch. Snap!

Recognizing the sound, he groaned and waved to Kenn and Kyle. “Get them all in the hall, bring the heaters! Perimeter men too!”

The next three minutes were total panic and chaos as a hundred people ran for the cover of the windowless hallway. Adrian herded them, hoping the generators wouldn’t freeze, but there wasn’t time to bring them inside.

Heavy tree limbs snapped off, slamming into banks of ashy, black snow, and when the windows in the mall across the street shattered, the din of fear increased. Adrian shifted the Eagles to the front and rear of the terrified crowd, keeping his camp together.

Not as severe as in other places, the wave of freeze didn’t take out all of the bowling alley’s glass. Layers of plastic and mats were quickly sealed over drafty doorways, and the temperature inside continued to climb despite the below zero winds that forced the guards to do their duty from the few trucks that hadn’t frozen. Because of Kenn and Adrian, more than a hundred people were saved. Instead of fleeing, they continued to enjoy the light and heat when Adrian led them out.

6

The noise in the thirty-four lane alley was almost deafening, awful, and totally beautiful to those making it. Pins fell, balls thumped and rolled, voices talked, laughed, argued. Arcades dinged wildly, music blared from the speakers, and outside, snow fell in heavy sheets, blanketing everything. Other than the sentries now doing duty from snow-covered trucks and the plastic hanging all over the inside of the alley, it was as if the

crisis hadn't happened. Adrian was pleased that they had handled it so well.

Chris, Daryl, and Jeremy were the only Eagles on guard outside, all Level Two and uneasy as they kept the rest of those on duty alert. The noise was loud even through the muffling effect of the snowstorm, and the lights glared out in the darkness. If anyone was around here, they were hearing and viewing it too.

Temperatures hovered in the low teens as full darkness settled over the slick, ashy, gray town, and the supply trucks couldn't be spotted after only crossing the street. When they returned promptly, it wasn't just Adrian who was relieved.

The Eagles came in quickly, loaded with warmer clothes and boots and with boxes of extras, like books and music, all of the crew now eager for the warmth and comfort of their camp. This town, like so many others they had come through, was full of the dead and empty of signs of life.

The sentries changed shifts at dinnertime and their fresh gazes swept the blowing darkness, as uneasy as the last men had been, but inside there was confidence. Kenn would get the credit for the good day, but it was Adrian who had listened, Adrian who had made the right choice, and once again, Safe Haven had survived because of it.

7

Kemmerer appeared to be empty, but it wasn't. The noise of Adrian's group was a reminder of happier, lost times, and it rang through the small town, drawing the attention of the thirty or so people hiding there. They existed mostly in basements and schools now, connected by walkie-talkies.

By ten o'clock that night, a small group of these survivors had gathered and agreed to beg for help. Their town was dead around them, and while they were hoping the Alley people were from the government, they knew it wasn't likely. They were

willing to settle for normal survivors who could offer them a little hope for the future.

“Strike! Beat that, kid!”

Adrian sat down to record his score as Charlie took his place on the sparkling, confetti-covered lane, and the leader was glad he'd had Zack cut the confetti down before dinner. He hadn't wanted his people trying to eat while the party decorations had hung over them like a neon sign that read “Your world is dead, you'll never get this back.” All the other reminders had already been put in bags and tossed in the dumpster.

Adrian hid a wince as the pins fell again. He had a terrible migraine and longed to spend some time in his silent semi, but it pleased him that everyone happy and he wouldn't tell them to tone it down for a while. They needed this, and right now, he was trying not to be skunked by a fourteen-year-old with the arm of a pro. The boy was better than Kenn.

That thought made Adrian scan the crowd, and he was a bit surprised not to see the Marine. Kenn liked to be the life of the party, and when he wasn't, he was laboring on things they needed. Was he still in the basement?

Suddenly anxious, Adrian stood up, meaning to send someone for him. That ripple of unease grew as heavy footsteps echoed over the noise of the din.

“Adrian! Headlights!”

Jeremy and Seth were running toward him, people moving out of the way, and everyone stopped to witness the problem. Strikes and cups fell unnoticed as men drew their guns, his herd watching nervously to determine if they should stampede.

Adrian found Neil and Kyle in the twitchy crowd. When he motioned, the men rushed to the front doors, and both of their teams fell in behind them without being called. This was their job.

Adrian pulled the plug on the music and swept his scared camp, the silence almost a relief. “If you've passed the gun class,

form a line inside the door. Do not draw your weapon. Get behind the guards. Everyone else, stay behind them.”

Aware of Seth on his heels, Adrian pulled on his jacket as he went out and opened his holsters, taking the safety off both guns. Just in case. He was hoping for survivors, but the odds were high they had drawn a threat instead, and he would die defending his herd if he had to.

8

Down in the basement of the alley, where many of the bulbs were burnt out, Kenn was checking cords and connections. He was glad to see nothing overheating. He had heard the music stop and assumed Adrian had tired of the noise. He also noticed the lack of balls and pins falling, but didn't understand what it meant.

“All by your lonesome?”

Kenn's spin was fast, gun in hand, and Tonya held up a hand, smile saying she liked it that he was dangerous.

“Easy there, big boy. It's just the one ya been watchin' when ya thought no one was lookin'.”

Responding to the sexy accent, Kenn holstered his gun, gaze crawling up slender ankles to creamy thighs. “The party's upstairs. And I'm no boy.”

Tonya slowly sauntered toward him, hoping Kenn would be at least half as good as their fearless leader had been. “I've noticed.”

Kenn huffed at her, ears straining to hear if they were really alone. “What do you want?”

Tonya sauntered over. “I never got to congratulate you on making XO.”

She wiggled a finger, other hand slowly sliding her short skirt up.

Kenn didn't hesitate.

Tonya melted against him, lips finding a sensitive spot on his neck, and he lit up, arching against her.

Nose full of pot, whiskey, and woman, Kenn locked their mouths. He'd gone without for a long time.

Kenn grunted as his jeans fell to his ankles and then groaned as Tonya's soft hand closed over his hard flesh like a glove. Her lips slid from his neck, and his big hands tangled in her thick curls, pushing her to her knees. If anyone had come down the hall, it would have been too late to hide, but luck was with them, and they remained alone while Adrian met the new people.

9

"Where?" Adrian strode into the storm, Doug and Neil flanking him, but didn't need them to point out what could only be the headlights of a big truck moving carefully through the heavy snow. Adrian's gut immediately said sheep, and he turned to Doug, storing the fact that Kenn was still nowhere to be seen.

"Tell the doctor he has patients, and put up tents in the lea of the Alley. Get some heaters in them too. Also have...Maria start a fresh batch of meals."

Doug was still scribbling the information down as he and Neil left, and they began dividing the list.

Adrian watched the semi roll toward the only part of the alley's entrance that was still visible through the eight inches of gray slush. Their noise had drawn more of his own, and he wanted them, but maybe there was another of *his* circle in that truck too.

"Get everyone inside. This is now a quarantine zone!" Adrian barked to the Eagle on his flank.

Kyle waved his men over, and Adrian watched the semi pull into the lot, weaving past deeper drifts that were as hard as concrete blocks. The inside light of the red rig was on and he counted four white, middle-aged males crammed inside, their hands in plain view.

“Lesson three, Eagles. Move.”

Nothing happened for a second, and then Kyle reacted, drawing his Glock. “Weapons out. Don’t shoot unless I do.”

The other eight men immediately dropped back to form a neat, wide V-shape in front of Adrian, aiming their guns at the truck’s huge tires.

The driver reacted fearfully, and gears squealed in protest as the semi shuddered to a stop about forty feet away, sliding a little in the thick slush.

Adrian was pleased. “Very good.” He said nothing else, only waited.

Kyle motioned his team forward. “Secure and disarm. Go!”

They went in a hurry, like the professionals from before the war, and the faded truck was surrounded before Adrian finished grinding out his smoke.

10

“Damn, that was good. Wanna do it again!”

Kenn agreed against her sweaty neck as his body twitched inside hers. He slowly moved out and let her slide down the wall, mouth running before enough blood had made it to his brain to allow thinking. “Later. We got lucky no one came down.”

Tonya hadn’t expected to be claimed right away, but his obvious reluctance hurt her, drew claws hunting a taste of his blood.

“They’re busy in the parking lot, talking to the new people.” Her face lit up with satisfaction and spite. “He’ll wonder where you were, but he’ll understand leadership comes with...perks.”

Tonya’s tone was gloating, and Kenn kept himself from hitting her by only a hair.

Tonya sensed it and ducked under his arm, moving away.

“If I lost ground, I’ll claim you to make you pay. Don’t ever come between us! You’ll be sorry.”

Tonya acted unafraid, though she knew he wasn't bluffing. She gave him a seductive smile as she fixed her clothes, tossed him his shirt. "I won't. You gonna...cum to me tonight?" she asked, eyeing his chest as he pulled the shirt on over mussed hair.

Kenn jerked her up against his hard body, grinding his mouth on hers. Her arms curled around his neck, and Kenn tasted her deeply before shoving her away.

"Yeah. Here, late. I'll bring a blanket."

11

"Hi! I'm Chris. This is Tim, Carter, and Paul. We live here." The man paused, showing his horror. "Or at least we did. Now we hide here."

The thin face was lined with worry, and Kyle waved toward Adrian. "Hand over that shotgun, and you can talk to the boss."

Chris did with little hesitation, and motioned for the others to do the same. "Give 'em up, boys."

The other three were less trusting, and without their guns, they all appeared scared and desperate. Heavy beards and thin bodies said they were, and Adrian greeted them with friendly, compassionate tones, handshakes hiding his disappointment. Only survivors in this batch, no shepherds.

"I'm Adrian. Welcome to Safe Haven. You come in peace?"

All the thinly jacketed men nodded, but Chris was clearly in charge, and they let him speak.

"You bet your ass. Peace and hope."

Adrian was aware of Seth's disappointment as he waited by the front doors with the others who weren't Eagles. Whomever the undercover cop was searching for, he already sensed they weren't with these people either.

"Then you're welcome here. What do you need?"

Relief fell over the man's face, and he said, "Help, son. We need help."

“We need food! They’re starving!” Paul blurted.

The other three new men stared disapprovingly at Paul’s red face before turning to Adrian.

“I’ll beg if I have to. We’re dying,” pleaded Chris.

“Not another one of you if I can help it,” Adrian swore with conviction. “We offer you sanctuary, so long as you follow the rules. Be sure, though. We consider ourselves a Red Cross convoy, and we gather survivors while we search for safety. We travel four days out of seven, sometimes more.”

All of them bobbed again, relaxing a little at his words, and while Adrian was glad they weren’t a problem, it confirmed it that he wouldn’t be finding any of his own in this group.

Neil leaned in, whispering, and the four townspeople shifted nervously as Adrian scowled at them. “Who’s in the truck?”

Chris hurried to explain. “Our families. We couldn’t leave them while we came to talk to you. It’s not safe here.”

“Or anywhere else. You should have mentioned them already.”

Adrian gave Neil a gesture that said to watch them, and he moved to the rear of the long vehicle before Chris could defend himself. All four of the locals followed at a distance, aware of guards who had yet to holster their weapons.

“Eagles. What is part B, of lesson three?”

There was silence, and then Kyle’s dismayed voice, “Never assume a cargo area is empty. Approach and handle as if it is full of the enemy.” They hadn’t secured the entire threat.

“No harm this time, and while you’ve done okay, this won’t be considered a success. Open these doors.”

Knowing they’d all just lost Level Three status, Kyle smothered his disappointment to unlock the heavy door and shoved it upward. He did a quick scan and then moved back to allow Adrian inside.

The reek of unwashed bodies hit them hard, but the slicked hair and messy braids told Adrian the people had at least attempted to make themselves presentable. He studied their

worried and hopeful faces, recognizing hunger but not starvation, need but not the desperation the four men had alluded to. Why the lie? Protection from raiders? He could provide a little of that.

“Eagles, these are our newest members. We’re going to feed them, give them medical care, and protect them. In return, they’re going to follow our rules and help each other survive.”

The women and children—there were only two, but Adrian was glad to have them—were huddled on blankets on the truck’s dirty floor, the elderly sitting in chairs with pillows and blankets. The oldest among them, her long hair almost silver, raised a thin, arthritic arm. “Will ya help an old woman up, young man?”

Adrian and Kyle reacted at the same time, with Seth waiting on the foot rails to assist. “Yes ma’am, and so will any of us. Eagles, assembly line. And someone find out how long before the food’s ready. Welcome to Safe Haven. May it become your home.”

When the truck was empty, Adrian went to Chris, who was still waiting by the tailgate.

“You lose your men and boys to the Draft?”

The man dropped his eyes to the left as he answered, “Yeah. Half our females too.”

Adrian frowned. What else was he lying about?

“Thank you for taking us in. I’ll make sure they behave.”

“No, you won’t. That’s my job now.”

Chris gave in quickly, with relief. “And thank you for that too. I thought I wanted to be in charge, but I’m not enough, and I give it up gratefully.”

Chris on his heels, Adrian moved toward the fullest tent, glad the doctor wasn’t being overwhelmed. When Kenn appeared at his side, Adrian said nothing about his tardiness.

“We now have twenty-eight new members. This is Chris. This is Kenn, my second in command. There’s little he can’t handle, so if you need something, he’s the one to talk to. We’ll need names, ages, and occupations and they’ll need the

medications John prescribes, lists of rules, clothing, and sleeping gear for tonight. Chris will go with you to get them settled. They'll also need porto-cans and some kids to run errands for them—your boy too, if you're all right with it."

Adrian paused to let him catch up and took in the messy hair, the corner of his shirt untucked. If Kenn found a woman here, all the better. "We'll sort out tent arrangements first. Double the sentries again and tell everyone inside to go back to what they were doing. Lights out at 1am."

12

The tired leader was in the office hours later, writing in his journal, and he paused at yet another creak of footsteps outside the open door, where over a hundred of his people were resting, finally calm enough to sleep.

"You busy?"

"Nope. What's up?"

Charlie hesitated to go inside, and did only after sweeping the dim hall first. "I heard something while I was shoveling...about the new people."

The question was there, and Adrian nodded. "Tell me."

"It wasn't the Draft. They left to find help."

Adrian added up the clues. "The others tried to stop them? Made them run?"

Charlie's voice was low. "Some of them escaped, and died. They chained the others."

Angry, Adrian asked before he knew he was going to, "Should they be allowed to stay?"

Once it was out, he didn't pull it back, waiting for this curious child's decision.

Charlie shrugged, aware that it had become his choice, but not why or how. "They're sorry. They hope some of them might come back, left them notes about us."

Adrian considered. Sometimes guilt would make changes where little else could, and sometimes your instinct was all you had. The boy thought they should be allowed to stay, and he would feel guilty if his words got them thrown out. "It's not always wrong now, death. Your mom might tell you that, I think."

Adrian was taking a big guess and knew he was right by the silence. If it were anything else, he would have denied wanting his mother.

Charlie hesitated, lonely and wanting to trust, but his fear of Kenn was as big as his mother's was. It made him turn away without saying any of the things he wanted to, without offering a special kind of help.

Kenn was busy getting the new people settled, and his mood stayed good despite missing his rendezvous with Tonya. He had plenty of help without having to ask, and Kenn was confident his place here was sealed. Right-hand man belonged to him now, had all along according to Adrian, but the camp's approval could make or break you, and now he had it.

Adrian's other men, those who had been here longer (and still wanted what was no longer available), tried not to be bitter or hateful, accepting that Adrian saw something in Kenn that they did not, something they themselves were lacking. Their desire for Adrian's approval and recognition would make them uneasy and awkward with Kenn at times, but only Neil had spoken against it and not openly. Adrian had made his choice, and now Kenn could openly give what the job demanded—everything.

Chapter Twenty-One

Paradise

February 25th

Pitcairn Island

1

Kendle's exile into the wilderness lasted for sixty days and sixty nights, and then, as suddenly as her nightmare had begun, it ended. The small, weathered speedboat washed up on a sandy shore while she slept, and it was the painful twisting and cramping of her stomach that woke her.

The adventurer crawled clumsily to the side of the boat with her eyes still shut and retched until her belly was empty and her throat burned. She didn't notice the lack of motion that was causing her misery and dipped her hand to splash her face, crying a little at the abrupt beginning to her day. Instead of debris-filled waves, there was only the warm wetness of her vomit and the hard grit beneath it.

Caw! Caw!

Kendle's eyes flew open. Thick green trees waving over a vast, sandy beach greeted her.

Birds called curiously above, flying into the thick palm trees with annoyed chirps, and she blinked, smelling fragrant flowers and earth. Her attention shifted to the steep green and orange cliffs, and hills of waving trees. Land?

Kendle stood up in a quick, jerky movement, and her stomach twisted again, knocking her off her feet and out of the boat.

Her hands and legs flailed, trying to keep her afloat, and she hit the sand with a hard thud that knocked out the instinctive

breath she'd sucked in. She lay on the warm, dry beach, coughing and crying as she cradled her aching stomach.

Land! I'm on land!

Kendle forced her shaking knees together and stood on dirt for the first time in eight weeks, muscles protesting as they struggled to hold her up. Her entire body felt weak, wrong, and she swiped distractedly at tears. She hadn't thought she would ever feel safe again, and her eyes repeatedly returned to the bright green treetops. She was on land! She could survive here.

The model-turned-actress forced her new legs to carry her into the hated floating coffin for her meager supplies, swearing it would be a long time before she ever got into one again. She had been afraid to fly before, but what was a quick, fiery crash in comparison to the hell she'd just survived?

It took Kendle a while to gather her things, and she cringed each time the rough surf caressed the battered boat, terrified the waves would pull her back out. She picked the middle of three paths into the dense jungle and, dragging the pillowcase behind her, began to walk, heart calmer than it had been since losing her sister. Her tender feet protested the cool, sharp, forest floor, and the pain sent joy rushing through her. She knew how to survive in this world. She was safe!

2

Luke Johnson gently set his pole into the small holder he'd dug in the lush paddle grass, absently aware of his line twitching as a fish toyed with his bait. On the beach nearby, bees and other fat insects buzzed and moved on, drawn to the waves rushing ashore with more garbage.

Luke leaned back, worried. The monthly supply plane hadn't come since December, and they hadn't been able to raise anyone on any of the CBs or satellite phones. And now, Frank hadn't shown up for their annual week together. The two men had forged a strong bond in the jungles of Vietnam, and the retired

pilots, who'd both been shot down and lived through eighteen months in the same POW camp, never missed their week together. Not once, in thirty years.

The retired soldier stood up to stretch, wishing he had one of those internet hookups all the tourists had been so attached to last summer. A little black case opened up like a Battleship game! Sometimes technology was great, but out here, it was nearly nonexistent.

Pitcairn was about as cut off from civilization as anyone could get. The whole island had only one bay for ships, the rugged cliffs foreboding, and there wasn't a single telephone line. The lack of communication to the outside world was frustrating sometimes. The island took as much as it gave, but for the most part, that was exactly why people came here and stayed.

"It makes us uneasy, though." Luke thought of the silent Coast Guard, who they could normally hear even during storms, and then the ocean itself. Not one cruise liner in the distance, and he would know. He was on the "traffic" side of the beach every day, fishing, reading, swimming, and forgetting. There was nothing but static and debris. Pitcairn Island seemed to have been completely forgotten.

It wasn't a crisis here. The sixty-one people calling this tropical paradise home had learned to pull their needs gently from the land around them, but it was causing unrest and lowly spoken conversations in town. What had happened to their old lives? Blown away? Luke was almost sure. He'd spent time in a war zone and could read the clues. No contact, strange sunsets, rough storms despite it not being the season, and of course, all the debris, were sure signs.

The water levels had risen, bringing in load after load of garbage until they'd had to expand the town dump. Even now, Bounty Bay was alive with crawling crabs, booby birds, and broad-winged albatrosses that were pillaging the trash. *The explosions that left behind this much wreckage had surely cost*

lives, he thought, packing up his gear. What the hell had happened? Had America gone to war and lost?

Luke turned on his flashlight as he trekked to his one room cabin to brush his grill and hit the rack. He wanted to know for sure and planned to be on the north beach at sunrise with the town's strongest CB. He suspected the entire world was AFU, and while there hadn't been proof, he'd already begun to grieve for his country.

3

LJ found Kendle before he hit the beach and recognized her immediately in spite of her rough condition. He had noticed tracks, followed them on a whim, and now stood quietly in front of her crude shelter, thinking it appeared sturdy for being handmade.

Shoestrings around thick branches formed a frame, a green tarp covered with Johnson grass served as a roof, and palm leaves made the walls. She'd even dug a drainage ditch to keep drier. It was clever. This twenty-six-year-old female of mixed parentage was clearly no timid brunette, though right now, she didn't appear much like the outgoing, vivacious woman he'd viewed on TV either.

The thin, famous woman sleeping barefoot and restless inside her shelter would probably come to the chin of his six foot one frame, and she appeared to be sick. Her short black curls were sun-streaked, as were her long, dark lashes, and her skin was an unnatural shade of red that made Luke uneasy. Where had she come from? He knew everyone in this community, and the Survival Challenge star wasn't a resident.

Kendle woke slowly, mind and body protesting. Her inner alarm had jolted her, telling her she wasn't alone, something she had been for so long that there was no mistaking it. The man's lean shadow (and it was a man, she felt that clearly) was

blocking the sun, and she groaned as she sat up, stomach rolling. Had a boat found her? Was she rescued?

Her attention locked onto the tall, leafy greenness behind him, where a teal fruit dove sat on a low branch, watching them anxiously. She was on land!

“You real?” she croaked, slowly climbing to her feet.

Luke nodded, noting the pulse in her neck that was pounding rapidly. “As can be. Luke Johnson—LJ—at your service.”

Kendle stumbled forward on shaky legs and fell into his plaid-covered arms, sobbing, and Luke was unable to stop himself from being glad her smell wasn’t strong despite her faded, mismatched clothes.

“So glad...to see you! Been alone soo...long!”

There was total horror in those last two words, the kind that drew him instantly. It said she, and she alone, might be able to understand him. He held her gently, forced his mind to stay where it belonged—in the present.

“Sshh... It’s okay.”

Kendle trembled in his arms, tears falling hotly on his weathered skin. “I’m K-K-Kendle Roberts. Nice to meet you.”

Luke chuckled as her arms tightened around his waist, and he slowly rotated them toward his cabin, her heat baking into him. “Likewise. You need a doctor, little girl. How’s about we go to town and—”

She sagged against him, and Luke swung her into his arms. She was sick and might be contagious, but the thought didn’t scare him. He’d faced worse.

Luke pointed his feet toward home, uneasy about not only her appearance and fever, but also at how weightless she felt. His mind had connected her to the tides and sunsets, already sure she was a survivor of whatever had happened... *A survivor who might have answers.*

A shudder wracked her thin body, and he increased his pace, not out of breath. She weighed almost nothing, and he’d maintained a strict workout routine since exiling himself here.

“Ship’s dead,” she croaked. “All dead.”

Her words gave Luke a chill. Her story would be no cakewalk, and as much as he needed to know, he was dreading it.

“You okay, sweetheart?”

There was no response, and once he put her in his bunk and stoked up the fire, he took the dirt bike into town.

4

The next few days were a blur for Kendle as the pneumonia raged and she fought for her life again, immune system weakened by her exposure to the radiation. She had only brief periods of alertness, where she tried to tell him what happened, but Kendle wasn’t sure if he understood. It was a full week after washing up on the north beach before she came to, feeling alert and aware of who and where she was.

Kendle knew she was alone with the gently snoring man in the recliner next to her—the fat, loud female healer was gone—and she stared at his face in wonder. He was so healthy! The sickness hadn’t come here?

She shut her eyes, head thumping. She was alone, but that death ship was still out there. Would they (she!) spread it? Huge tears rolled down her cheeks.

The quiet sobs woke LJ from his unsettling dreams. He couldn’t ignore her misery and went to her with his blanket. As he pulled it to her shoulders, her claw-like hand flew out and locked around his wrist with an iron grip.

“We’re on land?”

Her pain rushed over him, and he longed to erase her desperation. “In my cabin, on Pitcairn island.”

More tears slid out, and when the island outcast held his arms open, she accepted the comfort without hesitation, feeling the connection of survival with him.

“You’re safe here, Ms. Roberts. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She mumbled against his shoulder, and Luke eased them down, holding her close. He hurt for her, wanted to tell her it would fade in time, but he didn't. It hadn't for him, and it had been almost half a century.

After a while, her tears eased, and her even breathing told him that she had cried herself back to sleep. Her feverish body was pressed tightly against his, and Luke knew he should get up, but only pulled the blankets up. He let her warm nearness lull him into a slumber that was, for once, without nightmares of being stalked by his mistakes.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Self Defense

March 5th

Outside Versailles, Illinois

1

Angela flinched as Marc slammed the hatch on his Blazer, trying to get it to close over the full load of gear in the rear.

“Can’t we do something else, even though it’s muddy? What can you teach me that won’t land me on my back?”

Brady swallowed his first thought and said, “How about a new weapon today, instead of hand-to hand? We could try a knife or even a crossbow. I have one.”

“Okay. Knives are quiet.”

Before she could blink, he drew the blade from his muddy boot and threw.

It landed deep in a nearby oak tree, the handle vibrating. “They’re also deadly.”

She watched him pull it out of the tree with a smooth motion.

“This is a K-BAR, Marine combat knife. You try.”

Unsure, Angela took it and threw too quickly. The knife bounced off the tree’s rough bark and skidded across the ground, landing in the damp dirt.

Bracing for a correction, she was relieved when Marc got it for her without comment and handed it over.

Angela slowed herself down and tried to aim, but she was nervous with his big body standing behind her, and the blade sailed past the tree. It skidded into the dense undergrowth next to the bare squares where their tents had been set up along US 51.

“Sorry. I’ll get it.”

She shifted out of his reach, wading through the drifts of sticker bushes, and he studied her, remembering a blizzard and their house of snow. That had really been the beginning of them, of stolen, stunning moments, and he hadn't forgotten any of it. Had she?

No, but she didn't say so, and her confused heart distracted her further. Angela threw the knife harder than she meant to, wrist twisting. It bounced off the edge of a different tree and flew back, the sharp edge hitting Marc's arm. Deflected to the ground, it slid back into the stickers as blood welled.

Angela gasped, retreating. "I-I'm so sorry! I'll get my bag."

She didn't seem to hear him say it was only a scratch. When she came out, he saw her hesitate and knew she expected to be punished.

"Can you slide your arm out?" She knelt at his feet to dig in her bag, tense body waiting for the blows to begin.

Marc did it quickly, not in pain despite the increased bleeding from the movement. The air was thick with tension.

Marc not getting mad calmed her a bit, and Angie let the doctor inside take charge. She instinctively hoped that if she did a good enough job, he wouldn't hurt her for it. "Bend down here, please, and keep your arm up."

He did what she said, observing her face as she tied an elastic band around his upper arm. Blood dripped from his elbow in scarlet splatters as she opened sterile packages with an ease that told him she'd done it many times. She was a nurse?

Angela dumped water over the wound and then spent a moment examining the cut. She placed a large gauze pad over it, pressing hard. "Hold this while I thread a needle."

She made seven small, neat overlapping stitches, and as she finished, Angela became aware of how close they were standing. The tension around them was thick.

Her hands shook as she put on the medicated bandage. "I'm sorry. I guess knives aren't such a good idea."

Marc smiled, tossing his torn coat into the Blazer's open window. "We'll keep working on it. I've gotten worse from new recruits."

She stayed tense. Kenny would have been using his fists on her right now for drawing his blood, intentional or—

"I'm not him."

Her eyes flew up, and he shrugged. "Sometimes, I can read it in and know what you're expecting, but that's not me, not ever, for any reason."

She sighed, haunted as she allowed herself to open up a bit to him. "I used to know that but I... I can't help it that I'm afraid."

"I'm gonna keep proving it to you." His words were almost a promise, and he smirked. "In the meantime, where'd my knife go, and what in the hell were you aiming at? A rain drop?"

He went to hunt for it, and her laughter was good, genuine.

"So how much medical training do you have?" he asked casually.

She couldn't help the defensiveness that crept into her voice. "I'm an MD."

"A doctor. I never would have guessed. Didn't you want to be a writer?"

"Yeah, but I needed something dependable, and I found I could help people who couldn't figure out what was wrong."

Marc was still frowning, and when she carefully handed him a pain pill, he surprised her by dry swallowing it without asking what it was. Clearly, he trusted her.

"How can you be a doctor and a battered woman at the same time?" The question was out of Marc's mouth before he could stop it.

She flushed. "We become masters of disguise—to do anything else means bringing the wrath down. And I had a good reason to be careful and do what he said. My innocent son."

"What about him? Wasn't it a challenge to his...authority, to have you be a doctor?"

“He would say it’s because of our deal, that I had no choice but to go to work because he said so. That’s partly true, but mostly, it was the money. He hated my name on the check, but he didn’t mind spending it on war games or a new gun. He insisted that I finish my medical training. He said any woman of his had to contribute.”

Marc heard no real bitterness and was offended for her.

“So, keeping your career was part of the deal, but not marriage?” he asked, finally seeking confirmation of his suspicion, one he’d been working hard on. He’d never once heard her say husband.

He was unprepared for the wall of guilt her quiet answer caused.

“He wanted it to be, but even then I understood that if I said yes, he really would own me.”

She scanned their surroundings. Corn. “You gonna workout before we leave?”

“Yes.”

Marc said nothing when she joined him, helped him set it up, but his expression was full of questions.

She didn’t want to tell him (or anyone!) about her baby, but assumed he’d soon know. She wasn’t sure how well she could hold up under the routine he did every day, but she was about to find out.

“I wasn’t ready to join you before,” she finally explained.

“Should you be doing this yet?”

She winced. “No, probably not.”

“Then why are you? You don’t think I can handle things without your help?”

She scowled. “If I thought that, I wouldn’t have called. To be free, I have to learn, and I can’t do that while I’m resting. Time is a luxury I can’t afford.”

Marc studied her coolly, like he had done with every man he’d trained, but inside she continued to impress him.

“Quit when you know you should. I do a hard run, and you’ll need to build up to it.”

When she agreed absently, clearly not listening, he waved a hand at the steady drizzle that had begun to fall. “After you, my lady.”

2

“You should go back.”

The rain was hard now, the slick ground throwing up nasty brown sprays as they traveled the course.

“Not...maxed out yet.”

“Fine.” Marc picked up the tempo as he always did for the last ten minutes of his workout and was surprised when she managed to keep pace. The sit-ups and pushups had been hard on her, as were the meditation positions, but she hadn’t complained once, and he’d enjoyed her quiet company.

Angela winced as she stumbled against a muddy rock, catching herself awkwardly and masking her discomfort.

“You okay?”

She nodded, not using her breath for talking, and he frowned. “Damn, stubborn woman.”

It gave her the last bit of determination she needed to hang the full hour with him. When the pain radiated through her abdomen, she hid that too.

Marc knew she was struggling as they went over the garbage obstacle course he’d set up, but he didn’t realize how badly until they hit the end and were done.

Angela shut her eyes, body suddenly cold and foreign, and she swayed on her feet, hands going out to clutch at the nearest support. Marc.

He spied her legs folding and swung her into his arms, ignoring her feeble protests as he took her to their vehicles.

“Angie? You okay?”

She muttered something indecipherable against his shoulder.

“Angie?”

“...can walk.”

He ignored her mutters, putting her down only when he got to the door of her car. Her hand grabbed at the handle for support, missed.

“Angie!”

Her lashes fluttered briefly, then she was falling and he was scrambling to catch her.

Marc’s handsome face was the first thing she saw as she came to, and his deep frown sent Angela to other waking moments—of not knowing what to expect. Fear flashed through her, and her hand tried to grab at her gun before she controlled it. Marc wouldn’t hurt her. She had to believe that.

Marc waited for the fog to leave, relieved that she’d woken so soon but still very worried. She appeared weak, the heavy bags under her eyes purple and black, and he felt his heart clench. One of the things that caused her symptoms was pregnancy. If she was carrying her man’s child, this had just gone from bad to not winnable.

“I’m not.”

Marc met her eye. “Say it again and mean it.”

Instead of the anger he wanted, there was only unfathomable grief and he knew before she spoke. There had been another child. She’d been pregnant, and her man still hadn’t come.

“I lost a son during the war.”

“Miscarriage?”

She confirmed it, voice haunted. “It was a lot to handle, and I wasn’t strong...before.”

Knowing how much she must ache and burn inside allowed him to put her need in front of his fury. “You were alone?”

“Before, during, and after.”

He was quiet for a moment and then responded, sure she needed to hear these things—and not just in her own mind. “You should have died too, right?”

Tears welled, and Angela controlled herself, not telling him that she sometimes wished she had. He already knew that. “I’ve assisted in more than fifty births at the hospital. It saved me.”

Marc gave her a gentle, comforting smile in the morning fog that still lingered around the Blazers. “I’m glad.”

She smiled back, wondering who would die when they found her man. There was no way Kenny would miss the sparks that flew when their eyes met.

“Me too, sometimes.” She stood up slowly, waving off his protest.

“You should rest.”

“I’m fine. I pushed a little too hard, that’s all. I’ll ease into it from here,” she lied, smoothing her curls. “This first time, I just...” she hesitated, not telling him the ache to hold her boy was almost as overpowering as her fear.

Marc finished it for her. “You had to do it all, like me.”

Angela tried to seal that gaping hole and failed. She was maintaining a kind of radio silence with her son to keep Kenny from knowing she was even alive, let alone where she was, and the lack of contact was awful.

“I needed to prove that I could.”

“Not to me, honey.”

“No. To me.”

3

“We have to make a stop.”

“Copy, on your six.”

Marc wanted to tease her about her near perfect response, but made himself pay attention as they pulled into the deserted gravel parking area of the Versailles, Illinois, RV resort.

The large lot was empty, not a single camper on any of the hundred concrete pads, and Marc rolled slowly past them to the main complex of shadowy cabins and sheds. He stopped near the largest storage building, recognizing an older spigot setup.

“Are you overheating again?” Angela asked.

Marc got out and opened the hood, avoiding broken glass and piles of muddy rubble. Pockets of steam were escaping from under the hood of his Blazer.

Marc turned around to tell her to stand watch, only to find her already doing it, Dog pacing a wide perimeter around them both. There was better color in her face, but her movements were careful, as if she was hurting, and he tried to hurry.

Angela ignored the bodies—an old woman, young boy, and three adult males, their corpses riddled with bullet holes—and swept the traffic and trees, the distant outline of yet another dead city. Debris shifted with the wind, gravel crunched under their feet, and though she spotted no mutations, nothing appeared to be growing here. Not even the bluestem prairie grass that Illinois was famous for.

Marc broke the plastic end from his screwdriver and held the flat side against the top of the six-by-three-foot water tank. Using only two sure hits, he drove the metal shaft into the tank.

Water came rushing out around the tool, and Marc grabbed the jugs while Dog helped himself to a drink.

“Are those recent prints?”

Marc glanced away from the sign in the lot’s main office that wished them a “erry mas & no year” and eyed the deep ruts.

“Yeah. You can tell from the depth and clarity. Elements haven’t changed them much yet. They’re a day old at the most, probably only a few hours with the way this wind is blowing.”

He frowned, noticing more tire tracks nearby. “Movin’ fast too or they’d have taken the water. We’ll stay alert here.”

Angie helped him collect the valuable liquid, and a few minutes later, Marc gestured toward the raised hood. “Fill me up. Just like yesterday.”

Angela was still a little self-conscious, though proud that she had learned something. As she finished adding the coolant, she wished it were more. They’d been together for three weeks, and she had spent most of that time regaining her strength and

adjusting to the daily traveling. A third of their journey was over, and she wasn't anywhere near ready to face Kenny.

"Can we do some shooting? With real bullets this time?" she asked. They'd had to spend nearly five days at the cabin, waiting for the rain to come and melt the snowdrifts so that they could drive, and as a result, he had only gotten to show her basic gun care and hand positioning.

"I'll set it up."

4

"Ready to shoot something?"

Angela gave him a rare, genuine grin, looking at his bandaged arm, and he smiled back. "I said shooting, not stabbing."

They laughed as he set up a dozen empty Coke cans on a long, wide, muddy log. "Is your weapon loaded?"

"Yes," she answered nervously.

"Good. Check it again. Always anticipate problems. Expect them."

She did it slowly and carefully, as he had shown her.

Marc held up his own weapon, demonstrating. "Hold it with your right and cup it with your left. Curl your finger a little more. Good. Hold it a bit higher. Now, envision where you want it to go, and put it there."

Angela pretended not to be bothered by having him so close, but she was, couldn't help but think maybe Kenn was around the corner—

"Angie?"

She glanced at him warily. "Sorry. I'll pay attention."

"Maybe you can't do this," he stated quietly, hoping she would rise to the challenge. That much of his Angie hadn't vanished.

"I can. I will."

He shrugged as if he had little faith, and made his tone a bit patronizing. “Pull the trigger slow. Aiming makes all the difference. Go on.”

Angela’s hands were shaking despite her efforts to be steady, and his sigh made her flush. Embarrassed, she pulled the trigger without aiming.

Marc was fast, moving behind her as the recoil rocked her into his waiting arms. The bullet slammed into the hood of his Blazer with a loud thud, and he dropped his cheek to her sweet-smelling shoulder, loving being so close.

“The cans, honey,” he groaned against her. “The cans!”

His breath on her neck gave her a chill, and Angela eased out of his arms, still waiting to be punished and hating to be touched.

“Do it again.”

His tone was more amused than anything else, and she moved to him cautiously, thinking she hadn’t been quite as afraid this time. If he hadn’t hit her for drawing blood, what was a bullet hole in a car?

This time Angela expected the recoil and managed to keep her feet on the ground as the slug dug into the log, rattling the cans.

“Better. Aim a little below your target until you don’t jerk as much. Go on and empty it.”

Angela felt the zone this time, felt that moment when the gun was perfectly in tune with her hand, and cans flew off the log.

“Yes!” She grunted in satisfaction under the dim afternoon sky. “Third time’s a charm.”

She reloaded, and Marc swept the area, impressed with how fast she had settled in. He hadn’t expected her to hit anything yet, though she had adjusted well to the size of the .357 during their dry-fire sessions. Challenge was definitely the way to calm her down.

“That’s great. I’ll see if you put my Blazer out of its misery, and then we’ll go.”

She blushed, and he grinned at her, not thinking before he spoke. “Accidents happen, honey. Don’t worry so much. You should have been there for the cut this woman I was sleeping with gave—”

He stopped at her stunned, pain-filled expression, and she turned away before he could try to take it back.

Marc cursed his thoughtless tongue. None of those women compared to Angie. Even after all these years, she could still make him feel more with a single stare than anyone else ever had, and it hurt to think their chance had come and gone. What a hard, lonely future waited.

5

They traveled west, both seeing the wrecked limousine on the side of the road, its plates (J. Lo U No) smeared with reddish mud. As they rolled through the empty farmland, miles of it, Angela caught a chill that quickly grew into a bad feeling.

They had made almost ten miles today despite the flooding that had kept them detouring, and she should be happy with it but wasn’t. The sky was calm, the temperatures in the forties, and she hadn’t noticed much in the way of fallout damage or mutations here. All of it was good.

Versailles appeared clear on the other side, and that was great too, but the feeling of danger was strong, and she was torn, doubting herself. She said nothing to Marc, not wanting to raise an alarm without having a reason or a sign to support it.

Just before dusk, Marc pulled them up to an Amish schoolhouse surrounded by barns, sheds, and empty, weed-dotted soybean fields. Lofty willow trees on either side of the school hung over the long, white fence and partially obscured a rustic liberty bell hanging from the small porch. There were no homes in sight, only the barely visible outlines of the city they’d come

through, but they were encouraged to behold a healthy-looking white rabbit dart from under the stairs.

The rabbit dove under a broken board of the decrepit shed behind the school as they got out of their cars, and inside the moldy shelter, the hare drew up too late and was caught. Large hands broke its neck in a brutal motion.

Smelling more nature than rot for a change, Marc secured the one-room school, not thinking it necessary to sweep the barn or farmhouse that sat almost half a mile behind it.

“I can take the stuff in, if you want to go check that coop we passed. I’m almost sure a couple of them survived.”

Marc lit up at the thought of fried chicken, and he agreed eagerly. “Deal. I’ll go after I set the disks.”

She got busy, smiling as he carried the heavier items to the porch for her and then set the alarms. He was considerate, and it worried her to think of how bonded they might be by April.

“Stay, Dog. Guard.”

Marc gave her a questioning glance, uneasy all of a sudden, but not sure why.

She waved. “I’ll be fine. You gonna pluck it?”

He quickly slid behind the wheel. “That’s woman’s work!”

He laughed at her mock glower and was gone a few seconds later, leaving a trail of thick dust in his wake.

Angela looked around, suddenly scared, but shook it off and picked up a box to take inside, telling herself she was jumpy, as usual. This time she was worried over nothing. There was no open door, no voices whispering. Everything was silent, dark, and that meant okay. Right?

The dirty, dangerous man came from behind the barn, stalking them with cool calculation. When he saw her mate leave, he moved quickly and quietly toward the woman. In one large hand was the freshly killed rabbit.

As the man entered the schoolyard, breaching alarms, he flung the bloody meat past the wolf's nose.

The animal went for it, fooled at first, and the man traveled swiftly across the porch before the wolf understood the trick and lunged for him.

Angela jumped at the sound of the front door slamming. Something heavy hit it hard and yelped in pain.

"Is that Dog...?" Angela froze, heart squeezing as death bells echoed in her mind.

She sent out a silent scream for help, retreating toward the gun she wished she hadn't yet taken off. "What do you want?"

The filthy mixture of man and nightmare came closer, making her skin crawl. His dead eyes told her he'd been alone for a long time, even before the war.

"Pretty, pretty," he called softly, leering at her body.

Icy terror rushed through her. Frozen, all Angela could do at first was silently scream for Marc as Dog hit the door again and again, snarling furiously.

Marc dropped the pecking chicken and threw himself into the driver's seat as Angela's piercing screams echoed through his head.

"Think Angie! You have to think!"

Dirt and gravel spewed from his tires as he hit the gas, already knowing he would miss most of whatever was happening.

6

Angela dove for the gun as the stranger shoved her roughly to the floor. She cried out as his nails ripped her shirt off one shoulder and sank into her skin, drawing blood.

He fell on top of her, pinning one arm under her stomach, and she tried to roll over, but he shoved heavily against her, hands fumbling with her jeans.

“Get off me!”

Her shriek was piercing, and he punched her in the face and back, curling her into a ball. His rough hands pulled at her pants as he humped her from behind, biting her neck and telling her that her ass was first.

He yanked her jeans down with brute force, ripping the zipper, and Angela felt hot tears of hate and shame as his hardness touched her bare thigh.

“Be still, bitch,” he growled. “Don’t you move!”

Distract and get the gun, the witch ordered, but Angela continued to grapple with him, knowing she couldn’t reach it

It will come to you, the witch said.

The man thrust excitedly against her. When he shifted to get into a better position, Angela automatically locked her ankles and was able to lift him enough to roll over into his surprised arms.

He immediately ground his nasty mouth against hers, teeth scraping her tender lips as he shoved between her legs. His hands grabbed at her shirt, ripping it again.

Now!

Angela extended an arm toward the table above her head, and curled the other around her attacker’s neck.

She pulled hard, stealing his energy. When the gun began to slide, they both heard it and glanced up, him in disbelief.

Her attacker saw it falling, and realized she would catch it butt first.

Before he could retreat, Angela’s arm tightened like a band of iron around his neck. She held him close as the witch’s furious red orbs blended with hers.

“Oh, no! You wanted it! Here ya go!” She shoved the barrel against his throat, and pulled the trigger.

Warm wetness exploded, blood spraying as he collapsed on top of her, and Angela rolled him off, gagging.

Outside, tires slid to a stop and footsteps crunched.

Angela staggered to her feet, spitting, wiping at her bloody face.

“Angie!”

She wanted to answer, but was busy gagging again as she pulled up her ripped jeans. She stumbled to the door, jerking it open as Marc flew up the stairs. She fell into his arms, coughing and crying as Dog streaked inside the cabin.

“Angie!”

She clutched his shoulder like a life raft, smearing his shirt with blood. “He tried to hurt me, Marc! I shot him!”

Her thoughts spun from the beating she’d taken. She was a killer now, a murderer.

Her battered face told Marc it had been a fight for survival, and he swung her into his arms, taking her to the passenger seat of his Blazer. His rage beat furiously at all the bruises, scrapes, and cuts on her hands, arms, and face. Her clothes were ripped, shirt nearly off, hair and face wild, jeans ripped and undone. How far had he gotten? Had she been raped?

“No, but I feel like it. Give me a minute, huh?”

Marc ignored her chilly tone as he slid her onto the seat, digging towels and water out of the duffle bag at her feet.

“Dog. On top. Guard.”

The wolf leapt to the hood and then the roof as Marc shut the door on her pale face, motioning for her to lock it. He was only inside the cabin for a minute to gather some of their things (the heater, the gun she had dropped) and was horrified at the death scene she’d been a part of.

Two minutes later, he had finished hooking her Blazer to his and watched as she got out of the passenger seat. Moving as if she was in a daze, she took the one remaining gas can from the luggage rack, and his gut burned when he noted that she hadn’t cleaned herself up at all. Her face was terrible to view.

Marc was surprised by her strength as she calmly dug her lighter out of her torn jeans and marched back into the reeking cabin, tilting the can.

Bright flames shot up seconds later, and Angela kept the gas flowing as she came out and back down the stairs, the fire following hungrily. She tossed the can into the sweltering flames and didn't flinch at the almost instant explosion of plastic, though she was showered with hot sparks.

Marc stared at her worriedly.

It's because she's been through this before, the Marine inside stated. *This hell isn't new to her.*

The heat where she was standing was beginning to scorch the ends of her wild hair, and Marc took her gently by the arm, led her back to the Blazer. "Come on, honey. Let's get out of here."

She didn't respond, but she also didn't flinch or resist either.

A minute later, the fire's glow fell behind them. When she began to cry huge, silent tears, Marc shifted the towels closer and left her alone. This was her First Kill, and he ached for her, remembering his own. He'd thrown up afterward until his stomach hurt.

"Stop!"

He hit the brakes and her door swung open just in time to avoid the hot streams that flew from her mouth.

Marc put it in park and got out to give her privacy as she emptied some of her pain. He watched the fog rolling over a dark, foreign landscape where anything or anyone might lurk, listening. She'd been hurt on his post. He would never forgive himself.

7

Angela sat with her knees to her chest, sipping water and pushing away flash after horrible flash. She was hurting, horrified, ashamed, guilty, and still full of furious rage. She wanted to go back and shoot him again!

Her years of abuse had filled her as she was attacked, and it had been Kenny in her grip when she pulled the trigger. Always Kenny.

In that instant, she had seen the true feelings of the old Angela, and not only was there no way that girl would ever let him touch her again, she also knew both of the females inside wanted him dead. More importantly, if he pushed her, or hurt her again, she would kill him.

Angela shuddered as her attacker's cold, dead eyes slammed into her mind, and she wished again that she could kill him twice.

Marc walked a wide perimeter, the wolf watching from the roof. After a while, he heard sounds that told him she was changing and cleaning herself up. *Good*. She'd have to feel a little better with the man's stink off her skin.

"Will you help me with my hair?"

Her voice was shaky, and Marc moved slowly to the jugs at her feet. "Hold the door and tilt your head back."

She did it with only a large, white towel around her naked body, and he was shocked by her trust in him as he lathered her hair, face, and neck, avoiding her slender shoulders.

Red suds soaked into the towel and pink water pooled at her feet as he clipped her clean hair up. When she got another jug and handed it to him, letting the drenched towel fall to the ground, Marc spun around and mentally recited the phonic alphabet.

Alfa. Bravo. Charlie. Delta. Echo.

"Rinse, please," she instructed emotionlessly.

Shock settling in, he thought. *Foxtrot. Golf. Hotel. India. Juliet...*

Damn!

Marc poured the cold water over her, her gasp pulling at his male side, and he recited faster. *Kilo. Lima. Mike. November. Oscar. Papa. Quebec. Romeo...*

Marc saw her sexy outline under the water from the corner of his eye, pert nipples and creamy, water-flecked skin, and then he was moving away from her, dropping the empty jug and the distraction attempt. She wasn't in danger from him, but he didn't need the severe case of blue balls that would come from stealing peeks at her. There wasn't a worse time for it. She was more off-limits now than she'd ever been.

8

Angela smoked, drank, and watched the dark houses roll by, but her tone wasn't normal, and Marc knew her eyes wouldn't be either. Everyone dealt with death in their own way. It was harder for someone who'd sworn an oath to protect life, but she hadn't had a choice, and he hoped she would realize that and not let it eat her up inside. Killing wasn't easy, even for a Marine, and he would help her if he could.

Thank you for understanding, but I'll be all right. I just need some time, she sent mentally.

Marc sighed miserably, thinking even her voice in his head didn't sound right again. "I'm sorry, Angie. I never should have left you alone."

She didn't look at him, didn't want him to see that at the moment of choice, she had become a killer after all.

"It wasn't your fault. You're always telling me not to let my gun get out of reach. I should have listened."

Marc said nothing, thinking that was something she wouldn't forget now.

Angela put on a Pink Floyd CD and leaned back, exhausted and eager to escape into sleep, but there was only darkness for a brief half hour and none of it was comforting.

"Brady!"

Angela jerked up, eyes flying open, and she stared around wildly, fingers dropping to the handle of the deadly gun on her hip.

“It’s over, honey. He’s dead.”

She grimaced, the wild feeling slowly fading, and lit a smoke with shaky hands. “I need to talk it out.”

It was something Kenny couldn’t do, but Marc immediately turned the music down.

“You can tell me anything, Angie. You know that.”

She nodded. She did. “I thought it was you at first, when the door opened, and then I froze. Just like I always do.”

The longer she talked, the guiltier and angrier Marc felt. He never should have left her alone. He should have swept the other buildings. He should have been the one to pull the trigger, and then she wouldn’t be hurting so badly!

As it was, all Marc could think of to say was the same thing his CO had quietly told him after he’d finished throwing up.

“He was the enemy. Don’t doubt that. This is war, and he got what he deserved for his crimes. He should have chosen better.”

Angela found that his words did help a little, and this time when she shut her eyes, sleep came without dreams.

9

Around three in the morning, Marc pulled them carefully into a far corner of Siloam Springs State Park, an isolated nature preserve. He wasn’t surprised that Angela awoke the instant he shut off the engine.

“Where are we?” she asked groggily, pulling on her sweater with slow movements.

“Couple miles from Stonington. I’ll set us up and Dog will stay here with you until I’m done.”

She leaned back against the seat, and as he got out, locking the doors, Dog took his spot.

“Marc?”

He stopped. “Yeah?”

“I don’t want to be alone. Y’know?”

Marc nodded, thinking he hadn’t planned on separate tents or cars until her voice and eyes were normal again. He used his key to get in and out of the back and quickly had the small tent up and ready. He put the blankets and heater inside, and as he stepped to her door, she opened it.

Angela didn’t flinch when he offered a hand, and he noticed it. He saw that she didn’t hesitate as she came out into the chilly fog and stiff breeze, but she stumbled and almost fell. Marc swung her into his arms, thinking her face looked like the man had used her for a punching bag.

He took her to the tent, loving the curl of her arm around his neck, but Angela gasped in pain as images of holding her attacker that way flashed. Holding him tight so she could—

“Angie?”

Marc had stopped. When she nodded against his shoulder, he got moving again.

For a brief minute, Angela was distracted from the pain in her mind by the skin under her fingers, able to feel his strength as he ducked into the tent and gently laid her down.

He retreated too quickly, and she barely stopped the old Angela from asking him if he still loved her. Her heart clenched, and she covered herself up, shivering. She didn’t have to ask. She already knew, and it changed nothing.

Clink!

Her gaze flew to his in alarm, and he smiled soothingly, pushing the heater closer as the drizzle began to fall. “It’s Dog, sniffing for his dinner. I’ll be right outside.”

Angela shivered harder and shut her eyes, feeling small and alone as he left.

Half an hour later, Marc had placed three rows of disks, secured the area more fully, and was sitting outside the tent flap,

finishing a smoke and beating himself up. It would never happen again. *If there's danger from here on, I'll face it, not her!*

Marc sighed, knowing he couldn't make that promise, even to himself. This new world was a nightmare, and he couldn't protect her from all sides.

"Can stop being stupid, though," he muttered, causing the wolf to stare questioningly.

Marc wasn't finished berating himself. She wouldn't be left alone again on this trip. He wouldn't repeat that mistake, and he would increase her training.

Marc snorted bitterly. She would insist on doing a workout tomorrow. He had no doubt of it. She was stronger than anyone he'd ever known, and that included hardened Marines. His smile faded. *Because she'd already lived through worse.* Her man was going to pay!

It was dark, cold and silent except for the restless mutterings of the woman in the vinyl shelter when Marc finally crawled into the bedroll. The wolf was asleep in the doorway, and Marc took off his coat as he crawled in next to her. His matching .45s went under his pillow.

When he curled his body protectively around hers, Angela relaxed against him and fell into a deeper sleep almost immediately. Her fear of Kenny was overpowered by the need for comfort that only Marc's arms could give.

10

"Do we keep following?"

Aching with the rain, Dillan grunted angrily, studying a wrinkled map as Dean eagerly fanned the fire to life. With the cabin still smoldering hotly, their smoke would appear to be part of it. They had been running a cold camp to avoid being spotted, and both men were ready for a hot meal and a strong cup of coffee.

“No. They’re still moving northwest, like every time they leave. We’ll be able to track them down. He’s not covering their trail at all.”

“Back to Cesar, then?”

Dillan nodded. They had been tracking the couple, waiting for the right moment, but it had never come. The witch and her soldier were too careful. The one time they might have been ambushed while traveling, the two Blazers had stopped for a moment, and then continued a different way. Like they’d known there was trouble waiting.

Tonight, the twins had been nearby, planning to try again after dark. When the hunter had cleverly distracted the wolf and snuck inside, they’d gotten even closer. Hoping to kill her soldier and then her attacker, it had only taken a few seconds to feel the power in the air and realize the woman was the only one coming out.

Dean and Dillan might have gone in anyway, if not for the single gunshot, which meant either the woman was dead and there was no reason to stay, or the attacker had given his life and the witch would be ready for anything. They had watched her stumble out the door, looking like easy, terrified prey, but they knew she wasn’t. They also hadn’t missed her fast recovery.

The twins had finally accepted that they needed help. It was something they’d rarely encountered, even before, when only a cell had controlled them, stopped them from doing what they wanted. Now, a mere woman had hurt them, had made them feel fear, and they loathed her for it.

“Where do you think the deformed bastard is?”

Dillan’s glassy stare went to the map and then checked his watch for the date, wincing at his mangled arm. He had splinted it, and it was healing, but it would be almost useless. “He said every big town along 25. Maybe three days each, four on the bigger ones, skip every other, empty... He should be near Denver. We’ll follow Interstate 80 until we pick them up on the CB. Or until we see smoke after a storm.”

Dean stood up. “‘Cause where there’s a storm, there’s Cesar.”

11

Ccrrraaackkk!

Thunder from the fading storm rattled the ground, shaking the tent, and Marc woke suddenly from his dreams of thick smoke and desperate screams. He was alone.

Surprised he hadn’t woken, Marc quickly stepped out into dawn’s early dimness, immediately finding her standing by the open passenger door of her Blazer. Medical supplies spread across the seat; she was using the mirror to clean the injuries on her face.

Marc moved to her side slowly, making sure she was aware of his presence. He gently took the alcohol pad from her trembling fingers, wincing when she winced, heart breaking at her pain. She didn’t seem afraid of him like she had been, wasn’t nervous about being hemmed in by his large body, but he was careful not to crowd her as he applied the gel she held out.

He saw her tears, could feel the agony coming off her in waves. When she tried to turn away, he gently wrapped his arms around her. “It’ll get easier, in time.”

Her tears were falling thickly, yet even in her misery, she noticed the body pressed against hers. Noticed and compared it to what she remembered. Angela slowly retreated.

“You want to stay here a day or two?”

“And do what?”

Marc pulled a thoughtless answer out, not expecting the question. “I could teach you to hunt.”

He heard himself and braced for anger or more tears, but was amazed by her strength when she gave him a tiny, rueful smirk of accomplishment.

“Might as well. I’ve passed the gun test.”

They spent two full days at the preserve, and Angela improved quickly, telling herself repeatedly that she'd had no choice. They passed the days working out, drilling on what she'd learned. Marc's arms during the darkness kept her nightmares at bay and her heart frustrated by the walls keeping them apart.

They were back on the road soon after, and then to separate tents without a word spoken about it, but things had changed between them. Angela felt it and worried over who would survive the resulting firestorm when Marc realized it too. Everything was getting closer now.

Chapter Twenty-Three

True Grit

March 7th, 2013

Wyoming, mid-state

1

Waking with the feeling that something valuable had been stolen from him, Adrian listened first for the sounds of his flock. Tents flapped, dogs yapped almost casually, there was the soft, calm crunch of footsteps, the murmur of voices. The sounds were there and normal.

He sat up, reaching for his cigarette pack.

Naked except for his boxers, Adrian lit a joint, not cold but aware of the chill in the tent. His watch showed it was five thirty-three in the morning—time to get his busy day going—but he took an extra five to get set. The day's list was almost double what it usually was, and everyone would be busy right up to the shooting contest after dinner.

He hit the joint hard and rubbed the sleep from his face, thinking his goatee needed a trim. He coughed at the lungful of smoke and chuckled. Tonya sure knew how to grow it. Too bad that wouldn't be allowed when they settled down somewhere, but if he let in one drug, all the rest would follow. In the meantime, stashes and supplies would run out like everything else, forcing people off their habits without him having to be a cruel leader.

Adrian inhaled harder, holding until his lungs burned. He was tired and worried, his usual state of being since the war, and it took only a few hits for him to feel the effects. He gathered himself, lower mind planning the day, fitting things together for

convenience, while his higher mind searched for those he had to believe were still on their way. Maybe they were already here. Maybe he'd passed them by.

I need help! Adrian shouted silently. *I can't keep doing this alone!*

The leader let out a harsh sigh, knowing he would keep trying until he was used up, and probably even beyond that. He wouldn't give up as his father had. The guilt rolled over him at that, and behind it, came the overwhelming need to right the wrongs that he could.

Adrian got up, again listening for his people, something he did when he woke each morning. They were the reason he labored so hard, and he moved faster, eager to be with them.

Pulling on his jacket against the chill of mid-forties, he stepped out into the strong wind, and his attention went immediately to the sky. Adrian frowned at the ugly feel of it. Something was racing their way. Rain? Snow? Both? He would have to use his gifts, something those he was searching for would also have—to one degree or another.

Adrian did a slow sweep of the area, seeing only the guards' attention on him, and he concentrated.

Show me! he demanded silently, and as his eyes opened, the wind gathered strength. A two-foot dust whirl rose off the dry ground, spinning wildly toward him. It broke apart against his legs, covering his jeans in thick dust, and Adrian's heart thumped. *A sandstorm.*

Observing from nearby, Kenn joined Adrian and opened his notebook without being told, erasing his neat mental chalkboard with one swipe. He wasn't sure exactly what had happened, but it gave him a flash of the determined woman on the way to her son, and he kept his eyes on the page so that Adrian couldn't read his guilt.

“We'll only have an hour. It's moving fast.”

Kenn swept the area around them. Their mountain view to the south was becoming obscured by the wall of danger racing

toward them, and the sandy wind was starting to beat on their tents, tarps, and cars. The dogs were now barking in an agitated manner, and panicked animal sounds came from the livestock.

Kenn's gut unclenched from the boring resignation that had woken him. This would not be an average day.

"I'll keep 'em rolling," Kenn promised.

Adrian lit a Winston, sorting details, and Kenn gave a negative gesture to the Level Two Eagle from Neil's team who'd stopped nearby.

Jeremy started walking again at the denial, grumbling.

"We have to roll in the camp by at least half a click. It's too big to protect." Adrian took the knife from his boot and knelt down to draw in the dirt. He made deep marks to keep the wind from distorting it, thinking the sound of tent flaps smacking harshly in the heavy wind was a warning that few would understand. This storm would kill as many survivors as the blizzard had. Nature was pissed.

"Put the mess in the center. Line seven rigs up on the redline in front of it. Back them in as close as you can get. Make the wire tight and put a bathroom camper on each end. The weight of the water will hold them better than a semi. These two ends have to be right up against the corners of the mess, and then line the other vehicles up behind us, sideways, big to little. It'll create a barrier. Put tarps on the sides to wall it off. Tie 'em to the trucks, but be careful of gaps. If they billow in the wind, we'll be one big sail."

Both men looked up at an odd whine to the wind, just in time to be hit with a small tornado of dust as high as a car. It slapped them with bits of stinging sand, and Adrian's dirt map disappeared.

Wiping his face with a gritty hand, Adrian continued as if it was still there. "Put the ends under the tires and heavier stuff. Make sure it's secured right. Everything else has to be broken down and shoved into the outer trucks to add weight. Cover the livestock and dogs. They go in the very front."

Kenn was copying—orders and the map—and those nearby watched alertly in the gritty dimness as the wind increased. The sense of something big about to happen was spreading.

“The sheep in the center trucks?”

Adrian’s blade flashed through the dirt again, ringless fingers nicked and scarred. “Yes, here and here. Make the weight as even as possible. Do the best you can. One bag of possessions allowed and put the stickup dome lights inside, so there are no fumes or flames. Gear: goggles, boots, ski masks, orange safety vests—all Eagles on shift inside the area.”

Kenn finished writing. “What about the guards on the perimeter?”

Adrian looked back to the brownish-black wall of sand that was now advancing noticeably, vaguely aware of raised voices as people spotted what he and Kenn already had—danger coming their way.

“Only put them in the front trucks. Anywhere else is voluntary, and I don’t recommend the rear. Even inside cabs, there’ll be flying glass and debris if the windows go, and they probably will. Make it clear that anyone crazy enough to do it had better bring the right equipment.”

Still writing, Kenn wanted to volunteer for the credit, but he also knew Adrian would need him to help with the herd. Waving Eagles over, Kenn barely hid a grin of excitement. He thrived on shit like this, couldn’t wait for it to begin.

2

The dust storm bore down on them like an angry swarm, first invading with fierce winds that ripped tent pegs from the ground, and then hit them with a thick wave of sand and grit that blanketed everything. The sky darkened, turning almost black as it came over the last ridge, and the sand smothered the land like night falling. They gaped in amazement as great chunks of buildings were torn away from their foundations and sent flying.

The dust storm raced toward Safe Haven like a missile racing for a target, and Adrian felt his stomach churn. He hated it that his people weren't safe, but he loved the fury of nature. There was nothing else like it.

“Here it comes.”

Adrian and three levels of Eagles were in the much smaller mess. The thick telephone poles were a great anchor and the tarps kept out a lot of the grit. All the men wore the gear they'd been given, ready to assist wherever Adrian told them to.

“Brace for impact!”

They moved to the center as the winds picked up, tarps slapping violently, and then the air came alive with tiny, stinging bits of sand that filled every inch of the rolled-in camp.

“Damn!”

“Look at that!” Kenn pointed excitedly to a shed, faded red and breaking apart, rolling by in the thick grit. It just missed the end truck.

The winds increased, dust burning its way through their masks, and men began to cough.

“Bandana's too! Use your shirts!”

Adrian pulled his turtleneck over the bottom of his mask, struggling to stay on his feet as the storm engulfed them. The wind was awful, whipping, slapping, pulling violently, and the air around the area and trucked-off camp was alive with flying debris of every shape and size.

Caruunnccch!

“What the...”

Bang!

The men by the mess truck stumbled at the impact as the rig was hit by the storm, and pushed forward. Only the two trucks on the end kept it from going further.

Dust flew up in monstrous clouds, filling the area with a blinding whirl of dark sand the guards could hardly see through.

“Get those edges shut! It'll rip us apart!”

Men rushed to grab the ends of the snapping plastic, retying it to the poles. It immediately became easier to breathe as the dust sank down to their knees.

Adrian keyed his mike. "Check-in. One, clear."

"Two, clear."

"Three, all good here."

"Four, no problems."

There were noises in the background of each truck that made Adrian unhappy. Crying kids, voices on the edge of panic, arguments, and as soon as the last one checked in, he hit the button again. "Turn your radios up, Eagles. Let them hear me."

Adrian knew his herd needed good words and calm tones. "We're watching the storm from about ten feet away. It's unbelievable, scary. We can't see anything outside the mess, but we're hearing it, same as you. Lots of stuff flying through the air, slamming into the trucks. That's the noise, but so far, everything's good here. I repeat. We are 5-by, and so are you."

Adrian witnessed a huge sheet of wood go tumbling around the edge of the far truck, barely missing it. He fought to keep that narrow escape out of his tones. "We'll do bathroom breaks now, groups of four from each truck, women and kids first, as usual." He paused, orbs growing hazy as he sang to his herd, pushed his calming magic over them. "I'll be by each truck in the next few minutes, and I know I'll find card games going and people spending time together, not working themselves and others into a panic. This is nothing we can't handle." His voice deepened. "Nothing *I* can't handle."

As if to prove him wrong, the wind whipped through the mess from a billowing gap, ripping the tarp free. They were again covered in a vortex of spinning sand that tried to invade every inch of space available, and then space that wasn't.

"Grab that!"

"I've got it!" Kenn rushed to the loudly flapping tarp and hauled it down, securing it better as he fought against the wind trying to pull it out of his grasp.

Kenn was smirking—Adrian could almost feel it under the mask. Was Kenn ready? Only one way to find out.

Adrian saw men helping with the tarp, Eagles watching alertly, trucks holding against the wind. Rigs, seven of them, full of his people and protected, but still vulnerable because they had no one on duty in the rear where the sand was hitting them the hardest.

Anyone could sneak up on them by following the wake of the storm, and they wouldn't know until it was too late. There was almost no visibility, and the tales from the refugees they'd been picking up were a warning Adrian wouldn't ignore. The slavers liked to hit during bad weather, and they were only two hundred miles away as of last week, which wasn't nearly far enough. Sooner or later, Safe Haven would attract their attention, may have already. The pictures Kenn and Kyle had brought from Cheyenne Mountain had indeed been worse than the other places, and they'd been keeping a weekly watch on the big group.

Adrian signaled a handful of Eagles to start the bathroom breaks, hating the thought of so many using only two campers, but there was no other solution in this wind. It had been his experience that sandstorms took their time to pass through.

He looked at Kenn, seeing the excitement held under perfect control, the leadership rolling off him in waves, and Adrian gestured. They'd find out now if he was ready for leadership. "Eagle Two has point. I'll be around."

Adrian stepped out into the storm, leaving surprise among his army.

"Boo'yah, baby!" Kenn's grin had widened. It was official to him now. He was second in command.

Pulling his shirt up over his mouth, Adrian ran to the trucks first, calming, assuring, jumping and chuckling with them as debris slammed into the trucks. He didn't hurry the stops, understanding people needed him, but he didn't let them cling, either. They had to learn to stand on their own.

Yanking his shirt back up to muffle the dust, Adrian went next to the animal area they had covered with sheets of plastic, and was unhappy with the sloppy job Danny and Zack had done. The dust was coming under the edges in small waves, and the animals were coughing, pacing.

“On a dark, desert highway, cool wind in my hair...”

Adrian sang as he weighted down each side with the heavy cages, adjusting the edges until the dust began to settle and the animals relaxed.

“Last thing I remember, I was runnin’ for the door...”

The sand he’d already been blasted with gave him a rough rasp, and Adrian grinned in the dimness of the vibrating plastic dome. Kenn wasn’t the only one who felt alive when confronting danger.

Holding his breath, Adrian marched to his semi. The winds here were so strong that he had to punch his way through with low, powerful steps.

Doing what no one expected, despite all he’d done for them in the beginning, Adrian protected them, staying in his rig at the rear throughout the storm. He had secured the lives he needed to, the camp was now in Kenn’s capable hands, and he rode out the fury in his truck, marveling at the unchecked power.

Adrian was one of three men to take the drag position. Seth—who wasn’t an Eagle but wanted to be—and Kyle were on either side him. The cop and the mobster protected him as he guarded his herd, and neither mentioned, not even to each other, that they heard the warning he sent.

Not over a radio, but rushing out in powerful mental waves designed to get ahead of the storm, it rang through the air and into them until the urge to go to Adrian’s truck had them both fighting tight grips on door handles.

There were times, later, when both men doubted themselves, but at night, while witnessing their leader do rounds after a twenty-hour day, they would think about it and admit the truth to themselves. He had tried to save survivors in the storm’s path,

cared enough about the loss of life to risk using his gifts and maybe be banished...to help people he didn't even know! He wasn't like the rest. He was special.

The secret bonded the trio and earned Adrian their complete loyalty. He was their guardian, and either of them would give their life, to keep his safe.

3

The storm raged around Safe Haven for hours, wind forming tiny cities of sand that vanished as quickly as they'd appeared. The Eagles handled themselves well, rushing to anchor tarps, secure trucks, and comfort their people during the nonstop bathroom breaks. When the winds finally began to die down, everyone was glad, even those who had loved the excitement.

It was almost lunch before Kenn decided it was all right to come out. The Eagles noticed that Adrian waited for the Marine to make the call and that Kenn didn't glance to him first for an okay when he made the choice.

Adrian took in the damage with worry in his heart for his country and her people. The landscape had been completely altered. Nothing was the same. Piles of brackish sand in feet-deep drifts covered ripped-up tents, and grit blanketed everything, including his army. The damage was extensive, total. How many more lives had been lost?

“Eagle Two will keep point. Everyone else, shift.”

Kenn nodded at him from across the camp and then motioned Seth to go along on his rounds.

In time, Seth would be one of his too, Kenn hoped, like Zack and maybe Kyle. No one else knew Seth was Adrian's undercover guard, and Kenn supported it completely. The detective was good and someone had to do it. Adrian had to be protected.

Kenn knew what his boss wanted, knew how to get things done, and three short hours after the storm was gone, Safe Haven

appeared like it hadn't been hit. It was a stark contrast to the destruction outside the perimeter. Seeing the camp full-sized again, re-taped, clean, and running normal, Adrian was more than pleased. They were growing stronger.

By one o'clock that night, Adrian was once again roaming the sea of tents, unable to sleep. He was satisfied with the way they'd come through, happy with the job Kenn had done, but he hated the aftermath.

The land around them now looked totally devoid of life, instead of just isolated. It was foreign-like what the surface of Mars might be like. Even the smells had changed. The rot was still here, along with a hint of salty smoke, but the strongest was a thick, stomach-tightening mildew he didn't need John to tell him was from all the dead. The sand not only covered them, it scraped away tiny bits of decaying flesh that were then flung about by the wind. It wasn't comforting.

"Did anyone see you?" questioned a man's voice, one he knew well, and Adrian found the shadow outside of a dusty supply truck.

"No. Let me in."

The woman's voice was also familiar, and the leader wondered if the sentries had noticed them. Probably not, but they would if Kenn wasn't more careful. It didn't bother him, but it would the camp. Adrian smirked suddenly. Hell, maybe Kenn could straighten her out a little and put her to use. Surely, Tonya had a skill that didn't involve her knees or her back.

4

"You look tired."

The Marine had fallen in with him as Adrian came from his tent.

“I’m good.” Kenn didn’t offer any details as he opened his book. He had dreamed Angie was here. After that, sleeping again had been impossible.

Adrian eyed the three-foot piles of sand that were now their perimeter, the caution tape gone again during the night. “I need Seth and Mitch to come to me around nine thirty, and make sure he doesn’t leave the radio unattended again. I need ten minutes with the doctor around noon, and then we’ll do a lesson with the rookies at three. We’ll have a little surprise waiting for Kyle and his team right after that.”

Kenn nodded. Adrian had sent Kyle out immediately following the storm to do a recon to the southeast. Adrian wanted to know if the slavers were closer, and of course, to search for survivors.

“We’ll keep it simple. Use the laser tag vests.”

Kenn wrote, and Adrian ignored the stomach wanting toast with heavy butter. His people ate before he did, and they were low on bread. Flour was one of those things they didn’t find much of.

“We’ll need crews to clean up after the contest and to help with the targets during. You’ll have to dig through the schedules that end today to discover who already has their hours in or has a shift tonight. Set the contest up like last time, over in that softball field. People not shooting will stay behind the gate.”

Adrian paused to sip his coffee, studying the line where Kenn’s boy was. All of his people appeared healthy, normal, and he knew they had been lucky to have so few medical problems despite spending so much time on sour ground. They’d had a couple of deaths in the last weeks, mostly heart failures, and an EKG machine was one of the things on his constantly growing list.

“That it?”

Adrian snorted, watching the lines grow as more people came to the mess and the noise levels increased. Coughs, moans, groans, and laughs—to Adrian it was beautiful, the sound of

normal life continuing. “Until lunch. Here’s some FND work—a faster mess, one that has them in line for less than five minutes for both food and drinks.”

Having finished writing, Kenn picked up Adrian’s cup. “Refill?”

“You know it.”

When Kenn moved toward the line, Charlie slid by and put a small plate in front of Adrian. He kept moving toward the table he usually shared with Timmy and Mike, one of the guards’ teenage boys, but Adrian stopped him with a question. “You busy later?”

Looking furtively at Kenn, the boy came toward Adrian.

“No. Do we get new schedules tomorrow?”

Appearing absorbed in taking the plastic from his toast with heavy butter, Adrian observed Charlie. He’d spent a lot of time thinking about their talk in the bowling alley and had come to the conclusion that Kenn was in contact with someone special.

This quiet boy was the magic and Kenn claiming it to protect the child was almost an acceptable lie... Almost. At least it explained why Kenn had flat out refused to use his “gift” when Adrian had mentioned it a few days after the freeze.

“Mug of coffee, fresh pack of smokes, and a cardboard box this big.” Adrian demonstrated with his hands. “Bring those things to my tent around ten thirty. We’ll do some rounds and you’ll get your schedule then.”

Charlie agreed eagerly, scuffed shoelaces dragging through the inch of sand covering the mess floor as he shifted restlessly from foot to foot. “Sure. You need anything else?”

Adrian was still watching from under lowered lashes. “Yeah, a ton of food and water. You get an idea, make sure I’m told quickly,” he half joked.

“You know it.”

“He knows what?”

Charlie flinched, and Adrian waved him on as Kenn returned with two full cups and sat down.

“Kids need to be kept busy. We have to pick the next list of places to search. Bring the maps by after lunch.”

5

A short time later, stomach pleasantly full of toast, Adrian sat in the lea of his tent with a chair, folding table, and notebooks in front of him. The wind had finally calmed down, and he got started making schedules for the next week, glad he wouldn't have to spend the extra hours trying to figure out who didn't have all their shifts in yet. As of midnight, everyone was back at zero.

He worked on them in alphabetical order, trying to fit the person with the chore by their skills, and all the while, he listened to his people as they walked by, approving of the long pants and sleeves most of his people were wearing. Both John and his suggestions had been accepted.

“Those eggs was nasty and it's still the best meal I've had since January.”

The words drifted to Adrian's ears.

“Glad we're on full water rations.”

“Oohh. Imagine a hot bubble bath.”

“Girl, a hot shower would be heaven.”

“Yeah, like that'll happen. It uses too much water.”

Adrian flipped to a rear page and scribbled a note, then resumed working on the schedules.

Mitch showed up ten minutes late, giving the CB updates personally, and Adrian handed him a sheet of paper, still not totally sure he'd chosen the right person for this job. They had given a dozen men the radio test, but only this sloppy drunkard hadn't flunked.

“This is the way I'd like things run from now on. What we put over the air matters.”

The red-nosed man gave it a quick read-over. “Sure.”

“Kenn will be installing a more powerful CB system in the next week, so when he’s ready, move to another truck ‘til he’s done.”

“You got it, A-Man. I’ll catch you later.”

The hung-over man left, eager to use the bolder system, and Adrian was relieved when the ass-kisser was gone. He hated it that everyone saw him dealing with someone like Mitch, but it couldn’t be helped. He suspected Mitch was too good to waste, and Adrian planned to leave him on the radio until he knew for sure.

When he was gone, Adrian gestured Seth over and began gathering up his papers. “Long wait.”

Seth gave a tight smile, respectfully taking off his cap as he sat down. It didn’t escape Adrian’s attention that Seth was wearing the uniform of an Eagle, despite not being one. He had been busy, trailing Adrian almost continuously for the last week, and he was good, right up there with Kyle. The question was, why?

“I don’t mind. Its better we’re alone anyway.”

Adrian finished off his cold coffee with a grimace of distaste. “Because you want to know why I passed you up for the Level Ones again, but you don’t want anyone to know you’re questioning my judgment?”

Adrian’s words were brutally honest.

Seth nodded, not sure whether he was ready for the truth he’d come for, or if the things he needed to say to this man, who he now respected above all others, would get him asked to leave.

“Because I’m not sure about you yet.”

The cop’s hurt eyes flew to his, and Adrian made a dismissive gesture, thinking of his surprise when it had been Seth who joined Kyle during the storm, and not Neil. “Not like that. Not sure where I need you the most.”

“I know where I belong!” Seth clamped his mouth shut and waited to hear their conversation was over.

Adrian didn't speak for a minute, thinking that right there was what concerned him. Seth was a good man, but he had a short fuse, which was not a great trait for a bodyguard in this new world.

"Have you thought about something else? There's a lot we need," he said finally.

Seth didn't look at him. "Yeah."

Adrian mentally examined the man. Seth was often the first one at the tape to search through the new people when there was a call, never skipping it, and his devotion had gotten attention. Adrian hadn't been surprised to find out the undercover cop had been planning to apply to the secret service academy, had wanted to protect the president. In time, Seth might still get his chance.

"Why a Level guard, Seth? Why does it matter so much?"

Surprised at the easy opening, the thirty-year-old found the truth with no hesitation. "Because you need my help, and I need to serve. Because there's no one watching your six, and I want the job."

"You sure? That may be very dangerous in the future."

"More than anything," Seth responded gravely. "It's what I'm supposed to be doing."

Adrian studied him for another long moment before shrugging as if he wasn't sure the cop could do it, though nothing could be further from the truth. "I'll change your schedule, but keep in mind it takes more than good aim and confidence. It's hard work, and it's dangerous."

"I belong there." Seth stood up, holding out his hand. "Thank you."

Adrian shook with him. "I hope you find what you're hunting for."

"So do I."

As he left, Adrian noticed Charlie coming his way, right on time and hands full.

"What do you think about him?" Adrian asked the boy, indicating Seth.

“Seth’s okay. He never found his little girl, and he’s still upset.”

Adrian didn’t comment, thinking he’d have to be careful how he handled Charlie. As for Seth, he was another above-average survivor trying to become a shepherd, and Adrian would help him make the transition, but where were those who had been born to lead?

“I’ll put this stuff inside, and you can go with me on rounds.”

Charlie wasn’t sure why the boss wanted his company, but he was eager to help if he could and be seen doing it—like everyone else here.

Adrian folded up the table, taking it and a chair to the flap, and Charlie automatically carried the other one, but didn’t go inside because he hadn’t been invited. Adrian nodded his thanks. Well-trained...and it bothered him—a lot.

“Grab that box and come on.”

The first stop was the mess, where thirty or so people were in line or already sitting down to canned chili, crackers, and applesauce. Adrian stopped near the flagpole ropes.

“Raise our colors, boy.”

Charlie and Adrian saluted, as did others, and Adrian searched for those who looked like they’d done it before. It meant they might have military training or a history of service. He spied two, maybe three, and mentally added them to the list of interviews for the next set of Eagles. There was work for them if they still had the desire to serve. He wouldn’t respect them as much if they didn’t. In the Corps, in for life, but he definitely understood and wouldn’t treat them differently.

Kenn fell in on Adrian’s right as they moved on, and Adrian noticed Charlie dropping out of eye but not earshot. He was pretending to be very involved in kicking a path through the sand that had blown back in during the night.

“I have a great idea.” Kenn handed Adrian a slip of paper. “That’s our next supply run. Everything we need for a while, depending on how lucky we get.”

Adrian clapped Kenn on the arm. He should have already thought of this.

“Great, is an understatement. Kyle’s men will be your escort. Leave tomorrow. I’ll need a list of people and supplies by tonight.”

“You know it,” Kenn answered, writing the directions down.

Adrian saw satisfaction flash across young Charlie’s face. Had the boy helped Kenn? It was a brilliant idea. Over half of America’s goods were once transported by rail, and the massive boxcars would be sitting there, waiting to be found and emptied. Some, say half even, would already be cleaned out or too damaged, but the rest would still be on the tracks where the EMPs or lack of employees had shut them down. It was a terrific idea. Kenn’s or the boy?

“What else?”

They moved to the parking area, Charlie trailing them.

“Last thing. I know you do fuel-ups by yourself on days when we’re shorthanded, like at the end of the month. I thought that maybe you could change things a little. Like for the Eagles to graduate to the next level, they have to put in hours on a teaching class. That would free up six or seven short shifts.”

“We are always short ten men,” Adrian agreed.

Kenn ran a beefy hand over his short black hair as the gritty wind ruffled it. “Give me one of the extras. That’ll still leave you two.”

Adrian laughed. “Two, instead of ten. I won’t know what to do with the extra time.”

“Sleep,” Kenn said immediately, and they shared a grin of commiseration. Both of them averaged less than five hours a night.

“I’ve given your boy a full-time job.”

Kenn was okay with Charlie being distracted. The constant whining about his mother was relentless, and Kenn had found himself spending as much time away from the sulky teenager as he could. “He’s a hard worker.”

“I’ve noticed. You take the hand-to-hand test yet?”

“No.” Kenn didn’t remind him that they’d both passed one in basic training. What had happened before the war was mostly that: before.

“Doug’s class should still be going. Tell him I said to give you a quick run, but you should watch for a bit first, so you know what you’re up against.”

Kenn snapped off a quick salute as he left, and the boy moved back to Adrian’s side.

Adrian frowned. Kenn couldn’t help him teach the guards unless he was willing to go through the same things they did. He’d decided Kenn wouldn’t have his own team of Eagles. He would serve the boss instead. Kenn couldn’t do both, but he still had to do everything the teams did in order to help teach them.

A little less confidence for the match tonight wouldn’t hurt either, Adrian thought. Kenn was sharp and had only lost last time because the wind had gusted at the wrong second and ruined his shot.

Charlie felt sorry for whomever Kenn was cursing in his thoughts. When he did that, someone (usually his mom) ended up bleeding.

“Come on. Grab that box,” Adrian instructed.

Charlie did as he was told, clamping down on the request for his schedule that wanted to fly out of his mouth. Adrian would give it to him. Unlike most people, he never went back on what he said.

6

An hour later, Adrian was almost sure the rail yard had been the smart, observant boy’s idea, was coming to think that the

magic that fate had hinted at was already here—had been for a while. It was just too young, too raw, to be useful yet.

“So what’s this box for?” Charlie asked as they moved to the mess line for bowls of soup and fresh biscuits.

Adrian grinned at him. “I thought you’d ask long before now. Line it with a garbage bag from the truck and put a note on it. ‘Food only.’ Set it by the cans. It’s for the pregnant dogs.”

The boy had finished and joined Adrian at the table when excited voices echoed, causing people to turn and gawk. A small group of talking men came by, helping a bloody Doug toward the medical tent.

Adrian snorted. He had underestimated Kenn. He wouldn’t do it again.

A second group of noisemakers arrived a couple minutes later, Kenn happily in their midst.

“Damnedest thing I ever saw.”

“Shoulda seen it!”

“Two hits! Just two hits!”

“Broke it. I heard it snap.”

Kenn was grinning as they got in line, and Adrian glanced at Charlie, noticing how he’d tensed. “Ready?”

The boy immediately got up, and they slipped out before Kenn was even halfway through the long, loud line.

Their next stop was the new livestock trailers and even newer veterinarian, Chris. The Utah man had only been out of the QZ for a week and hard at work most of that time—alone, because of his surly attitude and smart mouth.

“Anybody home?”

There was movement from inside, but no answer, and Charlie raised his hand to open the semi’s faded white door.

“Not a good idea boy, but you do what you want.”

Charlie dropped his hand, and they turned to find the tall, thin veterinarian coming from a nearby tent. His neat white coat and handsome face didn’t hide the frosty attitude of a born loner.

“Star’s in there giving birth. She’s not in the mood for company.”

Adrian stepped over to him. “You see them yet?”

Chris tossed a small, white package into the teenager’s hands. “One, normal as far as I can tell. When she’s done, we’ll knock her out and run the blood work.”

“Good.” Adrian denied the offered envelope. “Kenn’s chore now. He’ll be by.”

Adrian focused on Charlie. “What’s your job that matters, son?”

“I’m a dog handler. Or at least I will be.”

“And do you know why this is a job that matters?”

Charlie’s brow furrowed in thought. “No, sir.”

Adrian smiled, pleased. Charlie would end up being helpful in the future. Reminded him of...Adrian stopped the thought. Not until they hit Arkansas. He wasn’t allowed to think of it (be distracted by it) until then, and that was still a lifetime away.

“When you do, come talk to me. In the meantime, Chris is the boss and teacher, so pay attention.”

Charlie snapped off a salute. “You know it.”

The smart teenager approached Chris with his hand out. “Hi. I’m Charlie, your new slave. What should I do first?”

Adrian chuckled, and even the stern-faced vet hid a smile.

“That’s a real good start, boy. Put on the clothes in the bag and then come in the truck. I’ll have her chained up by then. Today, we help dogs repopulate the earth.”

“Cool!”

7

On his way to the next stop, Adrian caught sight of movement in the gritty sky and watched an eagle fly over. It glided at an odd angle on the wind, swooping in sickly circles, as if it were lost. Adrian mourned the bird and the country it

unknowingly represented. Like the eagle, America wasn't doing well.

Suddenly feeling weighed down with the burdens he was carrying, Adrian went to the medical area, not happy to discover all the seats empty. People were afraid to hear what might be wrong, and soon he would have to enforce the testing law unless he thought of another way to get them in. Too bad Anne wasn't a doctor too. Being female would automatically draw the women.

"Coming in." He ducked inside and chuckled at the uniformed doctor and nurse kissing in a dim corner. They parted slowly and Adrian smiled when Anne blushed and left to give them privacy without being asked.

"Guess you've been a good boy," Adrian joked.

John was grateful. "Me and you both. She's glad we came now, and it does my heart good to see her happy."

Adrian perched on a stool, noting the slight shake of scarred hands as the stocky man sat down across from him. "I'm glad too, John. We need you both. I guess by now you've pretty much got things figured out?"

The doctor shrugged. "Enough to know we came to the right people, the right leadership."

"I appreciate that. There's a question I need to ask. Any idea?"

John agreed without hesitation, glad that he could. "Yes, and you have it. We're with you. *I'm* with you."

Adrian handed him a glossy black notebook and an envelope from the unusually light inside pocket of his jacket. He was used to it being full of papers to decipher later. "These are some things I need answers to. I'll get the equipment; just tell me exactly what you need. Most importantly, this stays between us."

John took it, slipping his glasses on to read the paper. "These are smart questions. I have some of my own things I've wanted to try that might help you, especially treatments. I'll need specimens."

Adrian moved toward the flap. “I have a few coolers in the rear of my semi. I’ll tell Kyle to give you access.”

As he left, John hid the paperwork. Adrian was being careful. He knew how to sing to his herd and still get things done, and the doctor was sure that their young leader bent out of shape would be something to behold.

As Adrian left the medical tent, Kenn was there.

“Kyle’s three hours out. Mitch talked to them.”

“Good. He mention where they are?”

“No. Call them back?” Kenn made a note to never give the same answer again. From now on, he would have the information.

“No.” Adrian climbed under the broken fence, moving steadily through the sand he’d already had two boys rake and clear of debris. The dust storm would be the burial for those who wouldn’t otherwise get one.

“Game?” Adrian asked.

Kenn shrugged, a bit disappointed that Adrian hadn’t said anything about him beating Doug. “If you like.”

Adrian dug through the dusty but otherwise untouched box of sports equipment that they had put out this morning and came up with a football. “Go long.”

Kenn immediately took off running, and Adrian threw the ball high and hard, hoping to draw some interest from his people. These games were good for them, but hard to get going. Most of the refugees kept to themselves as they dealt with their grief, and Adrian scheduled regular times for things like this, knowing they needed it as part of their recovery.

Kenn hurled the ball with a hard spin that made Adrian pay attention, and for the next few minutes, he left the heaviness of leadership on the sidelines and lost himself in having fun. The passes were hard and long, the catches punishing, and the echo of their laughter and taunts drew people. A small crowd slowly gathered, and when there was enough for teams, Adrian moved toward them. “Game?”

He and Kenn were the quarterbacks, and it got rough from the start. Kenn, who still struggled to hide his true nature, slammed his way through three other players, knocking them aside to run by for a score.

“If you bleed, you’re out. Eagle Two’s team has six points. Our turn.”

Adrian’s team let out a shout of approval and the game became an outlet for them as they tripped, shoved, elbowed, and harassed each other. Sweating, shirts coming off, they drew in more of the people who were sensitive to loud noises now. When Adrian glanced up, nearly fifty people were watching, with about half waiting to play.

“Time out!”

Adrian signaled Kenn over as he headed for the sidelines, stiff wind cooling his sweaty skin. “Pick your replacement. We’ve got a level test to give.”

Adrian threw the ball to Zack, knowing it would please Kenn. “Take my place, will ya? I’ve been knocked down enough.”

Everyone was laughing as the two men left. The leader had been tripped and hurried, but hadn’t hit the ground even once due to great protection, deft footwork, and respect.

The game continued behind them, and both men were pleased, Kenn mostly because his side had been up by twelve points when they stopped.

“Gather the Level Ones. Seth, too. Send ‘em to that barn half a mile back and have them put on the vests. Neil is the supervisor, not their leader. We’ll find out who that is today. Their mission begins with securing a two hundred foot perimeter and staying out of sight. If anyone sees them leave, they fail. Meet me at the house next to the barn in half an hour.”

Kenn agreed eagerly, hoping the boss would like his plan, and handed him the paper as he left. It was his first attempt at tests like these, though he had worked with *The Man*, before the

war. Nobody had been better than Marc Brady at high-casualty ambushes.

Adrian gave it a quick skim, and then put it away, going to his tent. In and out, he was in the parking area a few minutes later talking to Daryl, the only Level Three Eagle not out of camp with Kyle.

“Anyone come in?”

The tall, thin football coach responded, “No, it’s all quiet.”

Adrian sighed, not showing his disappointment. The help he needed wasn’t coming today. “Kenn will be by for the paperwork. That’s his job now. When’s Kyle due?”

Smothering a frown, Daryl checked his watch. “Little over an hour.”

“Great. Let’s give them a call. Message is to put on the vests and pay attention. Mission objective, shake my hand to pass to Level Four status.”

Daryl snickered and keyed his headset, one of a dozen Kenn had finished this week. “Base to Eagle Four.”

There was only a few seconds of silence, then Kyle’s calm voice, “This is Four, base.”

“I’ve been instructed to tell you to put on the noisemakers and look alive before you hit camp. Copy?”

“Copy. What is the mission objective?”

“Physical contact with Eagle One.”

“Copy. Four out.”

Daryl did a quick scan of the dusty landscape before turning back to Adrian. “Can I help?”

“Absolutely. You’re the instructor and then the hostage. The barn half a mile back. The rookies are going there now. Go and...entertain them—the way I did at your first test.”

Daryl grinned at the memory and the responsibility he’d been given, and Adrian slipped into his truck as the guard left. The leader changed clothes, made contact with the next shift coming on, then snuck away to play with his army.

An hour later, all the men entered camp the way they'd left, with Adrian and Kenn following more slowly.

"No one asked any questions. Big mistake. Seth's team got lucky to win."

Kenn was eager to help another of his picks. Zack was about to graduate to a Level One Eagle and had Kenn to thank for his name even being on the list. Now, all the truck driver had to do was live up to it. There would be no slacking off allowed. "True, that. Seth sure surprised 'em all."

Adrian lit a smoke. "Yes, he did. Give him a level test tonight. If he makes it, bump him to Level Four and we'll catch him up. I always thought that team should have been ten strong, just didn't know who went there. Do it after dinner."

Kenn didn't look up from writing, glad for Seth and hating the jealous part of himself that wanted to say he'd done well with Doug and ask for a reward.

"Who's our MC tonight?"

Kenn gave a tight smile, tone even. "Doug said he'd give that to you at mess."

Adrian met his eye, feeling his man's need, meeting it. "That's your job now. Once an evening you'll do rounds and collect envelopes. Organize it into something I can read quickly."

Kenn realized he was being rewarded, and his heart eased. "Sure! That's it for the list. See you at mess?"

"You know it."

Their radios crackled to life. "Mitch to Eagle One. Just took a call, A-Man."

Adrian's heart thumped, and he and Kenn exchanged a look. The drunk's tone wasn't encouraging.

"Still on the air?"

"No, low battery. Said they'd call again."

"Copy."

Kenn stayed at Adrian's side as they headed to the COM truck, where Kyle had taken up his post on sentry duty. The cabin reeked of whiskey, and Mitch rewound the tape without saying as much as usual, able to feel Adrian's disapproval.

"This one sounds legit to me, but I just roll your waves."

Adrian had to force himself not to grimace. Mitch Hopkins was one hell of a radioman, but he was too often loud, crude, arrogant, and intoxicated. All things Adrian and the camp had little tolerance for because it reminded them too much of what had been wrong with the old world when it had fallen.

"Play," Adrian ordered.

The fat-faced man hit the button and smirked at all the people watching, seeing him with the boss.

"This is Safe Haven. We are a convoy of American Red Cross survivors who will help if we can, no matter your age, race, location, or injuries. Does anyone copy?"

There was silence after Mitch's loud voice, and Adrian could feel the alcoholic fingering the button, wanting to be done with this round of calls. Then, there was a pause where Mitch had known instinctively that an answer was coming and waited, instead of garbling the transmission. Definitely one of the best before, and despite his glaring flaws, probably was the best now.

"SOS, Safe Haven! Need a military escort to the nearest compound! Will pay any price!"

The words were surprisingly clear considering the awful clamor of background noise and static. Adrian liked Mitch's answer.

"Americans help first and ask questions later. Stand by while I get the boss."

"Can't. Battery's dyin'. There must be some place taking in refugees."

"Yeah, us."

"But if you're Red Cross, who do you get your orders from? Where are they?"

“Those aren’t questions for me. I just work the radio. What’s your situation?”

“Bad. People are hurt, sick. Supplies are gone, food’s low. Where are you?”

“That’s another one I won’t answer on open waves. You need to talk to the boss. Call back and we’ll get him quick, but for now, what’s your message?”

There was a long pause, and then a tired voice so full of despair that it made Adrian’s heart demand he take action.

“I’m overloaded. I can’t describe it. We need protection, a way out to some place safe. Tell him we’re American citizens begging for his—”

The transmission ended suddenly, and Mitch shut off the tape. “Figured their battery went dead.”

“You did a great job,” Adrian praised. “Get me right away when he calls.”

Mitch was all shit-eating grin. “You got it, A-Man. Catch you later?”

Adrian forced himself to agree and was glad to leave the drunk’s company.

Kenn and Adrian went to Adrian’s semi (always in the lead), and the leader climbed behind the wheel, leaving the door open. Time was running out. He could feel it threatening what he held dear, and yet, he couldn’t ignore the call.

He motioned at the glove compartment, at the maps crammed inside. “Find out how far to Cheyenne and what’s between here and there.”

Kenn got to work as Adrian picked up the mike, knowing the leader was hoping for a reason to get the camp behind a rescue.

“Let’s do a count, Mitch. Eagle One, clear.”

The count-off always took a while, people forgetting or going in the wrong order. Usually Adrian handled it, straightened them out, but today he let it go, waiting.

After a full minute of not getting by thirteen, Mitch took control, knowing Adrian wanted the radio clear, and again, he pleased the boss.

“Fourteen, ready.”

“Okay fourteen, but thirteen goes first. Thirteen, you ready?”

“Roger that.”

“Good. We know fourteen is ready, so let’s keep going.”

“Rogetsssscccfourteenssch,”

Mitch’s voice boomed over the radio, “Fourteen! Put your mike down! Hang it up now!”

“Roger.”

The two men shared a grin as the check continued more smoothly. Everyone knew Mitch had little patience and, now, Adrian’s blessing to keep people in line.

“Three hundred miles. Laramie and Casper are the only big towns.” Kenn peered at the small writing. “Damn. There are only a couple of reservoirs. Not a good enough excuse.”

Adrian scanned the dusty Wyoming land around them as Kenn got his notebook out, shaking his head at the radio.

“Come on twenty! Why are you calling out of order?”

“Because I’ve got too many kids in my area!”

“Did you check the—” The radio went quiet for a moment as the guards straightened out the mix-up.

“Your impression?”

Kenn’s voice was flat. “He said protection before food or water, like we might be walking into something and have to fight for them.”

“Are we able to do that?”

Kenn shrugged, sounding more confident than he felt. Marines, these people were not. Most were more like shower shoes—not even a boot graduate. “Maybe we could be. Kyle’s team might be now.”

“Just a simple plan, a team of a dozen,” Adrian said, leading him.

Kenn's pen started moving, copying his own words as he also settled into the groove and gave Adrian exactly what he needed at that moment—signs of progress.

“We'd need more men as Eagles, a longer-range communication system, and full-time gun classes... Wish we could find ammo for the rifles, but we'll make do.”

Adrian waited, wanting to see if Kenn would get the most important part.

“Also need more tents and practices for the camp, a drill of some kind.” Kenn glanced up suddenly. “Cheyenne's by the slavers' path, on 25. Will the sheep go, with the base in Montana so close?”

Adrian stared out the dirty window. Even his right-hand believed they were still going. He would take care of that at the next meeting. “The Eagles will go where I do. The camp would feel extremely unprotected while we're gone.”

Kenn said nothing at the threat, not doubting. Those words wouldn't be used, but the message would be clear. Adrian was going, and those who were with him would follow. The rest would have to fend for themselves until—if—he came back for them. “When will they be told?”

“Right after the next call, but it's best to start with little hints. Have people ‘overhear’ the men say it's our duty. If not for that, none of them would be safe right now. Remind them that Americans don't refuse to do what's right just because it's hard.”

9

The sky was full of vivid shades of purple and green that were mesmerizing, and Adrian spotted people taking long looks at the mysterious beauty as he headed to dinner. There was a large crowd in and around the mess, most people talking of the shooting contest to come and of Kenn's match-up with Doug.

There were still yells and groans from the late-running football game, garbage cans full of trash were burning at the four

corners of the camp, and two warmly-dressed women were playing their guitars softly around the large bonfire. It felt like early October as Adrian got his tray and took it to the full center table. The smell of salt came to him, bringing flashes of an angry sea, and he wondered where and how many they'd be come fall.

The rookie sentries were at a double table nearby, still congratulating and welcoming Seth. The Level Threes were on the other side of the Adrian's center table, looking glum as they listened to the happy voices.

Doug and Neil sat across from Kenn, and when Adrian pushed his mostly finished tray aside, the others did too. "Mini meeting and we can skip it later."

Notebooks and pens came out, and Adrian got busy, not lowering his voice. It was crucial to his plans that the people here thought they knew how he ran things. "Sitrep on your run."

"We got everything on the lists, except gas. All the stations were dry or destroyed."

"Alpine?"

"Just like all the rest. Nothing alive. We took pictures."

"Okay. That's it. Who's ready to shoot something?"

The men laughed, the boasting loud, and Adrian saw Doug hand Kenn his envelope with apologetic words. He was glad when Kenn accepted it casually, as if Doug hadn't insulted him when clearly he had. Things were looking up.

10

"All right, let's get to it." Bonfire warming his legs, Adrian stood in front of two teams of men, his army, and raised his bottle. "Rookies! Congratulations on passing!"

All the men cheered, one group much louder than the other, and they all drank together.

"You are now Level One Eagles. You boys get to choose your leader tonight, and I'll need a name before this meeting is over."

He raised his bottle again. “Level Three Eagles, congratulations on passing!”

There were surprised looks with the cheers, and Adrian waved a hand at Kyle. “You made it past Kenn, and while there were mistakes, you couldn’t have won anyway. Seth was the wild card that you can’t always be ready for. I consider it a success.”

Both groups cheered fully this time and drank, and Adrian held up a hand as the yells lingered. “We have one more challenge tonight, a personal level test.”

He gestured. “Come up here, Seth.”

The cop left his beer and new friends, approaching Adrian with pride and confusion.

“You have demonstrated great thinking skills, excellent teamwork, and an above average slyness that men have used to protect this country for centuries. As a reward, Kenn will give you a test. If you pass, you’ll graduate straight to the top level and start working with Kyle and his team.”

The men all cheered, glad for him, and Seth raised a brow. “When?”

Kenn stood up, and Adrian grinned. “Now.”

The leader tossed his dog tags at Kenn’s booted feet, and the wind immediately began trying to cover the shiny metal with sand. “All you have to do is pick them up and hand them to me.”

“That’s it?”

The newly crowned Level Four men groaned and snorted at the question. Kenn’s look was menacing enough to make Seth get serious as he realized this wouldn’t be a give-me. Kenn had beaten Doug.

“Just get by me, is all,” Kenn sneered.

Seth handed his gun to Adrian. The second he let go of it, he spun and dove for the tags.

He came close, but Kenn kicked Seth’s shoulder with the flat of his boot at the last second, sending him rolling through the grit.

Seth got easily to his feet, eyes on the prize, and this time when he rushed Kenn, the Marine used Seth's own weight to throw him across the ring of now standing and shouting men.

Seth gained his balance, rolling as he landed. When the cop rushed a third time, Kenn planted a hard fist in his ribs that had him grunting.

"This is for real! If you don't want it, quit now!" Kenn growled, not about to take it easy on Seth, even though he hoped for another ally in him.

Seth shook his head, side hurting and heart waking at the challenge. His body language changed, became intent.

Each of the Level men watched him, remembering their own tests and that moment when they too, had realized they wanted it almost more than anything—because of Adrian.

Seth advanced as he circled, no longer eyeing the metal under Kenn's feet, but still keeping track of it. This time when Seth rushed, he came in low and hard, making Kenn retreat as they shoved against each other.

Kenn quickly delivered a vicious kick to his knee, then another to his ankle, and Seth fell, grunting in pain.

"Just quit," Kenn ordered. "Give up!"

Seth's face hardened, and everyone knew that he wouldn't. The feeling of failing Adrian was one that would never go away, not in this new life.

Seth got to his feet a fourth time and Adrian observed with real interest as fire grew in the cop's eyes.

Seth stepped straight at Kenn, as if he meant to rush again, but instead he swung a roundhouse that landed on Kenn's jaw.

The other fist came around, slamming into the Marine's cheek. Then, Kenn started hitting back and Seth fell to his knees in the sand while the Marine beat on his face.

Seth sank his head into Kenn's hard gut, shoving with his legs, and as they rolled over, his fingers clutched at the dusty ground.

His pinky snagged the chain, and when he got to his feet, the dog tags were securely in his grip.

Seth flashed them at Kenn, who was moving determinedly in his direction. "I got 'em! It's over, right?" he panted and then ducked as Kenn swung.

"But I'm done. I—"

No one spoke, waiting for him to figure it out.

Seth glared at Adrian's outstretched hand, and then he moved-ducking, darting, and shoving his way to the man whose life he often dreamed of giving his own for.

Kenn spun him by the shoulder, and Seth threw out a fist, punching him hard.

Kenn swung back, rocking the cop on his heels.

Pissed now, Seth returned the hit, putting his weight into it.

When Kenn did the same, the Eagles were impressed that Seth stayed on his feet.

The two men kept swinging, trading blow for fast blow, but when Adrian gave him a subtle nod, Kenn delivered a nasty hit to Seth's forehead that knocked him face down in the dirt at the leader's feet.

When Seth's hand rose, Adrian bent down and retrieved his property.

"Pass. Effective immediately, you are a Level Four Eagle."

"No."

There was a shocked silence as Seth climbed to his feet, covered in sand and blood splatter.

"Because?"

"Because...they...voted me team leader...earlier. Can't have...that as a Level Four."

Kenn slung an arm around the cop's tense, gritty shoulders. "If you knew you didn't want it, why did you go through with the test?"

Seth smirked at his fellow Eagle, but the expression on his bruising face said his words were for Adrian.

"To prove...that I could."

The call came as Adrian was grinding his hard body against a very willing ass, breath coming in short rasps. He pressed a quick, apologetic kiss to her neck as he stepped back, zipped up.

He left without a word, marching quickly through the blowing grit to the communications truck—sliding into the sandy seat a minute later.

As he keyed the mike, Adrian was aware of Kenn waiting nearby to help him. *Good.* The Marine would make it easier.

“This is Eagle One. Go ahead with your message.”

“We need help.”

“Tell me what exactly.”

“We have to leave no matter what, but we need an armed escort. Things are rough here.”

“How rough? Don’t send me in blind, but be careful what you say.”

“Slavers.”

That one word brought mutters from the half a dozen men lingering around the radio truck and Adrian keyed the mike. “Do any of you know Morse Code?”

“No... Wait.”

There were a few seconds of silence.

“We know it.”

Adrian signaled to Kenn, and the Marine opened his notebook and slid into the other chair. “Get ready for a message. Word for word. Don’t miss one.”

“Go ahead, Safe Haven.”

Adrian gave Kenn the mike. “Say the number, five.”

Kenn tapped out Adrian’s instructions, and they waited.

“Five,” came the reply.

“Say the state, Nevada.”

“Nevada.”

Kenn gave Adrian a nod and got ready to work.

“We will fight for you, protect you, and feed you. In return, you’ll be expected to obey and work for it.”

There was a lot of tapping and silence, and Adrian waited impatiently for this part to be over so that he could get to the information he needed.

“Agreed, but everyone goes.”

Kenn handed the mike to Adrian, and the leader’s voice was flat. “We don’t leave people behind. I have some questions. Ready?”

“Roger that, Safe Haven, and thank you. You’re the first people we’ve heard who aren’t in the same boat as us.”

Kenn took the mike back, and started tapping out Adrian’s instructions.

“Tell exactly double the number of people you have. Include everyone.”

“Seventy.”

“How many fighters? Double it.”

“Ten.”

Both men winced. “Weapons?”

“Limited.”

Tap tap tap tap tap.

“A few hand guns. No ammo.”

“Have you seen the slavers?”

“Yes. Twice, from a distance.”

“How many are there? Double it and add a hundred.”

“Not exact, four hundred?”

Adrian’s frown was deep. “Where are they now?”

The taps went on for a long time, Kenn’s hand flying, and then he circled an area on the map and held it up for the boss to view.

Adrian counted quickly.

Tap tap tap tap tap...

He looked over Kenn's shoulder, reading out aloud: "Heard them this morning. They spend a few days each time they take a town. Most people here are from the places they've invaded."

"Based on his calculations, they're only four towns away from Cheyenne. Two and a half weeks," Kenn estimated.

Adrian nodded, the plan falling into place. He didn't like it, but it was the only thing he could do. "Tell them to be ready from the twenty-first. Radio silence until then, unless they see or hear of the slavers reaching Wellington. Switch to channel eighteen and say double the date I've given you."

"Forty two," the refugee responded.

Adrian took the mike, hoping the slavers weren't listening. Hundreds of channels and both calls had lasted less than seven minutes total. Maybe they would get lucky. "Hang in there, Overloaded. Liberty and justice will prevail."

"Roger that, Safe Haven. Cheyenne, out."

Adrian looked at his right-hand man. "It's yours, Marine. Hope for the best but plan for the worst."

Kenn was confident. "We'll come and go like the wind."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Close Call

March 10th, 2013

1

Still alone and once again in danger, Samantha's heart pounded as she waited motionless in the dank basement of a farmhouse on the outskirts of Boulder, Colorado.

She viewed the drunken passage of a large group of well-armed men who were rolling down the street as if they owned it. Praying none of them glanced her way, she listened to shouts, glass breaking, and wild gunfire, ducking down a bit more.

These were the stragglers hurrying to catch up to the main group that she had already watched go by. The sky behind them warned of another nasty storm coming and she ignored the throbbing leg that confirmed the forecast. Samantha had been moving cautiously since surviving the battle with the wolves, and she saw the billowing, black smoke filling the air in the direction the Mexicans had come from. Were they the ones who had taken NORAD?

The small cellar room Samantha had taken shelter in was cold and stank of mildew. The floor was covered in standing, stagnant water, but she only had eyes for the dangerous men moving through the devastated neighborhood that bordered the big, dark city. Samantha didn't know who the men were, but it was clear that they were trouble.

Not that she would have made contact, even if they had appeared civilized. She hoped to be left alone until she got to Cheyenne, and it never crossed her mind that this group might be going there too.

Samantha had noticed more bodies around here than in other places, and the dead had sores that made her push away horrible flashes of the bunker where she had killed. There had been a few live people, too—brief, distant glimpses of her fellow survivors that had her dropping out of sight as fast as she could.

Sam was armed now, but shame and paranoia were her constant companions. The pair had settled onto her shoulders, making her prefer the lonely solitude to the conversations she would be forced to have. What would she say?

“Hi. I’m Samantha. I had a pass to the government’s bunker, but my chopper crashed, and now I’m stuck out in this hell with you common folk.”

Not a good idea.

She did want to be around other people again. She longed for her old life back, but she could only be with one type. She understood that now. The thought of being alone didn’t bother her nearly as much as how everything had changed, how dangerous living had become. She had to find her own kind.

Sam scanned the last of the vehicles driving through the dirty slush, lingering on the distant shadow of purple mountains with dull, white peaks. They would be full of lavender columbine by now, gigantic ash trees and evergreens providing homes for the rabbits, cranes, and larks that she hadn’t seen down here. Up there, was an entirely different world.

Her leg had healed slowly and painfully, forcing her to spend two full weeks at a farmhouse south of the hunting lodge. She was glad the morphine had only held out for the first six days. Any more than that might have turned her into a junkie. *Almost did anyway*, she thought, still wanting that liquid gold buzz, even though normal Tylenol was controlling the pain.

Traveling was hard, though, and she had only been able to keep going because of the cart she had found in a shed behind a vandalized golf course. She had been on the road for almost a week now and still wasn’t sure if it had been hunger driving the wolves or something else. The way they’d tracked her,

surrounded her, and waited for the storm's cover, implied organization.

“Almost like they planned it,” she muttered, pulling her trench coat shut as the last of the muddy jeeps fell out of her view. It was a view that was distorted by the rain on dirty glass and the tier of dark Hanukkah candles that would stay that way forever. “They were the hunted before. Now, they were the hunters.”

Her words, spoken quietly, disturbed the occupants of the dank basement that she hadn't noticed when she'd quickly limped down the steep wooden stairs. She had been seeking refuge from the large group of obviously dangerous men, but Sam suddenly realized her safe shelter wasn't so safe. She froze in abject terror.

There was movement in the corner. It was a soft slither around a cobweb-covered ceiling beam, long and drawn out as it came closer.

Another ripple of movement came along the floor, a dark, weaving shadow under the inches of water—and then Sam's paralysis broke. She had to get out of here!

Staying low, Sam swung the sharpened walking stick in front of her as she limped to the stairs, able to feel the snakes gliding toward her from above. There was no hissing, no noises except for hers, and it was menacing.

Samantha took the steep stairs two at a time, seeing another, larger snake coming from behind the wooden steps, and she lunged up the last three.

Unable to stifle a cry as she rolled, Sam lost her cane, and her bad leg took the brunt of her weight.

The air shifted near her arm, and Sam rolled again, hitting the wall. On her feet a second later, she quickly limped to the door, unable to see anything following but sure the angry reptiles were there.

The feeling was gone as she traveled through the heavily decorated front door, but she didn't slow as the rain pelted her,

only slid her goggles over haunted blue orbs. The ghost town around her was silent, smoking heavily in places, and Sam wondered if the fallout that was changing nature's routines and habits was also affecting the people.

She had seen things since the war that made even Stephen King's stories feel tame, and it was everywhere. There were dead corpses full of bullet holes, female bodies still lying with their legs spread and mouths open in mid-scream, the family dog impaled on a broken porch rail, blood smears in the shape of a small hand on the stone walk. Her attention landed on these things and flew away each time, but she knew she'd experience them up close and in perfect detail during her dreams. There was no escaping that hell.

2

Cesar and his slavers were indeed going to southern Wyoming, where survivors had been heard calling for help but had attracted his attention instead. These refugees read the Pledge of Allegiance and sang the anthems over the radio. Cesar couldn't wait to show them who this new America belonged to.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Night Ride

March 11th
Pitcairn Island

1

Kendle flinched at a brilliant bolt forking across the cloudy sky, stomach churning as the storm roared toward them.

“Nice night for a ride!” Luke shouted over the thunder. “Come on.”

Kendle moved faster, fighting the stiff wind and driving rain. She pulled the cabin door shut and then shouldered the pack while she darted for the idling bike.

The storm had been growing all day. When Luke had said to pack a kit, they were going to higher ground, she hadn’t argued despite not wanting to be soaked and get a chill from a midnight ride. She would face anything that kept her off that merciless ocean.

Kendle threw her leg over the seat and grabbed ahold of his belt buckle. The bike jerked forward and Luke grabbed for her blindly. He snagged her jacket and pulled her back on.

He found her hand, wrapped it around his hips, and Kendle buried her head against his strong body, heart skipping in her chest. The angry sky above them lit up again, flashing wildly, and Luke wanted to comfort her when she jumped, but already had his hands full keeping the Yamaha moving steadily on the muddy path.

Kendle knew to mold her body to his so their matched movements would help keep them balanced. She held on tight, feeling his muscles flexing, controlling, his heartbeat comforting

against her ear. These things were a relief, in spite of the fear. Overall, she'd much rather take her chances on land, with Luke.

There wasn't a road or any lights that signaled other people and she shuddered when the path they were on narrowed suddenly by more than half.

Soon, they rolled under the protective canopy of a thick forest of tall, leafy trees. Sheltered from the worst of the weather pounding on the thick vegetation far above them, Luke took a moment to ask, "You okay?"

She pushed closer against him as lightning flashed again.

"Be there in half an hour."

Kendle nodded. She was physically terrified, but emotionally, she felt only unbelievable gratitude that someone else was in charge of this crisis.

They traveled through the thick jungle for what seemed like hours to Kendle. Muddy, unseen, leafy plants and vines slapped at them from the dense darkness around their speck of a light.

The rain beat on them again when Luke turned onto an extremely narrow path that veered out of the trees and down a steep hill. The fast-moving bike hit the bottom, and Kendle clung to LJ as they shot upward, close to tipping over. They evened out onto a rocky path that led gradually up a tall hill dotted with heavily swaying banyan trees. Rain pelted their faces, wind stealing their breath in little, painful gusts each time he rounded a curve, and Kendle held on tight, waiting for it to be over.

Blindingly vivid lightning flashed, traveling toward them at thousands of miles per hour, and their ears were filled with roaring thunder.

It slammed into the ground, exploding in a ball of vivid red and white.

Ccrraaacckkk!

There was no way to avoid the flaming, bushy tree that crashed to the ground across their path. The bike tire hit the thick log at full speed, flipping them into the air.

Arm still deadlocked around his waist, Kendle screamed, and then the breath was knocked out of her as they hit the mud. They slid toward the edge of the steep hill, causing her to lose her grip on Luke. Kendle sucked in air to scream again, hands clawing for purchase as she felt herself start to go over. The small breath shot out in another piercing shout as she began to fall.

Luke snagged her slick wrist, pulling it out of its socket for a second of awful pain before hauling her up and into his arms. “You all right, darlin’?”

She burrowed into his chest, and Luke held her close as he got to his feet. Moving to the muddy path that he had no trouble seeing in the dark, Luke had a brief, horribly real flash of trying to carry each villager out of ground zero and shook it away. Now was not the time.

The rain fell harder, washing some of the mud from their hands and faces. Luke didn’t stop to examine the bike. He carried her to a dark hillside and gently put her on her feet.

“Hang on a minute, little girl, and we’ll be inside.”

Kendle spotted nothing that resembled a shelter, and she was impressed when he pulled aside a large patch of grass as if it was a carpet, revealing a wide, steel door set into the earth.

Realizing the term “carpet” was right, Kendle watched him twist the combination. When the door opened and he disappeared inside, she followed with only a little hesitation. She had that unnerving sense of wrongness as she entered, but it wasn’t as bad as it had been previously, and she guessed that it was one of the few wounds that might heal completely with enough time. She had been on land for a little over three weeks, but a lot of the horror was still there, lurking under the surface of her polite smiles and casual words.

The storm’s sounds were muffled by the dirt. A light flared in the darkness, and then brightened, allowing her to look around, and Kendle was glad to know they wouldn’t be laid up short.

Luke lit the lamps hanging in each corner of the long, wide room, and Kendle stared in approval. Everything they needed was here. The walls were concrete, the floors, ceiling, chairs, and small table were all made of plain yellow wood—as were the long rows of shelves running the length of the rear wall. On those shelves, there were supplies. Serious survival supplies. Lamps, batteries, weapons, a gas stove hooked to a grill, many dusty boxes marked “fragile, handle with care.” It was all neatly arranged.

There were also personal touches here that were missing from his small cabin, like the pictures of a jungle behind soldiers holding rifles up. Were these the men he had served with in ‘Nam? LJ hadn’t said he’d been there, hadn’t even told her that he was a soldier, but she knew. He was much too tight-lipped and organized to be anything but military, and she’d figured the location by his age. He had told her he would be sixty-one on the sixth of July, but she was pretty sure that back in the day, Luke had been a badass. The young pilot in those pictures certainly looked the part.

“This is amazing. You built it yourself?”

Luke unfolded a blue tarp behind the open door as she got a towel out of the pack to wipe her face. “Dug it, mostly. Frank helped when I put in the walls and ceiling. We’re only three miles from the cabin, but we’re almost a hundred feet higher. Even a rogue wave won’t reach here.”

He ducked out into the storm, and Kendle forced herself to wait, hating the awful loneliness that swept over her every time Luke got out of sight. She could follow. He’d made it clear that he liked having her around. He hadn’t even wanted to tell her that the doctor had a room in town if she felt uncomfortable staying with him. She got the sense that he was lonely too, and his full days supported that. It spoke of someone wanting to be too tired to think or even dream when he went to bed, and that, she understood completely.

Kendle covered her face with her wet sleeve as she sneezed. Wrist aching, swelling a little, she glanced around for a place to change. Seeing nothing private enough, she settled for peeling off her drenched shoes and socks and hanging her dripping jacket over a chair. Shivering as she listened to the rumble of the storm, the castaway waited nervously for her host to return.

Luke rolled the wrecked but fixable bike inside and leaned it against the wall so that the mud would drip onto the tarp. He quickly glanced away from Kendle's transparent shirt and slacks.

He rinsed his hands and then retrieved a coil of rope and a blanket from a shelf, aware of how her eyes lingered on him while he attached the rope to the ceiling near the bunk beds.

Luke threw a long blanket over it to duplicate the area he had made for her at the cabin when she'd said she preferred to stay with him, if he didn't mind.

"I'll make some coffee while you change," he offered, going to the tarp to take off his muddy boots.

Kendle quickly ducked behind the blanket, grateful. She couldn't wait to be warm and dry again. Being wet reminded her too much of her nightmare on the ocean.

Luke tossed his soaked, mud-streaked coat over the other chair and couldn't stop himself from stealing peaks at the slender shadow on the wall while he wiped his face and then got the water heating on the stove. He was decades older, with blood on his hands that he could never atone for, but he couldn't deny the want. He'd been alone for a long time, and she was beautiful, young, brave...

He'd found himself hoping for signs of interest. She had told him that her career had kept her busy, that there was no husband or even a boyfriend to mourn, and Luke had been able to read nothing else. She was nice, friendly to him and good company, but also careful and closed-off. She'd clearly had a fortress around her heart, and Luke had decided he wouldn't even try to breach those walls without at least knowing whether she saw him as an eligible man or just an old man.

“How long did all this take?” Kendle asked from behind the blanket.

Luke forced his gaze away from her alluring shadow, thinking she had to be the strongest female he’d ever met. Even the resourceful island women would still be in tears over that narrow escape, and she sounded like nothing had happened.

“Over four years.” He got the cups out, wiping the dust from them, listening to her movements.

“Anyone else know it’s here?”

“Probably. Everyone out here has a hole-up. It’s the way you do things on Pitcairn.”

“How long have you lived alone out here?” It was the first personal question she’d asked, and his reluctance to answer was clear when he finally did.

“All my life, it seems like.”

Kendle tossed her dripping sweater over the rope, hiding her underclothes beneath her slacks, and came out from behind the blanket.

Luke felt his lungs tighten. Her vivid red skin was a sharp, sexy contrast to the simple white dress that outlined a perfect young body. For an instant, Luke considered asking her outright to be his woman. Common sense returned quickly, with guilt on its heels.

He turned away, missing her look of relief. Those were choices she definitely wasn’t ready to make yet. She was weak, vulnerable, still dealing with the grief of losing her sister. Men and sex were the last things on her mind...right?

“How long do you think we’ll be here?”

“Day or two. We’ll be able to see the beach come dawn. If the crabs and sandpipers are out, I’ll know for sure it’s okay. Likely, I overreacted.”

Kendle pulled dry anklets over slender feet. “I’m okay with it.”

Luke ducked behind the blanket while Kendle wandered the far ends of the long room, impressed. She and her parents had

each had an area in their homes, but his was the king of all shelters—medical supplies, survival books, a long box with a picture of a thermal tent on the side, and a generator in the corner. All these things said Luke was a realistic, reliable person—but the creature comforts, like the cigars and chocolate bars, said life with him wouldn't be cruel either.

Life with him? Kendle asked herself sharply, hearing the clink of pants with a belt still in them hitting the floor. *Are you conceding your real life for this? Not even planning a single, foolish attempt to get back?*

No. Going on the water was unthinkable. Unless a plane came, she was here to stay.

With Luke?

Kendle wasn't sure yet, wasn't sure how much she could give him. There were younger, more arrogant men here. She'd met them and been asked out by a couple but had said no, even letting one think she and Luke already had something going on so he would take the hint and leave her alone.

She felt safe with Luke. She knew instinctively that he was her own kind, and while she knew people who'd started relationships with less, she didn't think she was ready for all the complications that always came. She owed him a great deal, and he was definitely one of the good people, but his demeanor said he'd done terrible things in the past. She often wondered if his solitary life here was a self-imposed penance for it.

There was a choice coming, though. She felt it in his heated gaze when he thought she wasn't looking, felt it when they shared a meal over a flickering candle. While it flattered her, she didn't encourage him or lead him on. Luke was a full-grown man who could easily take what he wanted if provoked, and that was nothing to play with when you were almost alone together on a deserted island paradise.

“Where did you get all this stuff?” she asked, needing to fill the silence as he emerged from behind the blanket. His big, scarred hands were tucking in a plaid shirt around lean hips, and

Kendle found herself thinking again that he was in great shape for sixty.

“Plane used to come. Some of it’s from crashes or what the tide brings in. A little came from people leaving, not wanting to take it to the mainland with them.” He paused, looking at her with dark eyes lined by the coming of old age. “Some from my time in the service.”

Kendle recognized the first information he’d offered about his past. She stopped herself from asking anything, knowing he expected it but didn’t really want to give it. Instead, she sat down, still shivering a little.

Luke took a long suede jacket from a wall peg and draped it over her shoulders, not letting his restless fingers make contact with her skin.

She pulled it close, smiling her thanks. She noticed the smell of whiskey before he retreated. Luke had been a complete gentleman the entire time they’d been together. Weak most of the time, Kendle felt guilty and wanted to help with the chores, but the doctor had told him to make sure she took it easy, and he did. Luke cooked and cleaned, did the laundry, and sometimes let her dry dishes or set the table.

As a result, she was regaining the weight she’d lost and was feeling better every day. Even the tears at night were coming less frequently. It had been almost a week now since her last nightmare, and she was grateful to him for everything.

Enough to give your body? When a man’s been alone as long as he has, that’s a powerful thing to be used.

No. Her virginity was worth more to her than the payment of a debt, or a bond to keep from being alone.

The storm outside their den grew stronger, and Luke flipped on the CD player. He surprised her with Aerosmith’s greatest hits, and then left her alone, knowing she needed time to heal. She reminded him of how bad off he’d been when he first came here. He, too, had been on the edge of death, on the verge of putting his gun in his mouth. But this simple life had healed him

enough to go on, and it would her as well, in time. He'd had Frank, and Kendle would have him. It would be enough to keep either of them from ending it when the nightmares got bad.

2

Hours later, Kendle jerked awake in the warm darkness, eyes flying to the shadow of the man standing over her. Her eyes locked with his, recognizing the terror that would never be spoken of. Being here, around the mementoes of his past, was hurting him.

Responding to his desperate need, Kendle slowly pulled back the blanket, inviting him in. They'd passed many nights in each other's arms, usually when he couldn't stand the sound of her sobs anymore.

Luke curled away from her, embarrassed, and Kendle molded herself to his body. Feeling his rapid heartbeat, his quick rasps for air, she held him tighter, lending her comfort. Laying there, listening to his struggle, she thought that maybe together they might teach each other to live with all that had happened and go on, despite the scars they would always carry.

Earlier, she'd been sure she wasn't ready to handle any type of a relationship right now, but the feel of his pain made her accept that she was already in one. She cared for Luke, wanted him to find a measure of peace with whatever demons were tormenting him...and he wanted the same for her. It wasn't a traditional relationship, but it was comforting.

Luke's body shuddered as his control gave a little, and Kendle comforted him as best as she could, not quite daring to tug him into her full embrace. Physical contact she definitely wasn't ready for yet, but being alone, being away from Luke... Well, that just wasn't an option anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Coasting

1

Bad-weather sensors and alarms on buoys in the Atlantic Ocean were storing data on a system of unparalleled size, but the warnings went unheeded.

Those operating the stations were long gone, dark halls abandoned. Most coastal areas had emptied out right after the war. Storm surges, tidal waves, and horrible flooding forced the tourists and vacationers to leave, but there were still people surviving here. They were the longtime residents who had stayed for Hurricane Camille in '69 and again for Andrew in '92. These die-hard survivors abandoned their homes for nothing. And now, they were leaving.

The ocean was telling them there was a monster on the way, though it was over two months before the season officially started. Some of these residents held hopes of returning, but most suspected there would be little to come back to. They had seen the signs.

Before, they might have had three or four days of warning. Now, they had one day if they were alert, and only a few hours if they weren't. The times of city pumps and mandatory evacuations were gone, but the natural warnings were abundant. Flocks of brightly colored birds that normally spent a few days in the area kept going, their cries upset. The surf was growing steadily rougher, pushing further onto the debris-littered beaches despite no visible storm clouds. The wind threw out sudden downdrafts and heavy rain bands that caused sensors to reach seventy before settling back down to thirty-five. The barometers

were dropping sharply, the tides almost impossible to distinguish as the rough surf rolled further inland, and animals began to beach themselves. It was enough to convince even the most foolhardy. Sharks, whales, and dolphins, all panic-stricken, were willing to suffocate themselves on the beaches rather than to face whatever was coming. This was no tropical depression, and alert coastal survivors raced to get out of its path.

However, some people had no idea danger was once again approaching. Large parts of Georgia, made oceanfront property during the war, were underwater, and Valdosta, where the crack had split the land, was full of people who had been on the road for the holiday. Stuck with no way to go forward and no way to go back, they had little understanding of the ocean's dangerous fury and the cost of the lesson was high. The group of survivors in Valdosta only numbered a hundred, but they were unrelated families who could have repopulated the entire country without any fears of inbreeding. Their laws might have been drastically different, their future waiting for them...

Out in the toxic waters of the Gulf, a monster had honed in on American soil. Hurricane Amanda, as it might have been called if anyone had been left to name it, was bigger than any storm on record. It surged due north, powered by a hot ocean current and violent winds full of radiation. It had churned for weeks, drawing smaller storm systems in, and at its peak, the outlying winds were sustained at three hundred miles per hour, with gusts upwards of three hundred seventy-five. The storm surge was twenty-five feet high in places as it pushed into southern Georgia, and ten inches of rain fell from the angry sky in the first hour. If satellite pictures could have been accessed, they would have shown a storm that, at its height, covered over half the United States, with rain bands touching both Mexico and Canada.

Amanda rolled northwest as she came ashore, submerging whole towns and leaving an immense path of destruction in her wake. The parts of the Bahamas, the Florida Keys, and Cuba that

survived the war were destroyed—flooded with high water that receded slowly, reluctantly giving back only half of what it had taken. The war had raised ocean levels as much as ten feet globally, and those lands already at or below sea level were wiped off the map by Hurricane Amanda, becoming a part of the vast, angry ocean.

Nearly no one survived in these isolated havens of “fun in the sun,” yet not all the victims came from the land. Boat after boat was flooded, rolled and sank, including battleships and Coast Guard vessels, which, having survived the bombs, could only drift on the tides without their engines and compasses. These people joined the millions of others already under the salty waves.

The eye of Hurricane Amanda hit Valdosta, Georgia head-on and came inland like a wall of liquid destruction, leaving not a single structure or tree for ten miles. Had anyone survived, they would have been shocked to discover a seven-hundred-foot-cargo ship sitting evenly atop a school building half its size. Upon closer inspection, they would have discovered that it was not a container ship, but a former battleship that had been designated as a floating hospital and the debris littering it were crushed cars and homes that it had picked up while gouging through the land. The USNS Comfort had crossed the oceans on thousands of missions of mercy, but its days were over now, gone like the police, 911, lotteries, and elections. Gone like Hollywood, American Idol, and the entire west coast. The survivors, the war’s desperate refugees, now have only the simplest of goals. They want to live, to continue, and if enough of the right people can find each other, they might stand a chance.

Hurricane Amanda did give the remaining survivors one benefit. It brought in warmer air from the south, where there was less grit in the sky to block out the sun’s rays, and for the first time since the war, it began to feel like the season it was.

The downside was that with these fresh winds came violent storms. Mother Nature was still furiously venting her rage, and America's losses continued.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Hard Days and Warm Nights

March 18th

Somewhere in Missouri

1

They were lost.

The storm battered their vehicles, lashing out at them violently. The rain came in sporadic bursts, with cold droplets that set their skin on fire as thick, orange clouds rolled menacingly through the sky.

Marc and Angela had been making good time until they'd gotten to Kirksville, Missouri, but getting past the tangled piles of wreckage was impossible. Damage stretching as far as they could see, it was clear that a massive flood had destroyed this town.

Boats were on front porches, heavy river barges piled against a Don Pablo's restaurant like firewood. Homes and businesses were collapsed and scattered, ambulances and fire trucks crushed together. For the first time, Marc wished for a navigation system, forgetting for an instant that it wouldn't work without access to the satellites.

Their way blocked, they doubled back, but the new route was closer to the North Fork Salt River, and when the storm broke over them, the water began to rise, blocking their way. As Marc relocated them to higher ground, he jumped from one unknown street to another in order to escape the churning water, and now, they were lost.

Marc surveyed the area unhappily. He didn't want to stop now, despite all the debris flying through the storm. He hated how low this area was.

"Let's try that parking garage," Angela suggested.

"It's kinda low," Marc pointed out.

"Sturdy though," she answered.

Angela pulled around him to take the lead, trying not to react to the Santa hat that blew by her windshield as she searched for a name. The signs that they could see, they couldn't read because the paint was too faded.

The four-story garage sloped gently upward in circles, and they were surprised to discover only half a dozen cars in the whole place as they did a drive-through check first. The vehicles were dusty, a couple with notes still taped to the inside of the windows, and there was a lot of garbage cluttering the lanes, including broken neon bulbs and a shredded exit sign on the first level.

Marc didn't like it that they couldn't see out once they were inside, but although there were bodies all over this town, there was none in here. The smell of them however, was under the salty, smoky rain.

"Up here should be okay for tonight, right?" Angela backed in, worried when he didn't answer. "Marc?"

Silence.

She discovered him gesturing at his mike and then the ceiling and understood they had no radio in here.

Angela put her vehicle in park, but didn't switch it off as Marc backed in next to her. She'd put them in a far corner, like he would have, but the rain was still dusting the hood and front windows and the wind was strong, rocking both Blazers.

Marc exited and disappeared, going to secure the perimeter with Dog.

Angela watched the darkness around them, gun in her tense hand. She knew the open area wasn't to Marc's liking as he came toward her, and she waited to discover if he would override her

decision. If so, she would go along with his choice. He'd been surviving out in the world a lot longer than she had.

Whammmmm!

They both ducked as something heavy slammed against an outside wall. When he opened her door, he was relaxing. "Probably the best place we can be, as long as nothing collapses. We can go up two more floors if we have to."

Angela nodded, reaching in for her duffle bag.

The wind gusted against her door, and only Marc's quick reflexes kept it from hitting her leg.

"Damn. We need to get out of this wind. We'll make camp over by the elevators, in that hallway."

Marc grabbed each item as she took it from the Blazer.

When she shut the door, empty-handed, he gestured toward the dark hallway he had already checked. "Light and gun. Let's go."

Angela started to tell him this wasn't a good time for a lesson and then stopped, realizing this was the perfect time. "Okay."

Dog now alertly at her side, Angela tried to concentrate as Marc had shown her, tuning out the distractions. She slipped quietly through the loud darkness.

Marc watched their rear. And hers.

A short time later, Angela was unpacking what they needed, preparing to hunker down and wait out the storm while he went for his things, thinking she wasn't as nervous as she had been nine days ago. Killing had definitely changed things, changed her. She was suddenly a much harder person than she'd ever been before.

Angela set the heater against the wall and made up one large sleeping area between it and the cooler, creating a wall to block the wind. She started getting settled as he returned with his arms full, Dog at his heels.

"Great idea."

Angela took off her sweater, listening to the wind howl as he added his own items to the barricade.

“Hungry?”

She was setting up the stove. “Not really. You?”

Marc dropped his trench coat on top of a box and pretended not to notice how her gaze went to his chest, lingering there. “No, but we should eat.”

She agreed, but only put on water.

“I’m gonna mark the water levels. Be right back.”

Angela pushed off her shoes and sat down against her pillows—journal, pen, and cup on one side, gun and ashtray on the other. She was calm. She had already seen them, safe and sound, in this very spot as dawn broke. They had seemed to be in a bit of a hurry to leave, but she hadn’t sensed any real danger. Trusting the witch inside was easier since Versailles.

Marc wasn’t as confident. He used a can of waterproof chalk to mark where the water was and then marked every ten feet, all the way to their Blazers. A quick glance would now tell him how fast it was raising.

Angela was lighting a joint when he returned, and he noted his own side of the big bed had been set up identical to hers. Even Dog’s quilt was lined with a bowl of food and water. Neat, organized.

I like that, he admitted to himself. *I like her*.

Marc put his gun next to the ashtray on his side of the makeshift bed. When she casually held the joint out, not looking up from her writing, their fingers brushed, sparked.

Angela dropped her hand without looking up, but Marc witnessed her nostrils flaring. That didn’t feel like fear to him, and if she wasn’t scared anymore, then it was proof he had made some progress by holding in all the things he still longed to say.

They were traveling well together. They started their days with a quiet meal and then a workout, where he taught her things, like how to breathe and read the ground. Afterward, they did a training session. First was hand-to-hand, and then weapons,

which put them on the road around ten each morning. They traveled until it was too dark to keep going, and then he picked a place, if she told him it was okay. Her magic was something they had been avoiding. Marc had almost no experience with the subject, but her gifts were now being used when they made camp. He wasn't taking any more chances with her life.

“So, tell me about him.”

Angela's flinched before she realized who he meant. “Oh. Charlie's a great kid, warm, funny.” Sadness was in her face. “Probably looks different now, older.”

Knowing he wanted more, Angela let her worried mother's heart answer, “He's smart. So much that it makes me ashamed that I'm so dumb, and I'm a doctor. He's loyal, hardworking, and cares about things, like saving the whales. It's agony for me to be away from him. Sometimes a boy needs his mom, and sometimes, a mom just needs her boy.”

Not wanting to let emotions get the best of her, Angela dug through her bag and tossed a yellow packet onto the blanket by Marc's leg. “Those are from his first birthday. I still love the clown outfit.”

“He was born on Halloween?”

“Yes, on ten thirty-one, at ten thirty-one in the morning.”

Her voice was rough, sexy. Marc let his gaze roam her while she wrote in her journal. “Is he special?”

She tensed before giving a quick nod. She could trust Marc. “Yes. He'll be stronger than me.”

“Is it because of being born on Halloween?”

“I assume because he's male. Fate controls, not the moon and stars.” She inhaled deeply again, closing her eyes against a sharp curl of smoke.

Marc thought about how erotic it would be to give her a shotgun. “You still believe in destiny and the great plan?”

Angela hesitated, not wanting to stir up that old argument, and still not sure who would survive the encounter with her Marine. Marc was good, she had seen that, but so was Kenny.

“Yes and no. It’s not a set plan. People miss their purpose in life and have to spend eternity repeating it, searching for that one moment they missed.”

“And do they find it? Does fate give second chances?”

The implication was clear, and while she didn’t want to encourage him, she couldn’t lie. “Yes, almost always. Fate wants the world to be perfect, and each correct or corrected life is a step on that road.”

He took the joint. “You know that for sure?”

“No, but I examine the world around me and get my answer there. Everything on this planet dies, ends, and usually violently. If not war, maybe it would have been the plague again or another asteroid. For some reason, it was all fated to die.”

“But why everyone? Why not just the bad?”

Angela shrugged again, tone resigned. “That is a question I can’t answer.”

Marc held up the pictures as she eased down. “You want these back?”

“No. I’ve got the memories.” She rolled over and covered herself up to her neck. “Goodnight, Brady. See you in the morning.”

“Yes, you will. Sweet dreams, honey.”

Not likely, she thought, the nightmares a lot of the reason she smoked just before bed. Her heart whispered again about his arms. Angela couldn’t help thinking about it, but there was no way she could accept that comfort this time. She already had a fear that Kenny would sense it if she even touched the line, let alone crossed it, and try to kill her. In her dreams, he succeeded.

Outside, the storm showed no signs of letting up, and they were awake until well after midnight. Marc set his watch and checked on the water every half hour, and each time his footsteps faded into the darkness, Dog at his side, Angela knew it.

Around two o'clock, Marc and Dog went to check the markers again. He was relieved to find the water already going down.

Angela snuggled deeper into the thick blankets, trying to ignore the heart crying for her to slide into his spot. She sighed sadly, feeling guilty that hairy legs and maybe bad breath were the only things stopping her from sleeping in Marc's big arms. Being attacked and then not only surviving, but also killing the person responsible, had unlocked the last of her chains. It had freed the young girl who feared nothing and slowly, Kenny's timid mouse was disappearing.

How was she ever going to face her Marine after being with Marc again? Kenny would use her up quickly in this new world, and she would die young. With Marc, though, the witch said there was a chance for the future that had been stolen from them. She wanted to talk about it, to ask and tell, but didn't. It didn't matter that she was falling—

Angela stopped herself and tried to imagine telling him how she was feeling. "I can't stop thinking about you, about us and how good we were together, and... I may want another chance with you once I get my boy back and find a way to ditch my other man."

Never in a million years. Even if Kenny were out of the picture—and he wasn't, not by a long shot—there were other walls between them. Still, the young girl who had believed in the dreams continued to whisper, and it was hard to ignore as sleep refused to come. They were a great match, and she still cared, still wanted the life he had promised her so long ago. Soon, Marc would figure that out and do something about it. Then they would all be doomed.

Marc returned to his side of their bed, thinking they were getting closer despite her trying not to let it happen. She was so strong! She not only recovered quickly, she grew more confident from each encounter. She wasn't afraid to meet his eyes anymore, or to walk by him, and he could feel her thinking about

him and the past. She felt it too. He could read it. She felt the... What? Love? Maybe. Lust?

You bet that sweet ass, he thought, slipping his belt and buckle loose. He had never lit up around a woman the way he did with Angie. He had no doubts about his feelings. He now had roughly four weeks left to convince her that giving into her man's will wasn't her only choice.

2

Waking with a feeling of revulsion, Angela brushed at her arms as she sat up. Her skin prickled with tiny irritations in the damp morning air, and her hair seemed to be moving on its own. She was so tired!

“What the hell?”

It was the sound of Marc's voice that brought her awake, and Angela couldn't stop the yelp of disgust that echoed off the concrete.

“Spiders or crickets, trying to get out of the water. I'm not sure which. Come over here and let me brush you off.”

His tone was soothing, and Angela stood still while Marc rid her of the nickel-sized spiders with legs twice as long as their bodies and bent over like grasshoppers.

“They're under my clothes!” she moaned, horrified.

Marc immediately grabbed the edges of her shirt and yanked it up and off her. He shook it out and gave it back, watching Dog avoid the mutations, instead of snapping at them as he did with normal insects.

“Do under your pants, and I'll get our stuff loaded. The water's down enough to roll through if we're careful.”

“It'll all have spiders in it.”

Marc listened to the storm still rumbling, sure they should stay, but the water was rising again and they couldn't share their shelter with spiders. He needed to get her out of here. “Yeah.

When you put those on, tuck the cuffs into your socks and come get what you want. We'll leave the rest."

As he stepped past her with the heater and their duffle bags, it occurred to Marc that she hadn't jumped when he'd reached for her shirt. His heart stirred. Things were changing.

Half an hour later, they were passing through Matenea, Missouri, and Angela listened to the voices as the wind pushed them along.

"I think we should take cover."

Little black balls of hail were pinging off their roofs and hoods.

"What's...? Oh, shit! Stay on my ass!"

Angela spotted the funnel cloud by following his line of sight and for a second, she couldn't move. The twister wasn't very wide, but it was moving incredibly fast and closing in, as if it had sensed the presence of humans and dropped out of the sky just for them.

"Come on!"

His shout startled her, Dog's piercing bark through the radio broke her daze, and Angela hit the gas. It was a real tornado!

"Thought this only happened in the movies," she whispered. She was scared as she caught up to Marc's bumper, but the raw fury of something they had no chance of controlling was beautiful too, and Angela knew she would never forget it if they got away.

Marc turned them into a large, mostly empty parking lot, speeding up. When he sent his Blazer crashing through the front glass windows of the theater, plastic and glass flying, she followed.

Behind them, the tornado churned across the small city, smashing through anything in its way as it zeroed in on the enemy: man.

"Get as far in as you can!"

Angela swerved in next to him, lobby props tumbling, and they both ducked down as the tornado hit the theater.

The building shuddered, and both Blazers lunged forward with the wind, bashing into the concession stand's high wall. Glass sprayed as the display shelves caved in, large chunks of debris banging off them as the roar grew louder.

A blast of straight-line winds swept through the cinema on the twister's heels, grabbing and spinning Angela's Blazer in dizzying circles before shoving it into a line of heavy arcade machines. Marc watched helplessly as the big games were sent flying into the air and each other from the hard impact, glass and coins erupting like tiny, silver volcanoes.

Bouncing back with a jarring thud, her muddy Blazer slid the length of the lobby before coming to a tire-squealing halt inches from his front bumper.

A second later, it was over except for the rain, and Marc scrambled over wet debris to open her door and help her out. "Are you hurt? Are you all right?"

"I don't remember asking for the tour," she joked breathlessly.

He laughed. "Me either. You're okay?"

Angela trembled, a bit shook up, and didn't tense when he surrounded her with his arms. She rested against his hard, comforting body and held on.

Marc rubbed her arms to warm her, knowing it was the shock of being woken so abruptly and being forced to deal with the fury of their environment before she'd even had a cup of coffee that had shaken her, made her vulnerable.

"Dog, up. Sshhh... It's okay, honey."

Angela kept her arms locked around his waist as the wolf leapt to the roof of his car. Marc held her, watching the drumming rain continue as his body tried hard to ignore hers. It was still a perfect fit.

"Are we safe here?"

Marc recognized the moment. If she could ask him that and be prepared to believe it, things had changed.

“I think so. I need to do a quick check.”

Angela shivered when he stepped back, immediately feeling colder as he disappeared into the dim shadows. The wind blew her hair around, and her witch whispered this storm was traveling northwest, toward her boy. She had to warn Kenny again. She gathered herself quickly, doing it before the fear could make her change her mind.

Marc could feel the energy humming through the cinema. Without knowing he could or that he was going to try, Marc slid directly in front of her, concentrating.

At first, he was blocked by a wall of crumbling mental bricks, but he sent his want ahead of him and it fell easily enough.

Angela’s lashes fluttered, but she didn’t protest, and then Marc was in her mind and angry.

Where are you?

The man’s voice was loud, intimidating, and familiar somehow.

You have to take cover. Bad storms are coming your way.

One more time, bitch! Where are you?

It was a struggle for Marc to remain silent.

A lot closer. How’s my boy?

Happy with me. How close?

The barely-controlled anger was clear, and Angela forced herself to stand, emboldened by Marc’s presence. *I’m coming for my son as fast as I can.*

You’ll never get him back unless you do what I say.

Searing rage filled Marc, but it was nothing compared to the fury coming off Angela. It came in clouds of heat that he could actually feel.

You won't keep me from my boy, Kenny! That was the old world. Things have changed, and you're the one who should be careful!

She sucked in a breath as he screamed obscenities, and then overpowered him with her anger. The words blasted out in a furious snarl. *If anything happens to my son, there won't be a place on this fucking planet where you can hide!*

She slammed the door before Kenny could respond in kind.

“He’s in a good mood,” Angela tried to joke.

Marc was pissed. “I won’t let him hurt you or the boy. I’ll protect you both. My word on it.”

Angela turned away. That was the first time in over a decade that she had stood up to Kenny so openly. There would be a payment for it.

“You can’t promise that. You think you know what you’re up against, but you don’t. He’s a violent, trained killer, and in the end, someone’s blood will spill.”

“His, not yours,” Marc stated flatly.

Angela hated it that he was thinking of murder. “Please don’t. It’s on my hands if you kill him, and it would destroy me as sure as losing my son would. My freedom is not worth a life. I need you to swear to me that you won’t.”

“I can’t. You don’t deserve to be treated that way, and I won’t sit by and watch.”

“I’ll figure something out. For now, you think we can stay here until the storm’s gone?”

Marc sighed at her obvious distraction technique, running a hand over his neck-length hair in frustration. Wasn’t he getting to her at all?

“Sometimes, too much.”

Marc flinched guiltily, and she insisted, “Well?”

“I don’t know. Let’s have a look around, and we’ll decide.” Marc let it go, not telling her that he could make it appear like an accident and not feel any guilt. He was also a violent, trained killer.

“Dog, in.”

Marc shut the door behind the big animal, not wanting him to get distracted by things blowing in the heavy wind and run off into the storm.

“Guns and light. Move out,” he ordered, thinking if he decided to handle her man that way, Angie would never know. He’d lock it up so tight that even he wouldn’t be able to access the memory.

3

A few minutes later, they were on the upper balcony. The ghostly smell of popcorn and butter that still haunted the stale air was almost covered by the fishy rot blowing in with the rain through the broken doors.

“Wanna watch a movie while we wait?”

Angela smiled sadly. She hadn’t been to a movie since Charlie was a baby, and she kept herself from saying it only by looking at the poster for *A Miracle on 34th Street*, trading one pain for another.

“You know how?”

Marc listened harder, fighting the urge to find a room with a window. “Just have to find the generators and add some gas.”

Angela read the fading movie posters, ignoring the unease of her stomach. After the morning they’d had, that was to be expected.

“Okay. How about *The Shadows of Fate*? I loved *The Chronicles of Riddick*.”

Marc grinned, feeling unworthy of her with his long hair and unshaven face. “You just like Vin Diesel.”

Angela laughed at his joking accusation, admiring his sexy goatee. It added to his image of an old west gunfighter.

My own John Wayne, she thought, and said, “It was a good story.”

“It was crap with a lot of eye candy.”

She turned away, joking, “Not just for the eyes.”

Marc stilled suddenly, scanning the destroyed lobby and dark, shadowy hallways where he thought bodies should be but weren't. This would have made a good place to hole up, but until they'd hit it (literally), there hadn't been anyone here. “Did you hear that?”

Angela listened for a moment, hearing only the storm and things moving with the wind, and then responded, “No. What?”

“Sounded like someone clearing snow with a metal shovel.”

The image made her grimace, and Angela pushed at the door in her mind as her stomach dropped. They had made over a hundred miles in the last week, and she was tired. The door hadn't opened on its own. Something was happening.

“Up, I think. We should go up,” she whispered.

BOHICA, Marc thought. Bend over. Here it comes again. “But Dog and the Blaz—”

“No time.”

The noise came again and they listened intently. It was a headache-causing sound of metal and stone meeting, but instead of a distant echo, it was loud and close. The vibrations rattled the walls and pounded through the floor under them.

Angela ran for the employee door to the right of the upstairs concession area. “We have to—”

The grinding noise was suddenly deafening, and Marc grabbed her arm. He shoved them both into the dark stairwell as the building around them shifted, knocked forward on its foundation.

A twenty-foot wall of mud and debris slammed into the rear of the movie theater like a bomb, blowing out walls and windows. The sound of it was like a tanker truck jackknifing, and the space immediately began filling with sliding ooze. The entire back wall of the cinema crumbled under the onslaught, filling the rows of seats with thick, dark mud. The side walls held against the mud, which slowed and then was finally stopped by

something bigger—the strip mall around the theater, which was more than a mile wide.

Sludge continued to invade, flooding the theater and parking lot around it with ten feet of thick, lumpy glop. It gushed over counters and ticket booths, shoving the two vehicles against the glassless front doors and then out of them.

Angela and Marc flipped on their penlights to view the dim stairwell and bowed-in door below them.

“Is that mud?”

Marc shined his beam on the bottom of the door, where thick, blackish silt was gushing underneath.

“Yeah. A slide.” He motioned her upward. “That door’s not gonna ho-”

CCrrraack! Sswwwooosh!

The door gave way, buckling under the weight of the sopping mud that began to flow into the dark hall. The soggy dirt was almost up to the ceiling, and pale worms the size of pencils squirmed all over each other and the debris, trying to rebury themselves. It horrified Angela. It was normal that the smallest and fastest breeding animals would begin to change first—snakes, rats, worms—but the sight was enough to wake that steel in her spine.

“Those are wrong. They shouldn’t be that big yet,” Angela stated with an odd tone to her voice, feet rooted to the spot as the desire to kill them flooded her. They were a future danger, an abomination. They needed to be handled.

“Not by us, honey,” Marc nudged her further up the steep, twisted stairs. “Keep going. It’ll take a full day to go that way.”

She turned reluctantly, and they climbed to the roof’s exit door, both listening for Dog.

Marc pulled her back before she could go out. “Wait. Always check it out first.”

“Teach me how to do this.”

He nodded. She really would have made a good Marine, a strong fighter.

“Stay no more than two feet away and put your feet where I do mine. If I fall, you should come back here and dig your way out with boards or whatever you can find.”

Angela kept her head down at the thought of losing him, and her mind flew to her gifts. She’d do what she had to, no matter how forbidden it was.

“The whole hillside’s gone!”

They stood outside the doorway, the rest of the roof cracked, crumbled, missing in places. The Show Me state gave them an awful view of missing homes, businesses, and roads that had been between the hill and the theater. Even the reeking turkey farm and rye field beside them was now a twenty-foot high pile of uneven, treacherous mud and debris for miles to the east. Small puffs of smoke and dust rose eerily in the early morning chill.

“Look.” Angela pointed to a black corner, where thick, sloppy mud was still spilling around the front of the theater. “Is that your Blazer?”

Marc sounded relieved. “Mud must have pushed them out. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Angela smiled. “Think we already did. I hear Dog.”

“Come on. Let’s get down from here before the whole mall collapses.”

“We need rope.”

“It’s in the Blazer with my kit.”

Marc was reprimanding himself for leaving his kit when she pointed to the dead telephone wires.

“Can we use those?”

“It’s the grip that’s hard,” he explained. “The poles and wires are sprayed with a flame retardant chemical that makes it slippery. We’ll have to braid a rope together.”

He began fishing in his pockets. “We’ll hope the pole wasn’t loosened by the slide.”

He cut the phone, cable, and electric wires and quickly wove them together.

“Will this work?”

“We’re gonna find out. If it breaks, try to go limp.”

Angela watched as he stood up, studying a dark patch of brackish mud now covering a deer that had been impaled by the thin branch of a walnut tree. “What?”

Marc wrapped the braided cord around his fist and then his waist.

Angela scowled fearfully. “This is the best we—”

“Hang on!”

A second later, she was tight against his body, feet in the air, and then they were dropping off the side of the building.

“Semper Fi!”

His shout gave her the courage to wrap her legs around him and keep her head up as the ground flew closer.

Marc had swung them toward the pole, hoping to slow their descent. He put his feet straight out so that they slammed into the wood with a jerk that had their grip on each other tightening painfully.

Legs holding them to the slippery pole, Marc picked out a shallower-looking patch of mud and swung them for it and the braided cord snapped under their weight.

They dropped to the ground with a hard, wet thud.

They landed with her on top, legs pinned around his waist, and she winced as the layer of mud shifted beneath them, putting more pressure on her knee.

“You okay?”

His eyes were shut, and she leaned in, muddy hands feeling for his pulse. “Brady?”

Dazed but aware that she was getting upset; Marc opened his eyes and said the first thing that came to mind.

“Never have I seen anything so beautiful.”

Angela blushed, fighting the urge to lean down and kiss his pouty lips in relief. “If you say so. How about getting off my sore leg?”

They were on their feet a second later, and he was reaching for her. “Let me see.”

“I’m fine.” Angela flinched away, slinging mud from her hands. “Let’s check on Dog.”

Marc followed her, frowning. Another side effect of her man or the life she’d led?

Neither, his heart whispered. She feels the attraction. She’s not scared. She’s interested and feeling guilty about it.

That made sense. Angie and loyalty went hand in hand.

When Marc let the anxious wolf out, Dog eagerly rushed to check them both over, and Angela took a minute to scan what was left of the town for survivors. She still hoped they might be able to help if someone was stuck, or maybe leave food, but there was only silence. Kirksville was a ghost town, and it made her think of the History Channel. All the bodies that must be buried under that mile-long stretch of thick mud—would archeologists discover them hundreds of years from now and try to figure out what had happened?

“We got lucky.”

Angela didn’t say anything, sure it was more than luck. Fate had allowed both of them to survive repeatedly. Was it because it wanted something from them, something bigger than their tiny lives?

The two Blazers were mud-splattered, the glass on Marc’s side window cracked, but other than dents in the fender and bumper, both vehicles had held up despite being shoved through the glassless windows by a wall of mud. They climbed into their seats with squelches, grimaces, and shared shrugs. They were alive. It had been a good day.

As they drove, Angela’s mind was on her reaction to Marc reaching for her. She had wanted to melt into his embrace! She was no longer able to ignore the intimacy that was growing. Marc was still a good man.

Your man? the witch questioned, and Angela was glad when Marc interrupted.

“You okay back there?”

She flashed her beams in response and saw he wanted to say something but wouldn't. She'd been a fool not to call him all those years ago.

“Ready to go till dark?”

She picked up the mike. “And then some. You lead, I'll follow.”

“Copy that.”

They had been traveling together for a month now. Five hundred miles of heartbreaking, gut wrenching, unbelievable horror, and Missouri was no different from Indiana, Virginia, or Ohio. Except, the ground here felt bad and smelled worse. They had seen their first obvious mutation yesterday. Only a single black ant the size of a baby's shoe, all of its eyes had watched them alertly as they went by.

When she'd stopped, Marc hadn't said anything, just waited while she squashed the freak under her tires. It had been a powerful moment for him, seeing Angie so appalled by something that she decided it didn't have the right to exist, and he had never felt closer to her than at that moment. It was how Marc had spent most of his adult life.

“Three o'clock, down low.”

Angela immediately hit the brakes, searching for a clear path to her target.

“Use your gun this time,” he instructed, and Angela didn't fight the urge to destroy, the need to do something overpowering. She'd had to let the worms go. These she didn't.

“Slow down. Don't scare them off.”

The small pack of ants didn't stray from their slow, disorderly course through the dying switch grass and they didn't seem afraid of the tires and engines that rolled closer, but the witch said they were aware. The demon could feel the scent of alarm coming from them.

Angela slid her window down.

“That's far enough.”

The witch protested the distance, but Angela agreed. She could hit them from here if she tried, and Marc knew it. He wanted her to use this as a lesson too.

My how we've changed, the witch commented as anger and revulsion took over Angela's trigger finger.

Not a killer, huh?

Angela ignored the hurtful jab. These mutations were in reach and couldn't be allowed to endanger more of her people, couldn't be left free to turn America into a cheap slasher film. Angela opened fire

They tried to flee, squealing and panic-stricken, and she took a savage, guilty pleasure in their destruction, getting the last one with her tire as it darted for cover under the Blazer.

Marc was impressed, aroused, and he struggled to keep it from his voice as he keyed the mike. "Very good. Ready?"

"Let's roll."

4

They traveled until it was almost dark; the land around them was wet, deceitful-looking. By the time they hit higher, dryer ground, the mud had molded to them like a second skin.

Marc had chosen to make camp on a flat, almost deserted stretch of highway, and their only cover was two moss-dotted dogwood trees, both without a single bloom.

"You look like an abused dog."

Marc snickered and stomped to the rear of his Blazer, trying to dislodge the mud. "Feel like one."

"Let's make a shower."

He thought about it for a minute then began to gather a mental list. "Got an empty gallon jug?"

An hour later, the wolf was out roaming the breezy darkness around them, and they had tested their crude invention on the

dinner dishes, sharing tired grins of accomplishment. It had been a long day.

“Where should we set it up at?”

She tossed a blanket onto the roof of his Blazer and moved one of the jugs they had warmed to the hood. When she turned, he was frowning.

“What’s wrong?”

“Who’s gonna hold the towel?” he questioned.

She was getting a bit nervous, but hiding it. “I’ll pull my Blazer alongside. Once we open the doors and hang a couple of sheets, it’ll be fine.”

Thinking this was probably going to be hard on her, Marc got busy. The privacy was for her, not him. He had showered with ten other naked men in the room nearly every day for years. His red face was from the images of her naked and soapy that had flooded his mind.

When the jugs were ready, Angela climbed onto the roof and sat down, supplies next to her.

Marc took off his Colts and entered the cozy four-by-four area. As he began undressing, Angela lit a smoke, trying not to imagine his every action and failing as she kept watch on the dark, Missouri sky. Her sharp gaze picked out shadowy forms of mountains to the east that she assumed were the Ozarks. Everything appeared normal here, but she wasn’t fooled and continued to keep watch.

Rap-rap-rap-rap!

Angela fumbled for her gun, and felt Marc’s displeasure even though she couldn’t see it.

“It’s a woodpecker.”

“This time of night?”

“Everything’s screwed up now for them, too.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Don’t be, just remember it. Once you familiarize the sounds of your surroundings, you’ll only react to what’s not normal for that environment. Your mind will sort it out for you.”

Angela smiled softly, grateful for him and all she was learning. Marc was the perfect teacher. He never made her feel stupid or acted like he was better, and she loved being with him.

Angela heard his dog tag clink and felt her mouth go dry at the thought of his naked chest. His belt buckle was next, then a zipper, and a rustle of jeans that made her heart pound.

“Hit me, woman,” he called cheerfully.

Angela slowly began pouring warm water into the shower they had made, thinking she hadn’t heard any underwear.

She sucked in a surprised breath when her body responded to that image. He was the only male she had ever been physically attracted to.

Liar.

She ignored the witch.

“Soap, please.”

That brought a new set of images, and she was careful not to touch his wet fingers as she handed him the blue cake.

“Washrag?”

She got it quickly, wishing he would hurry.

When he finally called for a rinse, she was relieved. Too many feelings and memories were coming back to her, and it had to stop. A spark hadn’t been enough then, and it wouldn’t be now.

“I’m done. You can stop drooling.”

Angela flushed, stuttering in embarrassed denial.

Marc laughed, drying off. “Well, I thought it was funny. Come on down. Your turn.”

Angela moved slowly, fear creeping into her veins at the thought of being defenseless with a man above her.

Pulling on his shirt, Marc sensed it. Their eyes locked, spoke.

I’m scared.

You can trust me.

Prove it.

“Hang on.” He pulled on his shoes and then dug out another blanket that he tossed over the opening.

“If it gets lighter, you’ll know I’m peeking.”

“Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Angie. You know that.”

Marc kept up a steady stream of chatter about their travel plans, and Angela hurried, body tingling from her hands and thoughts.

By the time she finished, Marc pouring water through a small hole, she had relaxed more than either of them had thought she would. She trusted him. Marc had always been hers, and that hadn’t changed.

5

A bit later, they settled closer to each other than usual, sharing a pot of hot chocolate by the fire. Angela was trying to comb out her hair, the length making it difficult.

Marc watched her while he cleaned their weapons, not glancing away as the flames danced over her black curls and pale skin.

“I can do that without ripping all your hair out. The birds could make a nest with what you’ve thrown into the fire.”

Angela’s first thought was no, and she was shocked to hear her own eager voice say, “Deal. You battle the tangles, I’ll roll.”

His surprised, happy look kept her from withdrawing the offer, and she surrendered the brush reluctantly when he held out a hand.

Marc shifted behind her and knelt down, then began to gently brush through the tangles. He started with the damp ends, aware of how shallow her breathing had become, how tense her posture was.

It was an uncertain moment for Angela, and she listened with a thumping heart, hearing leaves rustling in the soft breeze, the gravel crunching under Dog’s paws as he returned, panting. And all the while, she waited for the footsteps and gunfire, fear insisting Kenny could be here by now.

Dog sniffed their feet, their beds, and then curled up near the fire, and Angela told herself to relax. The wolf would hear anyone sneaking around, even a Marine. Besides, she wasn't doing anything wrong. Marc was just brushing her hair.

By the time he had gotten a third of the way up her small waist, Angela had adjusted and Marc eased down, legs on either side of her. She tensed again as his big body surrounded hers, but when he only continued to work on her damp curls; she continued what she was doing.

Marc wondered if she would note today's escape in her journal. She'd had him telling stories every night for the first few weeks, but hadn't asked for one lately. He suddenly wondered why. Had his tale of betrayal and self-preservation during Katrina bothered her that much?

"Not so much your part. You followed orders. It just makes me sad all those people were hurt."

Marc agreed. "I almost left the Marines over it. I mean, we could hear them screaming for help. How's a guy supposed to live with that?"

Angela wanted to comfort him, but she was afraid to say the wrong thing and break the peacefulness.

She did the best she could. "They wouldn't let you help. You were knocked out when you tried to anyway. Nothing you could do."

Marc sighed glumly, wishing he had... He sighed. If he had shot his way out, he'd be dead now too.

Pop!

Angela jumped into his arms as the log in the fire exploded into a shower of sparks, bodies brushing as they laughed.

Marc was pleased when she didn't move away. He kept his hands working, almost holding her.

When he finished, he laid the brush down and rested his chin on her shoulder. "You got that rolled yet?"

She held it up, and they both laughed at the misshapen joint. Angela's stomach tightened at the feel of his warm breath on her

cheek, but she didn't pull away. "It'll burn, but it won't be pretty."

He chuckled, fishing in his pockets for a lighter. When he leaned in to share the flame, their bodies made full, willing contact for the first time in fifteen long years.

Angela's heart immediately settled into a rhythm of a peace that she hadn't felt in a long time.

"Look, honey. The moon."

She leaned against Marc's hard chest to peer up and was happy to be able to see the dim outline through the grit.

"It's a good sign." She still didn't move. "We need more of those."

They smoked in silence, and Angela let the warmth and comfort of Marc's body carry her away. She was safe, if only for this moment.

Her lashes fluttered when he slid an arm around her to pass the joint. Caught up in the good moment, Marc couldn't resist putting a soft kiss on her smooth cheek. "Never did I see such beauty, such courage, such passion, and such fear in her eyes. The lonely heart demands and the mind refuses, but the body, the core, pulses with need."

He inhaled and passed, continuing to speak his poetry as they relaxed in clean jeans and matching Marine sweatshirts.

"Never did I see such hair, dark as the night, and lips of love, red as a rose. A body that tempts me, begs me, and blue eyes that follow me into my dreams and beyond. Forgive me these careless slips of shameless flattery. I cannot explain, with mere words, what you mean to me. Hold to the truth, to your heart, to love... To us."

"It's beautiful." Angela let her cheek rest against his chin, pushing away the voice screaming of Kenn's anger.

"It's the way you make me feel, what you make me see. My life was so empty without you."

Hers, too. Other than her son, she'd had no one she could love or trust, and when Marc wrapped his arms around her, she relaxed against him, the long day wearing her down.

Don't lie to yourself, her heart scolded, and Angela faced it this time. She was too aware of the man behind her to keep denying it. Marc was the only one who had ever understood her and what she needed.

When he kissed her jaw again, she said nothing to make him stop.

"You smell good," he mumbled against her neck, sweet vanilla assaulting his senses. The feel of his lips on her skin sent an unexpected shiver of pleasure into her stomach.

"Are you cold?" he asked, tightening his arms around her.

Angela flushed, nodding so that he would pull the blanket around them and make their innocent embrace more private.

Aware that things were going too fast and that tomorrow she'd probably be standoffish again, Marc wrapped the quilt around them anyway and pulled another cover over their legs. As he wrapped himself around her, she slipped her hand into his.

Marc sucked in a breath, heart skipping, and they sat together in silence, both very aware of the other, yet content to be so close.

The day caught up to her quickly. When Angela was asleep in his arms, Marc gently laid them down and pulled the covers up. He cradled her, loving every second. As he buried his face in her hair, he placed a long, slow kiss to her neck that gave him chills and sent her eyes flying open.

Marc forced himself to stop despite how hard it (he) was. "Night, honey. See you in the morning."

"Yes, you will," she mumbled groggily, already falling back to sleep and Marc joined her, the wolf at their feet. They would face their demons together when the time came.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
The Devil and his Minions

March 19th

1

Dillan and Dean made it to the filthy slaver camp right before dawn, pulling three middle-aged women and a strikingly beautiful teenager behind their horses on rawhide ropes. The females had all come from Kimball, Nebraska, where the brothers had spent a few days waiting out a dust storm.

Surrounded by a wall of mountains, the slaver camp was a sprawling, unorganized mess of mud-splattered, bullet-ridden vehicles and torn, dusty tents across highway 287. They were out of sight and sound of 25 and the next town, with trees, charred frames of cars, and ranch homes as the border. One house had been reduced to only a blackened frame with anti-religious phrases sprayed on its sheds and outbuildings, targeted due to it being covered in Christmas decorations. The hundreds of statues and displays were riddled with bullet holes and melted by Molotov cocktails, but there had simply been too much to destroy all of it. Now, it stood as a warning that the world of rich excess was over.

Smoke swirled sharply with the wind from burned-down fires, and hordes of flies buzzed and landed, swarmed and resettled over the garbage dump behind the camp, where small corpses lay rotting in the foggy drizzle.

The females on the ropes didn't react to these horrors as they stumbled by; concentrating only on moving their feet so they could draw another breath. The rawhide was constantly shrinking, rubbing away the skin on their necks until they were

slowly choking all the time. Even rape was secondary to breathing.

Dean and Dillan came into the camp openly, not expecting to spot guards and they didn't. Word had spread, and many of the places ahead of the Mexicans would already be abandoned by the time they got there. That would work in the twins' favor. Empty towns meant no women and for these men, that might lose Cesar leadership if it continued long enough. The twins had an offer that would be to the Mexican leader's advantage. Or so he would think, if they did this right.

They had made it over four hundred miles in two weeks. Alternating driving, they had stayed on the move until they stopped near the Nebraska-Colorado state line to rest and ferret out a few females for Cesar. His uncontested rule had given the Mexican a sense of power and control that few would be stupid (brave) enough to challenge and it was that strength the brothers had come for.

Despite owing Cesar their lives, Dean and Dillan felt no loyalty toward the mean little man. There was respect for his quick, brutal methods of control, but if not for their failure with the witch, they likely would have never returned. It was one more thing they hated her for. They had been gone a long time, and Cesar was unstable, making it hard to know how well they would be received. He might order them killed before they had a chance to make the offer.

Few of the passed out and sleeping slavers noticed their arrival. Those who did acknowledged them and ignored the bandages, swept the women, and then averted their gazes. Word had also spread about the brothers, and despite their long absence, now was clearly a bad time to draw their attention. Even the camp mutts, starving, mean mixes of indecipherable origins, shied from them.

Dean and Dillan went to the rear of the dirty area, past the reeking, rusted semis. They shoved the cringing captives into the rear of an empty one, locking them in. These were the holding

pens for slaves, and there was no guard. Those already broken had no courage left to run, and those who were fresh wouldn't make it far before every man in camp was on them. A loose slave was fair game.

With their noses full of the holding cells' decay and the harsh odor of gasoline, the twins traveled to the center of the muddy, stinking site, certain they would find the leader there. His tent would be surrounded by his men so that if they were attacked, he wouldn't be hit first. Cesar was smart, ruthless, and exactly what they needed.

The grungy green tent was indeed in the middle, and it was one of only a few dozen vinyl shelters. Most of the men preferred the open sky above them after years of not seeing it at all from federal detention centers. It was also a lot easier to wrap up in a blanket and sleep under a truck.

From outside Cesar's tent, the twins could see the Loveland, Colorado skyline lit up with flames and thick, black smoke. Their eyes were drawn to the charred frame of the hulking jumbo jetliner resting in a thicket of piñon trees to the right of the burning town.

Surrounded by a muddy, devastated landscape, and covered in reddish, ill-looking dust, the crushed plane was still more unbelievable than the destroyed city behind it.

Loud snores were barely audible over dogs yelping, women crying, and the pop of neglected fires, but there was an instant silence as the twins slid inside the center lean-to...and then the sound of a gun being cocked.

"Who ees there?"

The smells of sex, blood, and violence mixed badly with the cigar smoke in the dark tent. The cautious brothers stayed in the shadows, so there wasn't a clear shot.

Their gazes lingered on the naked teenager chained to the center pole of Cesar's filthy tent like a dangerous dog. She was curled into a ball, showing a body they immediately wanted.

Jennifer felt it, tensing. Other than that, she didn't budge. She knew better.

"We have an offer for you."

"And, an untouched gift."

Cesar grunted in recognition, putting his weapon under his pillow. When he yawned lazily, the twins grimaced in distaste as bad breath mixed with the other strong odors.

"So, you have returned. I did not think you would."

A candle flared to life, giving them a better view of the Mexican and the bloody girl at his feet whose swollen face and crusted thighs said she had passed a rough night in Cesar's tent.

"What happened to you?" the slaver demanded, getting a look at their bandages as he pulled up his cruddy jeans. The material was tacky with dried blood—the girl's from the look of her. "Who attacked you?"

"A witch," the bald brothers answered together.

The bearded slaver puffed on a cigar, considering. Cesar had never been sure about these two, and he studied them while pulling on muddy boots. If not for the good work they had done for him in the past, he would kill them here and now. "A bruja?"

They nodded at the same time, tones full of hatred. "Yes, magic."

"Spells. A witch."

Cesar tried to figure out what they could hope to gain from such a lie. When he found nothing, he let himself consider what it could do for him. He was no stranger to the occult and its mysteries. If the twins were telling the truth, if they had found what the old world hadn't, his plans to seed America with his bastards and control it through them would be unstoppable. "You have seen this?"

The twins told him everything that had happened. They offered no excuses for their failure, didn't talk up their actions, and it convinced the Mexican. The mercenaries believed what they were saying. Was it possible? A real witch?

The three men tensed as the flap opened to reveal a stocky Mexican with crisscrossed gun belts and an ugly scar that stretched across his cheek, ran up his nose, and over top of his brow. It cut his face in half and gave him the appearance of someone who liked to cause people pain. “Everything is okay?”

Cesar waved him in with his deformed hand.

The twins ran scornful smirks over the new man’s broken, yellow teeth, baggy shirt, and torn, muddy pants, but they both recognized him for what he was—a possible threat to their plans.

“No, but it cannot be helped. Get the men up and ready for tomorrow—then give Richard the signal. Trace light red ‘e uno green.”

Cesar hated the sound of the broken English coming from his mouth, hated anything American, but with so many of those here not knowing their native language, he had little choice if he wanted to be understood.

José swept the hermanos with clear dislike. He had been openly against Cesar letting these two live, though he had voted to spare Rick.

The mercenaries smirked tauntingly.

“We have esclavos in truck six.”

“See to them.”

The heartless killer bared his broken fangs at them before ducking out into the heavy wind and mud. Men who were about to come toward him with questions changed their mind when they viewed the look on his face.

José was only a cousin and not nearly as deadly as Cesar, but he had earned a vicious reputation with his temper. He was left alone when he stomped to the trucks, worrying about the twins. They were hard asses, and if they decided they wanted control of Cesar’s camp, there was a good chance they would get it. In Mexico, they were the ones to call when no one else could get the job done.

The wind beat against the tent, and in the thick silence after José ducked out, all three men could hear the girl's nervous breathing.

Jennifer had been with him since the week of the war, and fear for her life was something that never left, even when she was alone.

Cesar looked at the brothers with a hard, calculating expression. "There is no way to explain these things?"

"No."

"We followed for almost a month. She was alone until she sent out the wave of power."

"She conjured a protector."

They appeared desperate to Cesar, clearly not the same men who had left him after they'd conquered NORAD. "You know where she goes?"

"She's only traveling northwest, never deviates."

"There is a group near Yellowstone that calls for survivors," Cesar said.

"You hear them this far away?"

Cesar frowned, pulled a beaten sombrero from the debris-littered floor and slapped it on over his tightly kinked black hair.

"Sí. Your bruja is going to them?"

"Maybe. We think she's hunting for family."

Cesar's frown grew, noting burnt spots on their clothes and the grimy bandana wrapped around Dillan's bandaged wrist. The white of the gauze under it had long since turned black.

"We must get to her before she reaches them. This group is big, organized. A witch would make them a threat to me." Cesar looked up, mind racing. "You can take her?"

Dean shook his head, while Dillan shrugged.

Cesar felt a tremor of worry in his gut. He had never seen or heard of a time when the twins had disagreed on anything. The woman's soldier must truly be strong.

“Not by ourselves,” Dillan stated finally, and Cesar observed his grimace when he flapped his hand to deflect a determined fly. The injury to his arm was obviously bad.

That is it, Cesar decided. It is her man they wanted, her soldier.

Surely he was the one responsible. Then why say a woman? That was worse. Either way, it came down to revenge.

“So, this is why you’ve come.”

It wasn’t a question, and he glared at them, thinking it wouldn’t hurt to agree for now. “Mine during the day, yours at night?”

They both nodded eagerly, and Cesar grinned, his gold front tooth flashing. “It will be good. We will lay a trap, kill her soldier and have her.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“She knows things.”

Cesar fingered the handle of his hoja, hating it that they were always so disrespectful.

The injured brothers waited for him to pull the knife and thus hand over his camp. Either way, they were determined to pit his men against their witch.

“You have a plan?” the slaver asked finally, full of controlled anger. Anyone else, he would have already challenged, but against these two vicious assassins, he wasn’t sure he could win with only the blade he was sitting on and a hangover. He was too far from his gun.

“Yes.” Dean’s leer lingered on the chained girl, but he was aware that the evil Mexican was now an enemy instead of an ally and would need to be handled as such.^[1]_[SEP]“We’ll follow her; figure out where she’s going. If it’s a good place, we can take shelter there for the winter.”

“You are estúpido to let her reach familia. Then you face dos brujas, yes?”

The twins were clearly pissed at the insult, had killed for less, and Cesar kept his hand on the knife, thinking he would at least be able to take one of them with him.

“It’s better to control them both, than to have the missing one ambush us. And we can’t find the other until she leads us to them.”

“How will you get them once she reaches the safety of this Haven?”

“You’ll surround them and demand they hand over both. We’ll pick off a few easy targets, use your inside traitor to cause chaos, and then make it clear we followed her so they’ll hand her over to save themselves.”

The other brother picked up the explanation. “Once they do, we’ll make her use her power against any defenses they have, and you’ll be in control of a safe area, new supplies, a witch, and slaves—all without having to fight and lose men.”

Cesar needed proof to go through so much. Their word wasn’t enough. This had to be a trick. “The men will not believe.”

“They will later, but for now, it doesn’t matter. They don’t even have to know. Just keep going north and give them whores and whiskey,” Dean instructed.

“Didn’t you tell us you wanted to take Cheyenne and Casper by May?” Dillan asked.

Cesar’s face lit up greedily. “Sí, and my men know it.”

“Good. That will put us on an intercept course. Dean and I will track her, and we’ll also find some bait to send in with Rick.”

Cesar considered it. He had used the betrayer repeatedly, and no one ever suspected him until it was too late—because he was white. The Americanos should have remembered their own history. Whites were not more trustworthy than the Russians or even himself, for that matter. They were just a bit more careful to cover their asses.

“Less than a month from now, you’ll own Wyoming, probably have a good start on Nebraska, and be only a day or two from the tank hidden near there. Best of all, you’ll rule the entire western half of this country, from the Nevada wastelands to the Midwest corn belt,” Dillan stated.

Dean finished it off. “Plus, this group you want will know you’re coming and lose courage.”

Cesar gestured savagely and the brothers knew they’d won.

“America is dead, and I will show them that!” Cesar gestured violently, the missing fingers making it a grotesque motion. He didn’t see the looks the twins were giving his young slave. She was his personal property, and he didn’t share. He wanted to be sure the bastards he left were his, and every man in his camp knew he would kill (the girl and the man) to be sure of it.

“It shall be as you say. Drink, smoke, rest. Tomorrow, we take Windsor and then you shall have the revenge you deserve. Now, let us go get my gift, and you will prove she is pure.”

2

Cesar invaded the untouched town of Windsor under the cover of darkness and a violent thunderstorm, ruthlessly directing his men to block escape routes at all four corners of the city.

They split up, began moving in at the stroke of midnight, and gave no mercy to anyone, like they hadn’t in any of the other towns and cities they’d taken along Interstate 25. Moving inward, the Mexicans slowly invaded Windsor over the next six hours, burning everything as they traveled. Those few who managed to escape would have nothing to return to.

Doors were kicked in and terrified girls and women were dragged into the rain, floors and bedclothes soaking up the blood of their husbands and fathers. Those found with the radio broadcasting good old American values were tortured, beheaded, and dismembered, then left with Mexican flags draped over their

faces. All the males were killed where they were found, babies left to die alone, and female after female was raped, beaten, broken.

During the first hours of this hell, the twins were in Cesar's tent, taking what was his. They snuck back to join the battle (slaughter) after they filled her with seed over and over, and Cesar never knew they hadn't been with him all the time.

A few of his sharper men could have told him, but that might mean a confrontation between the three, and Cesar's men weren't sure he would come out on top. The twins were hard, and none of Cesar's crew wanted them in control. Their way of life now was perfect, without rules, and the stocky Mexican was still followed without hesitation even when they got to Fort Collins and found it abandoned. Word had spread through the area, and the survivors were scared.

The slavers were coming.

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Success and Failure

March 21st, 2013

1

This had to be close enough.

Adrian waited for Kenn to finish updating the newest Eagle who was about to take over his post for his shift of eight in the morning to two in the afternoon. Jeremy was on Neil's team, Level Three status, and the right to have Point had only been earned last night.

Adrian sighed, tired and worried as he waited for his people to get ready to start another day of hard traveling. They were on the edge of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands, off 387, and while he was glad to be east of 25, pictures had verified that Casper and Buffalo were ghost towns.

It made his stomach burn. One was buried, the other submerged. His warning hadn't been heard, hadn't mattered. They hadn't picked up a single survivor since the dust storm, which made these people in Cheyenne all the more important.

Sighing again, Adrian swept the mountains that surrounded them. Would the evergreens up there have the mold that the fir and pine trees down here did? Would it smell like smoke and unburied dead? Were there bodies of deer, moose, and people? He was almost sure they would discover that for themselves.

"You're *The Man* on this one, Marine. You ready?" Adrian asked as Kenn came to his side, sharp tone of a drill instructor replacing the calm demeanor the camp usually witnessed. The slavers' rampage had traveled up Interstate 25 faster than they had estimated, and Cheyenne had called again.

“Locked and loaded. Kyle’s team is stowing the beans, bags, and bullets.”

“They’re good to go, eager to prove themselves. What about you, jarhead? How do you feel?”

Kenn’s expression was hard as he noted Adrian’s dusty jeans and wrinkled camouflage shirt. He’d been up all night again. “Good, ready.”

“In and out, Marine, like with the old lady. But if not, if something goes wrong and you have to fight?”

Kenn’s voice was intent. “Then we’ll kill as many as we can.”

It may have been wrong in the old world, but it was all that was left to them now, and Adrian made them believe in it by doing it himself whenever he thought the man’s crimes (it was almost always the men who committed big transgressions now) warranted it. This definitely did.

The slavers were a growing threat that he felt duty-bound to eliminate. But he couldn’t yet, not against one hundred fifty well-armed men who had become good at conquering large groups of survivors. The terrible stories of the refugees who had escaped, town after town, neighborhood after neighborhood (life after life!), said he needed to tread carefully with the slavers.

It pleased him that Kenn seemed to feel it too, repeating himself to make sure his boss knew.

“If any opportunity comes up to do damage, we’ll take it. *I’ll* take it.”

Adrian clapped him on the arm, satisfied that Kenn meant it. They had been falling behind and would arrive later than expected. That made the mission more dangerous, putting the Eagles and the slavers near Cheyenne at roughly the same time.

“Watch your six. We need you.”

“Semper Fi.”

“Oorah!”

A deep frown planted itself across Adrian’s face as Kenn and the Eagles left. He hated it that their first encounter with these

dangerous men would happen without him there to judge the threat.

Adrian hit the button on the tape player in his pocket, listening intently. Was he missing anything?

“SOS, Safe Haven! This is Cheyenne! SOS!”

“Go ahead, Overloaded.”

“They’ve hit Wellington! We can see the smoke and people are coming here, and I can’t care for them! We need help now!”

Adrian hit stop, the desperation making him consider changing places with Kenn, but he knew he couldn’t. The Marine wasn’t ready for leadership of an entire camp yet. For this mission though, he was perfect. Kyle and his team were good, making steady progress every day, and though only ten men were getting into the armored vehicles, they would still be a force to be reckoned with.

Fighting a migraine, Adrian went on his rounds. Another forty souls would bring their number to a hundred and seventy-seven. They were only a week from Cheyenne, but there was no way the whole camp could go and get out without being seen. Kenn and Kyle would make it in two days, and Adrian would worry the whole time.

The constantly growing group seemed almost empty to Adrian once Kenn and the Eagles were gone, and the leader threw himself into the work, forcing a faked optimism that only his men noticed.

Adrian didn’t like the feeling of being incomplete but never doubted that they were. He also hated to have people out of Safe Haven, only relaxed when the entire flock was under his watchful care, and he knew they’d been lucky so far that everyone who had gone out had returned. He’d increased their chances with the addition of armed escorts, but Adrian anticipated a time when he could settle them down and show

them how to provide for their needs, instead of scouring this broken land like scavengers.

Now camped in the heart of the Thunder Basin National Grassland, they were only fifteen miles from the South Dakota state line. The tall pines, blue grass, and forget-me-nots were comforting sights after all the horror along 387. If not for the heavy fog, they would already be on the road now, sheep gawking out the windows at a muddy landscape that included a crashed government chopper.

Adrian tensed suddenly, feeling the uneasy mix of power and magic coming. The landscape wavered, changed, and for a moment, he saw a survivor of the crash, her outline tall, thin and tough.

He looked away from the vision, thinking it had been so long since he'd had one that he'd forgotten how it made his heart feel squeezed.

Hoping she was one of his, Adrian got moving again, feeling a little bitter with fate. He had been promised magic, and so far, had only gotten a gifted teenager who was too young to help yet.

Adrian lit a smoke, telling himself it didn't matter. When Charlie was needed most, at least he would be here, already under the discreet eyes of the Eagles. They had been told to watch him right after the restless teenager had gotten his own tent—the result of a noisy fight where Charlie had almost hurt one of the boys he was bunking with.

Kenn's cadet was a bit unstable. *Unhappy*, Adrian corrected himself. Even the job with the veterinarian wouldn't be enough to hold him here. Something had Charlie's mind, pulling at him, and when Kenn returned, Adrian hoped to ferret out whatever it was.

There was a full day of activities planned—the biggest: a towing contest. Their clearing times had improved because he'd made it into a race to discover who could do it fastest without breaking any safety rules. Tonight, the first crew leader would be picked by whoever won, and with Kenn gone, more people

would be willing to try. There was very little that his right-hand man wasn't good at, and it even sounded different without him here. The people were subdued somehow without his energetic, boisterous XO.

Adrian kept walking, sick of hearing tents flapping in the wind. It was slow going right now. He was organizing them, teaching them to survive, and the whole time, he had been moving them north, toward Montana. That had changed last week when he'd convinced them that going any further north would run them into a ground zero and probably give them lethal doses of radiation. Stories from refugees they'd picked up supported him. They were moving by vote now, picking a long list of places to try, but he would have guided them east even if they hadn't voted to. It was bad here. They couldn't stay in Wyoming any longer.

The packs of mutated ants were thick throughout the state, and once he got them a couple hundred miles further from 25 and the slavers, Adrian planned to travel southeast for a while, toward Georgia and the miles of caves hopefully still waiting there. He hadn't thought of a better place yet and dreaded having to confirm that going into the ground was the only way they would survive. There had to be somewhere else!

Comforted by the steady crunch of boots guarding their perimeter, Adrian moved past Kenn's improved mess—where coffee and food lines were now open on both sides—and came to the traveling emergency class. Tents flapped mockingly in his ear, and he paused to listen to part of a lesson, immediately assaulted with the odors of cologne, sweat, and cigar smoke. He loved it. It was the smell of life, and beat the hell out of all the other shit they were usually inhaling.

A small group was gathered around the side of a big van, watching Peggy Ann Kelly, the single, 40-something mother of little Becky, change a flat tire. This class had solved the need for one crew to do all of the work, all of the time. This way, the entire camp did it.

The cute, reddish-blond woman was sweating and greasy. Most of the men watching would have gladly done it for her to get her attention, but Adrian had made it clear that people needed to be able to fend for themselves, as well as function as a team, and the males offered advice but no actual help.

Peggy struggled to break the last lug nut, and Adrian denied the bald professor who stepped forward to help. The portly man carried his profession proudly, from his thick glasses to his plaid-patterned suit. Adrian didn't look away from the brooding glare the teacher sent his way. He also didn't keep his voice down, and the gusting wind carried it further than the class.

“She has to learn. What if she gets separated?”

The man frowned, and the thick, disapproving silence from the others surrounded him.

“You sure it isn't because I'm black and she's white?”

Adrian stiffened at the accusing tone. Joseph had been here long enough to know how things worked. Was he still holding onto that shit? They didn't have many of the other races represented here yet, but that wasn't because Adrian didn't want them. The war had split more than families. The old segregation lines had slammed down, making most races search for their own kind. It was something he needed people like this bitter teacher to help him conquer.

“You're from Salt Lake City. You were almost dead when we found you. Group of men had beaten you so badly that we didn't think you'd live at first. There were only twenty of us then, and no one knew what to do with you. About you.”

“Because I'm a nigger.”

It wasn't a question, and the people around them muttered uneasily. No one used the word here, not even in joking. Adrian would throw you out for that, even if you meant it affectionately.

Adrian's tone was sharp. “We only had our basic laws, and race was something we hadn't even talked about. We saw you bleeding and had to make a choice. Let you die, or let you in and

find a way to deal with all the problems mixing races inevitably brings.”

Adrian now had the attention of everyone close enough to hear, and he used the moment to strengthen the bonds. “We made the choice in about fifteen seconds, Joseph. You’re not black or white in this camp. You’re a survivor, and that’s the only one that matters here. Leave race in the past, where it belongs, and things will continue to improve for everyone.”

2

“All those jeeps worry me,” Kyle stated quietly, lowering the binoculars.

“We’ll have to draw them out,” Kenn replied, watching the heavily armed men patrol the top and four sides of the large brick school house where the refugees were hiding. Two on top, one each on the sides and rear, and two more on the front doors—maybe four inside, but judging from all the jeeps parked wildly along the exits, probably more like six or ten.

They were outnumbered, but not by much, and Kenn frowned in concentration as the thick clouds rolled through the sky and colored lightning flashing in the distance. He scanned the area again, seeing holiday decorations torn down and pictures that had been used for target practice, but underneath, he was evaluating how best to kill them all.

“You and me are covering the top?”

Still missing his rifle, Kenn merely answered with his hands. They hadn’t found any ammo for the M16s, so that meant getting into range for handguns. When it started, a few of the Mexicans would come out, but most of them would take up positions around the hostages, and they’d have a standoff. For a while. Then their reinforcements would come. This was only a scouting party, and it bothered Kenn that neither he nor Adrian had expected this level of organization. They would have to do this quietly. No telling how far out the big group was.

It had only taken Adrian's Eagles thirty hours to get here, driving straight through in five-hour shifts. The men who hadn't driven stood sentry duty when they arrived, to let the others get a short rest. They had snuck in as dusk slowly faded.

The ten men on sentry duty hated it here. It reeked with decay, and even the constant gusts of salty, smoky wind couldn't knock it down. The awful odor came from all the bodies. Thousands of them, fresh and old, littered the city, along with lines of burnt houses, cars, and businesses. There were thick drag marks in the dust left by the storm, garbage and mud-covered streets, and little pillars of smoke rising that signaled the path the Mexicans had taken to get here. It was a war zone.

"What do you want to do?"

The edge of frustration in Kyle's voice was what Kenn had been waiting for, and he stood up, always feeling the need to prove who was in charge when they were on missions together. To the listening men, he said the right thing. Only Kyle would sting afterward when he remembered almost losing his cool with only silence used against him.

"We kill them all."

Kenn knelt in the dirt, flipping open his K-BAR to draw in the damp dirt behind the big storage sheds they were using for cover. He hadn't created this plan, but these men wouldn't know that. "We go with suppressors. Take out this side and corner, and as they come out, we pick them off. If *The Man* comes out too, it'll all be over."

"And if we don't spot the leader?" Kyle kept the bitterness out of his tone, but not his gestures. He almost hated the smug Marine leading his team today, and was now actively hoping for someone to join Safe Haven that he could support.

Kenn slid his knife into his muddy boot. "We'll have taken out at least half these men, and that'll leave a lot of exits without coverage. We'll look from those trees along the windows first, then slip in and nail 'em as we find 'em. Once inside, we go for

the gym, because that's where they'll be with a group of sheep that size. From there, we'll do what we do best."

"They might negotiate, surrender."

Kenn stood up, automatically checking his gear and gun, and the other Eagles followed his lead. They had been on a few missions where hostages were involved, but only once had there been a shootout. The small gang of Aryan brothers hadn't wanted to give up their captives. They had given their lives instead, but the newness of doing battle hadn't worn off for the Eagles yet.

Kenn tapped his good luck charm, a Zippo lighter he kept in his pocket. "Adrian wouldn't give them mercy, and we won't either. Top four shooters with me, the rest to the sides and meet up. I'm man in the middle. On my mark."

Kenn's timing was perfect. He and Kyle fired as they ran, and the two Mexican lookouts jerked at the same time, fell together. The other man on the roof darted toward his comrade, and then he arched, stopped, and fell as the second rush of black-clad Eagles hit the building.

They came to the wall in fast waves, Kenn and Kyle sliding into view as the front doors opened, and two men walked out.

Kyle whistled and then waved a ringed middle finger at the shocked faces.

The two men drew their guns, and the Eagles ducked out of sight as they gave chase.

"One...two...three. Now!"

Jumping out together, their guns took down both men before they could return fire, Kenn shooting twice—but only one shot was aimed at the enemy.

The two Eagles quickly dragged the heavy bodies around the corner as Chris pointed to the other row of trees. Chris was on Kyle's team, second in command. "The banners center there. That's probably the gym."

Eight men carefully eased up the trees a minute later, using the thick branches for cover from the ground and windows.

“Bulletproof glass.” Kenn’s voice was barely audible.

Kyle snickered, showing white teeth, but the amusement didn’t reach his voice. “Not today. All the Eagles are packing armor-piercing rounds. Your mags too.”

Kenn’s mind raced as he peered through the dirty glass, seeing only five armed men around the circle of roughly fifty civilians on the gymnasium floor. Which one was the leader?

A door opened on their side of the building, and a tall, thin man emerged; face completely hidden by his bandana. He noticed the bodies right away.

“Dedro!”

“Aaahhh!”

Kenn’s shot connected, but the guerilla’s yell ruined their element of surprise. People came to the windows, and footsteps ran toward them.

Kenn aimed for the jeep in front of the glass doors, trying to time it as the next rush of men came out.

His earlier shot to the gas tank was already allowing a long stream of the pungent liquid to escape.

Kyle and the Eagles stayed still, waiting for the distraction Kenn was about to provide.

Woosshhh!

His flare sparked the puddle of gas, and they watched bright, orange flames flash eagerly over the concrete and scorch their way up the fuel dripping from the gas tank.

KKkaaaablammm!

The explosion shattered half of the windows along the front of the building, throwing the jeep through the doors just as they opened. The slavers rushing out were consumed in a cloud of twisted metal and hot flames.

“Fire!”

“Get out!”

“Sit down!”

The gym was in chaos, people pushing for the doors. The slaver's orders were ignored in the panic, causing the guerillas to raise their guns and take aim at retreating figures.

“Now, Eagles! Open fire!”

Bullets began to fly, raining down on the Mexicans before they could retaliate, and the shooting was very, very good. Their targets were moving, mixed in with the small sea of terrified civilians, and slugs found foreheads and throats amid total chaos. Despite all the people trying to get out of the chained doors, only slavers were hit.

“Damn!”

Chris examined his arm as blood dripped down the thick tree trunk in steady streams. “I'm trimmed—that's it.”

Kenn and Kyle were both relieved, ignoring the refugees who continued to panic. Neither man ever wanted to tell Adrian they'd gotten one of his army killed.

Seeing no more enemy movement, Kenn leaned inside the window he'd shattered with his shots. He spotted shaggy, unkempt hair, cold sores, and smelled body odor that made him grimace. *No threats to my place in this group.*

“US Eagle Force! Safe Haven!”

The shout echoed in the concrete room, getting attention, and Kenn whistled at them.

They looked up warily, quieting.

“Someone here named Overloaded? Your taxi's waiting.”

Kyle and his men dropped ropes, and lowered themselves to grab fire extinguishers as the people cheered. A tall, thin man with a long staff and a dirty bandage over his face slowly stumbled toward Kenn's window position.

“What's the word?”

Kenn scanned the bodies on the floor and then the door, where Kyle and Chris were getting the small fire under control. He keyed the mike on his belt. “Freedom. Mission accomplished. Let's do some cleaning and get these people to the boss.”

It took Kenn and Kyle under an hour to evacuate the filthy school. It would have been one hour exactly if the Marine had swept every room, but he didn't bother with the basement, where the dead had been placed. As they pulled away, no one noticed the hysterical blonde woman running up a nearby road, arms waving frantically. They never glanced back.

Kenn brought home forty-one survivors, and Adrian met them eagerly with Seth at his side, but both men were once again disappointed. They now had a hairdresser, yet another bank teller (it wasn't surprising to Adrian how many of them had survived. They were used to having their lives threatened), and a lot of other careers they didn't need yet, but none of them, not even Greg, the blind radio man, had what he was searching for.

There was no fire burning in these people, only bright fear and desperation, and he was unable to sleep until very late, sure he had passed one of his own somewhere. Adrian chose to linger a bit, knowing it was a dangerous thing to do considering how close they were to the slavers, but he needed the help as much as these refugees needed him. He would keep calling.

Chapter Thirty
Fame and Fortune Ain't Everything

March 22nd
Pitcairn Island

1

“I can't handle that. Server's been gone for months.”

Kendle slid the credit card into her pocket and pulled out money, ignoring the dumpy island woman's abrupt tone.

“Cash okay?” she asked evenly.

The middle-aged storekeeper frowned. She darted a tense glance toward Luke as he waited, lounging carelessly against the small shop's front door.

Kendle gave a sharp look of warning, pulling the clerk's attention away from LJ. “One of those caps too.”

It was up on a shelf that required the heavy woman to climb for it, and Kendle smiled sweetly when the pie-faced female glared at her in the almost stifling heat of the general store. “Love the Dodgers. Gotta have it.”

Storekeeper or not, the woman clearly wanted to tell her to go to hell, and Kendle flashed a warning that said, *Do it at your own risk*. The air in the musty little shop was cold despite all of them sweating.

Luke shoved his hands into his jean pockets, embarrassed and yet impressed with the way Kendle was handling things. Plump but scrappy, with the air of a snob, Mary Jo had been born on the Island and hated outsiders. The fact that Kendle's show had been popular even here made the frumpy spinster more jealous.

Luke sighed. Mary Jo also hated him. That didn't help.

The moment was long and tense, and it was the vivid skin of the movie star that convinced Mary Jo. Kendle was obviously tough, and the island native chose to climb the ladder for the ball cap, muttering under her breath.

Satisfied, Kendle took a moment to look around as the sharp odor of cleaning products stung her nose and smothered the hint of Luke's sexy cologne. There were neatly stacked baskets and racks, tasteful signs and pictures, and not a speck of dust to be found. The front glass windows were spotless as well, white curtains shut to dim the bright noonday sun, and Kendle was suddenly sure the woman now jabbing at numbers on her tiny calculator hadn't been the one to clean any of it.

"A hundred even."

Kendle laid the cash on the spotless counter with a frown, but said nothing at the too high price, wanting only to go. Not for herself, but for Luke, whose embarrassment she could feel. They didn't like him here. Why? Did they know his secret? It explained his reluctance to come into town to replace the things they'd lost in the storm.

Kendle met his eye in the dimness of the store. When sparks flew between them, the storekeeper shoved the full bag at her.

Kendle spun around in time to catch it before it fell to the tiled floor. "Is there a problem?"

She observed Luke's wide shoulders tense, wondering if they were about to mix it up, and knew the clerk wondered that too.

When the woman's face changed from unfriendly to mean, Kendle held up a hand. "Of course there is. Let's do it like this. I plan to be here a while. Should I spend my money with the crazy lady across the creek?"

The storekeeper seemed surprised she knew there were other options and shook her head, voice hateful.

"No. Come in anytime."

Kendle smirked as she turned away. "Not even if you bent over and kissed my red ass! Have a great day."

Luke held the door as she swept out, regal as any Hollywood actress he'd ever seen, and he laughed at the speechless clerk. "I'd pay to see that!"

He slipped out before she could respond and went to help Kendle store their things on the cart attached to the rear of his bike.

"She always like that?"

"Yes. Wanna go to Baxter's? They have shoes." Luke motioned at one of the four other shack-like, brown and green stores that made up town proper on this side.

"Same attitude, right?"

"Probably, yeah." His voice was a low mutter.

Kendle grimaced, sweeping the tiny town again. There were patches of wild roses amid clumps of Miro trees that hung over every inch of the town, creating shaded canopies that housed dozens of multi-colored parrots. There were no cars, only two dirt bikes parked by theirs, and she saw the outlines of neat, white-fenced shacks in the distance that she assumed were the storekeeper's homes. There were no mailboxes, no addresses on the doors, just gravel walkways and rocking chairs on the porches. The striped barber pole on the last shop made her stomach clench with longing. She missed her home, her country.

"How about we go fishing instead?"

Luke's face lit up, and Kendle felt her first response to him, to his happiness. There *was* something there.

"Sounds like a plan. Now?"

She chuckled, feeling soft and attractive for a change, instead of just being grateful to be alive.

Another spark flew between them that anyone lingering in shop windows felt.

"Yes, the sooner the better," Kendle answered.

Eager to be in the cool, quiet jungle, she swung her leg over the bike, staying back to leave him room. Kendle blushed at the thought of holding tight to Luke while they were flying along. They were getting more familiar now, and it surprised her. She

never would have seen herself being attracted to a calloused, big handed, suspenders and plaid-wearing war veteran.

It was a beautiful day. Sunny and warm with a cloudless blue sky above and a saltwater breeze that made her shiver. She couldn't—

“Leaving so soon?”

Kendle saw Luke tense at the male voice and immediately knew he not only disliked the owner of it, he hated him. When she viewed the stranger, it was easy to understand why. The man was everything that Luke wasn't.

Pretentious shoes, expensive slacks and Polo top, deep scorn in the thirty-something island god's green eyes. Great body and teeth, deeply tanned, manicured hands, a watch on his wrist that had probably cost more than she had made on her last show. Instead of being impressed, Kendle only wondered vaguely if the watch still worked. She had no interest in a trust fund baby.

“Introduce us,” the man ordered.

Kendle stood up when she witnessed the muscle in Luke's stubble-covered jaw start twitching.

“Be careful, pasta boy, or—”

Kendle stepped between them before Luke could finish the threat, holding her hand out. The menace in Luke's body language was a surprise to Kendle and like a whiff of cooking meat to the lonely woman inside.

“Roberts, Kendle. And you are?”

“In awe of your beauty,” oozed the tall playboy as he gently kissed her hand. Keeping ahold of her, he introduced himself, flashing expensive veneers. “I'm Ethan Kraft, oh goddess of survival. I own this island.”

“Just the town, fader,” Luke corrected.

Kendle pulled her hand away with a warning look that said not to get too friendly.

Ethan frowned at the nice term for someone who can't follow through and pretended not to see the red-skinned movie star wipe her hand down the side of her jeans, as if he might have

contaminated her. Luke obviously saw it, though, because his grin widened.

“Give me time,” Ethan boasted arrogantly, flashing beautiful dimples at Kendle.

She grimaced at the unspoken implication that he would have her too. Not in a million years.

“You ready?” Luke interrupted, indicating the bike.

“Yes.”

Ethan stepped forward, meaning to take her hand again.

Luke, unsure of his intentions, slapped both palms against the playboy’s hard chest and shoved him, forcing Ethan to retreat to avoid falling.

“Don’t ever touch her unless she says you can! You got that?”

Ethan bristled, but wasn’t sure about crossing Luke physically, despite being younger. “Sure.”

His countenance was hard as he watched them ride off together. Maybe she didn’t know what kind of man Luke was. Ethan strode to the store he had spotted her leaving. Maybe he would make it his job to see that she found out.

2

Later, with the sun fading behind a layer of ugly clouds rolling in from the southeast, Kendle watched Luke cast out over the calm water of the second fishing hole they’d tried. The first had been full of debris.

“You never talk about yourself. You know everything about me.”

Luke wondered how he had fared in her comparison to Ethan. “Does it matter?”

Kendle scanned her twitching line, vaguely listening to frogs and gulls calling to each other. “Sometimes.”

She heard him sink the pole into the ground next to his chair and then there was silence, but she knew he was nervously

waiting for her questions to begin. So she didn't ask. Not only was she living on his dime out here, he had been good to her, understanding, and she wouldn't push. If he wanted to tell her, he would do it on his own.

Kendle dug her bare feet and hands into the bur grass around them, still in love with the land. She could hear the rustle of a small animal in the underbrush, dragonflies zipping over the surface of the water. She thought she could even hear the ants and beetles crawling over the salty soil, and she held in the tears only by willpower. She was alive!

Luke outwardly relaxed when she didn't speak, went back to enjoying the beautiful day, but inside, he was worrying over what to say. He had a horrible secret, and while she hadn't found out today, eventually, she would. He needed to be the one to tell her.

"You want to go to town for lunch? Stacey's Place has good chicken sandwiches."

Kendle jerked her line hard, felt the fish get hooked.

"Not really. This is fine," she lied, thinking if she never ate another piece of any kind of seafood, it would be too soon.

Luke got the net for her as she reeled in her catch. He was very aware of her as a woman, of how tiny she was compared to him, and he swept her curves as she fought with their dinner.

A lot more comfortable with each other now, the strength of his attention had grown since that wet ride in the dark. Slow and easy was the ticket to win her over. He could probably try now, but he hesitated to get closer to her than he already was. She was pure, he was tainted, and when she found out, their time together would be over.

The end of her time with Luke was something Kendle had found herself thinking about more and more. It wasn't right for her to stay with him. It didn't look good to the townspeople, but the thought of not being around him made her hurt. Soon, she would have to leave or flaunt convention to stay.

Her health had dramatically improved, red skin finally fading to brown, and she was better emotionally too, unless a smell or sound hit her the wrong way, flashed her to the ocean and its relentless grip. When that happened, she sought Luke's comfort, instinctively knowing he understood what she was going through. Some nights she crawled into his bed and huddled against his warm body, shivering, sweating. He never mentioned it in the morning, just gently shifted her off his big chest so he could get up. He was easygoing, didn't expect much, and the only time she'd seen him even close to upset was today. With Ethan Kraft.

"You don't like the people here much, do you?"

Luke dropped the small grouper into their catch holder. "No. We don't care about the same things."

Kendle understood. The people here were rich, ostracized from civilization for one reason or another, while Luke was...what? A hermit? Definitely. A criminal? Maybe. Either way, he'd been nothing but great to her, and she would respect his privacy and not ask what his crime had been. It would eventually come out, and she would face it straight on, but for now, he was a comfort that she wasn't ready to give up. Kendle knew there were choices coming, hard ones that would take strength she wasn't sure she had, but for now, it was just the two of them in paradise.

Luke's thoughts were again in line with hers, eager to put it off. It was a sin that he could never atone for.

Cawwww!

They both stared as a scattered flock of dingy cranes headed for the ocean. The couple doubted the birds would reach land again, their movements implying sickness. Neither of them mentioned it. It wasn't an uncommon sight anymore, and served to remind them both of the homeland they'd left behind.

"How did he know who I was?"

"Same way I did, I guess. TV reception out here was good for a while. Easy for him *this* time."

His tone implied the playboy hadn't had such an easy time finding out who he was, and Kendle chuckled, thinking Luke's cologne was so much better than Ethan's heavy Polo. "Took him a while to figure out who you were, huh?"

"Yeah. He finally had to go through my garbage to get my fingerprints for Daddy Kraft to run."

Kendle was horrified for him, at the invasion of his privacy. "What an asshole!"

Luke threw her a grin. "He got a mud bath for it. I ruined his four hundred dollar shoes."

She grinned back, almost stealing his breath at her innocent beauty. It was a good moment for him, and he memorized it studiously, from the muddy tennis shoes sitting by her bare feet and the face that was great without makeup, to the sound of water lapping and a rock falling somewhere nearby.

"Did he cry?"

"No, but it was close. One of the best days I've had here." Luke looked away. "Until you came."

Her mouth opened, and he tensed for questions he knew he would at least try to answer.

"It's bad, right?"

"Yes."

Kendle studied the man who waited, expecting no mercy.

When she spoke, Luke felt her words reach that cold, barren part of his heart that he had been carrying for most of his adult life.

"That was the old world, and it's gone. The people here may not believe it, but I do. You're no longer that man."

Dear Reader,

You have reached the midway point of this file. I'd like to remind you that the extras section in the rear of my books usually has things like:

- Deleted Scenes
- Interactive challenges
- Maps of travels, some hand-drawn
- Listen to a Safe Haven radio call
- Links to character bios and interviews
- Links to the next book in the series
- A list of all my books and a way to contact me
- A note from me about the book

I just wanted to be sure that you knew.

Now, back to the story!

Chapter Thirty-One
Broken Bridges

March 23rd
Western Missouri

1

“...**i**s Safe Haven... Red Cross convoy...survivors. Does anyone...”

Angela froze at the static-laced transmission.

The witch whispered that her boy, Kenn, and grave danger were almost at hand.

Marc came to the open passenger door, jarring her. “Everything okay?”

“That’s them. That’s who we’re searching for. You ready?”

Marc was thinking that group had to be within a few hundred miles for them to hear the transmission. “Few more minutes.”

He fished in his coat pockets for his smokes. Only another three weeks left alone with her.

Angela got out and shut the door, ignoring the gray and black wolf on the roof that edged over for her attention. “I’ll help.”

Marc understood her need to hurry, but he wanted to linger over the radio for a location. She always pointed him in the right direction, but in this big empty, it would be easy to miss them.

“We won’t,” Angela answered firmly. “I won’t.”

Marc lit a smoke, watching her quickly take care of their lunch mess. She wiped her hands down her jeans as she finished. It was something she wouldn’t have felt relaxed enough to do during their first weeks together. She was constantly growing, learning, changing, and on some things, she was as good as he was.

“They’re near Gillette, Wyoming. We’ll catch up in South Dakota, I think, around Interstate 90.”

Marc frowned. They would be facing her man by the end of next week. Ten days left. His heart twisted.

“Come on. I’ll back it up, and you can do the chains.”

Marc cracked an imaginary whip, making them both snicker. They had made good time, eating up nearly three hundred miles, and they’d chosen to tow one of the Blazers to save on fuel, something they were low on again.

“You drive. I’ll check the maps for what’s between us and them.”

Angela was settled quickly; glad he’d interrupted her thoughts. Instead of relief that she was about to be with her son, all she could feel was the fear of facing Kenny. Time to pay was close now, and she still wasn’t sure if she was strong enough to do it.

Minutes later, they were leaving Corning, Missouri, both uneasy. This was tornado country, part of the alley. It was eerie to discover one block totally normal—if you could call looted, burned businesses normal—and the next street knocked flat with nothing but piles of debris left standing. It was also farm country, crops of tobacco and river oats everywhere, surrounded by Indian grass and milkweed. There was no traffic in sight, hadn’t been for the last day, and she held in a shudder, sure she knew why. Not many people had made it through the last town.

Pattonsburg, fully decorated, had real bodies in every Christmas scene, with each corpse painstakingly put in the place of the person they most appeared like. Mary, Santa, Wise Men, even the baby Jesus were represented.

She and Marc had gone around, the feeling of evil too strong to ignore. They had detoured an extra day, sure each of the “actors” had been survivors of the war, not victims. They were too fresh.

Pattonsburg had become, or maybe always had been, home to a serial killer reigning unopposed. She had marked it in her journal, and then tried to let it go. She had kept worrying over it, though, and Marc had offered to go back and challenge the mad man just to ease her horror. She'd denied him, but when the witch had asked the same question, she'd said yes with a heavy heart. After her own encounter with evil, Angela now understood that some people had earned death. The nut job in Pattonsburg was certainly one of those, and she had let the witch hunt him down while she slept. The fact that it hadn't been by her hand physically was helping, but death was something she couldn't handle, and if she ever had to kill again, she might—

“Angie.”

She glanced up to find Marc staring at her.

“Try to let it go.”

Angela breathed deeply. Knowing that she had saved future travelers was helping. “I will. What did you say?”

“We'll have to cross the Missouri to get into Nebraska, unless you want to parallel it until we get below Kansas City. Flatter land might mean a better chance of finding a shallow place to cross.”

She was already shaking her head, raising her sunglasses. “That's another week. Let's try to find a dam or a bridge around here that's okay.”

Marc stared, stomach suddenly uneasy.

Angela gave him a quick look that revealed a desperate need. “I feel it too, but I can't waste another week. I can't.”

“I won't ask you to unless we can't find a shallow or dam, like we did when we came over the Mississippi.”

Angela studied the mud-streaked lanes of Interstate 29. The cracked pavement was full of potholes and mud that was slowly drying in the steady breeze now that the temperatures had stayed above freezing for a few days. The wind was calm, weather clear for a change, and Angela lit a smoke. She wasn't sure what was

wrong, but knew something was since there was only darkness when she searched her mental doors.

“Do you—”

The ground under them began to shake, and she slammed on the brakes, jerking them to a stop. Scared, she started to get out as the vibrations increased.

Marc put a gentle hand on her wrist. “Wait. If it gets worse, we’ll get out. Watch for big cracks.”

His touch was soothing, exciting.

He let go slowly, responding to her interest.

The ground under them rumbled and swayed, shifting nearby debris piles, and from the distance came the distinctive sound of buildings collapsing.

The shaking eased gradually, quieting over a period of maybe a minute, before finally going still. Angela looked at Marc, who was busy studying the map as if nothing had happened. “Should we go on?”

“Yeah, stop if it starts again. Always stay clear of anything that can fall on you, and watch for cracks. They open up fast.”

Angela eased on the pedal, shocked to discover that not only was there a fault line under St. Louis, but it was active. They had felt other tremors, of course, but not while driving and not this strong. In the Midwest, the big one hadn’t come yet, but things were certainly warming up.

They listened to Pink Floyd as she drove over weedy, debris-littered streets, rolling around the abandoned cars with indecipherable notes mildewed to dashboards. The conversation was about anything other than the destruction all around them. Mother Nature was clearly the cause here.

Marc was aching. Time looked short for them, and though he could say they were friends, he wasn’t sure if there was more. She had been keeping the space between them since waking up in his arms in front of the burned-out fire, one of the best memories for him from the entire trip. She’d been so peaceful in his embrace, so relaxed (sexy), and he was discouraged.

Appearing to look at Dog, who was curled up contentedly on the backseat, Marc stole another look at her profile as she drove. She was still so far out of reach that he didn't think he would ever have a real chance with her again, but that didn't stop the want.

Angela could feel his hot looks, but she was blocking so she didn't catch the exact thoughts unless he sent them to her. She tried not to fidget. She loved having him so close but hated it too. Her female body was acutely aware of him sitting next to her, and she was reminded of a time when the mere thought of sex didn't make her cringe. She had loved to touch him, to kiss him, to run her fingers through his feathered black hair. They had stolen dark, shadowy moments of heaven, and the voices whispered that he could conquer her fears and make her feel it again, that Marc could also have a part in healing her that way.

“You have to trust me.”

Angela threw him a startled look. “What?”

“You have to turn by that tree.”

Her eyes darted away, face red, and Marc thought again that she had done so much better on this journey than he'd thought she would. They both had.

2

The couple made it to the Nebraska-Missouri state line before dusk and stopped to inspect the area. Marc wasn't encouraged.

The bridge they'd hoped to cross was almost completely submerged. The river was well over its banks, covering even the roads leading to the blue metal structure, but the water was only dammed up on one side. The south end was nearly empty, so low that they couldn't see it from where they were. As a result, the ground between them and the bridge was mostly covered with nasty, stagnant, reeking liquid, the edges of it pushing up onto the road they were sitting on.

After a long study, Marc handed her the binoculars. “No way that we could cross that, even if we found a way in.”

“Damn. I’m surprised it hasn’t fallen yet. Is that a bulldozer jammed up against the railroad trestle?”

“What’s left of one. The water backing up like that behind the bridge might mean there’s a shallow spot a bit downstream.”

The Blazers rolled slowly, and Marc searched, picking out places that appeared solid as he guided her around the spots that were a quicksand-like mud that would suck them down.

Half a mile from the doomed bridge, Marc had her stop so that he could get a better view, and she waited nervously, stomach full of spiders. Angela grimaced at that thought and hid it as he came to her window. There was danger here.

“It’s steep, but maybe we can make it. Tracks say someone else did recently, and if I had to guess, I’d say they did it in a small, light car. Look at it while I unhook my Blazer and then we’ll try. You go first.”

Angela did as he said, hating the way the damp ground gave under her weight and tried to steal the boots from her feet. She felt a little better when she observed that it wasn’t a straight drop into the riverbed, but it still looked rough. She could see the tire ruts that someone else had left further down, just above the shallow water that rushed by with bits of debris bobbing furiously.

Not feeling the peeks of sun anymore, Angela tightened her belt and slowly drove toward the muddy bank, heart thumping wildly. This wasn’t going to go well.

Better tell him, the witch warned.

Angela shook her head. It was too late to go back now. Nothing would keep her from her son!

“Nice and slow until you hit the flatter part before the water, then pick up speed,” Marc instructed over the radio.

Angela rode the brakes as she started down, and the vehicle bounced over the big rocks, jarring her.

“A little faster, honey.”

She eased off the brake, and let it coast as the water rushed by. It was deeper than she'd first thought, maybe two feet and moving fast, and then she was in. Easing on the gas too late, sprays of water flew up from her mostly submerged tires, creating small rapids that surged outward.

Her tires slipped near the middle of the wide riverbed, going sideways with the water, and then she was back in control and shooting across, heart pounding.

Marc was coming down the incline behind her, and Angela felt her tires slip again as she hit the muddy embankment on the other side. Pedal going to the floor, her tires dug into the wet ground, and the Blazer came to a stop with a jerk that snapped her seatbelt painfully against her chest.

Angie let off the gas and hit reverse, but only sank further into the thick slop. She got no response from the four-wheel-drive mode, either. Slamming it into drive, she was overwhelmed by that feeling of danger, and the Blazer fishtailed as the ground began to shake again.

Out! We have to get out!

Angela mashed the pedal, spinning tires, and a cloud of white smoke billowed into the sky.

Marc didn't warn her as the rumbling increased. He hit the gas and slammed into the rear of her smoking, sliding Blazer, knocking it up and out of the thick mud with little visible damage.

The sound of the bridge's final collapse was extremely loud, but Angela didn't notice it as she was suddenly hit hard and moving again.

As she cleared the edge, she picked up her mike, stopping to look back. "Damn that was...Marc! Get out!"

Marc knew the wall of debris-laden water was surging toward him hungrily. He'd been here before. When his tires bogged down where hers had, he shoved himself out the window and got onto the hood, glad Dog was already on the hill, out of reach.

“The tree! Grab the tree!” Angela’s scream was frantic.

Marc darted across the protesting hood, jumping just as the water slammed into the Blazer. It was snatched by the current, and rolled violently. The thick swells quickly carried it under.

“Marc!” Angela jumped out, rope from her kit in hand, and ran to the embankment. She leaned over the edge, frantic as Dog yapped furiously next to her.

“Marc!”

“Here!”

She spotted him in the center of the churning, rising water, and threw the long cord hard.

It landed on his outstretched fingers. She saw him double it around his wrist, and she hurriedly tied it the other end to the hitch of her Blazer. She ran for the driver’s seat, not thinking, just doing what the witch told her to.

Marc held the rope and then his breath as the water closed over his face, body submerged, scraped, bumped, sliced, battered.

The rope tightened, jerking his shoulder brutally, and then he was out like a fish caught by a boater, gasping for air. He coughed violently, feet and hands digging into the mud, clawing at the grass for purchase as she hauled him up.

The angry roar of the water echoed in protest at the escape.

Angela observed him collapse in her mirror and had her bag in hand as she rushed to him. “Marc!”

She saw him move and remembered to breathe. “Are you hurt?”

Marc pushed onto his knees as he coughed out mouthfuls of diseased river water. She ignored his protests, running her hands over him to check for injuries.

“...finger, or should I give you something?”

Marc was confused, trying to get his air back. “What?”

She gestured at the rising water rushing loudly by. “Some of that’s inside you. We have to get it out before it can settle in and do damage. I’ve got a shot of something that’ll do it.”

She set a tiny vial on the ground by his feet. “I’ll get camp set up.”

Marc blew out a disgusted sigh, pushing up onto shaky legs. “Fucking quake. Some great joke.”

“...swallow it all and then take a deep smell of the bottle. Are we okay here?”

Marc blurrily scanned the muddy ground and a park-like area about two hundred yards away. No buildings in sight, crooked elm and willow trees behind plum fields, and thick, lush grass sprinkled with poppies. It actually appeared normal.

“Over...there. This should be part of the Brownville...State Rec area. Leave my duffle bag... couple of jugs of water. No fire ...stove’s okay.”

Angela left him alone, glad that the sound of the water crushing anything and everything would drown out his misery and provide privacy. She studied the area around them before getting anything out and the wolf jumped up onto the roof to stand guard, though he had obviously wanted to stay with his master.

Angela turned to check on Marc and saw his torn shirt hit the ground, exposing a wide chest that she was drawn to even over the distance. When his hand dropped to his belt buckle, she spun around, clumsy fingers getting the Coleman lit. She’d almost lost him. Her impatience had almost killed them both.

If it was supposed to be, it would have been, the witch tried to comfort.

Angela found Marc’s naked body across the distance again and couldn’t look away. His hair and face were lathered, and as he poured the clean water over himself, she felt a chill of desire. He was a beautiful man, and they would be sharing a bed tonight to stay warm. She should have been afraid of getting so intimate with Marc so openly, but things had changed for her again. She certainly wasn’t afraid of him as a man anymore. It was a welcome change from the paralyzing fear that she had lived with for so long. Would she feel this confident around other men, or

was Marc the only male that she could respond to? Their bond of trust was one of those blind comforts that might mask the truths she wasn't ready to face. It would be too easy to fall back into a submissive role with Marc and forget her own needs in order to make him happy. However, knowing she could feel a normal attraction would give her hope that Kenn hadn't damaged her beyond repair when it came to things like love...and sex.

Marc could feel her staring, body swelling to thickness in seconds, and he took his time rinsing, drying, dressing, and brushing his teeth. He felt a little better, though he hurt all over, and he was still alive. *So, let her stare all she wants, Marc thought. Maybe she'll see something she likes, and hold me down and take it.*

Angela snickered, picking up the thought. The block between them had crumbled when she'd seen the water reaching out for him like alien hands, and she scowled at all the scrapes, cuts, and bruises on his arms, chest, and face.

Marc walked slowly, shirt open, duffle bag over his uninjured shoulder, and their eyes locked over the distance, speaking louder than the water still rushing by.

I almost got you killed.

Marc shook his head, full of fierce gratitude that he would never be able to express. *You saved my life!*

I'm sorry.

"Don't be," Marc stated firmly, pressing a gentle kiss to her cheek. "No way to know the smart-ass upstairs was gonna pick those ninety seconds to shake the ground again. Your quick actions saved me. You deserve a promotion."

Angela waved a hand at the tailgate. "Have a seat. I'll patch you up while you tell me about this raise."

He took the Irish coffee she pushed into his clammy hands, and the red-flecked wolf sat on the ground at his feet.

"All right. In the Corps, you'd start out a private, but you would have been a Private First Class after Versailles." Marc

watched for signs that it still bothered her, but spotted nothing as she raised a brow.

“And now?” she asked, opening the packages from her bag as the sun sank, leaving a pale orange and purple sky. Angela felt him fishing, but that bait had long since been stripped by her own guilt.

“Now, I’d say...a Lance Corporal.”

She laughed, hiding her wince well. Kenny was a Lance Corporal, though he also would have been ranked higher if he could have followed orders. “Better get a good raise with that. What about you?”

Stifling a sneeze, Marc shrugged, concentrating on the red of her lips instead of the stinging from the alcohol pad. “Happy where I am.”

Angela heard it all in his voice: the need, the respect, the fierce joy to be alive. She tenderly slid his dog tag aside to smear gel over his cuts and scrapes. It was heaven and hell, touching him, and she barely kept the old Angela from doing something they might regret...like allowing her hands to wander freely over his hot skin.

“Soup when you’re ready, then pills.”

Angela tried to hurry, to ignore how he felt, and her pulse was pounding when she stepped back.

“Ready for—” She fell silent as the ground under them lit up again, rattling the Blazer and everything inside it.

“Just a tremor. We’re all right.”

She hated the way the ground shifted under their feet, and when it pounded through her legs, the dirt giving a little, she stumbled, and Marc caught her.

Angela sucked in a breath, tight against his bare chest, but instead of immediately pulling away when the ground stilled under them, she was drawn by the devotion in his dark gaze as he stared at her. His heart was pounding as hard as hers was, body warm under her fingers, and she saw his nostrils flare, as if he

was scenting her. The image made her blush. She wanted him. What a wonderful feeling!

Marc let her have the lead, patiently waiting, hoping desire would have its way eventually, but he was dying to kiss her. He craved it. He swore to himself that before she got to her man, he'd have at least one taste of her to remember when he was alone again.

A wave of sadness fell over him, and when she pulled away, he let her go, trying to keep it from his face. Who was he kidding? He would never take it, and she would never offer.

Angela pushed a bowl of hot soup into his hands. "Any other cuts?"

"No." He stirred the warm noodles absently. "I didn't even tear my jeans. Lots of bruises, though."

She handed him a small cluster of pills and a cup of water.

When he heard "painkiller," Marc smiled. His body was sore all over, aching, but his shoulder hurt the worst. Throbbing sharply, it continued to swell. He was surprised it hadn't been dislocated, but he didn't complain or even mention it. There had been little time for anything else.

"We'll stay here tonight."

Marc agreed, watching her set up a lawn chair next to the stove.

She waved a hand, and he went where she wanted him, closing his eyes with a small smile that made her gape. Would his kiss still ignite her passion, or would it repulse her, the way Kenny's did?

Angela dropped a blanket over his legs and held up another. "Lean forward a little bit," she coaxed, laying it over the chair. When he sat back, she pulled it around his wide shoulders, not flinching when their fingers brushed.

Angela stayed behind him, and Marc couldn't stop a small moan of pain when her hands settled firmly on his shoulder. Then she began rubbing, soothing, pushing, manipulating it back

into position, her fingers like fire one minute and ice the next as she healed him.

Drained, Angela stepped back. "I'm gonna put the discs out. Twenty feet?"

He nodded, smothering a yawn as he handed her the wristband controller. "Two rows. One at twenty and one at thirty."

She did it as he had shown her, and Marc watched for a minute, before slowly rising to his feet. "You want a cup?"

The wind gusted as Marc scanned the distant but clearer shapes of the mountains to their south, bringing the stench of rotting fish. He kept himself from gagging only by sheer will, his body suddenly feeling foreign and clammy.

"I'll get it. Sit down, will ya? That was enough dope to knock you out," Angela scolded, finished with the discs.

When he didn't answer—only put a hand on the hatch for support—she came over and slipped an arm around his lean hips. "Come on, grunt. Time to hit the rack."

"Been waitin' weeks to hear that," he joked tiredly.

She surprised him by laughing. "Well, wait a while longer, Romeo. Come on now, slide in."

Marc eased onto the stiff bed, and she tossed the two top blankets over him. When he looked at her, his face was full of fear, instead of the male pride she had been expecting.

"I'll get sick now, right?"

She didn't even consider lying to him as she brushed dust from her jeans and then leaned inside to pull his blankets up further. "Maybe."

"Will I die?"

"Oh, God no!" she exclaimed, sliding in to sit next to him. "At the worst, you'll be tired, have diarrhea, and throw up, but it'll only last a couple weeks because you're in great shape."

"So, I'll just feel like I died."

She grinned, running her hand over his brow to smooth his hair back, loving the feel of it against her fingers. "That's the

worst. We handled it quickly. You might be a little queasy for a couple days, but probably not even that. You'll be fine."

Marc sighed, relieved, and stared at her until he wasn't able to stay awake any longer.

The chill in the wind made Angela shiver as she stepped out to repack everything, and she loaded it quickly so he wouldn't get a draft. The heater was dead, all the propane cylinders gone, and they couldn't waste the quarter tank of gas they had left to run the engine while they slept. Body heat would have to do.

Finished, Angela ignored her racing pulse as she shut herself inside the tepid Blazer with Marc and lay down, leaving Dog outside. She slid carefully against his back, covering up as the horror of the day washed over her.

That constant voice of fear whispered that she would pay dearly for breaking Kenny's rules, that it wasn't just her life in danger. She wasn't allowed to talk to another man, let alone crawl into bed with one. The past rose up to assault her weary mind, thoughts of being separated from her children flashing, and she let herself cry a little against his warm comfort. What was she going to do? She was chained to one man, but she loved another.

Marc had woken the second she'd gotten out of the Blazer, and her pain was something he couldn't ignore. He slowly rolled over and wrapped his arms around her.

"It'll be okay, honey," he whispered.

Angela didn't respond. She could only hope he was right.

"I am."

She stared at Marc questioningly, and he brushed away her tears.

"We're connected. Always were. No one can stop that." He kissed her cheek, felt her shiver. "We belong together, Angie, and right or wrong, I love you. I always have."

Her tears fell harder. "There's no future for us. He'll never let me go."

“We’ll find a way to convince him.”

“And if we can’t?”

Marc didn’t hesitate. “Under no circumstances will I allow you to give in. You’re gonna fight back, and he’s gonna get a wakeup call.”

Chapter Thirty-Two
Rude Awakenings

March 26th
South Dakota state line

1

Danger to the herd!

Adrian woke to the ground beneath his tent grumbling and groaning. He grabbed for his boots as the tremor strengthened and the panic started. Things fell and broke, feet ran, engines fire up and radios crackled, but the silent roar of the quake distorted the sounds, making ears vibrate.

Adrian pulled his jacket over his bare chest and ducked outside as he zipped it up, scanning the nervous, unsure guards. They'd had tremors before, but not as strong as this, and he keyed his mike. "Hold your posts, Eagles."

Adrian motioned Neil and Kenn over, the two black-clad men roughly the same height.

They came to him quickly, dodging members in robes and slippers who were fleeing—most toward the parking areas. He hit his radio again. "Empty a mag, Doug. Turn 'em around!"

The towering, red-vested giant didn't question, just fired into the air above the small mob of about thirty.

Ground no longer rumbling, the gunfire got immediate attention. The panicked herd pulled up short and stopped, faces wild with fear.

Doug's heavily bearded face was full of disapproval as he waved a beefy hand to where Adrian stood.

The crowd slowly turned, staring at the sight of Kenn and Neil hunkered down to let Adrian stand on their shoulders. It was

such an unexpected thing that it instantly captured the twitching crowd, and Doug had the thought that Adrian had expected this, had planned his reaction perfectly. It was simple, a distraction.

Seth, a quiet shadow ready to protect the boss, had the same thought, and he shared an admiring glance with the Eagle on Point, Kyle.

Nearly everyone was watching Adrian, the crowd growing as more people came out of their tents.

Adrian tapped the hats below him. "Up."

The Eagles moved slowly, but there was little teamwork, and Adrian swayed dangerously, amusingly. His wild arm gestures drew titters from the calming group of nearly sixty. Most of them were refugees from Cheyenne who had broken their quarantine.

Adrian grinned as they finally got him up all the way, and the watching people gave a small, uneasy cheer in return.

"We had a tremor. This is how it feels." Adrian lowered his voice. "Walk, guys, and do it together for God sakes, or I'll break my friggin' neck!"

He raised his voice again. "We survived it."

Adrian swayed, almost falling, and the tall Eagles grabbed at his legs, pulling more laughter from the people.

"Damn it!" Adrian hauled himself up by sheer will, struggled to stay there. Hearing real calm in the crowd's reactions, he gave up the fight, wobbling.

"He's gonna fall!"

"Grab him!"

"Down, guys!" Adrian rolled forward as Neil and Kenn bent down, and ended up on his feet in front of the crowd that let out a cheer, clapping.

Adrian waded into the thick of the people, and they quieted, most realizing they had overreacted and were due a scolding.

Adrian's men watched silently, thinking they were beyond lucky that Adrian had known how to handle the crisis. Nothing broke the spell of panic and fear like laughter.

Nose full of sulfur and smoke, Adrian felt the air shift, and knew by their guilty demeanors that they understood. He said nothing and the silence stretched out.

When many of them were about to offer apologies, Adrian stopped them with a curt gesture. “During a quake, you get away from anything that can fall on you and then stop. Wait for cracks that open up.”

He pointed to the jagged, gaping hole in front of Doug that a lot of them would have fallen into. “Like that one. Panic makes people do stupid things. I understand, but sometimes, it also costs your life and I can’t return that.”

Neil watched in approval with the other Eagles, hands on his narrow hips. Adrian was giving them what Kyle like to call the “lay,” or how things stood.

“All of you have broken quarantine and will have extra time in it, along with all the members I’m looking at.” Adrian paused to spot them out with his sharp gaze, and the crowd was silent, ashamed. “This is nothing we can’t handle if we use our heads. It’s over now, and I want this camp back the way it was and everyone accounted for.”

There was only silent stillness, and Adrian let them understand how displeased he actually was by impatiently jerking his hand. “Now.”

The commanding tone had them all rushing off, and he gestured to Kenn and Neil as people went by, torn between talking of the tremor and of his juggling act.

“Sitrep in five. Check-in of the guards first. Gather your team, Neil, and round up the strays. Kenn, get Mitch on the radio. Have Zack and his guys oversee the cleanup. I heard engines. Try to call them. Have Doug handle the count and tell the cook to start chow. Almost dawn anyway. Kyle keeps Point. I’ll be around.”

Neil observed Seth’s tall, thin shadow following Adrian, and was pleased. He and Seth had hit it off, and he knew the redhead would cover Adrian’s overloaded back.

Five minutes later, Kenn and Adrian were in the mess, the camp a flurry of activity in the foggy morning. They'd had no serious damage, no injuries, and all but two people were accounted for.

Adrian finished his cold coffee with a grimace as the stench of rot wafted through the crowded, loud mess. About three miles southwest of their location, a large herd of bison lay dead. John was testing the bodies since there was no obvious cause of death. The big ants (that Adrian sometimes thought might be following them) were also here, along with a burgeoning population of field mice that they had set out traps for.

This area was all nature as far as they could see, no sign that humanity had ever been here, except for the corpses. Adrian dreaded dropping south into the Badlands but he would if John said fallout had killed the bison. That strange, eerie landscape would be better than sickness, but the barren area had little that they needed. South Dakota was no longer the sunshine state.

They wouldn't stay long—only a couple of weeks total instead of the month they usually did, Adrian decided. There wouldn't be tours of Mount Rushmore or the Wild West sites that had featured Annie Oakley and Wild Bill Hickok. That world was gone.

2

“Everyone accounted for?” Adrian asked a short time later, and Neil opened his book.

“Almost. We had five cars leave. All but one is on the way back, and we made contact with the supply team. Chris said he hasn't been able to reach the fifth yet.”

“They were together?”

Neil nodded, continued his report. “Says there were two people in her convertible. They'll probably show up at dawn.”

Adrian glanced to his XO.

Kenn immediately waved a hand for Kyle to join them from his post on the mess. He'd been expecting it. "Get your team and do a recon for Tonya and the bitch. Half hour check-ins."

Kyle swallowed his dislike. The orders actually came from Adrian. Kenn didn't like the bitch, few of them did, and though he was screwing Tonya, the mobster didn't think he really cared for her. *Women are only possessions to Kenn*, Kyle thought, calling in his relief early. He pitied the female who had shared Kenn's bed before the war, when there had been no Adrian to keep him in line.

Kenn waited until Kyle was out of earshot, noting the body language indicating the mobster's displeasure, but even that didn't ease the thumping of his heart as he spoke to Adrian. Angela was almost here. He had to leave.

"Mitch took a call. Thinks I missed someone in Cheyenne. A woman named Samantha."

Adrian had recognized the edge of fear in his tone. "Could you have?"

Kenn was miserable. "Yes."

Adrian knew instinctively there was more and waited unhappily when Kenn scanned the black hills that surrounded their camp instead of maintaining eye contact.

"I need to leave for a while. Charlie's stayin' here. I'll recheck Cheyenne first and bring the woman if she's still there."

His tone implied he doubted she would be, and Adrian hid his grimace as his heart skipped, sending pain into his arm. He couldn't keep it from his eyes, though, and Kenn mistook it.

"I'll be back. *Soon.*"

Chest slowly easing, Adrian gave him a hard stare, mind and body already dreading the Marine's absence. Kenn had been more help than he knew. Fresh out of the quarantine zone, he had only been back from Cheyenne for half a day as it was.

"When?"

Kenn didn't look at him. "Now."

Flat, devoid of emotion, and careful. Adrian stopped. “I told you once that everyone here is free to go any time they please, and I meant that. If you have something to do, somewhere to go, come home when you’re ready. Just don’t forget about us. And watch your six. We need you.”

Kenn, beard covering his guilty flush in the windy darkness, responded, “I hear that.”

Adrian frowned. It had been his experience that when someone said that, the opposite was true.

“I’m comin’ back,” Kenn repeated, addressing the uniformed shadow who had given himself away by a quick breath at the news. “Hold my place.”

“You know it.”

Kenn hadn’t been sure how to bring up the subject, didn’t want to give details, but in his heart, he was sure the lone female had been Angela, the radio static keeping Mitch from understanding. Kenn had to go now and set Angela straight. Adrian could never be allowed to know what she was.

3

As dawn finally broke, Tonya and Cynthia rolled in, flanked by Kyle’s team.

Kenn waited nearby. He was lingering in dawn’s last shadows, waiting for the people to be settled at the mess for chow.

A few minutes later, Tonya’s tent flap opened, revealing a dim, smoky interior. A small red glow winked on and off, and Kenn moved forward. If she and Adrian had been an item, it was over now.

Kenn entered the pungent tent, inhaling from the thick joint that slid between his lips.

The flap shut them in darkness, and he remained motionless, smoking as unseen hands rubbed him, opened his jeans.

Tonya had quickly figured out that something was happening with Adrian's right-hand man. She'd seen Kenn's loaded Bronco and wanted to be sure that her place with him was secure before he left. Kenn was her ticket to power here, and Tonya gave him an amazing effort, trying to dig her hooks in deeper. For a little while, the hard new future was forgotten by them both.

Chapter Thirty-Three
Old Wounds and New Bonds

March 28th
Pitcairn Island

1

“**W**ant to sleep with me?”

Face sweaty and flushed, Luke stopped in the middle of a sit-up, shocked. He quickly replayed what she’d said, what his male mind had heard. “Want some company?”

Luke quickly glanced away. These awkward moments were happening more and more as she recovered.

“I can dig up other books if you’re bored,” he offered, finishing number eighteen.

He’d already done the forty push-ups while Kendle forced herself to pretend to be reading, but her eyes had stayed mostly on him. She wondered if he knew. “I’d rather get back in shape, and that looks like it works.”

Luke grinned at the compliment, and she blushed. “I mean it. I get out of breath just carrying our basket to the fishing hole. I used to be...” she trailed off, wistful as memories swirled over her.

It was something Luke understood all too well. “In the morning?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

She dropped her attention to *The Stand*, the last book on his shelves that she hadn’t read yet, but her mind was on leaving...on going home. She dreamed of it most nights that the ocean didn’t claim her. It made her stomach clench painfully and

her spine hunt for a place to hide, but so help her, she was now considering the attempt.

Kendle wasn't pushing herself much yet, and Luke wasn't pushing her at all, but she wasn't going to be content here for long. She was weak, tired, and it would still be a month or two, on top of the seven weeks she had already spent here, but she planned to find a way back to America that didn't involve those awful waves that called to her, mocked her.

"Lotta hard words?"

Kendle looked down into his understanding face, thinking she might not go if Luke wouldn't come with her. Being alone was something she didn't ever want to face again. "I'm sorry?"

"You haven't flipped a page in a while. I thought maybe you were stuck."

She gently closed the book of death and destruction with reddish-brown hands that her gaze lingered on. "It's too depressing."

Luke wiped his face with the towel from the pocket in his cutoff jeans and then slid it back. "Great writing, though." He fell silent, thinking America was now experiencing it firsthand and knew Kendle was too.

"All right, enough of this," Luke said, "Let's go do something." He began pulling on his shoes, trying not to stare at the long legs that her dark shorts allowed him to view. "I'll skip the run, and we can play some cards or something."

He paused, scanning the neat cabin. No carpet on the wooden floor, two recliners, a table, two beds, two doors, four walls, white curtains she'd sewn, a three-drawer stand he'd made for her things, all of it dusted, washed, and made up. They were inside too much. She needed to get out there again if she was going to recover. What had helped him when he'd first come here?

"Hey. We could work on my garden."

That got Kendle's attention, and she smiled, forgetting how loud the ocean was outside the safety of his small cabin. The

only time she was alone was to get a shower or relieve herself, and she liked it that the small generator would come on anytime they used water in the M*A*S*H-style shower setup. It drowned out the noise that tormented her.

“Now?”

Warm breeze blowing on his skin, Luke shrugged. He tried to remember the last time he'd broken his exercise routine, but was unable to. Making Kendle happy here was important, and sometimes, like when they were sitting in his leather recliners, reading and listening to his records, it was hard to remember how quiet (lonely) his life had been before she came.

“After lunch. We'll have grilled salmon hoagies and then play in the dirt.”

Kendle's spirits picked up a bit, adventurous soul long since bored. She was looking forward to having work to do, instead of staring at Luke when he wasn't looking her way and studying the walls when he was.

2

Hearing albatrosses and seagulls fighting over a beach full of small, red crab hatchlings and the dull roar of an upset, unhealthy ocean, Kendle examined the terribly tangled vines and sticker bushes warily. They were at least five feet high and so thick, she was unable to determine where the brambles ended and the jungle began or how big the area behind the cabin was.

“When's the last time you came out here?”

“Couple years. Planted a big garden, spent a lot of time letting the earth soak into me. It seemed to help.” Luke let out a sigh. “Then the ocean took it.”

Kendle heard the haunted tone and understood more than anyone else could have, but she said nothing as she dug through the box of tools he had pulled from a small attic space.

“Clippers?” she asked, holding them up.

“No. They'll never chop through this tangle.”

Clearly, he was struggling with something, a deep frown planting itself on his face. When he strode toward the cabin without saying anything, she wondered again, what crime had made him choose the painfulness of solitude over the quick end of a suicide. He wasn't a coward, but he was doing penance; she was sure of it. Luke had been hurting himself for a long time, and Kendle wanted it to stop. He'd done so much for her! She almost felt like a normal person again. There had to be something she could do for him in return, some way to ease his pain.

The jungle was alive around her, monkeys and squirrels chattering from vine-covered banyan trees and leafy palms that waved in the warm, dry wind. The sun was shining comfortably, the breeze light, and sometimes, like now, it felt as if they were the only ones on this nearly deserted southern island. If not for the heavy, hurting heart that needed to know, she thought she could be happy here.

Luke came out carrying a long, black sword case decorated with patches, an American flag, and the initials L.L.J. His expression was dazed, far away, and Kendle watched curiously as he unzipped the bag, removing a worn machete. Shiny and no doubt deadly, the machete gleamed in the sun as he dropped the empty sheath into the thick paddle grass by her feet, mind clearly not in the present. She left him alone, eager to inspect the markings on the case.

The past instantly came alive for Luke as he held the machete. The memories ran up the blade and dug into his rotting soul. He hadn't touched it in years, not since clearing the land where his cabin sat. After that, he had locked it up with the rest of his old life.

The first swipe was sweet, powerful, and Luke was jerked through time, suddenly facing his greatest joy and his biggest *bête noir*.

The other men in his platoon had hated cutting a path through the dense jungles of Cambodia, griped constantly about

the backbreaking, mind-numbing work, but not Luke. He understood that clearing their own road meant they were there before the enemy, before the mines and homemade traps meant to blow their legs a mile away. He'd been known as Whacker then, had used that excuse to explain always volunteering for point, but more than safety, hacking his own path gave him a feeling of power and control that the sixteen-year-old runaway had fallen in love with.

Sweat rolled into face, and Luke automatically pulled off his white tank top and wiped his face, keeping the deadly weapon in hand. He pushed the shirt into his pocket and went back to work, enjoying the only good thing that had come from his time in the service.

Frank, his mind insisted. *Frank had been good*. The POW hadn't been from Luke's platoon, but he had been another soldier (teenager much too young to be killing people), and they had formed a bond that was stronger than what they had with the other prisoners. They'd been hostages together, tortured together for their friendship, and when they'd gotten the chance, they had escaped together, taking nine other survivors along.

It had earned them both medals and citations, but there was no erasing what had happened during the escape. An award couldn't return all those lives.

Regret rolled over Luke in waves, and he stopped swinging, breathing harshly. That world was decades gone, but it always seemed so much closer.

Attention drawn repeatedly to Luke, Kendle was surprised by her reaction. She hadn't expected the hard, sexy muscles to capture her attention so completely. Then, he'd started swinging again, tan, naked back flexing gracefully, and her mouth went dry.

Luke turned in time to catch her staring, and there was no way he could mistake the desire as a breeze blew deliciously

over his sweaty skin. The male inside him demanded he grab her, kiss her...*claim her*.

Sun beating on his gritty neck, Luke took a single step before stopping. He turned away instead, putting his shirt on. Would she have denied or welcomed him?

Kendle's face was red, but with his sweaty, sexy skin covered, her mind seemed to wake from the sexual daze that had swallowed her.

She noticed the machete hadn't left his hand once. *Must be special to him*, she thought, and she was surprised when he came over and gently pushed the handle into her grip.

"You can do the rest."

She hesitated. "I don't have a clue."

Luke threw her a challenge in response, very aware of the salty air and the thick green jungle around them. It felt like he was caught between the past and the present. "I'll show you. Unless you don't think you can?"

Kendle carefully took hold of the sharp weapon's worn handle. She strode to the area that was almost a third cleared and raised a brow at him expectantly.

Not quite smiling, Luke answered by sliding behind her and tugging her gently into his big arms. Barely suppressing a groan of pleasure, he wrapped himself around her and guided them, mouth near her ear, giving instructions.

It was awkward at first, Kendle too aware of the hard male body molded to hers to work with him, and the images of his naked skin flashed through her mind as they bent and swung, dipped and cut.

"Close your eyes."

She did it reluctantly, hating to give up control, but almost immediately, the feeling hit her. Total power, it was undeniable and consuming. She giggled against his jaw, as he led.

They settled into a rhythm that made her stomach jump as primitive and sexual instincts converged stunningly with each carefully controlled and yet harshly violent swing.

For Kendle, it was the release she needed and the attraction she had lost hope of finding. She wanted the real love that her parents had shared, the kind that set off bells and whistles in her heart, and while this wasn't that, it was definitely lust. She let her body melt against his as they ducked and swung, bent and rubbed.

The area was cleared too quickly for both of them, and they stopped reluctantly, neither of them moving away as sparks flew.

Kendle was lost. Even the sand in her shoes felt right. When he placed a kiss on her jaw, she shifted toward him, eyes still shut.

Moving slowly, the lonely pilot slid his lips to the corner of her mouth for a chaste but erotic kiss that gave her chills of want and drew a moan of frustration when he started to pull away.

Luke felt the denial, her need, and tilted her head up, sealing their lips.

It was the sweetest kiss he'd ever had, one to remember a lifetime later, and he leaned back to stare at her, thinking it shouldn't go any further. Liquid pools of desire stared at him, and Luke forced himself away from her, putting the machete in its case. Would she want that room in town now? A line had definitely been crossed.

Kendle could still feel his lips against hers, his hardness behind her as they worked together, and she went to the box of tools with an expression of pleasant discovery. It was what she'd been hoping for since high school, and she was a bit stunned that she had found it here and now, and without even searching.

She glanced up to discover Luke watching her warily, and she blushed. "Sorry. Guess I got carried away."

"Me too, darlin'. You're safe here with me. It won't happen again."

Luke snickered at the protest in her eyes and saw her clamp down on her first response, giving him another smile instead.

"I know that. If I have to be stranded in paradise, I couldn't have better company."

They let it go, got back to the gardening, but it stayed on their minds.

Luke became acutely aware of how often her gaze came to him after that. She was young, innocent (despite being a star from California), and he would try to give her time to adjust to the new feelings before taking advantage of her...but time was running out. He could feel it pulling them along, and he wanted to tell her what was in his heart but didn't, still not sure of what response he might get.

3

Not one to wait, fate stepped in. A few hours after their first embrace, they were forced to confront their future directly.

“Is Miss...Roberts about? I thought I'd take her on a tour of my estate.”

Luke clamped his jaw shut against his first thought—*No, Jackass, not if she has any taste*—and used a polite response instead.

“Hang on, damn it.”

Spinning away, he slammed the door in the surprised son of a millionaire's face, hard enough to rattle the frame. Luke longed to order the playboy off his property, but knew he couldn't. All the island males had come sniffing around (Ethan Kraft the most determined), and though it was her decision to make, Luke couldn't help the jealousy that filled his heart. *Mine! She's mine!*

“Kendle! Company!” he shouted out the rear door.

Her soft response made him like her even more.

“I'm not here.”

Luke didn't bother to lower his voice. “Too late. Come say hi to Ethan.”

“Shit.”

Luke laughed as she came to the door, muttering about people with more money than brains. He settled in his chair with

a drink and a cigar, shamelessly flipping off the record player to listen.

Kendle yanked the front door open and held it, not inviting Ethan in and not going out. This was the fifth time the snake charmer had dropped by in the last two weeks, becoming increasingly frustrated that none of his power and money mattered to her. He'd finally reached annoying.

"Hello, Ethan."

He blinked at her unfriendly tone and flashed a brilliant smile meant to blind her so that she wouldn't see the way his eyes crawled up her jeans, scanned her chest, and finally made it to her face.

"How lovely you are today, Ms. Roberts. I've come to sweep you away for that tour I've been promising."

She held up dusty, gloved hands. "I'm gardening. It's slow work."

She hoped he would take the hint, and she frowned when the tall, curly blond, daddy's-boy leaned in, almost leering.

"I could help."

"Do what? You ain't no farmer," Luke grunted from his chair in the corner.

Kendle flushed, hoping the snobbish fop hadn't heard. "Thanks, but I already ran Luke off. It's very relaxing."

Kendle swept the tropical jungle that was alive with life, bushy leaves waving in the soft, warm breeze, and tried not to respond to Ethan's smug, patronizing tone.

"You should be resting. Let me take you to my estate on the bay. I'll pamper you...show you what the red carpet treatment is."

"And probably every venereal disease known to mankind," Luke muttered.

Kendle couldn't stop the snicker that mistakenly encouraged Ethan to begin telling her what he would "introduce" her to, like she were some backwards bush-baby he had to tame.

After a full minute, Kendle found herself getting angry. Didn't he know who she was?

"I've also got a rock wall that I'll show you how to climb. It's the biggest one the company ever made," Ethan stated arrogantly.

Luke's scornful voice echoed loud and clear, "Yeah, forty grand for a wall when he could have climbed these hills for free. Bet Daddy's real proud."

Ethan's handsome face disappeared behind his scowl and Kendle flushed beet red, embarrassed but struggling not to laugh.

"You said you're busy. I'll come back another day."

"Ethan, wait." She stepped out, but left the door open. "I'm sorry. I know you want to be my...friend, but really, I need more time to myself."

He answered, "I should think you would be eager to be with your own kind."

Frowning at him, Kendle crossed her arms over her chest. "What's that mean?"

The dandy's expression was eager now, mean, and Kendle suddenly wished she had let him go away mad.

"It means normal people, Miss Roberts, not an old man who hid here from crimes that he was never punished for. Be careful. You could be in danger."

He left before she could think of a response.

As she came in and shut the door, Luke said, "He's right. Not about you being in danger, but about my past. I did something awful that cost innocent lives, and I was never charged. I was barely even investigated because of the scandal it would have caused. It was swept under the rug, and I was sent to a new unit in a different part of the world."

His voice was careful, expecting the worst, and Kendle listened calmly, hating the Kraft heir a little for Luke's pain. There was no comparison between the two men, and she liked the fact that Ethan had backed down. It said she was safe with Luke, that he could handle things.

“I knew it was something like that. How terrible to have carried it for so long. Alone.”

Surprised by her reaction, or lack of, Luke repeated his words. “He’s right. You should be with your own kind.”

Kendle sighed, pulling off the dirty gloves. “You are my kind. He can’t understand how it is with us. He only wants me because I say no.”

Tension invaded the room.

“How is it with us, Kendle? Tell me, so we’ll both know.”

Face red and heart thumping, Kendle stared at the floor. “I don’t think we should do this yet.”

“Too soon?” he asked, trying to steel himself for her words of rejection, despite the kiss he couldn’t stop thinking about.

“Too awkward. It...may not be what you’re hoping for, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’d be surprised by how little I’d settle for.”

His voice was incredibly sad and it stunned her for a moment.

Luke let out a gentle sigh filled with resignation, as if he knew he wasn’t worthy, and it broke her heart to see the hurt lurking in his face.

“I understand. I’m content with our friendship.”

“Really?”

He bent down to place a soft kiss on her cheek that sent chills into her belly. “Yes. Anything more is up to you.”

Unsure where the future would take them, Kendle followed her heart. They would take what fate gave them. “I know I don’t want any strings. I haven’t made plans for the future.”

“And you don’t have to. We’ll keep things like they are.”

“I’d like to try a little more.”

Luke’s breath caught at her words. “What do you mean by a little, darlin’?”

“I want you to follow your feelings, and stop holding yourself back from me. I can handle it.”

“I hold back out of respect for you and your reputation,” he hedged. It was really the stain on his soul and the feeling of worthlessness that he wore like a cloak.

“People will think it’s wrong. I’m old enough to be your grandfather.”

Kendle’s mind flashed to their embrace in the garden, and she shook her head, unknowingly telling him what the male inside had been longing to hear.

“I don’t care what they think. I don’t see you that way.”

“How do you see me?”

Kendle’s face reddened further. “I see an attractive, resourceful man that I’d like to know more...intimately. If you’re interested?”

Luke pulled her into his arms and this time, when their lips met, he let the man in him have control. He held her with a hand tangled in her short, dark curls and the other on her slender hip as his tongue tasted her.

He broke the kiss reluctantly, and her lashes fluttered open, gaze full of hazy desire that made him grin. “I’m interested.”

He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, and she peered up sexily. “How about another?”

Luke chuckled, body under tight control. “I’ll need an ice shower.”

Kendle slid her arms around his neck and pressed her soft woman’s curves against him. “No need. I’m not a tease.”

She kissed his lips softly, gasping softly against his mouth when he slid a hand down her hip to her cheek. As he deepened the kiss, Kendle was swept away, tightening her grip around his neck.

The wind gusted against his hot skin, and Luke held himself in check as he swelled, wanting to push against her like a horny teenager. He made himself leave her hot embrace.

“We hafta slow down, darlin’,” he said and put a little more distance between them. “This is one of those moments you can’t get back. You should be sure.”

“I am,” she protested.

Luke forced himself to do the right thing. He lied. “I’m not.”

Kendle’s desire fell under an immediate swell of self-doubt. What was she doing? Acting like a whore came to mind, and she spun away. “Yeah, okay.”

Embarrassed by her actions, she was gone a second later, and Luke watched with regret, sorry that he’d hurt her but sure it was happening too fast. He wouldn’t be able to stand it if they made love and she was sorry when it was over.

Kendle was horrified by the way she’d thrown herself at him and she couldn’t stop the hot tears. She told herself she had been treated worse by people she was related to, but the rejection was heavy in her gut as she went to the garden.

“Stupid,” she muttered, wiping at her face. “Red skin, no hair. No wonder he didn’t want me.”

“That’s not even close to true.”

Kendle jumped. “Don’t lie.”

“I’m not.”

She wiped at her face with the sleeve of her shirt, “Doesn’t matter. My fault for thinking I could have what I want and not consider how you feel. I put you on the spot, and I apologize. I used to have better manners.”

“Don’t do that to yourself!” Luke stated sharply, moving toward her. “You did nothing wrong.”

Her pretty eyes streamed with tears that the sun lit up like sparkling jewels as they rolled down her cheeks. He hated himself for hurting her and for being aroused by her youth.

“Then why don’t you want—”

“What? You think I don’t want to make love to you?”

Flushing scarlet, she didn’t answer.

When she started to twist away, Luke pulled her around and forced her to listen.

“I want you so much I dream about it,” he whispered, leaning in to slide his lips along her jaw. “I want to be with you more

than any woman I've ever known, and the next time you invite me, I'll do my best to love you the way you deserve.”

Luke kissed her damp cheek and then returned to the living room, afraid he'd fallen in love with someone who would never be able to return the feeling.

It'll be enough, his heart answered. He would love Kendle a lifetime's worth in the weeks or months that fate let them have. Her fears of the future were groundless. Death was in the air. His...and the only time he wasn't scared was when he was close to her.

Chapter Thirty-Four
Wrong Place, Wrong Time

March 29th

1

“**Y**ou forget who I am! Never talk to me that way again!” José snarled, hand dipping toward his belt.

Dean peered up from the muddy ground. The thin layer of grit was still blocking most of the sun, and without the glare, Dean had a perfect shot.

“Whoever did this might still be around. Listen to my brother, *Josey*, and shut up, or maybe your body will join that one by the burnt jeep. It is one of your *hombres*, yes?”

The school had obviously been the site of a battle. Blackened jeeps, fly-ridden corpses, puddles of drying blood, drag marks in the deep sand—and the front of the brick building appeared as though a bomb had gone off.

José picked it all out through his binoculars. Seemingly concentrating on the scene in front of them, he stored the insults. One day, he would be in charge, and these two *hermanos* would be *muerto*.

Dean sensed the thought and snorted. “You’d better bring help, *Josey*.” Mounting his solid black horse awkwardly, Dean silently cursed the wound that had healed but left nerve damage that prevented the smooth control he used to have.

At the second intentional slur of his name, José considered trying it now.

Dean read it on his face. “Don’t miss.”

It was a long moment between them, and Dillan reluctantly distracted his brother. They needed Cesar. Killing his reckless cousin wouldn't help. "Fresh tracks. Not ours."

Dillan stood up from his perusal of the hard ground, and Dean continued to keep track of the Mexican who abruptly gave his back to them. José was pretending to watch mutated ants the size of an infant's shoe climb out of a high hill of dirt, but both brothers knew he was a coiled snake, waiting for the right moment to strike. If he could conquer his carelessness, José might eventually gain the deadly air that Cesar carried, but for now, they weren't impressed.

"Our men were overpowered?" José asked, lighting a thick cigar with hands that were steadier than the brothers were expecting.

Dean realized Dillan had been right to stop him.

"They had help. Casings are from 9mm."

José's plump, scarred face screwed up in anger as smoke swirled in the gusting wind.

"Safe Haven," Dean said flatly, sliding his coat back to finger the rifle on his pommel. His rage toward the witch grew as he watched his brother swing up onto his horse and wince. The painful pressure on his mangled wrist was still too much to hide.

"They're the only group we know of that are organized enough to do this. Go tell Cesar to make camp here," Dillan ordered. "Last call said he was three hours out."

The slavers were still finishing up with stragglers in Wellington who had barricaded themselves in. Rick had been sent in to take care of it.

"Tell him we'll track them, find out where they're at and going."

Hand holding the dirty white sombrero on as the wind gusted sharply, José spun away angrily, and the twins rode off in a cloud of dust purposely kicked up to insult him further. *When I'm in charge, those two are dead, and I'll do it myself!*

“Who has done this?” Cesar shouted furiously, his face red with anger.

The dozen men in the gymnasium with him stared at the filthy, bloody floor and the bodies of their men instead of him. They were glad when José hurried in.

José was Cesar’s right-hand man, the scarred guerrilla the only one to speak his mind when choosing time had come, but all the men knew the Kelly twins (when they were here) were really second, and everyone else was behind them.

“It was Safe Haven. The twins are tracking.”

“I want them dead!” Cesar screamed in frustration, stomping down a long, dim hall that should be full of bound slaves but held only cobwebs.

“I will get el los solgados ready to attack.”

Cesar didn’t slow, and José hurried to catch up, scrutinizing the gold-handled pistols in the slaver’s crisscrossed gun belts. Was this the moment?

“No.”

“But now, while they don’t—”

“No.” Cesar lowered his voice, reluctantly confiding, “They have a powerful weapon. We will send in el traidor to take care of it.”

“What kind of—”

Cesar scowled, shaking his tightly kinked curls. Would the young never learn? “Not here.”

He used his deformed hand to open a door marked “Office,” and the two Mexicans stopped short, coming face to face with a tall, blonde woman wearing a long, unbuttoned trench coat.

They saw stunning blue eyes full of hatred, and then she darted between them. Even limping, she was halfway down the hall decorated with Christmas pictures before they reacted.

The two men gave chase, words a mix of English and Spanish.

“Apurarse! Stop her!”

“Grab that puta!”

Samantha made it out through a side door. The men in the gym were just as surprised as Cesar and José when she darted by, but the door shut loudly behind her, and she froze.

A sea of male faces spun her way at the echo. A loose slave was fair game.

Terror ran through Sam’s veins, making her shiver, and she dropped submissively to her knees, heart thudding furiously in her chest as they all rushed toward her. She was in deep shit, even worse than when the chopper had gone down, worse than when the wolves attacked.

Help me, please! she screamed silently.

The doors opened behind her a second later, and Sam cried out as she was jerked backward by her thick braid, landing on her ass in the dirt.

Cesar gave José a nod, and the evil man swung a knee over each shoulder, pinning her arms as he opened his filthy pants.

Without mercy, Cesar knelt beside them, puffing on a fat cigar to get it red-hot. Then he moved it toward the bare stomach now showing from her struggles.

Sam had time to notice that the man was missing two fingers on his left hand, then he ground the cigar against her hip.

José thrust into her screaming mouth, gagging her as he pushed in as far as he could. With a hand on Cesar’s stocky shoulders as his brace, his free paw roamed her chest mercilessly.

“Bite me, you die!” the Mexican growled, breath already short.

Cesar held her by her hair so José could shove all the way down her throat.

“I have questions, chica,” Cesar stated casually as José thrust in and out of her mouth, forcing her to breathe through her nose. “You will answer.”

José stiffened, hips bucking forward, and Cesar's evil face filled with delight as he slammed his deformed hand over her nose and watched her choke.

José pulled out, feverish at her purple face.

Maybe I'll do it again and not stop, he thought, but when Cesar motioned for him to move, he did.

Sam rolled over, gasping, straining for even a thread of air as tears streamed over her cheeks.

"Each of my men waits for a turn, puta, and they will get it if you tell a single lie," Cesar warned as she continued to cough and gag. "Your name and why were you left behind. You have disease?"

"Samantha...not left. Here...too late. Saw...them leaving." She stayed on the ground, coughing it up, and cringed when the short, stocky leader jerked her to her feet.

"Tell me," he ordered, not letting her twist away from the wind that was gusting sand at them in small clouds.

"Two ...jeeps, three vans?...Like SWAT...only solid black."

"How many men?"

Sam shook her head, trembling. "They were leaving when I...came up 210. I only saw them go."

"She lies!" José exclaimed, advancing toward her with an expression that said her mouth hadn't been nearly enough.

"They left her because she is diseased! I claim her."

Cesar watched how fast the fire blazed on her hate-filled American face.

"They did not leave me! They would have loved to have me, but the dumb-ass driver never looked back!"

Cesar swung her around. "And why ees it that they would love to have you, puta? What makes you so especial?"

Sam stepped through destiny's open door. "I'm a storm tracker. Who doesn't need that now?"

Cesar hid his pleasure and gave José a nod as he shoved her, tripping her so she hit the dirt. "My tent first. Show her what I expect tonight. Mañana, she does rounds of el los soldados."

Samantha's heart clenched with fear like she'd never known, unable to believe he found no value in her. *Escape!* her mind screamed.

Sam immediately began to make a plan, ignoring the dark hands now crawling inside her torn shirt.

She had gotten out a call and been answered, but the radio had gone dead before she could ask if they would come and get her. She couldn't count on that. She would have to save herself again.

Samantha looked around, desperately searching for anything that could help. Crooked tents with Mexican flags and slogans were going up, the smoky breeze carrying the odors of feces, rot, blood, and death, screams echoing from the other side of the big camp... It took only a moment to understand. These men were evil, plain and simple.

She had stayed in the school because she'd been hoping the men who had gotten the others would come back, had decided to give them a full week to get here if they were coming, but now her time had run out.

A piercing scream echoed, making her jump, and Samantha stopped struggling as the man led her roughly through one side of the unorganized camp. There were other whites here, but they were in the same boat as she was.

Sam's mind suddenly replayed the first evil man's words: *Show her what I expect tonight.* Fear filled her body from the feet up. Melvin and Henry had been bad. This was going to make her want them back.

Her captor shoved her into a large, lopsided tent. When he followed her in, closing the flap, Sam shivered in terror.

3

The second she was able to move, Samantha forced herself to her feet and began searching for a weapon, ignoring the blood

that dripped from her mouth, from her nose, and down her bruised thighs.

Longing for a shot of antifreeze to calm her nerves and take the edge off the deep, familiar ache low in her guts, Sam kept hunting, even though the tent held only piles of reeking garbage. There had to be something!

Her attacker had chained her ankle to the tent pole like a dog, and the cold metal was a horrid reminder of her weeks in captivity with Melvin and Henry. Her gut was blazing with determination to get away. Tonight. They would be expecting it, but wouldn't think she'd kill to escape. They didn't know what she was capable of!

Aching, Samantha edged to the flap and slowly lifted a tiny corner. She quickly swept the men, who appeared unhealthy with cold sores, coughs, and noses that were wiped on filthy shirtsleeves. They were an ugly group of hardened killers, bruised faces and clothes still streaked with innocent blood that drew insects. Sam instantly hated the penny-sized snapping flies swarming over the filthy camp but thought it was fitting the mutations were here, in this place of abominations.

What she could see of the town around them also offered no hope. Rusting Army trucks rammed through the gates of a charred warehouse, block after block of damaged, destroyed, burnt homes, along with bodies rotting openly. This place had been gone before the slavers, and Sam cursed herself for being caught off guard. She should have known there was trouble coming by the way the rescue party had been leaving so quickly.

It had taken her days to figure out how to charge up the CB system. After finally succeeding, she'd fallen asleep in front of the radio and hadn't heard the slaver's engines over the wind or her own bad dreams. Samantha shivered as the noise levels increased—cries, gunfire, barking, and shouts. All the men she could see through her tiny peephole were Mexican, and fearsome in their blood-tacked leggings and long shirts. Help would not

come from the town or from any of these men. What about the females here? There were none in sight.

As she started to raise the flap higher, instinct took over, and Sam ducked as a big boot slammed into the tent where her face had been.

“Closed!”

Samantha scrambled back, afraid the guard would come in and hurt her too, but there were only the noises of the camp. A loud, drawn-out scream, a gunshot, and more shouts in a rough dialect she was only vaguely familiar with. What the hell was she gonna do?

Keep trying.

That, she would do until she was dead. It was who she was. A survivor, no matter how many times this new world tried to kill her. At one point, Samantha had even lain low in a supermarket full of decaying bodies during a dust storm. The warning had arrived only an hour before the sandstorm, but it had been enough. The waves of energy had made her heart clench in longing, knowing instinctively that it had come from someone who was like her. She had almost chosen to skip Cheyenne and hunt that person down, but wasn't sure how to do it. Now, she bitterly wished that she had tried.

Unlike NORAD, the school still had small treasures, like clothes and shoes, and a basement of boxes she'd happily explored after finding a case of fruit cocktail and a crate of bottled water wrapped for the vending machines. Apparently, the rescue party hadn't swept the basement, and neither had any of those hiding here. Why? Just because of a few bodies? Were they stupid? Those were everywhere. What was a few more if it meant fresh supplies?

She shrugged, running her fingers around the entire tent line. Their loss had been her—

“You won't find anything.”

Samantha was on her knees in front of the flap, and she looked up to find a tall, thin white man with shifty eyes and a

black bandana around his neck holding the flap open. He held a jug of brownish water in one hand and appeared so much like one of the slavers that Samantha forgot her own plan.

“What do you want?” she snarled, mentally calling him a traitor as she backed up on the blood-splattered floor. She wouldn’t get near that cot again unless she was dead or unconscious.

“Cesar wants you to get cleaned up and ready for him.”

Sam ignored the words, escape plans reforming in her mind as she watched his vivid green gaze crawl over her exposed flesh. She felt that steel in her spine harden and slowly stood up, faced him. Maybe she had gotten lucky. If he still wanted her when she was battered, he was a sexual deviant at the very least, and therefore, weak.

“Are you one of his men?”

Rick entered slowly, and let the flap shut them in smelly dimness. “Slave.”

Sam took in the fresh and old bruises, the dirty, ragged jeans and shirt that hung on him—no jacket despite the low temperatures. The voice inside warned her that this was yet another man who could not be trusted.

“Can you get a gun?”

Rick shook his head again, ogling the bare skin showing through her torn shirt. “No. Pills, though. You’ll be a zombie while he’s using you.”

Sam forced her lips to curve into an inviting shape. “Do you have a woman or family here?”

“No,” Rick denied yet again. Cesar would be very pleased with how easy this was going to happen.

Samantha stared, and Rick felt his body respond. The blood and bruises were indeed a turn-on for him. That was another reason he’d stayed. Here, a man was allowed to be just that: a man.

“Do they let you come and go?”

“Sometimes,” he said, staring at her platinum hair and bruises with a hot gaze that hid a scheming male mind.

“Usually, I have a guard.” Rick gave a slight wince he made sure she witnessed. “I got away once.” His voice lowered to a mutter. “Haven’t tried in a long time.”

Very aware of the dim day fading fast, Samantha ran a hand up his arm, letting her shirt fall open. “You like women?”

His expression was full of want, mind full of control. It was all part of the plan, and Rick had done it enough to know he’d already succeeded. He was numb to the guilt as he worked her.

“Hell, yeah.”

“Wanna touch?”

Rick’s breath was coming short. He did want her—unlike the other females here, who cried too much and only cowered—and he broke Cesar’s first rule: don’t touch until the deal is done.

Samantha was unprepared for the bolt of lust that his gentle hands drew. When she arched into his caress, to her shame, it wasn’t completely faked.

“Wanna do more?”

His hands slid down her bony hips and Sam pulled back, closing her torn top as best she could. “Then get us out of here. I’ll be *your* slave.”

Rick’s hands lowered in mock fear. “He’ll kill us!”

“We’re not Mexican. He’ll do that anyway.”

There was truth to the statement.

She leaned against him, sensing weakness. “It’ll be great. Just the two of us, and you’ll never be alone.”

“It’ll have to be fast, while they’re drinking. Be ready.”

His words surprised her, even though it was what she wanted to hear, but Sam was too terrified to turn down even a chance of escape.

“I will. You can trust me.”

“She went for it already?”

Rick told Cesar everything word for word, as he always did, and tried to keep the rank odors from blowing in his scruffy face as they lurked out of sight of the tent where they had Samantha stashed.

“She is smart. Talk to her only a little. Sneak out on one of the twins’ horses.” Cesar fingered the handle of the knife in his belt as the cool wind blew by them. “You will contact me in two weeks. If you do not...”

Rick gave in without a fight; shame no longer something he felt. “You’ll have what you want, like in Trinidad and Boulder. This plan always works.”

“And what reward do you ask, white man, for betraying your people? Again.”

Rick didn’t deny or even flinch, didn’t feel anything at the jab. They were not his people anymore. They hadn’t been since the war. “The woman, until I’m tired of her.”

“There are no white unions here!”

“Not a union. *My* slave.”

Scowling, Cesar slammed his deformed hand on top of his dirty sombrero to keep a gust of wind from stealing it. “If there were to be a child, it would be killed.”

Rick snorted. “I want her, not some screaming shit machine. If she comes up pregnant, I’ll make it go away.”

Cesar didn’t doubt that tone. “Deal. Do not forget. Two weeks, and then you will deliver this Safe Haven to me.”

5

“You follow. Make sure your witch is with them,” Cesar ordered, watching Rick go to the woman. “We’ll be along.”

The twins hovered in the shadows, eager to do as instructed. The tracks from the school might have led them to the witch, but the twins had lost the prints in a sewer drain and hadn’t been able to find them again despite checking exits for hours.

The weeks that had gone by had made the twins doubt themselves. If the woman wasn't what they had assumed, then they would just keep going. Cesar had put a lot of time and effort into this now. He'd made strong plans based around the control of such a power, and being denied would cost someone's life.

It was a big risk the brothers were taking. They'd likely be caught and killed in the future if they had to run, but the need for revenge on the woman and her protector was undeniable. And if she was what they had thought, then they would gain something any man would risk his life for: true magic.

Now feeling on top of what could be a future problem, Cesar watched them go. First, the twins went ahead to hide and follow, and then Rick left with the woman, sneaking through the tent shadows. Cesar had no doubts the traitor would contact him on time. The men here had no rules, no chores, just sex and drinking, with killing thrown in for fun.

It is the real American dream, Cesar thought, gold tooth gleaming as he grinned cruelly. Mine, and I'll kill any group that tries to change things back.

America was in for a long storm season.

Chapter Thirty-Five
Fire and Desire

March 30th
Near Chadron, Nebraska

1

“**W**e are an American Red Cross Convoy picking up survivors. We offer food, shelter, medical care, and protection. Does anyone copy?”

“We hear you, Safe Haven! We’re in Hot Springs. We’re out of food. Are you around here?”

“Close enough. How many people?”

The man’s voice that answered the woman’s plea for help was different from the one they’d been hearing regularly for the last week. Marc and Angela both stopped cleaning up their late lunch to listen to the conversation.

It was late afternoon, and they needed to get moving again, but the waves of authority from that voice were impossible to ignore. To Marc’s ears, he sounded military.

“Twelve. Two are sick. We don’t know what it is.”

“That’s a lie,” Angela stated, able to read it in the woman’s shaky voice.

“We offer help to everyone, sick or not. Do you know Morse or phonetic code?”

“I know both, but go slow, it’s been a while.”

“You an ex-sailor by any chance, Hot Water?”

“Nancy, and yes, for seven years. How’d you know that?”

“Because of the slight dislike in your words. Marines and Navy didn’t usually mix well.”

The Safe Haven man's tone was laced with a comforting humor.

“No, sir, they didn't.”

“They do now. We're all soldiers in the same fight for survival. Take down this message.”

“He tells his men that too,” Angela muttered, listening in many ways.

The taps came slowly enough for Angela, who'd been learning the code from Marc, to understand. “They're in the Black Hills. That's only one day from us.”

Over the hood, Marc stared, full of longing.

I want more time.

Me too.

Can't we?

...no.

Two days would be All Fools' Day. Was it an omen?

Marc frowned. “You all right?”

Angela stared at the vast field of corn that ran as far as they could see on both sides. They were only five miles from the Nebraska-South Dakota state line. There were barbed fences and brown grass struggling to survive along the side of the road, but no trees. Other than a faded red barn with a tall silo on one side, there was only corn here.

“Angie?”

Marc hated the fear in her expression. It hadn't been there much in the last weeks. She had worked hard to overcome her weaknesses, and he was still amazed by how fast she'd done it.

“You could call now. Talk to your boy.”

“No. I don't want Kenn to know where we are.” Angela pushed the fear back as her mother's heart spewed awful words at the refusal. “And we need to talk about what happens when we get there.”

Marc straightened up. “After we make camp tonight?”

“Let’s stay here. Meet up with them in the next few days,” she chose, gaze wandering large circles of charred dirt that reminded her of the empty holes they’d seen in middle Nebraska.

Marc’s unease grew. They had covered three hundred miles in nine days, driving continuously. Last night, he’d had to insist they rest and get ready to face whatever was coming. They had only made one long stop to replace his Blazer (again they were identical; the only one they had found was the exact match to hers. Fate...? Marc wasn’t sure.), and she had been pushing them hard to get here. Now, she was hanging back. Nerves?

“Are you sure? We could be there by dusk tomorrow.”

“No. It’s already been ninety-eight days. A few more won’t matter.”

Marc took a step toward her. “You can’t put it off, honey. Just face it, and we’ll go from there.”

Angela watched Dog patrol the edges of the shoulder-high corn, knowing she had to let Marc in on what she was feeling, thinking. “I’m not avoiding, but I am nervous. I’m cutting ropes, erasing his hold on me, and he’ll hate it, hate me for it. You need to have the details you asked for in Indiana and I need to strengthen my determination. Will you drill me on the things you’ve taught me, remind me that I can fight back?”

Marc’s heart broke for her. “I think that’s a great idea. You’ve gotten a lot stronger. He won’t know how to handle you.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.”

2

“Faster. You can handle it.”

Angela pushed the pedal down, and the Blazer leapt forward, throwing them back.

“On my mark. Just like before.”

Angela concentrated, hands and feet connected to the thrum of the engine, the vibrations of the tires.

“Now.”

She spun the wheel, jerking up the emergency brake, and then they were spinning in the dusty street, seat belts holding them in place.

“Now.”

Gunning the engine, Angela straightened the wheel, and the Blazer shot forward.

“Again. Seventy this time.”

Angela mashed the gas, emboldened by her repeated successes, and managed to make the emergency rotation without his instructions.

She grinned, waved at the line of dirty, faded targets they had come to a stop facing. “Next?”

Marc then made another mistake that would later haunt him.

“Loser has dishes!”

Angela got out of the car and took off at his challenge, darting for the distant line of dented soda cans they’d set up.

Distracted by her happiness, Marc gave chase, and left their vehicles in the middle of the street for anyone to discover.

Angela was able to match Marc shot for shot until he moved the cans back so far that she could barely view them. After missing half, and him missing none, she put her gun away.

“That’s not a challenge for you, is it?”

Marc shrugged, expression shuttered. “Does it matter?”

“Maybe. Stand by that speed limit sign.”

Their eyes locked for a brief, intense moment.

“If you like.”

It was amazing to watch. When she asked him to go farther, Marc did it with no comment, just a curious glance that she chose not to answer. He was wondering if she was seeing a showdown between him and her man.

She was.

Marc didn’t miss a single shot, and Angela knew instinctively that this still wasn’t hard for him. Marc was good.

Better than anyone she'd ever seen, maybe even Kenn, who liked to take her to the range but not let her shoot. Designed to rub in how defenseless she was, it was yet another difference declaring these two men worlds apart. Kenn had been her warden, while Marc... He was her protector.

He makes me feel safe, she realized, watching him holster his gun and move toward her. Marc was a good man; one she trusted, cared about...one she still wanted.

Angela smelled him as he stepped by, smoke, sweat, and, deep underneath, sexy, musky man. Her nostrils flared, and she inhaled deeply, instinctively, before it was gone. Feeling the restless yearning of her heart, she turned away, suddenly lost and hurting. They'd missed so much!

"You all right?"

It was a question that he couldn't stop asking, and Angela stared at the thinner layer of sky grit instead of his handsome face. She could almost feel the sun again, but even the good things couldn't distract her from the fear, the desires. There was no way this would end well.

"Just thinking."

"Care to share?"

She shook her head. "No."

Marc could feel her unease, her sadness, and he tried one last time to get her to take the easy way out. "Let's grab him and go. We'll find other people to settle down and rebuild with."

"I can't."

Marc sighed. "Because you owe him."

Angela chose to give him complete honesty, whether he was ready to hear it or not. "Not anymore. When he left me out here to fend for myself—hoping I couldn't, that I wouldn't—it cancelled our deal more than anything else he's done."

"Then why?"

"It's hard to explain. I'm going for my son, but there's something else pulling at me too, at the other side of me. I dream a lot. I'm sure you know."

Marc knew it well. The nightmares had come less often, but when they did, they seemed worse. Twice, she'd woken him up screaming about a metal monster.

"I dream of a refugee camp most nights, and it's full of people. Our kind of people, and they need help. I want to belong there. I want us to be a part of that protection."

There wasn't a lot Marc could say to that. Being alone with her was great, but it couldn't stay this way. "In the same group as your man? Don't you think that's asking a little much?"

"Of course it is. For now, our son's all that matters, anyway. We'll handle it as it comes."

"Remember the night we made him?"

Marc hadn't meant to say it out loud and was relieved when Angie only blushed.

"No, not so much."

"Ouch. That hurts." He feigned being crushed, aware that he really felt it—he'd thought of little else during sex for the last fifteen years.

Her voice softened a bit. "Don't ask questions unless..."

"...you're prepared to hear the answer," he finished, laughing with her.

"We could talk about it," Marc teased. "Maybe you'd recall."

"No need to."

"So you do remember?"

Marc watched her eyes glow a smoky, midnight blue, and he tensed.

Angela was unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "All the time, at first. I'd think about you, and I'd wonder what raven-haired, blue-eyed whore you were with. I'd wonder if you were able to sleep afterward, if you stayed until morning and kissed her lips, if you promised to love her forever as you walked out the door."

Marc took a step forward, heart aching. "No Angie, to all of it. I've only had one love, only said it once, and I meant it. Forever hasn't come yet."

A tear spilled from under her dark lashes. “Don’t. It hurts.”

“I’d take it away if I could.”

“You have, some of it. Knowing you came back means something to me.”

Marc blinked. “I didn’t think you knew.”

“I picked it up a while back.” She shrugged. “Didn’t seem like you wanted to talk about it.”

“I didn’t,” he admitted tersely.

“You would rather I went on thinking that you didn’t come back for me?”

“Yes,” Marc said quickly.

Angela frowned. “I don’t understand. Why would you want me to hate you for it?”

“Because you should,” he told her emotionally. “I knew you’d forgive me. You’re a good person, but I have to be punished.”

“Because I was hurt?”

“Because you were being hurt right then and I let my cowardice keep me from helping you!” he almost shouted. “I’ve never run from anything in my life! ...except you.”

The pain she’d been carrying all these years dropped like a stone into an ocean and flooded her with warmth. He’d been scared to face her. It was the one explanation that she had never considered.

“I allowed you to be harmed,” Marc said, awash with the shame he’d held in check for so long. “It’s unforgivable.”

“It was fate.”

Marc was startled from his self-evisceration. “What?”

Angela tried to be comforting, resisting the urge to wrap him in her arms. “One of you would have died that day. The other would have gone to prison. Fate didn’t want that and neither did I.”

“You don’t want either of us dead or gone,” he repeated, dazed at how fast she’d ripped him open and then begun healing him from the inside.

“No. I owe him my son, Marc. Charlie wouldn’t be waiting for me in that refugee camp if Kenn hadn’t cared for us all these years.”

“That wasn’t care,” Marc insisted angrily. “It was ownership.”

“I know,” Angela answered. “But it allowed us to survive. Fate has jobs for all of us. I believe that.”

Marc didn’t want any part of fate and the cruelties that were always for the greater good. “I don’t.”

“I know.” Angela smiled. “Fate brought you back into my life, Marc. Not when either of us wanted it, but when it was needed. You’ll see that in time, I think.”

Marc rolled his eyes and Angela giggled.

The awful tension was broken and sadness took its place.

“I’m sorry I didn’t knock,” Marc said. He was relieved, but wasn’t sure it was okay to feel that way.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call,” Angela admitted. “Fate or not, if I could do it over, I’d call you.”

That was enough for Marc to be able to let it go. He put his hand out. “Truce?”

She shook it, and said, “Didn’t know we were at war.”

Angela let her hand linger. Contact with another human, skin sliding across hers in warmth, was something she had missed.

When he moved toward her, she held still, needing to discover if the stray curls of want she’d been feeling were real. Could she be whole again, in time?

Marc saw her nostrils flare as his hands came up to her face, and she shut her eyes when his palm slid along her cheek, thumb rubbing across her bottom lip.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, leaning forward. “A goddess.”

Marc pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth, felt her sudden intake of breath. Not sure if it was fear or desire, he pulled back. “Angie?”

Her hands curled into balls, wanting his kiss, wanting to be faithful. Not sure, either, about that flood of heat low in her gut, Angela melted into his arms and tilted her mouth up.

Marc didn't give her time to change her mind. He gave her the welcome he had been saving since she'd recoiled from him in Indiana.

Angela stiffened as his hand slid to the back of her neck, but the mouth against hers was sweet. He gently tugged her closer, and she curled her arms around his neck, lost in the first real passion she had felt in too many years.

Marc deepened the kiss, let their tongues touch, rub, and the doors between their minds swung open, thoughts mixing.

Missed you!

Need you!

Taste like a woman.

Smell like a man.

My woman.

My man.

The last one made Angela gasp against his mouth, and she slammed the doors, broke the kiss in surprise. So much feeling in a single embrace!

Marc glanced away to lie. "I'm sorry."

"Brady."

Her voice was rough, sexy, and he looked back slowly, prepared to hear almost anything.

"It wasn't fear."

Marc laughed, body hard and heart light. It was gonna be a good day.

Angela's thoughts were along the same line, and she was hoping that feeling would stay with her through the hard reunion she knew was coming. She had a plan of action based on what little she had picked up about the people Kenn had joined. Marc would have to watch his ass, but there might be a chance for peace if her Marine could be reasoned with. She would know within the first few hours of being around Kenn's people if that

stood a chance. If not, she would use the backup. They would run.

After all this time with Marc, there was no way she could return to being what she'd been before—caged. There was no way the witch or the old Angela would allow that. They'd kill Kenny first.

3

Angela ducked under Marc's arm, grunting in effort. She spun and dropped, throwing her leg out to trip him.

Anticipating, Marc jumped, but she'd counted on that and immediately spun again, leg catching his ankle as he landed.

Tripping, he rolled forward.

Marc was on his feet in an instant, spinning, but knew she was already there, and was impressed.

Angela used the palms of both hands to shove him, hard, and for the first time since he'd begun to teach her, Marc landed on his ass in the dirt, grunting at the impact.

“Very, very good. Now, do it again.”

Angela rushed him the second he was upright, looking to his right. When he defended the left, she came straight up the middle, hands going to his big arms. She used the leg sweep on him again as she shoved and then had to duck the fingers that tried to pull her along as he fell.

“That's was great,” he praised, starting to get up.

“Don't move!”

Her tone froze Marc with his hands splayed out in the dirt. He sensed something moving nearby as she slowly drew her weapon.

“Roll to your right when I yell, and come up firing. Targets at... ten, two, and three.”

Marc heard the soft pad of paws, and watched her for the moment to react.

“Shit. Two more at twelve o' clock!”

Angela watched the three lanky, gray-and-white wolves, trying to judge their intentions. When a big black-and-gold animal that she hadn't seen lunged from the shadows, there was only time to react.

“Now!”

Angela fired, a bit wildly on the first few shots, and one of the rounds caught the wolf in mid-leap, slamming into its chest.

It landed on the ground with a hard thud as Marc rolled and hit his feet, began to fire.

“Watch your six!” he warned, immediately sure the wolves were pack hunting. He put them back-to-back as the brittle stalks around them swayed with barely seen movement. The sky had begun to darken as they worked out, but neither of them had worried. They were used to being in the dark, but this time, they had let themselves be surrounded by dangerous predators.

Orbs gleamed at them through the dusk-tinted rows and they fired at the same time, dropping two wolves that had jumped from opposite sides.

A dark shadow appeared at her hip, and Angela stopped herself from shooting as she recognized Dog. She narrowed on a stocky white wolf running through the distant, yellow stalks. Before she could take aim, another shadow streaked past her.

“Damn it!” Again, she kept herself from firing by only a hair. “Dog darted to my right, chasing the white one.”

Marc spun them to face another dual attack meant to separate. They came in low, lunging for legs. Both shots killed, but two more hungry hunters jumped at Angela.

“Duck!” she shouted, firing.

She got the lowest animal in the chest as the other sailed overhead, and heard Marc take care of it as more and more eyes shined mercilessly in the dimness. Wolves were now streaming through the corn like rats.

Making sure they stayed tight against each other, Marc moved them in half circles, firing and kicking at the wolves not hungry enough to lunge but still bold enough to snap. He could

feel Angela doing the same behind him, her grunts and shots mirroring his.

Flames rose up behind them suddenly. Marc noted the tall shadow of a man as he turned, shot a leaping wolf in the chest, spun again and killed a snapping wolf going for Angie's leg.

More fire erupted, along with the pungent smell of gasoline as full darkness fell over them. Some of the wolves hesitated, but not the hungry frontrunners.

Angela jerked forward, stiff-arming a determined predator in the throat. Her gun was empty, and she knew by the silence behind her that Marc's was too.

Drizzling, fur bushed up, the wolves padded forward.

Angela fumbled for the speed loader on her belt, and Marc turned them again, slamming his mag in as two more wolves lunged.

He caught one in the neck, blood spraying, and shoved Angie backward in time to let the second animal go sailing by.

"Incoming!"

Reloaded, Angela shot the wolf as it hit the hard ground, and then fired at one in the air as Marc rotated them again. Shadows lunged, coming through gaps in the wall of fire, and she picked them off, assuming the silent gun meant Marc was reloading.

Marc stared intently at the hulking man, aware that the three-fourths circle of flames was discouraging many of the animals. This newcomer was gigantic, over 8' tall, and yet he was graceful as he poured the last of the gasoline to ignite the gaps.

"Stay inside," the big man instructed gruffly, voice heavy under his furs and hood.

Before Marc could say anything, Angela spun around, six shots gone. She gasped in surprise at the big man, but like Marc, her fingers didn't stop. She had to be ready when he turned them again.

"On your right, woman!"

She twisted the stripper to load the bullets and flipped the chamber shut as she dropped the clip to the ground. She fired

without looking, almost able to hear the slobbering jaws about to clamp onto her ankle.

A heavy body thudded to the ground.

“Dog! Guard her!” Marc shouted, firing.

Dog appeared at her side, bloody muzzle snarling viciously at more wolves trying to sneak through a thin gap in the wall of fire.

4

Kenn shifted restlessly in the plush seat of his truck, unafraid of moving alone through the darkness but more than scared of not being able to discover a way to keep Adrian from discovering what he'd done, who he had been.

Angela was here. He could feel it. It had been a relief to get to Cheyenne and find only the slavers (he'd watched for an extra day to be sure she wasn't there, high in the trees with his scope), but he knew she was within a day of him, just not sure in what direction.

She was likely southeast, coming in on a straight line, but instead of going that way at the highway sign, Kenn kept the Bronco on the path he had taken after slipping away from the massive slaver camp. With full mags for his M16—swiped from the slavers—it had been an easy choice, and the Marine was sticking to it.

Kenn had his lights off, brake bulbs loosened to eliminate the telling glows, and he slowed as loud, rapid gunshots disturbed the darkness. Window down, he rolled slowly, trying to pinpoint the location. It was her. Kenn was suddenly sure of it.

More gunshots rang out, a battle for survival it sounded like, and he stopped. Scope always at hand, Kenn narrowed in on what appeared to be a ring of fire.

She was in trouble, he could feel that clearly, and the plan fell into place with a horrible snap. He would arrive in time to finish off whoever had killed his wife.

And if she survives? his worry asked.

Kenn grinned in the pitch-black truck. The sheep would be told she hadn't. If they discovered she'd ever been here. He certainly didn't intend to tell anyone.

5

Angela muttered a curse as three more wolves slunk into the ring, and she heard Marc echo her expletive as he fired repeatedly, hitting them all. They were in deep trouble. It was time to let the witch out and worry over the consequences later. "Fire!"

Bright flames spewed from Angela's outstretched hands, hitting a gap in the wall as two wolves tried to dart through. Their fur lit up, and the heat of her power blew them into the dark cornstalks as the gap filled in.

"Over here!" Marc shouted desperately as the stranger took a rifle from the sling on his shoulder.

The witch obeyed, flames shooting like golden-blue comets from her fingers. It closed the spaces as each infusion traveled the circle of fire, strengthening it until the ring was solid.

"That's it, Marc," she gasped. "I'm low."

All the animals were outside the ring now, whining uneasily, fighting with each other, and Angela pushed the witch back as she continued to shoot weak balls that disappeared into the air. *Stop. We can't win this way.*

There were numerous dead wolves, but dozens and dozens more still glowered hungrily at them from the darkness behind the flames. They would wait for the fire to burn down and attack again.

"Bad time to be bleedin'," the big man stated before he fired a well-aimed shot that took down a pair of wolves trying to breach the wall. One bullet had done the job of two.

Marc kept track of the big stranger as much as he did the wolves.

“You hit?” Angela demanded, keeping her attention on flickering shadows.

“No. Duck!”

They did it at the same time, dropping low, firing together. Two more wolves hit the dirt, and then slid through the already dying flames.

Dog jumped suddenly, meeting a wolf as it came over the fire. His powerful jaws clamped onto an unprotected throat.

Angela fired at the second animal stalking Dog.

Her first shot landed near its paw. Angie was afraid of hitting the wrong dark body, but her second shot went straight between its eyes.

“This is my last mag.”

“Me too.”

The stranger fired a bright red flare into the sky before their words had faded, and seconds later, a tremendous howl split the air.

Wwwhhhhhooooo!

It was a piercing whistle of some kind, the notes melodic and yet offensive at the same time.

Like a wolf's howl, Angela thought.

It seemed to go on forever, and Marc put a calming hand on Dog's shoulder as the wolves hesitated in their attack. Marc thought it had come from maybe two miles away, but no more.

Angela winced as the wailing increased and the wolves joined in. The volume continued to rise as the wolf call came again, pulling at them.

“That'll be the Missus. She'll have the bait out and be holed up with the others. We'll be able ta go in a bit.”

“Won't she need help?” Marc asked, amazed that the wolves were leaving.

“No. They don't climb none too well.”

“How will you get to your family without running into the wolf pack?” Angela asked.

The man leaned in, big form intimidating. “You tell me, *witch*,” he grunted.

Angela concentrated, feeling Marc tense behind her. “Underground.”

The man grunted, tossed off his hood to reveal a horribly disfigured face partially hidden by a thick, shaggy beard.

Angela stiffened as the witch whispered. Aloud, she said, “What payment do you expect for helping us? Nothing’s free. Not before and certainly not now.”

The man shrugged, gaze darting over her shoulder to Marc. “We got a broken radio and no medicine, no ammo. Got any of that?”

She relaxed further. “Possibly. What else? That doesn’t equal the debt.”

His face was hard as he swept her from head to toe. “Girls could use some clothes...maybe some books?”

Surprised, Angela gave him a genuine smile.

Marc heard the man’s sudden intake of breath. He recognized the sound, that reaction to Angela, and rotated them again.

“The woman is not for trade.”

The stranger’s hardened face tightened. “Can’t hardly get it up now anyway,” Max muttered, crossing over the dying flames. “Damn diabetes. Come on. She’ll have supper waitin’.”

Angela and Marc exchanged a long glance of uncertainty, but chose to follow the big man’s shadowy form into the darkness. The corn around them was empty now, but not silent. The breeze blew through the hollow stalks, making an eerie moan that resembled the calling howl they’d heard, and Dog followed, his fur still bushed out in warning. Danger wasn’t far.

Once again glad to be alive, Angela and Marc quietly followed the big man through the corn. When the rows ended, revealing a dark stretch of sickly evergreen trees, they exchanged looks that said they would be careful. The wind was cool, smelled of shit, and they both spotted the fresh scat that littered

the dead rows of waist-high corn. This was a part of the hunting ground.

“Almost there,” Max said, moving steadily despite his size. He stopped in front of a large clump of bushes.

Marc stayed by Angela, as did Dog. His thick fur was flecked in blood, and they both noted the big man casting hard glares at the timber wolf. Marc estimated they had come about two clicks from the battle scene.

“Grab an end.” The man bent down to clasp a large handful of the damp foliage.

Marc did it while keeping his ears open, not liking to be unfamiliar with an area but content enough to let the man’s true colors show when they would. The odds on this stranger winning weren’t nearly as high as with the wolves.

“Pull!”

Angela grinned in surprised admiration at the cleverly disguised sewer entrance that rose up like a blanket. There were thin, dark green puddles where it met the ground, a poison of some type Angie guessed. She was careful not to step in it, wondering if it was the chemical fumes that kept the animals from coming through, or if they had learned to avoid it from seeing their pack mates die.

“Close the flap and watch out for the rats. The antifreeze don’t tempt ‘em, and they don’t scare easy neither.”

As they trekked into the damp, stinking air of underground, Marc gestured to the night vision glasses on her belt. Instead of putting them on, Angela tapped the stranger on the arm and held them out.

Max started to take them and then shook his head, stepping by her. “You keep ‘em and watch out. Your blood’ll likely make fire shoot from their arses, and then we’d never be able ta keep ‘em out.”

Angela heard Marc snort in amusement, and she slid the glasses onto her belt. She didn’t sense evil in their huge guide,

but his knowing what she was made her uncomfortable, and she dropped back, putting more distance between them.

Marc, however, was relaxing. He was almost sure the man had been military before the war, and he lit a smoke as they walked quietly through the stone tunnels. They moved over and around rotting furniture, mildewed piles of clothes, and whole and broken cinder blocks. Gray and green moss climbed the tall, dank, concrete walls that met a cobwebbed ceiling above them, and their boots echoed along with the distant drip of water.

“About there. Be quiet. She’ll have the little ‘uns ta sleep by now,” he said, indicating that the battle with the wolves was a long-running one.

Angela caught Marc’s silent words.

He thinks we’re a couple. Tell him different, and I may have to fight for you when it comes time to leave.

Angela also felt the man’s interest, but there was no sense of him being the one to fear.

They came to a stop, and when Marc gestured upward, Angela spotted a trap door in a wooden floor that was over twenty feet up, an impossible jump.

A rock suddenly flew through the air to slam into the stranger’s cheek.

Max sucked in a surprised breath at the pain as another, bigger stone sailed down at them from the damp darkness. “Damn! It’s me!”

The rocks stopped, and a woman’s indignant voice called down to them, “Shoulda said something!”

Max grunted, rubbing his arm where the second rock had hit. “Jealous, I think. Seen your woman.”

Marc agreed. Angie was a tough act to follow.

“Come on, Lenore! Did I save ‘em from the wolves to feed ‘em to the rats?”

There was no sound from above them, and Angela was unable to keep from grinning at the sigh of long-suffering that the big man let out.

“Definitely jealous.”

“I am not! The rope’s kinked up again. Hang on!”

Eyes, round and gleaming in the darkness, appeared in the deeper shadows around them.

Angela’s gasp was followed by the man’s urgent voice, “Now, woman! They’re comin’!”

The trap door slid open, and a rope ladder dropped on top of the man’s head.

“‘Bout damn time. Here!” Max grabbed Angela’s black sweater and lifted her onto the ladder in one effortless motion. As she climbed, his big hands settled firmly on her ass, shoving, caressing.

Angela jerked herself up and out of his reach, and her .357 was pointed at him an instant later. “You ever touch me again, your missus will use your balls for bait!”

The man stopped halfway through the opening, glaring at her.

“Angie.” Marc’s tone was patient, resigned.

“What?” she snapped, backing up.

“There’s a rat about a foot long trying to eat my boot. Let him through.”

Angela felt the rage clear and holstered her weapon as she studied the only other person in the big, cluttered kitchen of what was probably a one-floor, ranch-style home—Lenore.

Dressed in a stained white shirt and an enormous pair of farmer’s overalls with the pockets ripped off, the large woman was smirking at her man. A grand beehive of black and white hair hung in every direction like a bad wig, and the long, jagged scars on her face and arms told Angela she had fought to protect what was hers.

“I’m Missus Lenore Codd.”

Angela held out a hand to the giantess, the name ringing a faint bell. Wasn’t there a fairy tale based on the life of a giant by that name?

“Angela. I hope we won’t be a bother to you.”

The woman watched them intently as she shook firmly. “Me? No. Him?”

She indicated the man leaning down a hand to help Marc, not reacting at all when the wolf riding uneasily on his shoulders nipped at him. “Probably already have. T’was me that seen and sent him after ya. Told him I wudn’t cookin’ till he got ya here.”

Angela covered the woman’s large hands with her own. “Then, it’s you I owe the debt to. Good. Maybe we can barter, but for now, let me pay on the debt I owe. I’m a doctor.” Her voice lowered. “Diabetes can be controlled by doing certain things, and then the side effects go away.”

“Might could be. Let’s get them men fed, and we’ll talk.”

The woman grinned, clapped her on the shoulder, and Angela held onto the big arm to keep from falling as the reek of corn filled her nose.

Angela took her sweater off in the warmth. There was barely room to walk in the dusty, ten-by-twelve space, and the cluttered shelves full of bags, canisters, and unpacked boxes told her the couple had come here recently.

“Can I help? Set a table? Do cleanup?”

“You’re polite, eager to help. You remind me of the past,” Lenore mused matter-of-factly.

Frowning, Angela didn’t look away, though the stench of corn was making her eyes water. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Wudn’t all evil.”

Angela didn’t agree with her, but the glance of understanding they shared said this new world wasn’t all bad either.

“Damn it, woman! Feed me! Them,” the man ordered, dropping down at the long, wooden table in the narrow, lantern-lit room.

His wife motioned at a chair in the corner, seemingly indifferent to the large wolf standing tensely in her kitchen. “Put your man to the right. We’ll stand. Only got two chairs left now. Keepin’ warm’s more important than pass-me-downs.”

Angela subtly shook her head at Marc when he started to offer to take the floor, and mentally told him to be careful, that the man wasn't in charge here.

Angela brought the heavy chair over with no visible effort and knew the big woman was pleased when Marc obeyed her and sat in it. The feeling increased when Angela snapped her fingers at Dog to get his attention and then pointed at the trap door. The wolf immediately went to that spot and laid down, only tail and ears moving.

Angela stayed by the woman as she served big bowls of what appeared to be stew from a large metal pot on a double burner gas stove.

Marc fell into a conversation with the man about the wolves, he and Angie quietly keeping track of each other.

"Everything's agin' us now," the mountain man stated, cracking his knuckles impatiently.

"But so many? Packs are never more than ten or fifteen," Marc observed.

"We killed the world. They hate us enough to band together."

"Surely that can't be?"

The man grunted, spoon already in his beefy hand as Lenore set his deep bowl down with a heavy thud.

Angela looked away from the mats of dark hair on his forearms as he scooped up a big bite of the steaming stew.

"Tis not just the wolves. Rats, snakes, ants. People'r the enemy."

Marc was frowning at the picture, and Lenore's attention stayed on him. "Must not be that way where you came from?"

"No." His military mind calculated the odds of mankind if that were true. *Slim to none.*

"How far have you come?"

"So many miles I can't feel my ass anymore."

Lenore's face lit up and she leaned in, intelligence clear. "Tell me. Is it safe? When were you there?"

Wondering if it was the wolves that had scarred them, or something older, Marc nodded toward Angela. “Wrong one to ask.”

Lenore produced a tight, grim smile—satisfied—and turned to Angela in approval. “He’s well-trained. We can make some deals, trade. I’m Lenore. He’s Maxwell. Welcome to the Killin’ Fields of Nebraska.”

6

“Ohio, huh?” Lenore grunted, handing her a thick slab of cornbread.

They both ignored the loud belch and male grunt that echoed from the table.

“Never been past the Missisip’.”

“This is so good!” Angela groaned as she chewed the first bite.

Marc glowered when the hairy man’s gaze went to Angie’s face, lingered there.

“Missus makes the best,” Max stated gruffly, leer now on her chest.

Angela held her ground though she had the urge to put her sweater back on.

“You’ve been here since the war?” Marc asked and wasn’t surprised when Max glanced at his wife.

“Tell ‘em what ya will,” Lenore allowed.

Lenore ducked through a heavily curtained doorway that held a long, oddly decorated horn Marc thought was probably the wolf caller.

When Angela turned to see what he was staring at, Max waved a hand. “She’s checkin’ their breathin’. Corn fumes.”

They both frowned, confused, and the man finished his last bite before explaining.

“We have the corn. Keep it from the rats. Fumes build up while it sets. Poison, o’ course, so we sleep in shifts. People

cough and puke, we get out the guns and open the windows 'til it airs out."

Angela was horrified. "Why?"

The big man's tone was rough, but his demeanor said he too hated it. "To eat. Can't hunt anymore. Damn wolves get ya or there's no meat around to hunt cause o' them. Gotta eat. Gotta last 'em out."

"You could leave," Marc suggested, which was met with silence.

Angela shook her head when he would have repeated himself. "Not our business. Maybe you should examine their radio now."

It was enough to fool Max, who immediately responded to the tone and got up. Angela hid a snicker at the warning look Marc slid her way. Up to a point, this could be fun.

There was quiet except for the wind outside, but all of them tensed suddenly, sure the wolves were out there.

Angela turned to Lenore as she emerged through the curtains. "You vent the corn?"

Lenore handed her a list. "Yes, but the generator is out of gas. This is what I need and what I've got to trade. I'll throw in cornbread if you got the last one."

Angela scanned the list quickly. When Lenore handed her a pen, Angela understood the male here wasn't allowed to know how much of what they had. To keep down thievery? Control was more probable, and the fact that Max had none was likely more responsible for his impotence than the diabetes.

"I can spare this much of each, and you can find that one here," Angela stated. "This one, I haven't seen in over a month."

Lenore creased her brow. "And the last?"

Angela grinned. "Six months' worth sound good?"

Lenore's leer said it would go faster than that. "Deal. I'll bake while you sleep with your man."

Unprepared for the probing comment, Angela flushed and witnessed the woman's face fill with speculation. She hurried to distract.

“You have room for us?”

“Too much. You'll stay?”

Angie didn't like the hungry stare the woman gave Marc as he removed his coat to work on the radio, big arms flexing. “Yes, but let's have this clear now. The man is not for trade.”

Lenore studied her coolly. “Things not for trade are often taken by force.”

Angela felt the witch surge forward and knew it showed when the woman paled.

“And often, people die in the trying. Perhaps mankind will be smarter this time.”

“Not the men,” Lenore grunted bitterly.

Angela let a bit of the heat come into her words. “Maybe not the women, either.”

Lenore flushed at the pointed tone. “But if he's not yours—”

“He is!” Angela interrupted curtly, prepared to fight.

Marc listened intently, ready to help, and both of them were relieved when the woman sighed resignedly.

“I've mistaken, maybe. Forgive me?”

Angela waved it away, hoping this was the end of it. “My first time in control. I overreacted.”

“First one's always the best. They still have a hope it will change back.” Lenore grinned, clapped her on the arm again, and this time, adrenaline kept Angela on her feet.

7

Hours later, Marc finished changing parts inside the radio and Lenore led Angela through a dark and blanket-covered room where five adult women and three kids were sharing a very large bed.

As Lenore pushed open a rear hall door, she saw Angela's expression and said, "You're putting no one out. They sleep together for warmth now that their mens is gone and the snow comes so unexpected."

Angela heard and understood the tone of betrayal in Lenore's words. "The Draft?"

Lenore recognized a fellow victim. "Aye. Yours too?"

Angela voice were haunted. "My son. I'm on my way to get him back."

The giantess raised a surprised brow. "Just the two of you?"

"Yes. No one will keep me from my blood."

Respect laced the woman's answer. "My prayers will be with ya. Not that God listens any more now than he did before."

Angela smiled her thanks, suddenly tense as the wide bed, lit by a candle in each corner, came into view. She hid it and shut the door with relief. A few minutes alone at last!

8

"Coming in," Marc called softly as he entered and locked the door.

Dog went straight to Angela for a sniff and then explored the room. Covered in dust, it sported a rickety bed, one end table, a plush, dusty chair below a window, and a long, cluttered dresser without a mirror.

Marc blinked guiltily when he saw she had a row of medical supplies spread across the dresser. "You hurt?"

Angela didn't look up from the needle she was threading. "You are."

Marc gave a sheepish grin at the dry tone and began taking off his coat and sweat-stained shirt. He tried not to wince as the cloth peeled painfully away from the wound.

"When did I get you?"

Marc shrugged out of the gun belts and laid them on the stand near the bed as Dog curled up under the front corner. “First few shots. It’s just a trim.”

Angela rolled her eyes at the crusted, three-inch furrow along the underside of his arm. “I’m always hurting you, Marc. I’m sorry.”

He noticed that she had cleaned herself up and put on the jeans and black shirt from the emergency kit he had helped her assemble. They’d gotten lucky to have them when the wolves attacked. “Mistakes happen.”

“I could have killed you. Again.”

Marc tensed as she cleaned the wound with alcohol pads, and Angela found herself watching the way his muscles flexed.

“This world is full of chaos. It was your first real fight. I think you did great.”

She needed to know how true it was. “Really?”

“Yes,” Marc said, his tone revealing that he wasn’t blowing smoke.

Angela had to fight the urge to reach out and run a soft hand along his bearded jaw.

“You learned well.”

She examined his injury, letting the doctor take over. “Hope it’s enough.”

Marc twitched at the needle as it sank into his skin, and Angela tried to hurry. It occurred to her that she now had stitching in both of his big arms. How many more times would he be put in the line of fire for her?

The wind outside picked up suddenly, as if responding and Angela shivered.

“Damn. It got colder. How do they keep warm in these rooms?” Marc mused.

Angela kept her tone light, but blushed at the pictures running through her mind. “They share one bed for body heat.”

That explained all the people in one sloppy tangle in that center room, and it made Marc think of how Lenore had held his

arm as she led him through, fingers caressing. She had whispered of being a good master if he was unhappy with his current one.

Angela's anger made the demon's red orbs bleed through her own. "She made a move on you when she brought you back here?"

Marc said nothing, and Angela went to her side of the bed as she dried her hands and controlled her rage. She had no real claim to him. If he wanted to sleep with the woman, he could.

"I don't."

Her eyes flew to his in time to see him grimace as he tried to pull on his shirt.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Marc sounded amused, and it calmed her.

He began trying to button the emergency shirt, but with only one arm and pain shooting through the other, it was slow going.

Angela waved a hand at him. "Leave it open or you're gonna rip out those stitches."

"You could do it for me," he suggested as the throbbing increased.

Angela frowned, thinking he wouldn't ask for a painkiller, but he would take it if she said to. What was it with men and their pride?

"There's Vicodin in my bag, top left side. Take two, leave the shirt as it is, and go to bed, will ya?"

Marc raised a brow at the curtness. "What's up?"

Angela sighed. "Damn. I'm sorry."

"Tell me what has you on edge."

Angela turned toward the window, glad for the bars on it as she spotted shadows padding restlessly outside. "Besides the wolves? I'm not sure."

Marc saw the V on the bottle and dry swallowed two of the tiny blue pills, thinking she sounded restless. "Nerves from today. You wanna talk it out, play some cards? Both?"

Angela shivered. She wasn't anywhere near ready for that bed. "No."

Marc sat in the chair and began working on their guns, hands always sure and steady.

He was right; it was nerves from the battle, Angela agreed, starting her own nightly rituals, but she was very aware of the man pretending not to watch her. This was their first time in a real bed together since they'd made a baby, and the old Angela was harassing her with memories of how good their time together had been. The mating had been sweet, soft, and beautiful, and she'd forgotten none of it.

Marc knew she was thinking about him, but kept quiet. He was out of time. If she said her man was near, then he was, and that meant this was their last night alone together. His heart was already breaking, missing her, and Marc burned to remind her of what it was like to be made love to, instead of being taken.

The sparks in the room thickened, and Angie felt him tense when she unbraided her long hair and began to brush it.

"Can I do that for you?" he heard himself asking, thinking his blood was pounding harder than it should be.

When she hesitated, Marc begged, "Please."

Angela couldn't deny him or herself. The need to get close to him tonight was undeniable.

When he slid behind her, big body warm and hard, she snapped her eyes shut and held herself in place.

The feel of her curls running over his calloused hands was like silk, and Marc took his time, using his fingers to gather it, touching her neck softly.

Angela heard the brush hit the bed behind them, felt his big hands go to her shoulders, but instead of moving away, she allowed him to rub her. The heat from his touch was incredible.

"That feels good," she moaned.

Marc breathed in deeply of it before moving back a bit, his body hardening.

Angela knew it was teasing him, but surprised them both by letting him continue, even when his fingers brushed the curve of her breast and sent chills into her stomach. She forgot to listen to the voice of fear as his thumb brushed her again, the sensation rushing into her gut like a bullet. “Mmmmm...”

Marc’s eyes snapped shut at that sound, liquid heat flooding his gut. He moved his hands to her waist, her slender hips.

They had to stop now, Angela knew that, knew she’d probably hate herself later, but the feel of him was enticing... When he tugged gently, she leaned against his hard, bare chest, wishing she had the nerve to give him what he so clearly wanted.

Marc controlled himself, and didn’t push against her ass like he wanted to. When she would have shifted to get closer, he retreated, not willing to destroy the peace.

Angela stifled a protest, her face flushed. She hadn’t meant to lead him on, had done well so far, but the need was on her. The witch and the old Angela were crying for release.

Marc recognized her confusion. The killing had done it for her. It was something no one liked to admit, but he’d had some of the best orgasms—alone—right after a battle where blood was spilled.

“You okay?”

Her gaze darted to the threadbare coverlet pulled across her lap. “Yeah, you?”

“Sure. You got that rolled yet?”

Angela forced a grin as the temperature dropped lower in the dusty bedroom, blowing grit across the dark, hardwood floor. “It’s in your kit.”

Marc got it and fired it up, body tight. He tried to force his mind to other things as she pulled her sweater over her shoulders. Her long curls hung around her pale skin, the smell of her assaulted his nose, and Marc frowned at himself as erotica flashed through his mind.

He switched to the other side of the bed, not feeling the cold anymore, but he observed her pointed chest and knew she was.

Marc got another blanket from his kit and tossed it on the pillow next to her. ^[1]SEP”Put that one around your shoulders.”

Angela drew on her courage. “Share it with me?”

Marc felt the need rise up, strong and hungry, as he sat against the headboard. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, honey.”

He held the smoldering joint out and she took it carelessly, letting their fingers brush.

Flames sparked, vanished.

Marc felt like he was sweating, body making it hard for him to sit. He shifted restlessly, waiting for it to go away as it usually did. He had quietly pleased himself from time to time while Angie was asleep, but right now, he felt like he hadn’t cum in years, and he struggled to keep it out of his voice. “You ready for tomorrow?”

Angela blew out a thick stream of sweet, pungent smoke. “As much as I can be.”

Marc was unable to stop his gaze from falling to her red lips. “You’ve learned a lot. I think you’ll do fine.”

She smiled at him, in a good mood despite the wrongness here, and she tried not to let the thuds and creaks outside the ranch home bother her. She was with Marc. They could handle about anything together. “I had a good teacher.”

Sparks flew between them, the hunger alive, and Angela felt heat flood her stomach. The passion was new to her, almost like she’d never felt it. When his eyes darkened, she felt a streak of heat that she knew he sensed by the way his grip on the joint tightened and the muscle in his jaw began to twitch.

Marc got off the bed and settled himself in the wide chair under the window, blowing out the candle closest to him. He left only one flickering flame in the far corner that gave off little light. His body and arm were throbbing together, one a pain, one a sharp and sweet pleasure. What the hell was wrong with him?

Angela was asking herself the same thing. She wasn’t a tramp, but she was pushing him. Marc was a man, one with

needs that hadn't been met for a long time, and here she was letting him kiss her, rub her, touch her breast.

Her face flamed at that thought, and she heard him shift in the chair, as if he caught the image. His shirt fell open at the movement, and she wondered where that furious wave of need was coming from.

“Angie.”

She heard it in his voice, and instead of fear, the woman inside responded, “Yes.”

Marc's eyes snapped open, but her guilty face had him shaking his head. “No. Go to sleep.”

Angie braced herself. There was one last lesson to be learned. “Come to bed, Brady.”

Marc groaned, breaking out in a sweat, and he shuddered. His blood was pounding through tight veins, breathing rough.

Angela peered at him. “Are you all right?”

Marc tried to nod, but the tempo of the lust beating inside him grew, and he shifted again, thinking he'd have to do something about the iron bar in his jeans before climbing into bed with her. That picture made the need tighten another notch, and he jumped when he felt her cool hand settle onto his brow. He hadn't heard her move.

“Damn, you're hot. Let me check your eyes.”

Marc gritted his teeth as she checked him out. The feel of her hands on him, her hair sliding across his skin, was torture.

“I don't understand. You don't ha...” Angela broke off, frown growing. *My bag*. She'd told him top, left.

“I think I know what's wrong with you.”

He did too. He needed to get laid more often.

“You didn't take Vicodin. It was Viagra.”

Marc was horrified. “What?”

Angela opened her worn medical bag. “It got mixed up during the fight. You didn't read the label.”

Marc let her go, hands itching to pull her back. “How long will I be like this? And why the hell do you have that?”

Angela flushed. “It’s for diseases. Lenore wants to trade it for the cornbread.”

Marc groaned again, body on fire. He eyed the white pills she held out warily.

“This is really Vicodin.”

He dry swallowed them before she could get him something to drink. “How long?”

“At least four hours, maybe six or eight.”

Marc’s head snapped back, eyes slamming shut. He wouldn’t last that long. “Can’t you give me something to counteract it?”

When she hesitated to speak, he knew there was something, but she didn’t want to tell him what it was.

“What?” he demanded.

“If you...take yourself in...” Face a furious red, Angela indicated the bed. “It will go away once you...”

“Next!”

“Let it wear off.”

Marc stifled a curse, shifting again. “There’s gotta be something else.”

“I’m sorry, there isn’t.”

The tension in the room only continued to grow. After five minutes of watching him squirm (and feeling her own hormones respond), Angela stood up.

“I’m gonna go out in the hall for a few minutes, have a smoke,” she stated, waving off his protests. “I’ll take Dog. You...handle things.”

“Stay?”

Angela froze at the blatant need in his rough voice, gaping at him. “While you...?”

Marc, surprisingly embarrassed, heard himself beg. “Please?” He’d never been so hard in his life, not even during their time together all those years ago.

Angela was surprised to find herself considering it, body long denied any real pleasure. “I couldn’t...”

“I’ll stay right here. I won’t leave this chair,” he vowed.

Angela knew she should leave before things went any farther, but the heat between them was stronger than the fear, and she hesitated, torn. He’d made her feel so alive when they were young! Memories, old and powerful, swirled through the drafty room.

“I can’t,” he groaned as their lips met again. “I’m sorry.”

The beautiful girl shifted restlessly under him, body begging for his touch. “But I want you to!” she complained.

The boy held himself in place only by a hair. They’d never gone this far before, and the hormones were in control of her mind. She was too young, forbidden...

When she slid a hand between them, he sucked in a harsh breath. “I can’t do—”

“Sshhhh...” her hand closed over him, stealing his voice, and he bucked in her grip as she stroked.

Struggling to think, he let her slide his tense hand under her skirt.

“Love me, Brady,” she moaned against his mouth. “As much as you can.”

Tortured will crumbling, he did just that.

“One of my favorite memories of us.”

Angie blushed at his words. The time after that, they’d gone as far as they could. There hadn’t been any holding back.

“I really can’t, Marc, I—”

“Shhh...” he soothed. “Love me, Angie. As much as you can.”

Jerked into the pain and loneliness she’d been forced to endure for so long, Angela watched his hands go to the buckle of his jeans.

Marc couldn’t stop himself, the lust was raging, and he held his breath as he popped the button on his jeans. He expected her to flee the tense seat she took on the corner of the bed.

Angela's face was red, but there was no denying that she wanted to be here. When he raised his hips to slide his pants down, she tore her eyes away, breathing rapidly.

"Throw me a blanket."

His voice was laced with need and control, and she did it without moving from her perch.

She heard the blankets rustle, hands shifting for comfort, and couldn't stop herself from stealing a peek. It was in time to see his hand go around a rod of flesh that had her on her feet.

Marc saw her gaze go over his body, flashing fire and desire, and tightened his grip. "Mmm..."

The sound woke the woman inside, and Angela found herself watching as he pulled the blanket up and start to stroke... She wasn't sure she could look away.

Marc watched her through narrowed slits, feeling the need tighten as she stared at the movements the blanket now hid. Slowly, he pulled it down.

Angela's breath went out in a rush, the sight of his thick flesh sending heat into her gut.

Stroking faster, Marc asked, "You too? You used to love this."

I still do, Angela thought. How many hours had they spent this way before the lust had driven them to more?

Marc heard the man inside push, "There's another blanket. I'll stay right here."

She shifted restlessly, and he shut his eyes...most of the way. "I won't look."

Angela was still shocked to find herself here, in this moment, but fear wasn't the strongest emotion—desire was. Physical contact was something she'd been reminded of during this trip and it was one of the things that she had hoped to conquer before now. In all the years since they'd been apart, she'd only pleased herself about a dozen times, and not at all in the last year.

"Please?"

Before she could change her mind, Angela grabbed the second cover and tossed it over herself, but from there...

“Angie, you don’t have to do this.”

The sudden flare of guilt from him had her shaking her head. He had nothing to feel guilty about—and neither did she.

With that choice, she put her hand beneath the cover and watched Marc...like she used to, when it was just them against the world.

Marc tried to slow himself down, not wanting to be done before she was, but he was on that edge already. He saw her arm brush a rigid nipple as she got comfortable and he listened to her small hiss of surprise at the sensation, fire boiling. She did it again, intentionally this time, and he stroked harder. That was the Angie he knew, the fearless, sexual nymph he’d eased into womanhood, and it was okay to think of that moment now, of how her tight body had wrapped around him in willing surrender.

He groaned at the feel of the memory mixing with reality and jerked himself from the edge by a hair.

Angela had stopped, watching him, remembering. She shivered.

“I can’t wait much longer,” he groaned.

The fear rose, making her tense, and Marc delivered one of those smoldering smiles she had always been affected by. “Scared?”

She nodded, voice rough. “A little.”

“You’re free to do as you please, Angie. No one owns you anymore.”

The happiness that gave her! Because it was true. She grinned, cheeks darkening further. “I’ll watch you for a minute.”

Marc wasn’t sure he had a minute after that. Lust surged, rubbing and caressing in slow motions that he burned to increase the speed of.

Her hands stirred under the blanket, slowly at first, and the urge to storm the bed and have her screaming out in climax was a hard one to resist.

“Move the blanket,” he coaxed. “Let me see, too.”

She did it slowly, revealing long, sexy legs and then white panties with a hand pushing the center aside. Her fingers rotated in small circles and Marc’s heart thumped as the edge flew his way.

“Damn, that’s hot. Lay back, pretend you’re alone.”

“Mmm…” The sound of Marc’s sexy voice had her convulsing in pleasure and her legs opened further to reveal dark curls and slick skin that pulsed.

“With me!” Angela demanded hoarsely as the first wave of fierce light exploded through her body.

“Uuhhh!” Marc arched, grip freezing as he released wildly at her climax. “Yeah!”

Coming down first, Angela immediately rolled over, pulling the blanket up. She’d thought to face fear or even guilt, but there was only relief as her body continued to jerk and twitch in satisfaction. She was free now.

Very unsure of her mood, Marc cleaned himself up and kept his mouth shut. He blew out the candle and moved to his side of the bed, intending to give her some space to think.

He was surprised when she held the blanket up and smiled at him.

“After that, I think it’s probably okay to ask if you’ll hold me while we sleep.”

Marc chuckled as he eased into the bed with her. That was what he wanted the most, what he had longed for at night. “My honor, baby.”

Sated, the witch and old Angela faded a bit, pushed back by the new person who was emerging. This new woman belonged to herself. She wasn’t so afraid to take chances that she forgot to live, and Angela let out a sigh of peace, tight against Marc’s hard chest. She fell asleep listening to his heartbeat for the first time in fifteen years.

Marc didn’t sleep at all—just held her and remembered.

Eavesdropping from the next room, Lenore was disappointed, but she would keep her word and let them go without trouble, sure she would forget about the handsome couple the minute they were out of sight. There was trouble on the horizon for all of them. Lenore could sense it coming, and she didn't think she would see them again. At least, not alive.

Chapter Thirty-Six
Heat Waves

March 30th, 2012
Chadron, Nebraska

1

He hadn't really expected to see her again, not even the body. He'd honestly hoped she would have already been dragged off by wild animals.

Kenn observed the couple as they slept, ignoring the unpleasant feel of the tall ash tree between his legs and the darkness that only let him hear the animals padding restlessly below. The beasts sniffed and pissed, trying to find a way into the truck that he had parked against the thick trunk, but the furious Marine paid them little attention.

Kenn had found the ranch house just before dawn, hitting shapes in the fog that were either dogs or coyotes as they attacked his tires. He'd taken up a window-high vantage point as a dim, foggy morning lit up the area, sure she was in there. His starlight scope had penetrated seven windows, and then he'd found them.

Covers tangled, limbs entwined, it appeared that a night of passion had worn the couple out. The woman wore a sleeping shirt that barely covered her thighs, flashing white panties as she stirred. The man, the wife-stealing, walking dead man, had on a pair of green boxers that the intruder recognized even from a distance. They were military issue...

Kenn's grip tightened on the rifle in his hand, nails digging shallow grooves into the stock as he spotted a dog tag, familiar tattoos, and that careful scan upon waking that every Marine did.

Dread and cold rage formed a thick knot of hate in Kenn's gut. Sergeant Marcus Brady was Angela's show of force. He was one of the few people Kenn had ever felt threatened by.

The Marine struggled with himself—the old Kenny wanting to aim and fire, the new Kenn not wanting to kill without justification—and he waited tensely to discover how close his wife and his team leader were.

2

Curled against Marc's back, Angela woke all at once and tensed. She sensed danger, though the voices were sated and silent.

He is close.

Her eyes snapped open.

She glanced at the window, and tried to focus. Had she seen something?

“Are you all right?”

Angela told herself it was just more nerves. She would be reunited with her son today...and Kenny.

At least it'll be Easter and not All Fool's Day, she thought. “We should get moving soon.”

Marc stretched, loving the feel of her pressed tight against him. “You regret it?”

“No.” Angela lingered despite feeling they should hurry. “You?”

“A little. It wasn't what I had planned.”

Angela's face was red. Watching him had been a blast from their stolen past—one she would be replaying in her mind for a while. “Hot as it got in here, I'm surprised it didn't go further.”

Marc slowly rolled over, sliding an arm around her tense waist. “Don't go back to him, honey. Please. We're so good together.”

Angela was tempted. The time they'd spent together was seared into her, but the first thought upon waking had been one of fear. "I can't make any promises. You know that."

Marc did know, but he slowly lowered his lips to hers anyway. He would take whatever she let him have.

3

Kenn couldn't take this.

Rage exploded in his mind as their mouths touched. When she let out a moan that Kenn couldn't hear but felt anyway, blood pounded in his brain. How many times had that sound brought him to a thick, instant climax? A hundred? A thousand?

Kenn kept his finger away from the trigger by sheer will. If he killed them now, like this, he could never return to Adrian. Those sharp eyes read the blood on a man's hands.

He had to do something, though. He couldn't sit here and let her betray him, not while he was in range.

Angela pulled back suddenly, another swell of fear interrupting a moment that she didn't know the ending to.

Even the wolf was tense, fur bristling.

Marc raised a brow. "Problem?"

She hesitated, very aware of him lying mostly on top of her. "Just wolves, I think. We should get up."

Marc let her arm slide off his bare shoulder. "It didn't happen, right?"

Angela flushed in the cool morning air. "For now."

Marc sighed and sat up. "I didn't expect it and neither did you. I won't even try to forget it, but I can pretend it didn't happen. Because in my heart, I know it did."

Angela rolled out of the bed, and though he could now, Marc didn't peek at her bare skin, respecting her choice. When she figured out what she wanted, she would let him know.

Knowing he should leave, Kenn lingered. Her creamy flesh was enticing as he studied them from a quarter mile away. The rifle was still clutched tightly across his lap as dozens of wolves continued to circle below. He had yet to find a woman whose body called to him as strongly or promised as much. Weak, Angela might be, but she was also hot. Always had been.

On the edge of murder, Kenn saw a clear moment below and took it, pulling the string to open the hatch of the sunroof. He quickly slid down the slimy tree, rifle over his shoulder, and was safely inside his truck with the roof latched before the hungry predators could react. They lunged onto the truck anyway, but it did them no good.

Viewing everything through a red haze, Kenn plowed into the animals mercilessly. He wasn't going far, just to the Blazers he'd discovered. He had until the couple returned to the vehicles to figure out how to get rid of Brady so that he could give Angela what was coming to her.

She had brought a dangerous man who Kenn had hated long before the war. His thoughts raced with fury and fear. Coincidence?

I don't believe in those. She's been keeping secrets.

Kenn scowled. A fellow Marine had touched his woman, maybe even violated her. It was going to be hard to keep from killing him. Brady deserved to die for that.

“Will we have to fight our way out of here? Kill them?”

“No. She heard us last night and knows she was wrong.”

To Angela's surprise, Marc flushed.

“That bothers you?”

He considered. “Might have been quieter.”

Angela laughed, tossing her small notepad onto the bed where he was tying his boots. “That makes two of us. Page seven is what I agreed to trade and what I got for it.”

Marc picked up the small notebook, subtly observing her as she moved around the room, getting ready to deal with what was coming. She left her hair down, braids mixed in, and when she tugged her jeans up over a creamy cheek, Marc forgot to breathe.

“Well?”

He mentally snickered as he replied, “Looks good to me.”

“Max said to leave it at the barn. The wolves don’t usually come out until dusk. I also agreed to have you check their venting system while I give the kids a checkup. We’ll probably be here until mid-afternoon,” Angela said. “I wanted to ask you first, but she’s set in stone on this “woman in charge” shit.”

“Works for me. I’m well trained, remember?”

The amusement was forced, the room suddenly tense, and Marc wasn’t sure how to begin. There were things he needed to know, things he needed to say.

“What do you think about Safe Haven? Do they feel okay?”

“They seem organized. Careful.”

“They’re his people. What he’s told them, they’ll believe.”

“Beyond grabbing Charlie and running, which you already know I won’t do, we’ll have to hope they’re good people who can recognize the truth.”

“So, you do plan to stay with them.”

“Plan? No, but I’d like to try. What I won’t do is pledge my loyalty to some asshole who thinks he’s God because his nuts still work. I want to try with other people, but I’ll be picky. I’ve just gotten my freedom back, and I won’t give it up.”

“How do you want to handle it?”

“Get Kenn alone, if possible.”

“I meant about me.”

“You’re a very good friend who’s helped me, a lot.”

“Most of the problem’s solved if you tell the truth,” he pointed out. “We’re family.”

“That would mean you can’t claim Charlie.”

“It’s probably for the best anyway, right? At least until you decide what you want.”

Angela was shaking her head. He had been too good to her. She wouldn’t allow Marc to make that sacrifice. “You’re a good friend.”

“Okay. Just tell me beforehand, so our stories match.”

“You make it sound like I plan to lie.”

“Don’t you?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure yet.”

Marc was always impressed with how she would choose to be honest first, and lie second. “I understand. Say what you have to. I’ll support it.”

She was warned. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, honey.” Marc’s attention dropped to her shoulder, to the scar showing from under her tank top. How it had got there, was really the only unanswered question he still had at this point, though, he would insist she get it all out now. It would be one less thing for her man to use against her. “Did he give you that?”

“...yes,” she answered slowly.

“As a punishment?”

“Mostly as a reminder,” she muttered. “He’s the boss.”

“Will you tell me about him?”

“Why?”

Marc grunted. “Because we’re a day out, and all I know is that he’s a Marine, an abusive bastard, and a walking dead man if there’s any justice, but that’s not enough. There has to be something I can use. I need you to tell me.”

Angela was quiet for a minute, considering how much honesty she wanted to give. You had to know your own mind when you dealt with Kenny or he would rip you apart. It was only fair that Marc be warned.

“You won’t find anything. At least I don’t think you will, but I’m only going to go so far. I can’t live it during the day too.”

Marc thought her nightmares had gotten a lot better since their night around the fire...since the morning she had woken in his arms.

“He’s strict on everyone but himself, and he’s obsessed with appearances. He can’t admit it when he’s wrong and he had a bigger shoe collection than any man should. He hates to be dirty, unshaven, or out of style in any way and demands the same of those around him. He’s manipulative and honestly believes that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

“Now, really tell me about him,” Marc instructed patiently. “Get it over with.”

Angela stared at the foggy bedroom window, not hearing anything now. “I hid what I could do. At least, I thought I had. I knew he was dangerous when we met, knew I couldn’t trust him, but I honestly thought I could hide it. I thought if I was careful and did what Kenny wanted me to, that I could have the same connection that...you and I had.”

Angela perched on the window ledge. “We only dated for a few weeks before he was inviting us to live with him. When I declined, bad things happened.”

Marc’s countenance darkened. “Like what?”

Angela couldn’t believe she was about to bare her shame to the one person she wanted to respect her more than anyone else. Finally, she answered, “My sitter’s daughter was hurt in a hit and run accident that required her to be there while her daughter went through therapy. The sitter’s mother, who was already a heavy drinker, suddenly had an endless supply and stayed too drunk to talk, let alone care for an active one-year-old. I had to call off, miss classes. Stress built up, and one night Kenny found me crying on my smoke break. When he offered again, I accepted so I could keep my son.”

She sucked in a calming breath to keep speaking. “I couldn’t apply for welfare because I was underage and didn’t know if the family had reported me as a runaway. I always assumed they didn’t care, but I wasn’t taking the chance, not after having my

baby for all those months.” Angela paused, voice sad, heartbreaking. “Charlie was my only joy.”

“You moved in. Did he know then, about what you can do?”

Her tone grew cold. “He wasn’t a Marine then, but he was still sharp. I doubt he didn’t at least have a clue.”

Marc was certain her man had known exactly what he was getting into. “How did he find out?”

“He kept up the act for almost a year. I was...content. I began to doubt he was the threat I’d first sensed. It made me careless. I would reach for the phone when it rang, stare toward the door before someone knocked. Sometimes...I’d respond to things I picked up from him.”

She forced herself to continue. “I met the real Kenn in our bedroom a little after our first year anniversary. We were about to...and I picked up an image of him with one of the teenagers at Brendamores, where he was a salesman.”

“And you didn’t hide it.”

Angela gave a bitter laugh. “I went nuts. It got bad fast, and after I’d slapped him a couple times, the police showed up. I was arrested and he kept my boy!”

Her voice was rough with hurt and anger. “He left me there until the court date. Five days. When we got in front of the judge, he told them I had a violent side and that he was considering filing for custody because he loved the boy but didn’t want me. I was put on probation and 241-Kids opened a file. When I got out, he let me find my own way home and made me sit outside the door until I’d pissed on myself before he would let me in.”

“Son of a bitch!” Marc shouted, furious. “Why didn’t you kill him?”

Angela didn’t react, still in the past, and continued as if Marc hadn’t interrupted. “When he let me in, Charlie wasn’t there, and I knew immediately I was in trouble, but it was too late.” She sighed heavily. “I don’t even remember there being any neighbors home.”

“What’d he do to you, Angie?”

She turned slowly, pulling up the sleeve of her shirt. “He marked me as his.”

“Why didn’t you use your power on him?”

“I couldn’t. Between the Child Protection people, his mom’s money, and my age, I would have lost my baby. Even if the court ordered Kenn to give him up, he wouldn’t have. Kenny would have sold Charlie off on the black market first. He told me so. He said he wanted control of what I could do, and then things would return to the way they were before I fucked it all up.”

“Back to him being in charge and you being his slave.”

“Yes, but he didn’t count on the witch inside. She decides who we use these gifts for, not me. When I would have given in, the demon locked it all up. It went away, and there was nothing he could do about it.” Her voice shook. “He was so mad...”

She closed her eyes against those days of living hell, and Marc unclenched his fists, angrier than he had ever been in his life.

“He didn’t believe me at first, tried to make me use it to defend myself. That’s how I got this.” She tilted her arm so he could see that it was, indeed, a letter K.

“After he cut me and...took me, he made me stitch myself up and then I was his.” Her voice lowered. “Every hit he ever gave me after that was because I let the witch deny him what he wanted most—my power. Deep down, he always suspected I could still access it.”

Angela took a deep breath and brought herself back to the present. “I think maybe he did give up after a while, believed I had no access to it anymore. As long as I was defenseless against him, he was content with that. In time, I learned I could have some of what I wanted—if I was willing to pay the price. His affairs continued, I was the perfect woman, and the witch stayed asleep. Until the war, I hadn’t used my gifts in over a decade.” She let the true pain bleed into her voice. “I lost who I was to keep him from getting it.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Marc demanded, full of fury and guilt he didn’t know what to do with. *He should have been there for her!*

“I was ashamed. I made a bad deal. And because...Kenny was my punishment for our love.”

Awful hurt filled Marc and his rage crumbled. “That’s not true! I was the one who should have been punished!”

“Because we were wrong to give in. Our love was a sin.”

“No. Because I let them keep us apart. Our love wasn’t wrong, honey, it was meant to be. They were wrong for getting in the way.”

Angie was afraid to believe. “You mean that?”

Marc opened his soul to ease her pain. “Even when we were apart, baby-cakes. I only stayed away to give you a chance at a better life. I’m sorry you paid for it...sorry I was too weak to recognize the trap. I let them keep us apart! I’m so sorry.”

Tears fell as a huge chunk of ice around her heart blew off.

“We should have run together. If I could do it over, I wouldn’t leave you twice.”

“But you will if I...choose to stay with Kenn?”

“Not until you’re safe, content.”

She stared at him sadly, already sure Kenn couldn’t give that to her.

“Think. What’s the first thing he’s gonna do or say when we pull up?”

She gaped in dismay, finally understanding. “He’s going to ask, no, *order me*, to tell him who you are and why we’re together.”

“He’ll force your choice right away. Tell him we’re family, and let him cool off.”

“If I do that, when it comes out that you’re Charlie’s dad, people will think he was born in incest.”

“We’ll tell the rest of it at that point, but if you say we’re just good friends, they’ll think there’s something going on between us.”

“Isn’t there?”

Marc was caught off guard and then stunned by her next words.

“I don’t want to ruin any chance we might have in the future.”

Hope and love filled him, but he controlled himself, replaying her words. Had she found a way for them to be together?

“Wow. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Yeah, well, I haven’t made a choice yet. I can’t until I get my son back. I’ll handle the rest after that.”

“But you’re thinking about it...about us?”

“Even more after last night.” Angela blushed at her own boldness.

“I won’t push. You’re in charge.”

“I know better,” she snorted, putting the last of their things into the two kits. “It’s all spinning faster now, and I’m sure these are our last hours together before the collision.”

Marc became quiet, thinking there was still so much he wanted to say.

“Now’s the time for it, Marc. Speak your mind.”

It was a good opening, and he took it.

“I still love you, Angie, so much it hurts. I want us to be together if you can forgive me for all the hell you’ve survived. I don’t blame you if you can’t, but you *can* count on me now.”

Marc leered, trying to lighten his somber words. “I’d also agree to be your man-toy, but I can’t wear leather. It gives me hives.”

His joke surprised a laugh out of her. “Thanks. That’s another beautiful picture in my head.”

The tension thickened as they stared at each other. When he advanced, she stayed still, wanting his kiss but still afraid of what it might lead to.

“Nothing,” he whispered against her jaw. “Just this.”

Marc pressed his mouth to the corner of her lips and Angela sent her arms around his neck with a sigh of pleasure that he responded to.

He tasted her, coaxing, and Angela felt him tense when *she* deepened the kiss, tongue touching his, breath mingling.

Angela pulled away, eyes wide with desire, and Marc reluctantly let her go. “It’s gonna work out somehow. You have to believe that.”

“It may take a while,” she warned, locking down on the loneliness that was already trying to overwhelm her heart.

“I understand. We’ll handle things as best we can, and maybe there’ll be a time for us later.”

There will be, Angela vowed silently. *I won’t give you up twice.*

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Reunited

1

“Time’s about up,” Kenn muttered, pausing at the intersection. He stilled, sensing movement nearby, but didn’t react.

If Angela and Brady were close, he couldn’t change that, but he could split them up. It sucked that she had made it this far. For a brief second, he considered leaving her here but knew it was only delaying the inevitable. He had Charlie, the only reason she’d come, but more than that, he couldn’t let go. She was his.

Kenn sighed unhappily, not caring about the patches of red weeds growing along the rusty, barbed wire fencing, or the two-headed water moccasin that was slithering across the ground near his muddy, steel-toed boots. The only question that mattered was, did he still want her? There was a strong claim, and they had a deal he had told her would never be broken, but did he want a life with her?

No, Kenn answered himself, not knowing how much he would come to regret handling things based on that decision.

If Angela joined Safe Haven, Adrian would find out what he had been hiding. The rage flared to life at that thought, as it always did when someone might be a challenge for the blond man’s attention.

When the snake slithered closer, Kenn drew and threw his knife as his jealous, furious mind replaying the kiss.

His K-BAR drove into the snake's thick, brown neck, pinning it to the dusty ground. The reptile was dead before the blade had stopped vibrating and Kenn retrieved the sharp knife.

He sheathed it and strode around the corner, now eager to get it on. Angela had forgotten who she belonged to and he couldn't wait to remind her.

2

He's here. Kenny's here!

Footsteps crunched behind her, and Angela's hand dropped to her gun as her gaze found Marc in the barn's moldy doorway.

Marc snapped his mouth shut on the warning that would have been too late, realizing he knew the Marine now striding determinedly down the middle of the street—and not just from their time together on the base. The cold glower of ownership he threw Marc's way said this was her man. The piper was here, and it was time to pay.

Kenn stopped a few feet away, wishing she would pull the gun so he could kill them both and claim self-defense to Adrian.

“Kenny?”

He knew the joy spreading across her expression wasn't for him. It faded fast.

“You're alone.”

Kenn glared. “I've come to get you.”

Her brow wrinkled, and he noted a flare of anger that was unexpected. She should be scared.

“Little late for that now,” Angela pointed out, able to feel him trying to control himself. Would he end it all right here? Marc was silently telling her to duck, that he would do the rest.

Angela didn't retreat from Kenn's thunderous visage, waiting for fate to determine who would live and who would die.

Kenn hated her new confidence, and his sarcasm hid a note of unease when she didn't blink, didn't take her hand from the gun on her hip. "You have no welcome for me?"

"Of course, I do," she hesitated, and then added, "We've been apart a long time."

The breeze gusted, sending her hair flying wildly, and Kenn was glad to detect her wary glance as he noted it. She wasn't allowed to have it down in public. It was another transgression to be held accountable for.

"Show me you are glad to see me," he ordered.

Angela stepped into his waiting arms with a heavy heart. Could she tolerate, endure a little (six years!) longer, so no one else would get hurt? Could she give in?

Hand resting on his holster, Marc watched from the lonely doorway, unable to believe he hadn't been able to put her clues together and come up with loudmouth, sometimes obnoxious, always snotty, Lance Corporal Kenn Harrison.

Marc's stomach was full of hot anger, and he felt himself preparing for battle even while the pain of her being in someone else's arms flooded him. Angie had her man back, and he wasn't at all surprised. Had Kenn been spying?

Their moment in the bedroom, right after they'd woken, came to mind, and Marc's gut tightened. What all had Kenn witnessed?

Them in bed together, the kiss... Too much. It implied a lot more than there was, and as their eyes locked over Angie's tense shoulder, the message was clear.

She's mine. Go away, or I'll kill you!

Dog's thick fur bristled, filling with dislike. When he gave a low growl, Marc put a hand on the distraught animal's shoulder.

"Me too, boy. Me too."

Angela regretted the hug the second Kenny crushed her close. She tried to pull away when his mouth lowered to hers, but

he had a hand tangled tightly in her thick curls, and he held her still as his tongue invaded, conquered, revolted.

Kenn ground his mouth against her as that distinctive, addictive scent of vanilla filled his nose. He wondered how much more Brady would allow before stepping in to get himself killed.

Ah! Not much at all, Kenn gloated to himself, rotating them to be in the right position as he shoved his tongue deeper. Her tag-along was already moving from his place in the doorway.

Angela picked up the thought and understood Kenny was trying to provoke Marc, catch him unprepared. She slammed her boot against Kenn's ankle, leaning her weight into it as she elbowed his flat stomach.

Not expecting her to fight, Kenn grunted, letting go.

Angela stayed between the two men and tried to remember everything she'd learned. Kenny would start understanding right now that things had changed.

"What was that for?" Kenn snarled, closing the distance between them.

The witch said to provoke him now so they could either kill him or be killed, but be done with it. Angela couldn't help but consider it.

"You wouldn't let go."

Kenn's voice was savage as he leaned toward her, itching to break her crooked nose again. "And I never will!"

He scanned the Marine now standing alertly by her bumper, then big black-and-gray dog bristling at his side. "You have one minute to tell me what you're doing with him! Who is Brady to you?"

"He... You know Marc?"

"Yeah, I know him!" Kenn mocked her surprise. "Answer me!"

He was trying to intimidate her, but Angela surprised them all by shoving him with both hands, moving him out of her personal space as she'd learned.

“Stop yelling at me!” she blared, catching him by surprise again.

“We can have a normal conversation, or we can spill blood right here and now,” she warned coldly. “It’s your choice.”

It was dangerous to push, but the old Angela, the one who’d battled him early in their relationship, was guiding them through this minefield.

When his eyes flicked to Marc and then Dog, she let herself breathe. Sometimes getting Kenny to think before he acted was the only key to surviving the encounter.

Kenn hated it that he might be outnumbered by the tense Marine edging closer and the bristling animal at his side that, upon closer inspection, appeared to be a wolf...but also by Angela herself, who had obviously done a lot of changing (reverting) during her trip.

“Fine. We’ll talk,” Kenn sneered sarcastically.

“We’ll start the entire conversation over.” Angela cocked her head and the sun came through the clouds of grit as if to support her. “Hello, Kenn. Good to see you. How have you been?”

Kenn instantly recognized her tactics. He should. He’d used them daily on her. “Never better. Enjoy your trip?”

Kenn felt his rage go up another notch when she nodded, glancing at her escort.

“Some of it, yes.”

“Hope it was worth it.”

Kenn’s expression promised payment.

“It was,” Angela continued to defy the rules, even though his beefy hands were clenching into tight fists. “Where’s my boy?”

Kenn said nothing, waiting, wanting to hear her beg. He wasn’t prepared for the hate that filled her face.

“I don’t need you to find him! How do you think I got here?” she ground out through clenched teeth.

Kenn was too pissed to be worried, though, he understood he might be in danger. *She did more than revert. She’s using the power. She unlocked it!*

He had always known she could. The old, thwarted bitterness settled heavily back into his stomach. “You do need me to get near him. He’s with *my* men, and they won’t want to kill you, but they will.”

Was there a way he could get control of her power now? His mind flashed a picture of her son. *Yes*.

“Be careful, *grunt*.”

Her tone was deadly, and Kenn growled at her in rage.

She didn’t back down, and he hated the new knowledge about life and death he read. She thought she could kill him, and that was bad. How much practice had she gotten? What had she done, been through, to get here?

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Angela stated harshly.

Kenn stared at her in shock, unable to believe she would get into his thoughts so openly, so arrogantly. Didn’t she remember what he’d threatened to do if she used it on him?

“Everything has changed, Kenn. You broke our deal when you abandoned me for that group of strangers you’ve been lying to!”

On the edge of control at her veiled threat to reveal his secrets, Kenn was surprised to discover that her disobedience was worse. He hadn’t thought her hold on him was that strong anymore.

“You have six years left! You belong to me!” he hissed violently, leaning in.

Angela, struggling against the fear, stood her ground. “Not anymore. I want out!”

“No.”

“You don’t own me!”

“How long have you two been sleeping together?”

“We aren’t!”

“Lyin’ bitch!”

“You go to hell!”

Kenn's hand flinched, and Angela felt herself being brushed aside.

Marc stepped between them, finally eye-to-eye with the man responsible for hurting his Angie over and over.

"It's been a while, Harrison."

"Not long enough, *Brady*."

Marc didn't respond to the accusation as Kenn waited for one of them (Angela) to get nervous and babble, but they (she) remained silent.

"You're...traveling together?" Kenn asked finally.

Marc took the lead, broad shoulders prepared to take what came. "We were both coming this way, and I couldn't let her go it alone. She was hard to convince, though." Marc lied easily. This was indeed a thin line, and he wasn't the only one walking it. She hadn't been exaggerating even a little. Kenn was deadly with the M16 over his shoulder.

"Well, thanks, buddy, but I've got it from here. You can hit the redline."

Marc's grin widened into sharp white teeth as the wolf at his hip growled aggressively.

"Welcome, *pal*, but a funny thing happened on the way here. I discovered I want to be with...other people, and I might stick close for a while." Marc took a step forward to bring them within inches of each other. "Real close."

Angela knew blood was about to spill and stayed out of it, waiting. Kenn could force his own death right here. She wasn't as eager as Marc, but if it had to happen, the best time was now, while Kenn was alone.

Kenn's hairy knuckles inched toward the 9mm on his hip. "She has a man, you fucking Jody!"

"If you want to call yourself that," Marc snorted with contempt.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean, *boot*?" Kenn sneered threateningly.

Marc put them chest to chest without hesitation. “It means she’s not your punching bag anymore! You want to hit someone, grunge-shit, you hit me!”

Kenn took the suggestion, bringing his arm up with force.

The hit rocked Marc backward, and then they were at each other, trading vicious blows.

“Like that?” Kenn taunted, following the upper cut with a powerful roundhouse.

Marc ducked the blow and landed a nasty knuckle to Kenn’s temple that made the Marine stagger. “Yeah! More!”

Kenn rushed him, slamming into his gut, and Marc immediately drove his elbow into Kenn’s shoulder blade.

Kenn jerked, grunting as he was rocked off balance. They hit the dirt together with a hard thud, swinging, wrestling, and trying to get the advantage.

Angela waved at Dog to stay back as Marc pushed Kenn off him with his legs and rolled onto his feet.

Kenn rushed, and Marc ducked again, foot flashing out at the last minute to trip him up.

The blow the jealous man had been throwing glanced off Marc’s wounded arm, and he kicked Kenn in the ribs as he went down, wound stinging from the ripped stitches.

Kenn was on his feet in a blur, hand flying toward his hip.

Both of Marc’s guns were out before the furious Marine could pull his own.

“Do it!” Marc goaded, fingers tightening, longing to squeeze. “Make it count. *I will.*”

Kenn thought about it. He was fast, better than anyone in Adrian’s employ was, but Brady had always beaten him at the base. Always.

Kenn’s hand moved away from the holster that he’d already gotten open.

“Wise choice,” Marc warned, not feeling the blood seeping through the dusty white gauze on his arm.

“I’ll kill you for this,” Kenn warned.

“Then let’s end it now.”

There was loathing in his team leader’s eyes. Kenn had no doubt Brady would pull the trigger, but fate intervened at that moment, and he didn’t get to find out if Angela would have even tried to stop it.

“Someone’s coming!” she gasped.

Both men responded to the undeniable tremor of fear in her voice.

“Good or bad?” Marc asked, lowering but not holstering.

She looked at them with hazy orbs that made Kenn’s heart slide into his gut. There was no way Adrian would miss that.

“Both?”

Marc glared at Kenn with the demeanor of a lifelong enemy. “This isn’t over.”

“You can bet on that!” Kenn snarled and spit blood at Marc’s boots.

Marc slid his guns into the holsters. “Where?”

Angela pointed to the west, still watching Kenny even though Marc had turned his back with no obvious worry. Her Marine had lost. That made him more lethal than if he’d won.

The faint echo of hoofbeats came to them.

Marc automatically gestured for Kenn to protect her and then did the same himself, putting her between them.

Angela was more than surprised when Kenn obeyed without any signs it bothered him. She made the connection an instant later.

That’s how Kenny knew Marc! They’d served together. *Had Marc known all along?*

No, she realized. He couldn’t have kept that from her. He was too open to be holding a secret that huge.

“There.”

A muddy black horse thundered around the corner as she spoke, carrying a thin, white male with a black bandana covering most of his face and a frantically waving blonde woman in a long brown trench coat.

“How did they know we were here?” Angela asked as all three of them relaxed a little.

Dust flew from the animal’s hooves and Kenn smoothed his short dark spikes. “They found you the same way I did,” he stated, throwing a cold sneer at Brady and then one to the softly growling animal that had returned to its master’s side.

“They passed over that ridge and picked out two muddy Blazers in the middle of the street!”

Before Marc could respond, the foaming black horse was upon them, barely stopping before the woman was off and staggering toward them. She was sickly-looking and gaunt, with the sharp lines of her skeleton poking against sagging skin.

She collapsed against Angela, pulling them both to the dusty ground as she sobbed, “People! Oh, God, people!”

The man also dismounted, lowering the bandana from his scruffy face, but he stayed by the exhausted horse. He studied Marc and Kenn with shifty green eyes, and they both noticed he paid no attention to the raving woman who was trying to get a rush of words out through her tears.

“Slavers! Escaped. Have to get further...gun? Have a gun?”

The woman cried gut-wrenching sobs, and Angela helped her take off the stinking trench coat so she could check her out.

Except for the infected burn on her hip, most of the woman’s injuries appeared to be minor. Her mental state might be a different story.

“Escaped from who?” Kenn demanded, moving toward the man. His tone was menacing.

Rick, a coward, cringed. “Big group of Mexicans! We got away while they were drinking.”

“Where?” Kenn growled.

“On 25, near Cheyenne,” the traitor answered, wondering who this hard-assed, beaten-up man was. The outline of a dog tag under a blood-splattered shirt caught Rick’s attention, and his lips tightened. *The enemy.*

“How many?” Kenn demanded, disapproving gaze sweeping dirty jeans, cruddy fingernails, and greasy brown hair. Adrian wouldn’t like this guy.

“Sixty or seventy, maybe,” Rick lied, glad that Samantha hadn’t seen all of Cesar’s camp. There was easily three times that number.

“Armed?”

“Isn’t everyone now?” Rick gave a pointed stare and thrust restless hands deep into jean pockets to keep his nervousness from showing.

“How long were you with them?”

“A long time. They took me in Trinidad.”

Kenn scowled, full of frustration. He hadn’t gotten rid of Brady fast enough. The new man and woman would have to be taken to Adrian. They had inside information about the slavers, and that meant there was no time to ditch Marc or hole up with Angela for a few days. *Damn it!*

“Who are you?” Kenn barked, thinking it should be Angela flinching instead of the filthy sheep in front of him.

“I’m Rick. She’s Samantha.”

Kenn joined Angela, one resentful eye swelling.

Teeth bared, Dog gave a menacing growl.

Kenn hesitated, and then snarled back his own warning.

Both Brady and Angela were surprised when Dog backed down. The animal only retreated a single pace, but Marc’s concern increased. Even the wolf knew Kenn was a violent, trained killer.

“How is she?” Kenn demanded.

“Dehydrated, malnourished, shock—”

“Can she travel?”

Marc wanted to protest the rude interruption, but made himself stay quiet. Angela wanted to try again to handle it peacefully.

“Get her in your Blazer. We can make it to camp by dawn.” Kenn ordered.

“Camp?” Angela asked sharply. “As in Safe Haven, the place you had yet to mention?”

Kenn didn't deny the accusation in her tone, but he worried over how much she already knew. Would any of his bluffs succeed?

In the tension, only the freshly sedated blonde woman glimpsed Rick's brief smirk of success at the name of the camp they were being taken to.

Kenn and Marc relocated the softly muttering woman to the passenger seat of Angela's Blazer and Kenn picked out details that enraged him. Like the edge of a lacy white bra under a purple gift bag and a pair of green boxers showing from the corner of a black duffle bag. He saw the vehicle for what it was—living quarters. They'd been playing house!

When the two men moved to let Angela through with her bag, their eyes locked over her head.

“You've disgraced the Corps,” Kenn accused. “Once we get to camp, I'll do my best to have you banished for it!”

He stormed away before his rage could take control again.

Angela handed Marc the hat she'd retrieved from the middle of the street. “You all right?”

His bruised face was troubled. “Yeah. You?”

“Better now. It's good that you were able to back him down. Thank you.”

Marc fingered his swelling jaw. “It really isn't over, honey. This was only the beginning.”

3

Kenn pulled up next to them a minute later in an ugly green Bronco and got out, waving a hand at Rick. Marc, he ignored. “Leave the horse. You drive your woman.”

Kenn then looked at Angela. “You ride with me.”

Marc protested, and Angela said, “I'll be fine, just keep up. He's hell behind the wheel.”

More than nervous, Angela let Kenn push her into his truck. As he got into the driver's seat, she turned to him, determined to throw him off balance from the start. "What were you doing out here, away from camp?"

She didn't wince as he slammed the door, though he'd expected her to. She was no longer scared of him because he was a man. She was afraid of the dangerous person she knew lurked inside, though, she thought she had done a good job so far of pretending she wasn't.

Kenn stared at her for a long moment, saying nothing. When she didn't speak either, just waited for an answer, he shifted into drive and hit the gas.

He didn't make sure the others were ready, but Angela knew Marc was on their bumper.

"Well?" she insisted.

Kenn lit a smoke. "We got a call from the woman. Adrian sent me to get her and some medicine we need."

His voice was laced with pride, and Angela hated the curl of jealousy in her voice as she laid the foundation of her plan—change. "Who's Adrian, and who are you to him that you're trusted with something like that?"

Kenn was surprised. The Angela he knew wouldn't have realized that the mission was important.

"I'm whatever he needs," Kenn answered evasively, not wanting to tell her how high in the chain of command he was, how permanent a place he'd carved out at Safe Haven.

"Well, what does he usually need you to be?"

Her sarcasm surprised him again. Brady had done all this in only a few weeks? It had taken him years to train her.

I should have used the knife, Kenn thought. With the K-Bar, he and Brady were equals.

"I drive, I make out schedules. I teach, I count, I defend, and I lead. Wherever we're short someone, I do it."

Picking up on images of a barricaded Louisiana room and her Marine hitting Marc from behind, she wanted to ask what kind of

man could do that to one of his own, but the old Angela took control. She knew this enemy well.

“How long have you been with them, Kenn? Long enough to build a new life?”

Anger and guilt were obvious as he snarled, “That’s above your pay grade! How long have you and Brady been having an affair? Before the war?”

“It’s not like that. We’re—”

“Friends?” he barked, driving erratically. “Don’t lie! You’ve been screwing him all along!”

Angela sucked in a calming breath, heart racing, “You would think of me that way, but it didn’t have to be. I was prepared to love you, to be your mate.”

“I only wanted your obedience. The rest of it is shit!”

“That’s what I mean. I had hoped the war might allow you to—”

“To what? Be okay with you bringing your lover along? Wake up! We have a deal!”

“It’s an unfair agreement! You lied, manipulated, *hurt me.*”

Kenn didn’t deny any of her accusations. “A deal is a deal.”

“Why, Kenn? You didn’t come for me, don’t want me here. Why keep me? I’ll take Charlie and go. You can tell your people whatever you want.”

“You have six years left, and you’re gonna pay for each and every rule you’ve broken!”

“There won’t be any more punishments. Those days are over!”

Angela’s voice shook with emotion, with warning Kenn couldn’t help but hear. He responded coolly, dangerously, “You have to be sleeping with him to talk to me like that. Wait ‘til I get you alone!”

“We are not! He’s a good friend who helped me.”

“Yeah, helped himself to what’s mine! Unfaithful bitch! It started before the war, didn’t it? Answer me!”

“No! We’re just friends!”

“You’re not allowed to have friends! You belong to me!” he shouted, almost out of control.

The witch refused to let her back down.

“Never! I’ve always been Marc’s!”

Kenn’s hand flew out.

“Mine!” *Slap!* “You’re mine!” He swerved as he leaned over to hit her again.

Before she thought about it, Angela drew her gun and pressed against his neck.

So close to killing you!

Shaking with a horribly cold rage, she shoved the weapon against him in satisfaction. Things had just changed between them forever.

Kenn eased off the gas and stole a glance at her.

Lip bleeding, her face was deadly calm and he brought the Bronco to a gentle stop.

The two Blazers pulled alongside, only Marc understanding what was happening, and he didn’t interfere, hoping Angela would solve the problem on her own.

A thick drop of crimson dripped from Angela’s lip, and her knuckles were white from her grip on the gun as she struggled with herself not to pull the trigger. *I hate him so much!*

“Next time, you’d better be sure I’m dead. If not, I will kill you!” she spat.

Although Kenn recognized the tone, knew he was as close to death here and now as he had ever been on the battlefield, he couldn’t back down.

“They used to stone whores!” he swore.

Angela drew in a shallow breath, sensing he was thinking of pushing her over the edge despite the gun in her hand. He was more than mad—he was crazy.

“I’ve been loyal to you, even when I didn’t want to be. You can’t say the same. I want my freedom, and I’ll do whatever it takes to get it. Whatever you make me do.”

She slowly lowered the gun, but it only went to her lap and Kenn noticed she didn't take her finger off the trigger. What all had Brady taught her? Thinking furiously, Kenn took his smokes from his pocket and lit one.

When he offered it to her, Angela didn't hesitate to take it, sensing it was his peace offering.

After a moment, Kenn eased on the gas, thinking about what she'd said. He believed they weren't sleeping together. She was too pissed to lie, but there was definitely something going on. The kiss proved that, even if he forgot about all the other signs, the sparks he'd witnessed, and her words: "*I've always been Marc's!*" What did that say?

Kenn glanced over and discovered her staring in her mirror at the Blazer rolling behind and a little to the right—in the bodyguard's place. ... Were they talking?

The rage flared back to life, and Kenn hit the gas, swerving so they couldn't make eye contact. "You better remember who I am. He's tough, and while he's definitely unexpected, he's not invincible, and neither are you! I'm important to these people. Maybe he'll have an accident."

Angela's anger was replaced by a thick flood of sadness. "Just let me go, Kenny. You don't love me. You don't even *like* me. It will only cause all of us pain, including you."

"We have a deal," Kenn denied. "You owe me six more years, and if I catch you with him or anyone else, I'll take Charlie out on a supply run, and we won't come back. Ever!"

4

Obsessed, malevolent brothers watched the small convoy drive off with Rick. The twins were a mere mile away, and while they were glad the traitor had been taken in, the strength of the men he'd joined was a worry. The second Marine was as much of a problem as the first. Clearly, both males wanted the woman, which would make it harder for Dillan's plan to work.

“They’ll fight to keep her,” Dean observed as they dropped down from the tall walnut tree, and trudged to their hidden jeep.

“Yeah,” Dillan said, taking his place behind the wheel. He picked up the mike. “Package has made contact. Tracking. Report later.”

There was no answer, and the evil twin hung it up, not caring if Cesar got their messages or not. They had a good plan. Fear was a powerful weapon, but the way her men were so willing to fight for her made the eldest twin nervous. Maybe they should have a backup plan in case she got lucky again.

5

Kenn drove hard and fast, fuming in silence. By dusk, he was taking bigger and bigger risks, releasing his frustration on his Bronco. When his luck ran out, Angela wasn’t surprised.

The truck swerved harshly as one of the tires finally popped, but Kenn handled it expertly.

“Damn,” he swore, not sounding mad to her ears.

He wanted a delay, she realized.

Kenn brought them to a rough stop in the middle of the empty, two-lane road that was surrounded by dead and dying fields of wheat. “Ten minute break. Stay close.”

Angela waited for Brady to circle the vehicles and give her a motion before getting out.

Kenn felt an iron hand tighten in his gut. That’s how it was, then. She’d switched owners during his absence.

Kenn got on the tire, expecting them to be together the whole time, but after the bathroom break that they all needed, Angela took her doctor’s bag and went to check on the woman. Marc circled their stopped convoy, Dog at his side.

Kenn glanced up at Marc as he walked by, but the man’s gaze was on the dark South Dakota borderlands they’d crossed into.

Kenn’s anger grew. That level of automatic responsibility was exactly what Adrian was always hoping for in new arrivals.

Despite his bluffs, Kenn already knew Adrian would welcome them warmly and do what he could to get them to stay and help with the dream. It was an ugly thought for Kenn, envisioning a life in Safe Haven while Angela and Marc were not only a legal couple, but also both in the chain of command. The only thing worse would be if Adrian gave his place to one of them.

“Will he really want us?”

Kenn swung around in surprise.

“I think you’ve told some big lies and don’t want them to find out what kind of person you are,” Angela stated. “Does that sound like the truth, or have you forgotten what that is?” She studied his red face and sullen eyes. “Wanna make a new deal?”

“No!” Kenn scratched the idea off his list of things to try. He stood up and roughly kicked the hubcap back on.

“Get in, we’re leaving,” he ordered, hating this new Angela. Where was the timid mouse he had curled into the corner with his fists, and how long would it take to get her back?

“You can’t. Ever. I’ll die first!” she stated flatly, hand on her gun as she stepped around him to the open passenger door.

Marc came by on a round; holding out a pack of smokes, and the nod of encouragement from him gave her a warm rush of confidence and a frenzy of longing. She was already wishing their time alone hadn’t been wasted. She’d denied Marc for nothing, and there was night in her heart.

6

As dawn neared, Angela was wide-awake, still bitter as she stared at Marc in the mirror. She couldn’t wait to hug her son, was unbelievably grateful that she had made it so far, but she was tense and scared again—the way she had spent so many years. It was depressing that the best she could hope for was Kenny letting his guard down enough for her to grab her boy and run. He hadn’t changed. He thought he still had her trapped, but this time she had Marc in her corner. Would it be enough?

Kenn scowled when she lit yet another cigarette without asking for permission, but he only lowered both front windows a bit to clear the smoke. He noted her eyes on her mirror again and he swerved the truck violently, throwing her a warning glare that had the old Angela bracing to fight again.

“We’ll be there in about an hour, and we need to talk about what you’ll do and say,” he dictated.

His hard tone and body language sent flashes of blind obedience through her mind.

“No, Kenn, we don’t,” Angela responded flatly. “You want to tell me the rules and the way things work? Fine, but save all that other shit. You don’t own me anymore. That life ended with the war I survived alone!”

Kenn was speechless as he fought the guilt her words caused.

“I won’t embarrass you. I won’t go to him, and I won’t run my mouth. In return, you remember that I’m a person, not your property. You don’t own me,” she repeated, stubbing out her butt. “You never have.”

Kenn burned at her words, her tone, even hating her using the short version of his name. It made her sound less needy, less weak, and he knew who was responsible.

“This is all *his* doing, isn’t it?” he accused angrily.

Her response was quick. “Because of Marc, I’m here and alive, two things you didn’t want to happen!”

Kenn said nothing and enjoyed her pain.

“Can’t you be even a little glad to see me?”

“Woulda been easier if you hadn’t brought your lover along,” he sneered.

“You left me there to die, Kenn. Don’t think that I don’t know that. I did what I had to, and I went through hell to get here.”

Kenn gave her a disbelieving once over. “You look fine.”

“I am...*now*,” she taunted, clearly implying that Marc was the reason for it.

Kenn let out a frustrated hiss. “Send him on his way!”

Angela shrugged indifferently, but her hand remained by her hip. “I don’t think I can. We’ve become close.”

Kenn stomped on the gas, throwing her back in the seat. “I’ll kill you both!”

Angela was suddenly overwhelmed with what had been caged before—anger.

“I owe you a lot, Marine, and if you miss, if you underestimate me, it’ll be *your* body they bury.”

Kenn barely controlled himself, almost sure she was trying to get hit this time, so she could shoot him. And, while he was fast, Kenn wasn’t sure he could grab her arm in time if Brady had taught her to fire from that hip holster. The way she was keeping her fingers on the butt hinted that the wife-stealer had.

Damn! He had to get her under control. Kenn foresaw embarrassing explanations, denials, and a trial. There was no way assaulting a woman would be overlooked.

“My...problems are not going to be made public,” Angela stated.

Kenn scowled, realizing she was trying to stay a step ahead by reading his thoughts. He would stop that later, when he had the concentration to bring up the old wall that had kept her in the dark. Right now, he had to find a way to save his place.

“The people here will make it their business to find out. There are few secrets in Safe Haven. Adrian arranged it that way to keep the bad people out.”

“One sure slipped through,” Angela tossed harshly at him, storing his lie to examine later.

Kenn flushed with shame instead of the angry denial she expected.

“A truce? A week or two and see how things go before you spread lies and make me do something ugly?”

“A truce? Hmm... Okay,” Angela answered coldly, knowing she had won the first of many rounds. “You have seven days to convince me that I should forgive you or forget you. After that, I’m free to do what I want.”

His hand flinched toward her again, and Angela held herself still as he grabbed the mike off the dash holder instead.

“Don’t push me!” Kenn warned. “I’ve done a lot of changing, but you owe me six more years. If I’m banished, I’ll sneak back in to slit your throat! You’re free when I say, and not a second sooner!”

Kenn keyed the mike, “This is Eagle Two, calling Safe Haven. You out there, Mitch?”

“You got me, Big Daddy.”

Kenn grimaced, clearly annoyed when he responded to the slurred voice, “I’m half an hour out. Four new arrivals, two of each, adult. One needs medical care. Have the QZ set up and tell the boss he’ll want to talk to a couple of these people.”

“Roger, Eagle Two. Did you find anyone?”

There was a pause, then Kenn’s bitter response, “Yeah, my wife.”

Kenn hung up the mike, wondering if Angela knew from the call that he had climbed to second in command. She wasn’t that smart, was she?

“These are my men, witch, and they’ll hate him because I do. I can make it ugly.”

Determination to make him understand that his timid Angela was gone forever filled her in a roar that would eventually have to be heard.

“A truce, Kenn. Seven days, and then we’ll talk. I’ll walk the line, and so will Marc. If you lose it all, it’ll be *your* doing, not ours.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight
Secrets Revealed

April 1st, 2013
Black Hills of South Dakota

1

“**Y**ou are entering an American Military refugee camp. Identify yourself immediately!”

Angela jumped, but Kenn’s beefy hand had been hovering over the radio before the call came, and he keyed the handset without picking it up. “From sea to shining sea.”

A different voice answered, sounding much younger than the one Kenn had talked to earlier.

“Welcome home, Eagle Two. The QZ is in the corner. He’ll meet you there.”

“Copy.”

As they crested the muddy hill, Angela gaped in surprise. It was a city!

The valley below was covered in fog and huge trees, and between these towering giants lurked a camp of survivors. Dozens of people were in sight through the swirling mist, and Angela sucked in air to ease the panic that suddenly threatened to overwhelm her. So many! How would she hide what she was? How would she keep the witch in line?

It all flashed by too quickly for details as Kenn steered the Bronco to the rear of the camp, where a faint but clear trail was etched in the mud.

Angela concentrated, feeling them out. Would she be hurt here? What kind of place had they come to? Was her son happy? Healthy? A prisoner? Trying not to shake, she forced herself to

breathe normally, determined to be the strong survivor she had discovered on the hazardous trip here.

They drove over muddy Indian grass, weaving in and out of tall pines as they drove to an area thick with spruce. Angela counted five small tents inside an area marked with bright caution tape. There was also a large white canvas shelter sporting a red cross and a name painted on it that she couldn't read from where they were.

Dense thickets surrounded everything, and other than small whirls of smoke from fires and a rusty semi parked inside the yellow tape, patches of grass were all she could view through the fog. The trees around the taped-off area prevented her from getting even a glimpse of the refugees behind them, and she pushed her nerves away, telling herself her boy was alive. That was reason enough to give these people an honest chance.

Kenn pulled behind an area that had a sign labeled "QZ" and put his vehicle in park as Angela's Blazer pulled in on the left and Marc's slid in on their right.

Kenn was still searching for an explanation that the herd (Adrian) would accept for her lip. It was obviously fresh. If anyone found out he had hit a woman, he would lose his place.

He glanced at Angela with desperation flickering. "You'll keep your mouth shut and behave?"

Angela thought his face was worse, but wasn't sure if that meant Marc would win in a fight to the death. This one had been more like two big dogs sizing each other up.

"Yes. Leave me be for seven days, and then we'll talk."

Kenn grunted and got out, calling greetings to the armed, black-clad sentries standing alertly around the perimeter.

Angela could hear him struggling to invent excuses as she opened her door and stood on the Bronco's wide foot rails. She studied the vague, shifting forms of the foggy refugee camp as the loud, heartbreakingly welcome sound of dogs yapping echoed.

Charlie! I've come! She sent, calling to him with her mother's heart. *I'm here!*

She heard his answering cry of stunned happiness as shimmery forms of people advanced through the chest-high fog. The hair on her arms and neck tingled, and blood suddenly pounded through her ears as a door in her mind tried to swing open. There was someone here like her and Charlie?

Yes, definitely. *He* was coming this way.

Three tall men in jeans emerged from the dense fog, and Angela picked out Kenn's idol easily. She wasn't surprised to discover that the vibrant sense of strength and power was coming from the great looking blond man with crisscrossed belts and holsters on both hips, like Marc. That was where the similarities ended. This man had sexy, sun-streaked brows, a goatee, and spikes of yellow hair like rippling wheat. He was only average height and weight, but it was the way he carried himself that said he was different. His pace wasn't a strut, but a confident step that said he could handle what came, that he knew what he was doing, and little would stand in his way.

The rattling door in Angela's mind swung open as the witch took over, and she pulled hard with no time to resist as the colors of his energy flooded her.

Stopping in surprise, Adrian stared at the pretty woman with long black curls and a fresh wound on her lower lip. Their eyes met across the distance, and the air became crisp, sharp, and then faded, taking the camp noises away and replacing them with the soft, lapping waves of a calm ocean.

A second later, the sounds snapped back into place, and it startled them both, making Angela jump.

Adrian faked a yawn and forced his feet to move. "We're done for now."

Instead of disappearing as they normally might have, Kyle and Seth stayed and waited. Something had given Adrian pause, and the off-duty Eagles would know what.

Who noticed? Adrian casually swept the area. The observant males at his side, for sure, and probably Neil as well, but no camp members were in sight.

One glance at Kenn's (bruised?) thunderous face told Adrian that not only had he witnessed it, he was angry about it.

Understanding fell into place. This was Kenn's wife, why he'd left. Surely, she hadn't beaten Kenn? The guy with her, then. Must be a hard-ass to do that to Kenn.

Adrian glimpsed Neil moving subtly toward Kenn's wife and her escort, and Adrian scanned the other new arrivals, content that side was now covered. Neil probably had the same questions as he did about the bruises.

Studying the other two arrivals, a deep feeling of unease sank into Adrian's gut. There was a thin woman with dirty-blond hair slumped against the Blazer on the left, staring hard at the uniformed guards with fear instead of relief. *Abused*. He could help her.

The thin man with the black bandana around his neck made Adrian's unease increase. He saw shifty green eyes and a slump to the shoulders that suggested a lifetime of being shit and no desire to change. That, he had only one solution for.

Adrian motioned Billy and Chris toward the couple and strode to Kenn. He scanned the woman with the split lip who was buttoning up her long sweater, more encouraged with her. She stood straight, showed no fear, and was obviously healthy. One of his herd or one of his shepherds? Was she one of those he still needed? Was that the connection he'd felt?

Ignoring Kenn's glare, Angela stepped down and over to Marc, who stood stiffly by the open door, with the big Timberwolf sitting as tensely at his feet.

Please, guys. Walk the line for a bit, and give this place a chance. It feels good here.

Angie's words were silent, and Marc nodded, eyes saying the things his tongue wouldn't as he pulled on his long coat. "We will. You okay?"

“I will be, I think. We’ve called a truce. Just be careful, like you always are.”

Angela swept the foggy landscape again before opening the side door, drawn by the murmur of voices when the wind dropped.

Marc handed her two full speed loaders, and she slid them into her pocket, along with a few other things from her kit. “I’m here if you need me, Angie.”

“I’ll run if he makes me.”

Despite her words, Marc could almost feel her rebuilding the walls between them, pulling away. “I only need ten minutes and to know where you guys are.”

She nodded, sad these were the last private words they would share for a while.

“I’ll miss you,” Marc blurted quietly, catching her thought.

Angie was sure she’d never get to sleep tonight without the sound of his breathing, without being able to roll over and stare at him.

“Me too. I just need some time to read things. It might not be the right place, may not even be worth it to try. If not, we’ll go.”

“Ten minutes and locations,” he said.

Dog shifted menacing golden orbs on a tall man in all black, except for a state cop’s hat, who passed by their bumper.

With an open hand on the holster of his Beretta, the guard swept them, and Marc recognized a gun run. The sentry was noting who was armed, assessing the threat.

Marc turned to Angela, but kept the guard in his peripheral vision. “You’re finally here. Bet you can’t wait to hug him.”

She looked anything but happy.

Marc’s trained ears heard no fear from the people they couldn’t view yet. *Smart to separate the areas*, he thought, meeting the eyes of a couple of the perimeter men. “What’s wrong? Isn’t he here?”

Also busy feeling things out; Angela was eased a little by the sense of a normal, safe life she was picking up from the men on sentry duty. “He’s here, on the way to us now.”

Marc’s lips thinned. “You mean to you. I’ll wait right here.”

“No.”

The same sentry made a second pass, sharp green eyes seemingly only on the bristling wolf, and Marc lowered his voice. “Now is *not* a good time.”

Marc noted the glints of steel, knew she wasn’t going to budge before she spoke.

“It’s the only time. You can’t hide it from him, and you two can’t start out on a lie.” She looked away before the sparks flew. “Besides, he’ll know right off. He picks stuff up as easily as I do.”

“What about Kenn? He’ll go nuts.”

Her face paled a little, but that glint of steel never wavered. “Maybe.” She slipped into his mind. *Maybe not, if we can keep it quiet.*

Marc was relieved that no one would know yet. He couldn’t protect her from so many.

“Others may suspect, but Kenn will eventually figure it out, and call us on it. Right now, he’ll believe it’s me introducing my son to my new man.”

“I’ll handle him if I need to. You’re sure it should be now?”

“Yes,” Angela replied, watching Kenn. He was deep in conversation with his idol, no doubt telling him of the slavers that the others had escaped.

Such loyalty, the witch whispered sleepily. And to a stranger. Where’s the devotion he should have had for you?

Angela ignored the question, but it burned in her gut. “Come on, Brady. Our boy’s here.”

Marc followed, more nervous than he wanted to admit. He had never allowed himself to consider having a child at all, and now he had one who was almost grown.

“Stay, Dog.”

The wolf sank down, mostly hidden by the tires.

Angela led the way to the corner of the caution tape, experiencing fierce joy as Charlie's taller form came through the thick fog.

Neil had been observing the new arrivals. He had a list of questions about how all the bruised faces were connected, but never doubted that they were. Fighting over the woman? Who had hit her? ...Kenn?

Neil stepped forward as they reached the tape. "I'm sorry, but you can't cross the—"

Invisible flames shot up, burning him, and Neil retreated. He wasn't sure what had happened. A flash of hot wind?

Neil met Adrian's eyes questioningly as he started to step in front of them again and was relieved when the boss gestured in denial.

Adrian missed none of it.

The woman moved around him, orbs tinged with red, and Neil took another step back.

When Charlie stopped at the tape, young face full of overwhelming happiness, Neil relaxed a little. Clearly, the teenager knew them. Family?

Neil nodded. That made sense considering Charlie was also...different.

Angela's heart was in control of her emotions, and instead of ducking under the caution tape; she snatched her knife from her boot and sliced through it. She sheathed the blade without losing stride, and everyone, including Kenn, was sure she knew how to use it. They also understood the message. Nothing would separate her from her son.

"Mom!"

The teenager threw his arms tightly around her neck, and Angela crushed him close, swinging him around. His face was buried in her hair, heart beating furiously against hers, and she

hugged him tighter, pain warring with her happiness. At least one of her sons had made it through the war.

“God, I’ve missed you, boy!”

Charlie kept his arms around her as she let him down, struggling not to cry. “I knew you’d come! *He* said you wouldn’t make it, but I knew!”

Hot rage pulsed through Angela, the same mother’s hate that had to be stopped from hurting the guard who had stepped between them.

She held her son back, looking into eyes that were the same shade of blue as Marc’s. “Our time apart is over. We will never be separated that way again!”

Angela hugged him tightly once more before letting go, not allowing herself to think, just react. “There’s someone I want you to meet.”

The teenager agreed reluctantly, hands going into the pockets of his dark blue hoodie.

She threw a comforting arm around his thin shoulders as they stepped over to Marc, who had hung back to observe their reunion.

She was obviously a loving mother. It didn’t come as a surprise, but it did hurt that he’d missed it all.

“Charlie, this is a very good friend of mine. He’s the reason I made it here. His name is Marcus Charles Brady.”

They both noticed the fourteen-year-old showed no surprise at the exact opposite of his name.

Charlie regarded Marc with his own cool stare. “So, you’re my dad.”

Glad the words had been low enough for only the three of them to hear, Marc held out a calloused hand. “Charlie, right?”

The boy reluctantly shook with him, and Marc felt the subtle tinkering of a child trying to get into his thoughts.

“Never without permission, boy,” Angela stated, the role of mother and teacher automatically falling back into place.

Charlie glared at the dusty ground. “Sorry.”

Ignoring the sarcastic tone, Marc asked, “Maybe we could talk sometime? Alone.”

The careful request drew a nasty glower from the upset boy. “About what?”

Marc pushed the silent words at him. *About the last fifteen years and why we haven't spent them together.*

The child shrugged. “The past is dead. No one cares.”

His voice was full of bitterness that no kid should feel so deeply.

“I do,” Marc stated. “I care a lot.”

Charlie's bright eyes blazed with anger befitting an adult, and Marc heard the words clearly, as if Angela had sent them.

Well, I don't. You left us in hell, and you're as bad as he is. Maybe worse, 'cause now he's pissed at her again!

Charlie spun to his mom in angry accusation. “When is he leaving?”

2

Rage was rolling off Kenn as he and everyone else viewed the reunion. He couldn't believe she would introduce her lover to their son so openly!

His fists clenched with an effort to control himself, but it was one that he already knew wasn't going to be successful. Brady had to go! Soon... Maybe even right now.

Adrian and many of the sentries also felt it, that sense of the inevitable coming.

The two men locked bruised eyes, and all of those watching were able to read the exchange.

I'll kill to keep her!

I'll kill to have her!

Sighing tiredly, Adrian stayed still, aware that trouble had just entered his peaceful camp.

Kenn moved forward a second later, and Adrian observed with the rest of his men, wondering whose blood would be spilled and what it would cost them.

3

Angela and Charlie spun around at the same time, and the fear on their faces drew attention.

Marc saw Kenn coming, but he focused on the black-and-gray blur streaking toward the Marine. “Dog! No!”

The powerful animal slid to a rough stop, long snout drawn up in a ferocious snarl as he glared at Kenn, who had pulled his weapon.

“Dog! Sit!”

The wolf dropped to its haunches, and Marc joined him, attention now on the real threat.

“You should have that thing on a leash!” Kenn growled, lowering but not holstering the 9mm.

“Maybe you shouldn’t provoke him,” Marc stated, rubbing behind the animal’s tense ears.

“I didn’t even see him!”

“He saw *you*, read your intent. He’s very protective of her.”

Kenn ground his teeth together and shoved his gun into its holster, giving the bristling wolf a hateful glare.

Marc let out a sigh and gave the animal an affectionate pat on his stocky chest as the Marine moved toward Angela and Charlie. They’d already had their first close call, and they’d only been here for five minutes. *Wonderful.*

“Good boy.”

“Praise for the quick response to your commands, or because he would have attacked Kenn without being told?”

Adrian had come over during the aftermath.

“Both and more,” Marc answered without hesitation.

Adrian took it all in, liking Marc, especially the sharp intelligence studying him back as intently. Was this hard-ass another of his circle?

Adrian felt relief then, thinking it was so late that it made perfect sense they would come together. He would give the woman now slumped against her man an interview, in case they had come in threes.

As Adrian and Marc faced off, the Eagles understood Kenn's uncontested power and cool control had taken a hit. The entire camp couldn't rattle the Marine. Many had tried, but this one man had shaken Kenn, and without doing much. Who was he?

"Everything okay?" someone in an approaching group asked.

More men had emerged from the thick fog, weapons in hand, and Marc was impressed that they had come so quietly and without being called.

"Everything's 5-by," Adrian answered, voice tinged with relief.

Marc picked out the earpieces and understood that one of those already here had given a signal to alert others guards that they might have a problem. The one Angela had pushed back? Probably. The brown-haired guard was hovering near her and Kenn. Satisfied that she was okay for the moment, Marc did another scan.

The two men who had been at the blond leader's side were observing him intently and Marc returned the scrutiny. They wore civilian clothes, but he knew they were off-duty and thought the leader here must be either really hard on them or really good to them, to have earned such loyalty. Sure he was being evaluated by everyone in sight, Marc gave his full attention to the man at his side, waiting to find out if he would be allowed to stay.

"So, is he dangerous, or does he just look like it?" There was a tone of double meaning, and as Adrian noted the dog tag, there was an audible click of another piece being put into place.

“He’s a wild animal with a little training,” Marc replied, aware of the double entendre. “I did him a favor, and he chooses to stay with me.”

Kenn will be livid when he realizes he brought in the very people he has to share power with, Adrian thought.

Adrian considered what he’d already witnessed and corrected himself. Kenn knew, and he was beyond livid.

“Do you make shit like that a habit?”

Feeling like the man was searching him for something, Marc asked, “Shit like what?”

“Doing favors for those less able. I need that kind of help here.”

Marc waved a hand at the tag around his neck. “Service is my chosen field, but helping animals is easier. You normally know their nature when you first meet.”

Adrian held out a hand in welcome, and Marc shook it, feeling like he’d passed a surprise quiz.

“Mitchel, Adrian.”

Marc automatically squared his shoulders at the authoritative tone. “Brady, Marcus.”

“Where you from, Grunt?”

Fully at attention now, Marc was surprised to find himself responding as if he were addressing an officer. Just like with Kenn, it didn’t take him long to figure out that he was.

“West Virginia. Ohio.”

“Marine?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Record?”

“Eight speeding tickets in four years and a couple of bar fights. I paid restitution.”

“What are your plans, Grunt, now that the country you were sworn to protect has fallen in flames?”

Marc couldn’t stop his gaze from straying to Angela and his son as they came toward Adrian, Kenn in the lead.

“My country’s not dead, and her people still need to be protected.”

There were nods of approval, and Adrian asked, “Did you rehearse that?”

Marc shook his head, smiling back, but Adrian noticed it didn’t reach his wary eyes. *He’ll add that strength to my Eagles!*

“I’m kind of a quick thinker under pressure,” Marc replied. “My mom said I’d make a good politician. My CO said I was a very wise smartass. I consider myself safely between the two.”

Adrian chuckled. “Brains are very welcome here, Marc, as are you. May Safe Haven become your—”

“Check it out, Adrian. This is *my* Angela,” Kenn interrupted, keeping his tone light.

Marc read the meaning. It said Kenn was the teacher’s pet. He had shouldered between them, not quite daring to drag Angie there, too, but pulling her arm in a way that made Marc grit his teeth.

“Ang, this is Adrian, our Commander in Chief.”

As Marc was forced out of the circle, Adrian noticed the woman’s lips thin when Kenn called her “his” and saw her actually grimace at the introduction. There was also a great strength lurking in this new arrival, and the leader in Adrian came fully awake and to take her measure.

Their eyes locked, kindred souls meeting for the first time... Lightning flashed suddenly, brilliantly, drawing everyone’s attention away, but Angela and Adrian didn’t react as eons stood still. Their life forces melded for a second of completeness, of incredible joy, and then it was gone.

To cover the flames of confusion, Angela let the witch ask a question that demanded honesty. “The last men to hold that position tried to kill us all. Do you plan to follow in their footsteps?”

It drew displeasure from everyone except Marc, who had been studying the small streak of gray in Angie’s hair. It was new and odd.

Even as he was reminded of the deep secret he was keeping, Adrian saw Kenn's hand flinch toward her and dive into a pocket instead. Because of all the witnesses? Was that where her split lip had come from?

Adrian subtly reestablished the earth-shattering connection he and the woman had made, and tried to keep his voice steady, now feeling like the one who was taking a test. "No, I don't, and I don't consider myself that important anyway."

Angela was already certain his people would argue if anyone else said that. Their protectiveness was evident. "Good. We have enough controlling jackasses left as it is."

There were frowns and surprised murmurs, and Adrian had no doubts about who she was referring to.

The tone of his reply wasn't quite joking as he noted the bags under her eyes and the hand resting on her gun.

"We'll talk later and you can point them out. I'd be happy to have them slapped and threatened for you," he offered, drawing a tiny smile from her that made him want a real one. He also caught Kenn's reaction. The Marine flushed with guilty anger.

Adrian's stomach twisted. Kenn had been here for a long time, had a good place, but there had always been something a little off about him. Adrian now had a terrible idea of what it was.

"I'm a healer, not a punisher," Angela joked and felt Kenn's rage grow when Adrian took the hint.

"You're a doctor." There was pleasure in his voice.

She was eager to stand on her own, but Kenn quickly spoke up, unable to let her. "You need first aid; she might be able to do it. You'll want to talk to—"

"Later!" Adrian barked. "Your mission has not ended until the supplies and survivors have been squared away!"

Kenn flushed, pinned by the pissed, cold tone.

Adrian's gaze went to the lone man studying them all, and then to the blonde, who was now slumped against the Blazer

again as if she couldn't stand to take comfort from him. "Separate those two and get her to John. Get on it!"

Adrian turned his back to Kenn, something he'd never done before, and his men noticed it.

Angela couldn't help feeling a bit bad for Kenn. His very nature would make this hard for everyone, but she was also relieved to be away from his anger for a while.

Adrian looked at Marc, who stood a little to Angela's right and behind. *The place of protection*, he thought, also liking the wolf's neat stance at her side. "If you need something, ask one of the guards. We'll talk tomorrow at say... eleven thirty. Someone will be by to show you around once you're out of quarantine."

Marc knew he was supposed to follow Kenn now and he gave Angela a resigned sigh. This was it. The separation had begun.

"Catch you later, baby-cakes."

"Yes, you will," Angela answered firmly.

Adrian saw her wariness as the man moved away, but she gestured to the wolf still sitting at her side. "Go with Brady."

The wolf listened alertly, but didn't budge until Marc whistled.

Dog rose slowly, and Angela patted the wolf she'd come to respect for his devotion to Marc. "He'll need you more than I will."

The wolf's ear flicked and he padded after his master, causing people to flinch out of his way.

"Are you two a couple?" Adrian asked, storing her obvious rapport with the wild animal.

Angela quickly shook her head, and they both noted the relief Charlie was too inexperienced to hide.

"Marc's a good friend. I never would have made it here without him."

Adrian was aware of how intently the boy was listening and how reluctant his mom was to talk about it in front of him.

“She’d know if she was sick. Does she have to be in the QZ?” Charlie asked, wanting her to spend the day with him.

“If you have chores, we’ll meet later,” Angela denied. She wanted to hole up in her tent, unsure about handling a huge group of strangers, but the witch said if she wanted a good life here, she couldn’t spend the first day hiding.

Adrian forced himself to act as if he hadn’t noticed that she’d read her son’s mind. “He has a shift with the vet. You can wait in the quarantine zone, but it may be dinner before he’s finished. Or you can go on rounds with me. It’ll give you a chance to meet your future patients.”

Unaware that he was breaking one of his own rules, Angela thought he was assuming a lot, but she also understood from the expression on Charlie’s face that she had just been offered something that was sought after here—time with Adrian.

“I’d love to spend the day doing...rounds with you, but I haven’t agreed to stay, let alone be your doctor. I only came for my son.”

“But you will,” Adrian promised and turned to the teenager. “Put your mom’s kit in a QZ tent and get to work before Chris marks you late.”

The teenager snapped a salute. “Yes, sir.”

Angela saw a lot (of Marc) in her son. He was changing, growing into a man, and she was suddenly sad for all the years Kenn had kept them chained to his side. It hadn’t been easy on the boy either.

“See ya later, Mom.”

“Yes, you will.”

Adrian waited patiently for her to watch him be swallowed by the thinning fog. “He’s a great kid. Marc’s?”

Angela froze, paling.

“Kenn doesn’t know?”

She shook her head reluctantly, hoping the good feeling of this place meant that she could trust him. If not, this would get ugly, and fast. “No. What gave us away?”

Adrian lit a smoke. When he walked, she followed. “A number of things I’m surprised Kenn missed. Eyes and hair the exact shade, same stubborn chin...and they both worship the ground you walk on.”

“It’s not like that. Marc’s an old friend who came when I needed him. Kenny and I had been together since Charlie was a baby.”

“Had been. Until the war?”

She nodded warily. “Yes, and then I did what I had to. Nothing will keep me from my son.”

Adrian felt a shimmer of power and a measure of respect. He liked this one.

As they walked through the fog in silence, he was also aware of a strong feeling of anticipation. It said something special could happen, that something special *would* try to happen if he wanted it to, and he had to choose quickly if he did.

What is it about her? he questioned his own gift reluctantly.
Kindred... Yours.

Stunned, Adrian stumbled over a mud hole that all of the camp had tripped over.

Angela chuckled as he juggled his body to keep from going down face-first. The sound echoed into the air and exposed a new surprise.

Adrian watched the colors over the camp ripple with vivid patterns and sharp, clear hues of health and hope. It faded quickly, something easily imagined.

Adrian stared at her, and his heart twisted.

Will you do that to her? To everyone here?

Already damned, Adrian answered the demon’s inquiry with shame and fierce determination.

Yes.

Angela iced over and turned toward his camp without another word.

Kenn had pointed Rick and his woman toward the medical tent and then studied Angela and Adrian until they were out of sight. It took a minute to realize the sentries were staring at him with expressions of curiosity and a hint of disapproval.

Marc was still staring after them too, and Kenn grunted, hefting two heavy boxes from his Bronco. “Grab one of those and stay close. Leave the QZ, and you’ll be shot.”

Marc followed with a crate on each arm, nodding politely to the men who moved aside to make room for the wolf, but inside he was dying. How long he would last here now that Angie had her man back.

5

Now out of Kenn’s line of sight, Adrian pushed a little. “So, you two hooked up in Ohio?”

“We met in Indiana. I left home around the first of February,” Angela explained. The witch inside was peering through door after door, trying to discover who Adrian was.

“Damn. Hell of a swoop you two made.”

Angela’s eyes grew murky, like the layers of grit above the fog. The witch was whispering of trust, of it being powerful because it was unexpected.

“What is it you want to know?”

Adrian blinked, felt the male inside ask before he could prevent it. “Are you sleeping with him? Was that how he was paid for getting you here?”

Instead of the anger he expected, Angela gave him a small, cool smile that made him stop.

“That’s not the question you wanted to ask, was it?”

Adrian chose his words carefully. “No. The query I have requires a certain amount of trust to answer.”

“It’s good that you have respect for these things. Ask your question.”

Adrian hesitated again, sure things were moving too fast.

“I guess it takes trust to ask, too. Another time, then?”

She was the real thing—he could feel it. Yet he couldn’t come out and ask her to prove it. Everything had to be given willingly to accomplish what his dreams hinted at. Still, he longed for it to be true and was disappointed with his own sudden, unexpected lack of courage. It was a very simple question. *Are you my Seer? The witch I was promised?*

“Are you asking me?”

Adrian forgot to breathe. He forced himself to nod. The one he needed the most was here!

“I’m here for my blood. I don’t even know you.”

“Fate brought you here.” Adrian picked out the truths she would have to hide. “You’re here to help me.”

Angela wanted to believe the whispers of the witch inside, but she’d been protecting herself too long to give in so easily. “I don’t know what you need help with, but that’s not what I came for.”

Adrian hid it all as footsteps approached. “That will all change in time, and you’ll stay. We have great and terrible things to do together.”

Before Angela could deny (or question, she wasn’t sure which) the tall guard from the QZ joined them, trooper hat firmly in place.

“Camp’s up and running. Kyle’s on Point.”

As Neil left, he gave Angela a quick, curious glance that she responded to with an apologetic smile.

“He’ll be okay.”

Angela became unreadable again. “He’s loyal to you. They all are.”

“It’s good here...but it could be better.”

Angela thought this was the hard sell and remained silent. What did he want from her? An immediate oath of loyalty? A moment of recognition of their power? She knew he was like her, but that was another thing that she needed to think about before taking any action.

Adrian got them moving, aware of how standoffish she was. He had a hundred and one questions, but he sensed she was done with it for now, and he switched them to business.

“You’ll get used to the way things work here, but basically, everyone’s required to follow the rules and put in twenty-five hours a week on various chores. With your medical skills, you’ll be put with our doctor, John. Beyond that, your time is your own. For now, you’ll have a few days to settle in before you get a schedule.” Adrian gestured toward the mess. “You hungry?”

“Not really. Coffee would be great, though.”

He paused to light another smoke, and Angela took the opportunity to pull off her sweater and tie it around her hips, eager to straighten herself up a little before she met anyone else. She let her dark hair out of the long ponytail, unknowingly drawing the notice of every guard in sight.

Men stared in longing as she brushed through the thick curls with her fingers and braided it in seconds with a grace born of many years practice.

Her pale shoulders gave Adrian a gentle chill of lust he filed away, thinking her dark blue tank top was almost indecent against that skin. The edge of a nasty scar was visible for a brief second from under one sleeve, and anger boiled in his stomach, hoping she’d killed whoever had given it to her.

Ready to continue, she casually said, “I know, I know. Women: always waiting for them. Some things haven’t changed.”

“I’m okay with it. Most people here aren’t sure if it’s all right to joke with me, let alone keep me waiting.”

“You don’t tell them any differently?” Angela asked curiously. She sensed a great love of humor.

“It’s another way to tell the leaders from the followers.”

Angela stopped, impressed as the camp came into view. *Impressed?* It was a bit overwhelming.

All the people were something of a shock. They stood in small groups, talking, drinking coffee, moving in and out of tents

and trucks, waiting in small lines, cleaning up Easter garbage and dog piles. Her ears rang with sounds she hadn't heard in a long time. Marc had taught her to make very little noise. Dogs were barking, dishes were clinking, and there were thuds of things being relocated, dug out, and set up, along with doors slamming and kids running around playing. She picked out small details faster than her thought processes could sort them. Piles of multi-colored glass were swept neatly against a charred garbage can, indicating the night's celebration had gotten out of hand. Dogs were heeling neatly, being led away from stakes around trucks that likely held valuable supplies, and she noticed the animals with red collars were avoided by those moving by.

She swept the people. Mostly white, she was able to spot a few Indians, Mexicans, and blacks, and was comforted by it. The people here were healthy and unafraid, prepared to deal with what came, yet they were somber instead of arrogant at their survival. Most wore ball caps, jeans, and jackets that didn't quite cover the guns on their hips, but there were also women in dresses and kids in lines wearing cartoon-covered coats. There were no bright colors, though, as if these people were in mourning. Except for one occasional flash of flame red, there was only blue, black, and green, and Angela found she liked the feeling of respect it conveyed. These people cared about the dead. They were Americans.

“Wow.”

“Little more than you expected?”

She nodded, still taking in tents, people, trucks, grills, coolers, small neat fires, chairs, and all sorts of other signs of normal life, all covered by a thin layer of cloudy white fog that was slowly dissipating.

“How many?”

“One hundred and eighty-eight, counting your group,” he stated proudly.

“You've done well by them.”

“You think so?”

She thought of the hundred dead towns she and Marc passed along the way. It wasn't like that here. Safe Haven held life. "Yes, and so do they."

"There's a lot to be done still. I need help."

Angela knew instinctively he didn't say that to very many people, but she didn't respond.

Adrian let it go again, though it was hard to keep waiting when it had already been so long.

Angela would stay. He would make sure that his wishes were clear, and his people would convince her. He had worked a lot of it out before, how to integrate someone like her, but to his pleasure, he was already aware that most of it wouldn't be necessary. Angela already had a strength that he would use, and it would start now. After the day he was about to put her through, the people here would suspect that she was being evaluated for a place in the chain of command, and that was good. She was.

"Welcome to Safe Haven, Angela. May it quickly become your home."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Welcome to Safe Haven

1

They continued down the left side of the squarely laid-out camp, and Adrian explained as they went.

“The two big tents are for the men and the women. They’re for people who can’t or won’t put up their own and break it down every time we move.”

She thought putting up tents was a considerate thing to do and smart. It kept them off the ground and protected them from the chemical rain.

“How often do you travel?”

“Depends on what’s around us. Usually we’ll be on the road three or four days in a row from nine to five, but in areas that are bad, we keep going. If its good land like here in the Black Hills, or there are a lot of supplies around that we need, we’ll stay an extra day or two.”

“Where are you going?”

“Southeast, for now. We pick places to search at each monthly meeting.”

Angela didn’t ask what he and his council were hunting for while trekking across the county. Instead, she simply followed him and joined a long line of people under a dark green canopy that was attached to the side of a flatbed semi with wooden walls. There was a flag flying high over a sign that said “Adrian’s Mess.”

Angela noticed that nearly everyone called a greeting to the blond leader while curiously staring at her. She gave the buffet

style meal (pancakes and powdered eggs) an approving glance, and sent her gift over the people, feeling them out while Adrian talked with those who had surrounded them. It was mostly the elderly at this end of the line, and she noticed not only his refusal of offers to skip to the front, but that he didn't pull away from the needy, arthritic fingers of the seniors.

Adrian placed a hand on her arm as he introduced them, and Angela jumped at the sweet curl of lust produced by his fingers on her bare skin, surprised. His hand tensed on her for a brief second before letting go, telling her that he'd felt it too.

"This is Angela. She's an MD."

The seven men and women immediately turned to her with groping, grotesquely swelled hands, assailing her with questions and complaints. They scared her a little.

Adrian saw her fingers flinch downward and then go out to shake the nearest hand instead.

"Are you a real doctor?"

"Will you check my rash?"

"Who'd you come in with?"

The queries came fast, and for Angela, who'd been alone for a long time, it was hard to smile awkwardly and keep her gift under control. It was crying in hunger that food couldn't quench.

I'm not ready for this yet, she thought.

"Nice hair. You dye it?"

"Are you staying here with that man?"

"It itches all the time."

"Cause we have laws..."

"Do you play...?"

They jostled each other, trying to get her attention, and Angela's thumb slipped, letting a bolt of frustration escape.

Enough!

The mental shout stung them all like the small, sharp bite of an insect.

Adrian's heart thumped as silence fell among the older people who were usually never quiet. Would she fail the first test?

Angela's eyes lit up with regret, even as a satisfied gleam flickered in her blue depths. She took a gnarled hand. "That was rude," she said, tone gentle as she connected with the miner. "Please. Forgive me?"

There was another second or two of tense silence and then Ralph responded.

"Will you come read to us geezers sometime?" he bellowed, hearing mostly gone.

Adrian relaxed as the older people lost their confused, hurt expressions and added their support. Had she known Ralph was the unofficial senior, senior? Adrian hadn't seen them take to anyone so fast, not even Becky.

Angela smiled at the small group of elderly men and women, open and unguarded. "I'd love to."

Adrian felt the magic again, that spark of flint on flint, and knew he wasn't the only one. Men across the mess were turning her way.

"Tell me about this rash."

The seniors converged on her again, much more gently this time, and the rest of the twenty-five or so people in line and already at the tables went back to what they were doing, not sure if they had missed something. Adrian knew how they felt since he'd been studying her the whole time and knew he *had* missed something.

They got their cups and walked up the other side of the neatly set up camp. Adrian stopped to light a smoke.

He didn't speak right away and Angela could feel her gift wanting him. His energy, willingly given, would be sweet, as refreshing as Marc's maybe. He was like her but different, and together they could—

"So what did you say to them?"

"You heard it," she hedged.

“Don’t do that!” Adrian’s voice blazed with emotion. “If we’re going to build something, honesty between us is all that matters.”

The old Angela was saying he was like Marc, that she could trust him, but it was that first sharp connection that she based her choice on. For too brief a second, she had known she was exactly where fate meant for her to be. The feeling was gone now, but she longed for that peace and sensed this man could help her find it again.

“I told them I’m young and don’t have enough control over my emotions. I asked them to be patient, *and quiet*, while I learn.”

“Mental conversations. You can do that whenever you want?” Adrian had tried hard to sound like it wasn’t a big deal and knew he hadn’t been successful.

Angela nodded nervously and missed the happy greed that flashed as she reaffirmed the plan. She would be herself here—the newer, stronger woman—or she would take her boy and go somewhere else.

“Usually.”

Adrian had to struggle with himself not to ask her to prove it. He got them moving again, leaving her relieved, surprised, and a little suspicious. Shouldn’t he call her a liar or at least be asking questions?

He knows exactly what you are, the witch informed her. *More so than Kenny ever did. Be careful.*

2

Safe Haven was fully awake now, and people were everywhere, gawking at the new arrivals. Angela could hear them wondering who she was and when she’d come in, but it was clearest in the expressions of the sentries.

Most of the security was inside the tape, easily accessible, and the black-clad men were patrolling set areas. They appeared

the same as SWAT officers, wore the exact clothes and gear from what she could see, but to Angela, the difference was in their gazes. They were much more aware, more alert than the cops of the old world had been.

She and Adrian walked by a taped-off area and stopped in front of a large grassy field with three enormous tents set up in a semicircle. The center shelter was a double-sided, brown circus style tent with an eighteen-wheeler backed in on each side. Angela glimpsed another, smaller, tent in the far corner and concentrated.

“You have a veterinarian?”

Adrian nodded. Despite all the trouble he already foresaw, his mood was good. His witch had come.

“Yes. We’ve gathered him a small herd. The goal is to produce our own food, and we try to be careful,” he said, leading her through a maze of chest-high, portable, wooden stalls that smelled of fresh straw and mildew. “We even keep them away from the gun area. Chris says it might upset them and make the meat sour.”

Adrian gestured at a thin, handsome, yet harried man of about forty, who was kneeling in one of the straw-covered pens.

Angela watched gentle hands push a big pill down a tiny mouth before putting the rabbit in a cage by itself.

“I’ve heard something like that,” Angela stated conversationally. “People used to say their livestock wouldn’t produce as well if they’re weren’t kept in the right surroundings.”

“Who’s this?”

The man’s voice put off equal waves of impatience and dislike, and Angela saw Adrian give him a warning look.

“This is Angela. She treats people. This is Chris. He treats animals.”

Angela automatically held out a hand, and the vet was forced to stop and wipe his on his filthy white coat.

The second they touched, she caught flashes, some of which disturbed her, and she quickly let go. “It’s pregnant.”

Before he could respond, Adrian moved forward, and Angela realized she had overstepped. The leader might think he was ready, but he knew his people weren’t. She would have to be more careful.

“You do this week’s tests yet?” Adrian distracted.

The vet’s gaze lingered on Angela as she wandered the cluttered aisles. “No. Tomorrow. I need...”

Angela swept the area as the men talked, admiring cats, chickens, a goat, and many other animals that each had their own neat cage or pen. It impressed her to detect not only extinguishers, but also fire alarms hanging from tent poles.

Adrian gestured, and she quickly took his right side, knowing instinctively that was where he wanted her. She looked at Chris, and he returned her stare with no change in annoyed expression.

Knowing she shouldn’t, Angela slipped into his thoughts and was a little surprised to find a thin wall.

He’s blocking me! She could be through it in seconds, sensed he was waiting for her to try, but she pulled out instead. What would she gain? Proving that she could, only to find he was scared and disliked her because of it? Angela let out a sigh and caught up with Adrian.

Next to the animal area was a large tow truck with a tarp stretched over a small space off to its side. As Adrian talked with the man behind the wheel, Angela understood this was Safe Haven’s communications center, and the man standing under the cover of the camouflage canopy was a guard, though, he wasn’t dressed like one.

Her brow creased with insight. Anyone this organized and careful had to be able to recognize Kenny for what he was. Had Adrian chosen to ignore it? He didn’t seem the type, but only time would tell. Time she and Marc would spend apart. She was missing him already.

Angela turned her back to Adrian and scanned the QZ, noticing there was one less tent now.

Marc appeared almost immediately in the doorway of the vinyl shelter farthest from everything.

You okay?

Angela was able to feel how upset he was. Had he and Kenn been in another fight?

I'm fine. Good place so far.

Marc shrugged, eyes going to Adrian as he came up behind her. *We'll see, won't we?*

Marc let the flap fall over the doorway.

"He'll be out of there by morning. I skipped it with you because you're a doctor," Adrian stated.

Angela spun on him at the evasion. "Don't do that! If we're trying to build something, honesty between us matters."

Adrian reddened a little at having his own words used against him. There wasn't anyone else here who would do that to him, and Adrian was a little surprised to find his soul needed to be held accountable. Needed it and wanted it.

"I skipped it because I didn't want to wait while you were quarantined."

Angela almost rose to the bait and asked "wait for what?" but she wasn't ready to talk about the things she sensed he now was ready for, and held silent.

Adrian once more let her evade, knowing she (and the herd) needed time, but he hated it that she was so aloof and so tense. He had only spent half an hour with her and already discovered things that shouldn't be there, even for a survivor. *Unless she was mistreated long before the war*, Adrian thought.

Steady eye contact, mild reactions to gunfire, and fresh curiosity were things most of his people had arrived (or been found) with. These refugees had been fresh out of basements and cellars, or recovering from shock. They were too numb to be scared anymore, but there was a deep, wild fear in Angela that kept his mind on her arrival and her lip. Adrian was almost

positive the injury had come from a vicious (or series of) backhanded slap, and he knew instinctively they hadn't come from Marc. Their stares were too intense, too familiar. She wasn't afraid of Marc, and unless Rick had hit her (*and wouldn't Kenn have told him that right away? Or killed the man?*), that only left his Marine.

Adrian felt something shift in him as he stole a glance at the quiet woman on his right. He would protect her. No man would ever hit Angela in anger again. Not while she was under his protection.

3

It already felt like they'd been traveling the camp for hours, and Angela drew in a steadying breath as more trucks and campers came into view.

Nearby, there were armed men smoking and talking, and behind them, small, neat lines of people who stared and whispered.

Angela suddenly wondered if Adrian had a woman here who would be jealous of the time that he was spending showing her around. There was a hollow ping somewhere deep in her stomach, and she blinked away a red haze of blood. Marc was the only man she wanted.

Adrian moved closer, and Angela sensed he was trying very hard not to ask for something he needed. She felt him come to a decision when she remained silent.

Adrian stopped before they reached the row of trucks and people. "We have a thief."

Angela's brows drew up. "Why share that with me?"

"I'm hoping you'll tell me who it is."

Clearly, he already understood a lot about how different she was, and if she did this, if she searched the doors for him now, she wouldn't be able to refuse later.

Still, the thought of earning her place here based on what she could do was appealing, as Adrian had known it would be. Who could resist being needed and wanted for who they really were?

Besides, the witch seduced, he's the best ally to have here. Give him what he wants. Build a debt.

Four of the five men sitting on crates by the open semi doors called greetings. Angela hung back as Adrian stepped over to the largest of them.

“Hey, Doug. How’s the count?”

The huge man grimaced, grinding out a cigar in the dry earth at his boots. When he stood, he towered over them all by inches.

“Light in every truck. Same as last week.”

The man’s Irish lilt was barely noticeable in his frustration, pleasing to the ear. When he caught her stare and winked, Angela couldn’t help smiling, a little amused (and intimidated) by all the interest from everyone. Kenn had ignored her unless he was *in the mood*, and people at a hospital weren’t aware enough of their surroundings to notice something as unimportant as looks. Until her trip with Marc, she hadn’t felt pretty in a long time.

“Didn’t break in. The locks are fine,” Doug stated. “They must have a key.”

Adrian stared into the nearly empty truck, and Doug waited for the new solution he knew was coming, but his mind was on the woman, recognizing the way she carried herself. Had she served?

“Okay. Post new rules. Fuel and water trucks are now shut from eleven to six at night. Only Level guards or higher will have access after those hours. Put a red collar dog out—stake ‘em down with those railroad spikes if you have to, and we’ll hope it doesn’t rain.”

Doug agreed, attention still on the woman.

Adrian knew and motioned her forward.

“This is Angela. She’s Charlie’s mom and, hopefully, our second doctor. This is Doug, Daryl, Chris, Tony, and Danny. These guys are pretty useful, so you’ll remember their names

after a while,” he joked, though, Danny and Tony couldn’t honestly be included. Those two were mostly just useless.

Angela exchanged polite (and avoided leering) glances with the men, and then Doug limped forward to shake.

His massive hand swallowed hers, and Angela’s gift surged forward at the contact, pulling violently.

The sky darkened to charcoal, and thunder crashed, shaking the ground they stood on.

A surge of protectiveness flashed across Doug’s face, an involuntary reaction to her kind.

Angela slid her hand free. “Nice to meet so many loyal men.”

The others hadn’t seen or felt anything (except Adrian. He caught it all), only heard her words.

Adrian snickered at Doug’s confusion, eyes ordering as his mouth spoke. “She must want extra shampoo or something.”

The men snickered, and Doug questioned, “You’re Kenn’s lady?”

“Not anymore.”

Her quick denial was noticed by all of them.

Doug gave her a friendly once over. “Well, I’d be honored to take his place.”

Angela blushed. The others laughed again, and she joined in, still embarrassed. “Thanks, but I’m not searching for a replacement.”

Eyeing her split lip, Doug wondered how much the new man had to do with that. Their arrival story was currently racing through the slowly waking people.

“Well, you say the word lass, and I’m all yours. I’d even take off me vest iff’n ya wanted.”

Even Angela laughed this time, but Adrian was silently asking if she’d made a choice. Had she?

Adrian drew the attention back to himself, wanting to know if anyone had heard anything last night, and Angela realized she had already made up her mind. She’d hoped for this a long time ago, a world where she could be accepted because of her gift

instead of in spite of it, and the voices whispered again that Adrian could give it to her. She would do this for him; allow him to place her where he wanted. Once things settled down, she and Marc could—

Angela stopped herself, not wanting to search her future again and see only darkness. She'd do these things for the right reasons and never take another life. That, was a guilt she didn't think she was strong enough to survive again.

Angela leaned down to tie her shoe and slipped into their minds, hard and quick. Seconds later, the dark glow of thievery lit up around one of them. It was unmistakable, very common at the hospital where many of the patients were strung out drug addicts suffering from withdrawals.

When Adrian raised a brow amid the conversation, she gestured at Danny, the only one pretending to belong, and then turned her back to all of them. She was unable to look at the man now that she had condemned him.

Adrian was floored, not sure if he believed her, and yet completely sure that he did. Danny was arrogant, lazy, and often disrespectful to the women. Adrian hadn't cared much for the "handyman" when he'd come to them back in Utah, and the feeling had only grown in the weeks since then. Especially when they had realized there wasn't anything the man was handy at.

Exchanging a friendly glance with Doug as they left, Angela stayed quiet and alert. She let the witch scan the people and file things they could improve on, but she didn't say anything, not sure if that was what Adrian meant by helping him. Answering when asked was fine with her.

Trying not to dwell on that side of the duties yet, she enjoyed the warming wind and bright rays of sun piercing the thin layer of grit. It was rare.

They passed a group playing soccer on one side of camp, then a circle of men and teenage boys learning to handle dirt bikes, and it was impressive. Such control and neat organization, amid so much destruction and chaos, was enough to ease some of

her fears about using her gift. Maybe these people were different. Adrian certainly was.

They hadn't gone very far when Angela noticed there were people following them, a small group of five.

Adrian felt her nervousness. Normally, they waited until he was ready, but the leader wanted her to relax. He stopped, waving one of them over. "What's up, Matt?"

The gawky teenager flushed with pleasure at being chosen first. "Dad said to ask you if I can relieve him for an hour."

Adrian pretended to be studying the teen with suspicion. "You passed Kenn's new radio test?"

The pimple-spotted boy stood up straighter. "Yes, sir! Yesterday."

Adrian grinned. "Great. Tell Mitch I said to take two hours."

Matt's face lit up, and he was gone a second later, his clumsy run difficult to view.

4

Adrian spent the next five minutes standing in the wind, making choices and easily pleasing his people while getting what he needed from them. When they were gone, he gave Angela a knowing tone. "Is that better?"

She didn't like to play mind games, but the old Angela took control, smiling coolly. "Set up like a king, and maybe the peasants don't know."

Adrian noted the beautiful, purple sparks in the depths of her crystal eyes. He would have to dig up information on that. He'd never seen it before. "They know it. It's their doing."

Angela didn't consider calling him on the lie, but she knew one when she heard it. There was no way he had left something as serious as his approval and power to chance. That realization sent her back to Kenn's introduction. It had made her uncomfortable, but she wasn't sure why. Someone had to be in charge, right?

People were staring openly now, not quite whispering anymore. Angela assumed Adrian was giving her the long tour, but as more and more people watched them, she was forced to consider that he probably wasn't the one who usually gave the tour either. He was telling them he considered her important, and Angela was surprised to feel honored by it. She had changed.

"They don't mean to be rude. They're trying to figure out if you're one of the good guys and why you're with me."

"That's why, right? So you can find out?"

Adrian held her stare. "I was sure of you the second our eyes met. I need time to convince you."

Angela chuckled.

Adrian steered them toward three long, white semis parked in a tight half circle, and her expression told him that she approved of the multi-colored lanterns and Disney-character decals. There was also a play area in this closed-in space, along with a jungle gym, swings, and slides.

Angela also noticed the guard, something she wouldn't have picked out, if not for her time with Marc. The armed sentry was stationary between two of the rolling homes, and she felt him assessing her level of threat. The attention paid to detail here was astounding after the last fourteen hundred miles of chaos and horror, but it was that sense of safety, of being protected, that was pulling at Angela. Here, she wouldn't have to kill anyone. *Except maybe Kenn*, she amended.

"We try to always have two sitters available at all times. It's important for parents to be able to come and go."

"Do you have a lot of kids?"

"No." The disappointment was clear in his tone. "Only a dozen and we have so many people who lost children that we had to create a test for them to pass to even be considered as a sitter or live-in. We have to be sure good people are raising our orphans."

He saw her raised brow and explained as he tapped twice on the door and stepped in. "Live-ins do just that. They live here

with the kids and help them. Foster parents. Peggy's the sitter today. She's everyone's favorite."

Angela instantly liked the older redhead, thinking it made a lot of sense to do things this way. "You're organized," she praised as they left the kid's area.

Adrian steered them toward the east side. "These people work hard. You will too, but it's all worth it."

Thinking she could use a pit stop, Angela wondered unhappily why Marc was so pissed. She could feel his anger from here and assumed someone's words (she hoped it was only words) had struck a nerve, but she didn't call to him and offer comfort. Marc would land on his feet, and while they were falling through this hell, he knew how to take care of himself. Hadn't he taught her?

They stopped at the rear of the now empty mess, near a large row of trucks with pictures of American cities on them. Adrian hit a button on a small black box attached to his belt that she hadn't noticed.

"Eagle Four to the refer trucks."

"Copy."

Angela was pleasantly surprised. "You grow reefer?"

Adrian chuckled, thinking that one small wave of happiness could steal a man's mind, and make him obsessed to create it again and again.

"Refrigerated. We butcher our own meat."

"A girl can always hope."

Angela was smiling, but Adrian caught the small note of seriousness in her words, understood it was a question of his leadership. Did he sweat the small stuff?

He immediately opened his cigarette pack and held out a thick, neatly rolled joint. "If I can, you'll have it. You'll be happy here."

He chuckled at her surprised expression. "Freedom with a capital F. Fire it up."

Adrian turned to greet a man with black hair and full lips under a gray-and-black mustache.

Angela hadn't seen him coming. Sporting a shiny Glock on his hip, the sentry had an Italian profile, with large, bushy eyebrows and deeply tanned skin.

"Have the perimeter guards checked in?"

Kyle nodded, unable to stop a very quick glance at the woman who was nervously lighting a joint. Nice .357 on her hip. Too big for her, though. Great body. Stunning eyes. Kenn's woman? Who hit her?

"Yeah. They're all where they should be for a change."

Adrian was aware of the mobster's reaction to Angela. "What about the weapons truck?"

Kyle caught a whiff of vanilla that distracted. "Uh, ammo missing again. Just finished talkin' to everyone who had a shift last night. No one saw squat."

"Figures."

Adrian glanced at Angela. "Puff-puff give, Bogart."

She let out a sexy chuckle that made both men very aware they were single.

Adrian inhaled deeply and passed it back to her as Kyle delivered a curious, "Hello."

Adrian hardly ever smoked with his men, and never in public. She was more than just Kenn's wife.

"This is Angie, our new doctor. This is Kyle Reece. He's usually in charge of our highest level of guards."

Adrian observed closely as Angela held out a slender hand, and both men noticed she had calluses, the sign of someone not afraid of labor. "Today, he's in charge of all the men."

Kyle froze as the temperature of the wind dropped to ice, giving him a deep chill that made his grip tighten for a brief instant as they shook.

Angela was in deep, reading his automatic acceptance that she was different, like Adrian. The voices in her mind whispered

of a sense of honor in this man that ran deeper than even the leader here might know of.

Angela forced the witch to let go, thinking control now would be a challenge with so many good men in one place.

“Ma’am.”

“Angie.”

Her voice was low, sensual, and Kyle felt his pulse triple.

Almost instantly, nervousness and fear flooded her expression, and she took a step back, color in her cheeks.

“I’m sorry.”

Kyle reacted before Adrian could, drawn to her. “Don’t be. I’m Kyle. Reece, if you like. You need anything, *want* anything, I can take care of it.”

Angela’s face flamed at the Italian passion in the tone. “Uh, thanks.”

She inhaled hard—from the joint this time.

Kyle tried to act normal. What had just happened? Had he declared loyalty and attraction to a complete stranger?

“The kid’s on the air.” Kyle said, voice not quite steady. *Yes, I did, and I stand by it.* He didn’t know her, but he knew he wanted her. “He’s a natural, too.”

Adrian glanced to Angela with a question flickering. “Talent usually runs in the blood.”

Angela only tensed for a split second, but Adrian saw because he’d been observing, and there was that sense of pieces falling into place again. The one he needed most was finally here, and things would spin faster now—he could feel it. Adrian handed her the roach, and as their fingers touched, felt her start to pull away and then stop herself, facing her fears.

“Base to Eagle.”

Two radios crackled, full of static, and Angela did jump this time. She hated it that she felt awkward again, but the voices were telling her Kyle would be important to her in the not-so-distant future. That was about the last thing she needed.

“Eagle, here.”

“Jeremy rolled in with three new trucks. No people.”

The voice was calm, confident, and sounded much older than the teenage kid she had seen.

Kyle keyed his mike and watched a rare sunbeam light up the long, dark braid swaying in the breeze. She was like a model from a magazine. “Four, on the way.”

“Copy.”

The sentry was quickly gone after a casual nod to Angela, and the preoccupied expression on Adrian’s face kept her quiet as they headed toward a row of port-o-lets.

“These are for everyone. The ones by the QZ and kid’s area are off-limits. The campers are men’s and women’s, showers only for now. Time limit is five minutes, but we don’t monitor that too closely.”

Angela hurried, not wanting to keep him waiting. When she came out of the smelly camper and didn’t detect him, she scanned the area, steadily growing more uncomfortable with all the people observing her every move and expression. Didn’t they have anything better to do?

A bit irritated, she turned and read the laminated sign on the side panel of the bathroom.

Safe Haven Rules of Conduct and Penalties

1.) Abuse (Mental, physical, and verbal) is forbidden here. Punishable by banishment.

2.) Fighting, property damage, and violence for any reason, except self-defense, is not allowed. Punishable by hard labor or banishment.

3.) Sexual Assault is a capital offense! Punishable by death, or branding and banishment. Jury vote required.

4.) Killing for any reason, other than self-defense, is a capital offense! Punishable by death. Jury vote/ Guardian can overrule.

5.) Child abuse is a capital offense! Jury vote. Guardian will almost always overrule any decision but death.

6.) Rape is a death sentence. There is no reason or excuse. It can only be overruled by a unanimous camp vote, which includes the victim.

7.) Treason/ Mutiny. When more than half of the camp agrees, a new leader will be voted in.

Mind still on the wisdom of adding that last one, Angela heard Adrian come up behind her, and she pointed at one of the detailed maps next to the rules list. “What’s the off-limits area?”

“It’s another training site.”

She found the answer a bit evasive compared to the openness he’d been giving her questions so far, but she said nothing.

“You ready?”

She fell in on his right as they traveled through the people, and she found she could easily read them without using the witch. They were wondering why a new (Kenn’s) woman hadn’t been put in the QZ. She didn’t feel any hostility or resentment about it, but word was clearly flying that Adrian had broken his own rules.

“What happens if someone refuses the tests you have your doctor run?”

It was an astute question. “What do you think?”

“You send them on their way?”

Adrian hurried to explain his reasoning, something else that was out of the norm for him. He didn’t want her to be upset. “With supplies and only after trying to change their minds. I hate to refuse anyone, but an epidemic right now would overwhelm us. There’s no way we could handle it.”

“Has anyone refused?”

“No. It’s the red cross symbol that draws most people in.”

“We heard you all the way in eastern Nebraska. It’s great, what you’re doing. No one else is.”

“I want to do more. I want to search for survivors and give them a chance to rebuild what was stolen from them. You can be a big part of that.”

Angela sighed, wishing she could view the future clearly instead of the foggy, distorted glimpses she sometimes got. She did know one thing, and she told him with regret in her tone.

“Kenny won’t like it.”

He hadn’t cooled off, and she dreaded facing him.

Adrian frowned at the fear. There would be trouble over her, no doubt about that, but she was one of his (the one he already wished fate had sent him first), and he needed her. “The women here are free, more now than they were before the war.”

“Them, not me. He’s very...determined.”

Adrian’s unease grew. “Yes, he is, and we need that side of him, but you’ve done fine on your own. If you have problems with him, I want you to come and talk to me.”

“He hates it when I talk to his friends.”

The submissive answer gave Adrian a curl of anger, thinking that while Kenn probably wasn’t responsible for all of it (life had a way of beating a woman down and using her up), he was the reason for it now. Adrian was suddenly furious with the Marine for the first time since he’d come here.

“I am not his friend! I am the guardian of this refugee camp, and you are now a member. He has to follow the rules.” Adrian looked at her pointedly. “Just be careful. I’ll do what I have to...remove who I’m forced to, if it will mean we survive.”

Angela was aware that Marc would be the one asked to leave. That couldn’t happen. It was a deal-breaker, and she let Adrian know with two simple sentences.

“Thank you for giving Marc a chance, despite everything Kenn will say. I’m not sure I would stay at all without him here.”

Adrian snorted, thinking Kenn had already lost her, he just didn’t know it yet. “Don’t thank me. He’ll have a hard time of it until people decide whether he’s a gentleman helping a lady or a fox in the hen house.”

“It’s not like that. We’re friends.”

“Yes. How close?”

Angela couldn’t force herself to lie, not to him.

When she glanced away, Adrian added, “I’ve been around you for a short time, and I already know this will cause trouble.”

“Then give me my boy, and we’ll go!”

Adrian was surprised to feel a small chill at the coldness of her tone. Damn, she had a strong heart! A *fighter’s* heart.

Adrian stifled a gasp as her full place in Safe Haven’s future was revealed. It was bigger than the magic he’d asked for and already begun to plan around. She was the fighter, the female warrior he’d dreamed of. She was still battling her chains, but she was winning, and he would finish what Marc had obviously started. He would set her free. Hope suddenly breathed life into his deepest plans. Immense and endless, they began to grow.

“Go to the medical tent and fill out a paper John has. I’ll get Charlie.” His own tone was chilly, and Adrian was glad to read her unhappiness, but he was unsure. What if she left? Would he go after her and beg?

“Wait.”

When she put a hand on his arm, electricity sparked. He felt her flinch before she quickly let go.

“Please, don’t make us leave.”

Adrian hated it that he’d upset her.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He was sorry too. “I never said you weren’t worth all the hassle, but you are free to go whenever you want. You need to understand that.”

Angela, studying the dusty ground, answered in a cool tone, “Thanks for the lesson.”

Aware he’d hurt her somehow, the sarcastic words made him blow out a breath of frustration, not sure how to handle her.

Angela felt that new, stronger female respond in a way that surprised and pleased her.

“As a woman first. Always.”

That snapped his eyes to hers, and her soft smile lit up a dark place in his heart.

“And then as...someone who hasn't agreed to stay and play these games with you yet.”

It was the second time she'd called him on that, reminding him that she didn't intend to grovel for a spot near him like the rest of his herd. “This will be a good place for you. I'm sure of it.”

Angela had to smile. He was attractive when he was happy.

“Come on. We're attracting a little too much attention.”

That made her happiness fade as she followed him to the west corner, and she was relieved when the main camp and all the people were out of sight between truck trailers and the trees. She could still hear the babble of many voices, though, and then a noise came that she had to react to. Gunshots rang out, and her hand flew down, impressing Adrian with how fast she had her holster open.

“Just target practice,” he said, using a subtle gesture to deny a guard who was moving their way. “There's a contest tomorrow, so that will be an all-day sound. Usually there's a class with more words and less shooting.”

Angela was glad of his calm tone and comforting presence, but she didn't ask questions, not wanting to draw more attention to her gun than she already had. If there was a class, then there was a test to pass to carry one, and she would have to fight him on giving hers up, even temporarily. Since Versailles, the .357 was never out of reach, even when she was with Marc. It was a lesson she'd learned well.

The parking area was neatly crammed with a small lake of cars, trucks, jeeps, vans, and bikes, almost all sporting tattered American flags. The hoods were up on many of them. She saw a guard leaning under the front of a long, brown wagon and recognized him from the QZ. The former state trooper was every cop who had pulled her over, from his suspicious green eyes to the brow line on his forehead that refused to grow his brown curls any longer. Even the Beretta, slung high on his hip, was familiar, and she gave him a restrained nod.

“Where’s your help?” Adrian asked.

Neil gave an irritated roll of his narrow shoulders, shooting a surprised glance at Angela. “Sleeping it off would be my guess. Said he had the runs.”

Adrian smirked. “Yeah, I hear you can get that now. It’s usually from a bottle, while at the bonfire until two am, getting bombed.”

“That’s about what I thought. He said he’d do an extra shift, so I switched him to refueling all next week.”

Adrian chuckled, and Angela understood no one wanted that chore.

“I’m gonna give him a hand. You can hang here or wait at the mess for me if you’re ready for a break,” Adrian offered.

“Neither,” she said, untying her sweater and tossing it over the handlebars of a nearby Harley.

“Neither. Marc showed me basic car care. I’ll help too. What’s first?”

“You’ll follow behind Neil and add what’s on the window while I fill them up...” Adrian was unable to keep the question from his voice. It was something none of the women here would volunteer for, and he didn’t force them.

Angela felt slightly insulted. “How long does this usually take?”

“Two and a half hours, the last time we had three people,” Neil stated, checking his watch. Neither man bothered pretending they were doing anything but waiting to discover if she knew what she was doing, if her words could be believed.

Holding a stray curl against the breeze, Angela read the window.

1 qt oil, 1/2 gal water, wash fluid, gas used? Left rear tire.

The loaded dolly was nearby, and she got what she needed without hesitating, ignoring the men. She tilted the oil bottle in, leaving it, and added the water to the radiator while the oil drained. She replaced both eyes, threw her trash in the bag on the

side of the dolly, and filled the washer fluid to the first line. The tire was someone else's headache. She wasn't doing that.

Angela started to advance to the next car, then stopped, considering. She closed the hood, then wiped the things she'd done off the glass before pulling the dolly to the next vehicle, aware of their approval.

"Women usually act the way you'll treat them," Angela said clearly, and when she saw agreement instead of the scorn she had expected, she decided this was a good place where she could build a strong life. Would Kenny let her?

5

Three hours later, they were on the last vehicle—a red, white, and blue semi with a shotgun under the front seat. At Angela's request, the two men were showing her where the fluids went. She was standing on a foot rail, Adrian and Neil on the bumper, and they were all leaning inside the big rig—a bit closer than some people would have approved of.

Angela was surprised to feel protected instead of surrounded with an unknown man on each side of her. She was even considering asking them about some of the more private questions she now had, and then the bells sounded, and uncomfortable nervousness flooded back.

"You can dump it in now."

She didn't respond, and Adrian gave Neil a shake of his head when he would have asked if she was okay.

Neil snapped his mouth shut as her eyes turned a smoky, roiling blue. *Well, that's different*, he thought uneasily.

"Kenny's watching us."

Both men heard the tremor of fear and responded to it. They moved immediately, stepping down to meet Kenn with hard glares.

Angela knew Neil hadn't doubted because Adrian hadn't. Nervous, she stayed behind them, washing her hands and listening hard. How mad was Kenn?

"John said I'm clear."

There was an accusing edge to Kenn's words, and Adrian responded with his own hard tones.

"Kyle's off Point at noon, and you're on until six. Jeremy's back from the supply run. Make sure it all gets squared away. I want John's report on the new people. Check with Chris and see if we're doing meat tomorrow. If so, we'll need that other refer truck by morning. Schedules end for the entire camp tomorrow at midnight, so I suggest you get on them today."

Kenn was scribbling furiously to get it all, and Angela felt Adrian's anger as if it were her own. He'd added up the clues and was upset over what he'd come up with. It meant he really hadn't known. How had Kenn hidden it for so long? Did that mean Kenn was a different person here? Had she ruined his second chance by showing up?

Kenn's thoughts were along the same lines, and he was gone quickly, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

Angela could feel Adrian and Neil forming questions. She smiled brightly, retying her sweater around her hips with a woman's slow distraction. "Did we beat the time?"

They both shook their heads, jaws tight, and expressions unreadable.

"Missed it by half an hour," Neil said thinly.

"Oh well. I'll get better the more I do it."

Very aware of the neat way they were being manipulated—this tactic was used regularly on the herd—Adrian turned to Neil. "See you at lunch?"

"You know it." Neil was sure Kenn would hate the way Angela automatically fell in on Adrian's right.

Adrian checked his watch as Neil left. "Ready for food yet?"

"For lasagna and garlic bread?" she joked. "I'd do dishes for that!"

“Me, too.” He liked it that she was taking the time to read the signs they had posted. The sooner she learned the rules and settled in, the sooner they could get rolling. “Meet you in the mess in half an hour?”

Angela wasn't sure where she should go. “I'll wait in Charlie's tent, if that's okay?”

Adrian didn't waste his time telling her which one it was. She had tracked him across the country.

“You can roam freely now. People know you're new and will help you, but if there's a problem, have a sentry call me.”

Angela was embarrassed at the suspicions running through his sharp mind. “I'll be fine.”

“If you don't tell me, one of my men will. I know everything that happens here.”

He walked away, and she didn't feel arrogance, just pride and protection, and was encouraged. There was no longer a reason to tolerate a boss, and yet they labored here, following Adrian's leadership as if he was their savior, and really, she could see why they might feel that way. In how many other refugee camps (if there were any) would old people and kids be so well cared for?

Adrian appeared to take the useful and the burdens alike, and had respect for both. How many of these “useless” people had been left for dead before he had taken them in and cared for their needs?

Most, she thought, going to her Blazer. She liked the feel of this place, the constant reminders of good days gone by, and she wanted to be a part of these people. If Adrian had as much sway as he thought he did, there was a lot she could do for them.

6

Adrian went straight to his tent, eager to write it all down while everything was fresh in his mind. He drank a Coke and smoked on one of the blunts that he'd rolled last night while the heartburn (anxiety) was keeping him up. He'd been smoking a

lot lately, trying to ease the worry. In the future, this sort of thing wouldn't be allowed on a daily basis for any of Safe Haven's members. Right now it helped with their grief (and his guilt), and it was certainly better than staying too drunk to hurt, but it was an evasion of life that had to end. *I'll handle it when the camp is ready*, he thought. Long before that, they would have to accept Angie for what she was.

Adrian had done many things during his military career, including four years in an underground lab in the Utah desert. There he had been involved in top-secret programs that had tried to create people like her. The successes were minor. The best had been a kid who could tell which direction the enemy was, but the things he had witnessed today were genuine, natural. She hadn't spent time in a lab or taken chemicals, and Adrian tried hard to record it all. She was the first descendant he'd come across since the war, though, her son could also be put in that category now.

Adrian had no real proof, just odd words and odd moments, but he knew it as sure as he knew they would find no place on American soil that was safe enough to rebuild. He doubted there would be a single normal human life left on this continent ten years from now. The radiation was already making its slow changes, working on the smaller animals and the plant life, lingering in the air they were all breathing. Bad now, but the mutations would get worse, and that made Angela the crucial link in the circle. She would help him figure out where they went from here. As long as he didn't push people too fast. If they suddenly found out she could read thoughts, she would never be trusted, and eventually, they (the sheep, not the shepherds) would drive her out despite his support.

It could get tense, but it could also be perfect. If he was careful, the camp would accept her as another much-needed doctor, and she would get the chance to become more. He would see to that, especially if her gifts were what he was hoping. If she got flashes of the future, he would give her whatever she needed to stay. The rules wouldn't apply to her.

Adrian changed his gasoline-splattered clothes and stepped outside. As he cleared the row of kids' campers, he immediately spotted Angela going toward the QZ with a heavy-looking black duffle bag in hand. She stopped at the tape, and Marc came from the medical tent with the wolf heeling alertly. Adrian knew he wasn't the only one who felt the sharp, yearning connection. How close were they? A thousand miles was a long time to resist such a strong attraction, especially when the only rules that said a person had to were the ones in their own head.

Marc stopped with a few feet of space between them, and Angela set the bag down, pushed it under the tape with her dusty boot. "I packed you a few things."

Marc could feel Adrian studying them. "Thanks. You're not being quarantined?"

"No. You out today?"

"No."

Their mouths said the right things, but Adrian read between the lines. He had forgotten about Marc, too excited at having Kenn's mate turn out to be even more valuable than he was. She didn't want Kenn. She wanted the Wolfman, and life would be full of sinkholes and black ice for the three of them until things were settled.

Adrian turned toward the mess, but caught Angela's motion. He waited, subtly watching as she said something quietly to Marc. The sparks of attraction flew between them until she left, breaking the magic.

Angela could feel Adrian's disapproval as she caught up with him and she let out a soft sigh of sad frustration. "I won't give up my...friendship with Marc to stay and help you. We should have that clear now."

Adrian sighed, but said nothing. He was hoping she would trust him with something important to who she was on the inside.

“Marc and I grew up together. He’s the only person I trust without reservations. When we...lost touch, it almost cost me everything that mattered.” She stopped, drew on her courage. “I understand your dreams, and yes, I could be useful to you, but I won’t trade anything or make deals. What I give will be willing or not at all.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, but if I can give you what you want, I will,” Adrian promised gravely. “My word on it.”

Angela found Kenn in the front of the mess line, where a gusting breeze was cooling the sweaty skin of those breaking for lunch from various chores, games, and activities.

“I want my family back. To give me that, you’d have to tear apart your framework and start over.”

Adrian assumed she meant that Kenn couldn’t be here while she and Marc tried to rediscover their love.

“That, I can’t do.”

“And that’s why there will be no deals between us. You can’t give me what I want the most.”

Adrian knew she was right—for now. But it wouldn’t always be so. He knew where she belonged. He would form his plans around that and her desires.

“You can’t end it with him and move on?”

Angela snorted, hand rising unconsciously to her split lip. “No.”

She stepped into the steadily moving line, not looking at him or the angry Marine now studying them from the center table. She and the witch both wanted to be certain about Adrian before she turned her gifts over, and she slipped gently into the leader’s thoughts, concentrating on appearing normal.

Adrian felt like someone was squeezing his chest, and it was a struggle to talk and act like nothing was wrong. Her response was a confirmation as far as he was concerned. Now Adrian knew what his second-in-command had been hiding behind all his carefully thought out words and actions. Kenn was a woman beater. How long did he have before the herd found out, and he

was forced to banish one of his own? He had put his complete faith in Kenn. These people would no longer trust his judgment. It was only a matter of time before it fell. All it would take would be for the truth to come out publicly or for Kenn to hit her again. The dream—these people—didn't stand much of a chance if Angela was a battered woman.

It took his full concentration not to show a response as she easily lit up a doorway between them. How strong was she?

They won't excuse it, if you do? she asked silently.

Never, he answered. *Most of these people were lucky to escape the draft trucks and then the gangs and slavers. They won't go back to that, and I won't condone it in any form.*

You have to for now. We've called a truce. Some time for thinking and choices. He's fighting old demons, too, and I might be able to get him to let go, but it will take time.

She felt Adrian's despair, the tide of misery that was easily heavy enough to crush them all, and the witch jumped forward.

Where's your will now?

I have enough will for all of you! he retorted bitterly. *I'm not the problem.*

Angela noted his anger, the immediate denial that he had given up. *I accept your rules and your hospitality, but Marc is my protection, and while we'll be careful, I won't sacrifice him. Nothing has to change for your people, except they'll have a new awareness that some of us were weak before the war. It can all still work out, as long as Kenn sticks to your rules and our truce.*

Adrian forced himself to relax, knowing some people might read things in his tenseness. He brought a wall of titanium around his mind, attempting to shut her out. He had no doubt that she'd get through, was only curious as to how long it would take.

Adrian concentrated on finding a doorway. They'd been talking on her connection, and he labored to open his own and appear normal to those who were witnessing but leaving him alone. The camp was sure he was feeling her out, but he was actually letting her check them out without so much pressure.

Is there no chance for you two? he sent, almost breaking a sweat, and he closed the mental door with relief.

That's what he wants, expects, but I don't think I can even try it.

The defeated tone came through as clearly as if she'd spoken aloud, his wall nothing to her, and her obvious discontent bothered him as a leader. It made him feel like he already wasn't doing right by her. Angela wanted him to stay out of it, he could feel that, and he would for now, but Adrian hoped she didn't expect that to last. Fixing problems was in the fine print of his job description.

Chapter Forty

Faces and Places

1

Angela sat between Kenn and Adrian, more than a little uncomfortable as she drank her tea. The meal had been good, the garlic bread great, and she remained silent while the five men talked shop.

She knew all their names, had exchanged friendly banter with them when they'd sat down. Adrian had taken the edge, directing her to his right, and Angela was careful to avoid making contact with anyone, not wanting Kenn to get angrier than he already was. These were Adrian's closest men, his chain of command, and she was aware that her Marine was more powerful, somehow, more...

Pissed, the old Angela filled in.

She let out a sigh of agreement that she knew was heard by the observant men around her, but she couldn't help it. The anger was rolling from Kenn, and while she knew everything she'd done and said today had made it worse, it had been Adrian's introduction as they sat down ("You guys remember Angie, Charlie's mom and our new doctor") that was the straw pushing on the camel's hump. She thought maybe Adrian had done it on purpose, and liked him for it even as part of her wished he'd said "Kenn's wife" just to calm the Marine down. He was so mad!

Pay attention! the witch ordered.

"...here, either. Seth's team took out a farm of hogs two miles northeast, said they were sick. They set poison baits."

Adrian added Neil's words to his notebook and then glanced to Angela. "Feel like answering some questions about where you've been?"

She felt Kenn tense and paled.

"Just the basics. See or hear of any place safe to go?"

"No," she answered somberly. "It's honestly better right here than any place we came through."

"Mutations?"

She nodded, thinking the constant noise and people made it more like a crowded amusement park... Was that intentional?

"About everywhere. We saw worms in Missouri and some kind of spider-cricket cross near Kirksville, but the big ants were in every state we passed through."

Adrian wrote it down, and Angela forced herself to keep going, sure he needed to know these things. "Ohio had a weird mold climbing up everything, even telephone poles, and aggressive rats, flooding. Most of Indiana was burnt up. Illinois..."

She hesitated, dead eyes of her first kill flashing through her mind.

Adrian shook his head when Kenn would have said something sharp.

Angela blinked away the past. "Sorry. Illinois was ugly. I don't think we saw one good thing in the whole state." She went ridged with pain. "There was a rabbit, but I'm pretty sure it died too. Illinois and Nebraska were killing fields."

She gave him a very brief rundown of their battle with the wolves and fell silent, liking most of the thoughts floating around the table.

Strong woman.

Good thing she had the Wolfman.

"What about radiation?"

She answered him in detail, and was almost sorry when he was done and returned to talking business with his men. Her escort wasn't mentioned.

While they handled small issues, Angela swept the guards in view, recognizing patterns and weapons from her training with Marc. Seeing them was a comfort.

Adrian noted how she stared at one part of the camp and stayed on it until she figured out how things worked before moving on. Like an Eagle would. How much real training had Marc been able to give her?

“You gonna defend tomorrow?”

Doug’s question drew Angela’s attention, and she observed Kenn.

“Yeah. Be at the practice too, in case you want to know how much I’m gonna win by,” Kenn boasted.

The table erupted with challenges, making it the place everyone else wanted to be.

“In that case, excuse me while I go rig the targets.”

They laughed again as Neil left.

Angela felt their bond, and was surprised at her longing to be a regular at Adrian’s table, instead of just a guest. The sights and sounds of everyday life were bittersweet. She both loved and loathed the voices raised in conversations, the low mutters of curiosity and disapproval, the almost constant crunch of footsteps as the guards swept them and their surroundings for problems. It was worlds away from how she’d spent the last months, and every peal of mirth from the kids’ area sent fresh pain into Angela’s heart. If she had been with these people, she wouldn’t have lost her baby. Adrian would have been able to help. He was stronger than she was and Angela didn’t need the witch to mutter it. She already knew.

Adrian (and others) noticed that she and Kenn didn’t speak to each other, didn’t even make eye contact. Adrian saw her wince at the can of Mountain Dew against her lip, and decided he would talk to Kenn. If he got the wrong answers, Adrian might do exactly what she wanted and tear apart his framework.

“Ready?” Adrian asked.

“Sure.”

He ignored Kenn's grimace as Angela quickly got up and cleared her mess.

Kenn took out his notebook, stalling. The more time alone with Adrian she had, the sooner the blond would figure it all out. "Will you be at the practice?"

"We'll be by, but I have a lot of stops left," Adrian said. "I'm not shooting anyway, I'm officiating."

"John says the blonde's all right for the most part. Severely underweight, dehydrated, exhausted. Says she'll be out of the QZ by nightfall or so. Also said he's taking his time on the men, especially the one she came in with."

Angela could hear the others at the table wondering why Kenn hadn't mentioned that right away to ease Adrian's mind.

"Have you gotten his *full* yet?" Adrian asked.

"No. They're separated. I told the guards to come get me if they're seen together, but she's still out. John gave her another sedative."

"Collect his story first thing in the morning. The earlier the better."

"You want me to do it?" Kenn asked in surprised pleasure.

"You've been with me enough times. Make sure I get the report."

"You know it."

To the camp, Adrian appeared to be firmly behind the Marine.

Angela knew Adrian planned to have the new couple watched anyway, and maybe even talk to the new man himself. She was comforted a bit under all the misgivings, understanding that this was to remind Kenn of how much he was trusted.

Kenn was indeed warmed by the public (in front of Angela) display of his high place, wanting her to be impressed.

Angela was, but not with Kenn. Only with Adrian, who obviously knew how to handle her temperamental Marine.

As they left, the men at the table (and enough of the eating people to start a rumor) noticed that she and Kenn hadn't even

acknowledged each other's presence. There was clearly no love between them. Even couples who fought all the time had more warmth. And then there was the way she flinched or twitched every time someone got loud or moved too fast. Confused and getting even more suspicious, none of the sentries lingered, each wanting Kenn to feel their disapproval.

He did. Kenn's heart was thumping as they fell out of sight. Angela had been here less than six hours and it had already begun to damage his place. What was he supposed to do now? He'd never planned on her surviving.

2

"Where to next?" Angela asked as he led them to a corner of the long camp with only a single perimeter guard in sight.

"Your boy should be working outside with the dogs soon. I thought we'd watch."

Angela's pleasure lit up her face, and Adrian forced himself to glance away. She had a man. Two of them, actually, and she had won over almost all of his chain of command in a few short hours. If she was a demon-in-disguise, they were in trouble.

"I'm not, and I won't."

His brow arched as he glanced at her questioningly. "Won't what?"

"Play with your men."

A little embarrassed, a feeling he didn't experience often, Adrian answered coolly, "You sure? We have a resident whore, but there'd be no competition."

Stung, the witch surged forward, sending out a sharp wave of need that men had to stop themselves from answering.

Adrian sucked in a breath as vanilla wrapped around his body like an inviting hand.

"Only two men have ever been between my legs and either of them would kill to be there now. A whore, *I* have never been."

Adrian fought the desire to take her up on the challenge. “It was a tasteless joke. I ap—”

“Don’t.” Angela stopped him, red haze clearing. Her voice was embarrassed. “I’m the one who should apologize. I haven’t...fed well, and it weakens my control.”

It was hard for her, even letting him have that much information, and she glanced away, unsure. What was it about Adrian that made her want to spill everything?

Adrian lit a cigarette, wanting to offer whatever she needed.

Angela’s voice was distressed. “I hate to do it. It’s...intense.”

Adrian’s thoughts spun. She had to power her gifts too. He would take care of that. “I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“I didn’t mean to provoke you.”

“My men couldn’t keep up with you anyway.”

Angela blushed at the compliment, and the tension eased, not only for them, but also for those observing.

As they started walking again, the silence was still a bit thick, and Angela stopped suddenly, looking around as the witch whispered.

She swept the tents and nearby showers, the curious groups of people, and then settled on a sexy redhead in calf-high black boots and a short red summer dress that was coming from the mess. The woman was sneering, locked onto Adrian as she sauntered toward them, and Angela felt the man at her side tense.

Angela immediately took a step forward, not questioning the need to do battle for him, and Adrian wasn’t the only one who noticed.

Tonya had been watching them all morning, anger and jealousy growing with each introduction, and she moved in front of them with spite. Tonya knew Kenn’s woman for what she was—a threat to her plans—and she already suspected that Adrian’s interest was more personal than business.

“So, who’s the Barbie?” she questioned snidely, raking Angela.

Adrian blew out a sigh of annoyance that hid his eagerness to witness Angela handle this. First, he had to tell her that it was okay to do so and hope she took the hint.

“This is Angela, our new doctor. *Useful*. This is Tonya. She’s no one. *Useless*.”

Tonya’s painted face iced over, and she gave Angela a glare that said meanness was coming.

“So, you’re the timid little mouse he didn’t want enough to go back for.”

Angela gave her a knowing glance as the witch whispered the accent was faker than the lashes. “You must be the resident whore Adrian spoke of…” Angela’s smirk widened. “And the piece of ass Kenn’s too ashamed to admit to.”

Adrian laughed aloud, couldn’t help himself.

Tonya’s cheeks flushed the color of her dress. “He never said that!”

The accent was gone now.

“Didn’t have to. My Marine likes them with their mouths and legs always open. I added up the clues.” Angela leaned in. “When I’m threatened, I don’t play games. I go for blood…but in this case, he’s not worth the effort. You want him? He’s yours.”

Angela moved away, still smirking.

Adrian followed, sniggering at the unusual flash of fear he picked out in Tonya’s reaction of silence.

“Next time, be nice,” he warned, still smiling as he caught up to Angela.

“Sorry. Some people rub me the wrong way,” Angela explained. “She’s gonna be one of them.”

Adrian chuckled, mood growing better by the minute. “Tonya’s a snake. She has no real friends here.”

“That does not surprise me.”

They slipped under the caution tape that wound around the entire perimeter, and as they got out of sight, Angela began to hear male tones rising in excitement. She stiffened, but the witch searched eagerly.

Five long semis were parked bumper-to-bumper, blocking her view, and Adrian turned to her.

There were no words, only thoughts.

After a minute, she agreed, liking it that he would talk with her this way. He was definitely her kind. “You have my word. I won’t discuss it.”

He led her around the trucks, and she understood the need for secrecy right away. It looked like a military base, and the two dozen or so heavily sweating men were decked out as if they were training to go to war. Closed on three sides, the huge grassy area was under an enormous green canopy, with dark canvas walls that flapped in the gusting wind.

The open side was covered by the semis and the perimeter guard. When Angela saw the rolled up tarp on top, she understood that if a warning were called, the tarp would quickly be dropped to hide what was obviously a training area.

“Welcome to Fort Haven.”

Angela couldn’t keep up with everything she saw at first, kept being drawn to the flag over the doorway. She could feel the power of the place. “This is special to you—to your vision of the future.”

“This is the most important part. The sheep think I’m training a police force back here, but it’s really the new world’s first army. *My* army.”

Angela felt a shiver of connection as he talked. The witch whispered of patriotism and a duty to his country that would rival the Founding Fathers.

“We survived because we’re strong, and I encourage that, but, moreover, I teach them honor and strength of mind. They spend two hours a day here, usually a bit at each area, being assessed, guided, and taught. I’ve made it the only truly

respected job for a man again, that of protector, and only those who truly believe in what we're doing are able to climb the ranks."

"You stack the deck," she stated casually.

Adrian didn't consider lying. "Of course, and I walk a fine line for it, but the good of this camp always comes first. I promised them safety, and the future is part of that. A well-trained group of soldiers is a must-have, especially in a world where the old government could crawl out of their holes any time and demand control over everything again. Most people wouldn't have a choice, but we will."

His firm conviction and hope was clear, as was his belief in himself and these men, and she was humbled by how deeply he carried his American spirit. "Show me your army."

The sun was no longer able to fight its way through the grit as they stepped carefully into the tent. They kept out of the way of the man running full-speed around the edges, a nearby guard holding a clipboard and stopwatch.

There were three office style cubicles set up to the far right that Angela couldn't view into from where they stood, also being monitored by a sentry. Directly in front of them were four men laboring on big home gyms, and a fifth man trying, with some success, to tread the length of a tightrope tied to two low cinder blocks roughly the size and shape of ten manhole covers stacked together.

There was a table next to the gym, covered in guns and ammo, and the men there were deep in concentration as they loaded their weapons at the guard's word. They were blindfolded, like Marc had made her do almost from the start. He said in a fight, vision was needed in other places, that hands just had to know what to do. He'd been right.

To the far left were walls of straw bales that formed a neat barrier all the way up to the roof. What was in there?

"We'll watch for a minute, and then slip out the back," Adrian stated quietly, moving to the right.

Angela noticed that not one of the men had even glanced their way. Were they taught to block everything out? How? Was that wise?

They rounded the cubicle corner, and Angela saw TVs and game systems set up, cords all running under the tent to—where? A generator that was so quiet she couldn't hear it? To a battery system of some sort? Was it solar? That's what she and Marc had tried to use the most during the trip here.

“Son of a bitch!”

Angela's hand flew to her gun, startled at the shout.

Adrian put a hand on her arm as men stood up, came their way.

“Stand down,” he said, tone telling them he was pleased by their reactions.

Angela flushed, realizing she was the threat they were responding to. Her cheeks stayed red as she realized how badly she'd underestimated them. They had been aware of her from the second she'd come in.

“Angela is one of us. Resume your sets.”

They all returned to what they had been doing, but when she would have apologized for distracting them, Adrian stopped her.

“Don't be sorry. It shows me who's serious and who's learning. Come on. This is the fun side of the room.”

There was a game on each screen, a different type of training, and the benefit of each was clear to her. The first man was using plastic guns to shoot at ducks and clay pigeons, a classic as far as she was concerned. The second was ambushing the enemy on a strategic game that had been very popular before the war, but it was the last cubicle that grabbed and held her attention.

The man inside was one of the guards who had responded to her flinch. Tall, he wore no shirt over his lean swimmer's body, hard, sweaty hips disappearing into army fatigues. He was beautiful, and for a moment, the woman inside was frozen.

The redhead stood on a white mat with colored designs, adjusting mirrors and earpieces as the instructions challenged

him to hit the arrow on the mat that corresponded to the ones set to flash on the screen. Angela observed eagerly as the round began.

His movements were graceful, sensual arms and back flexing with the rhythm he was hearing, and she wondered what it was as the hunger inside her sniffed eagerly. She'd been denied the company of healthy men before the war.

The man jumped, scoring a bonus, and as he turned, hips thrusting provocatively, their eyes met. He stumbled.

Seth tore his eyes from hers to find his place in the mirrors.

Angela expected him to turn around so he could concentrate, but the sweaty guard only tried not to make eye contact, body moving in unspoken invitation.

Still lost, Angela was unable to keep herself from slipping into his thoughts to discover the haunting strains of *Hotel California*. It was one of her favorites.

There was a sexy magic in the way the man controlled every muscle in his body, not missing a beat of the dance as the tempo increased, and Angela felt herself swaying along, full of electricity that sparked every time he glanced at her.

Adrian could feel the want rolling off the woman at his side, knew Seth was responding to her silent pull, though, he was trying hard not to. Adrian wondered if the lust in the air came from her or the hunger that she'd spoken of.

Adrian's thought sank in, and Angela shoved the witch into her cell.

Seth slid the earpiece out so he could hear them. He already felt like he knew her and was suddenly sure he would, intimately.

"You okay?"

Angela nodded at Adrian's question. "Sorry. Dancing runs in our blood."

Her tone was rough, sexy, and when Seth tripped again, losing the round, Adrian gave him understanding. "You can do it all again."

"Whenever she says," Seth stated intently.

Adrian rolled his eyes and stepped past the cubicles. “Kenn has no idea how full his hands are. Come on.”

Angela followed quickly, embarrassed and disappointed in herself. She could feel Adrian’s disapproval as they moved to the far left side of the spacious tent area. She could also feel Seth still staring at her. It was almost as if she knew him...

Adrian’s frown was drawing notice, and he smoothed out his expression, but knew he would have to talk to her about the men in her life. While he was at it, he would also bring up control of her pull on his army. It would have to be dealt with if she meant to stay and help him.

Adrian heard her sigh.

“That won’t fix it all. It’s drawn to kindred spirits and it’s...famished.”

“We’ll have to find a way to feed it that you can tolerate, won’t we?” Adrian soothed her even while telling her what she didn’t want to hear.

Reluctantly nodding, Angela was willing to leave it at that, and they slipped out through a rear corner of the tent.

Adrian checked his watch. “To your right.”

Angela spotted her son’s thin frame through the spruce trees, and witnessed him leading a beautiful black and white collie around a series of obstacles, followed by two other teenage boys with similar animals.

“He’s a dog handler. Just became the top trainer. He’s very good with them.”

Angela studied her son as he laughed and joked with the other boys as he taught them how to do it. He had been happy here, cared for. She did owe Kenn for that.

The teenagers were working on commands, and it pleased both Angela and Adrian when the collie obeyed without hesitation. It was clear that Charlie had a connection with his dog.

“Do you have all the teens do this or certain ones?”

Adrian leaned closer to talk, and her scent—sweet, thick vanilla—came to him. It was intoxicating, and he let his nose have its fill as he answered, “I try to put everyone to work. There’s so much we need, that I can’t waste even one warm body, but things like this matter more than others do. I picked him personally.”

“Charlie’s trying to listen,” Angela informed him suddenly.

Adrian recognized the moment of true trust for what it was, surprised.

Angela raised a brow, voice cool. “Tell me you didn’t already know what my choice would be.”

“I can’t do that.”

They were silent for a long moment, both subtly observing the teenager and each other.

“He’s upset.”

“I brought along the person he also least expected,” Angela explained. “He’ll adjust, once he understands no one has to die.”

Adrian was still able to recognize how much it bothered her. “I’ll keep him busy.”

“His dad’s good at stuff like this too,” she said quietly.

Adrian understood the hint that Marc would also need something to do until he settled in.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” And he would. She wanted Marc, wouldn’t stay without him, and Adrian would take care of that quietly. “You’ll talk to him, try to explain things?”

“He’s not ready to listen yet. When he is, I will.”

They watched the boys groom the dogs, Charlie easily taking the lead, and to his mother, he appeared much older than he was.

Adrian was thinking of his good fortune to have them both as eventual members of his army. Charlie had the paler skin of his mother, the full lips of his father, and yet, there was Kenn in him, too, in the rounded face and new, quicker temper. The teenager had earned an extra day of shit work last week for fighting with his tent mates, and now he had his own next to Kenn’s. Done to feel more independent?

“I think one of them said something about Kenny, and he felt bound to defend him. It doesn’t feel like he wanted to.”

“He’s a good kid. You’ve done a great job.”

Angela’s frown wasn’t what he expected and neither were her words.

“He’s got a nasty side, too. He learned it well, and at some point, he’ll push for freedom from all of us,” she stated, searching for her smokes. “Probably sooner than I think. He has a lot of anger under that obedient demeanor. He’ll find an outlet.”

“I suspect we both know who that’ll be.”

“Yeah, his dad.”

They shared a smile of understanding that made her wonder if Adrian had children, if maybe he too, had lost a child to the war.

“Thank you. It helps me to know he’s had these things. I owe you a great deal.”

The ground shook under Adrian’s feet as she slid into his mind.

I’d pay it any way you want.

Adrian was a bit winded from the shiver of lust that had dove deep into his balls. “It’s why I’m here. I expect no payment.”

“Thank you.”

He sensed her gratitude had multiple meanings and didn’t ask her to clarify. He would figure it out in time, but Adrian already assumed that it was connected to his XO. Everything seemed to hinge on Kenn right now and knowing the Marine was indeed his weakest link was not a comfort.

4

Kenn was in charge of all the sentries, the Eagle on Point.

It was usually a post that he loved, but not today. He’d watched Adrian and Angela jealously as they traveled through

camp, upset that they were talking so much, when she would share nothing with him.

People had been tripping over themselves to tell of Angela's exploits, and their stories were fanning the flames. She had flirted, said she wasn't his wife, turned her back on Adrian while he was talking to her, smoked a joint, had a confrontation with Tonya, and made Adrian bark at her at least twice. One of which had happened in a training tent full of Eagles, but not one of them would tell Kenn why. He had heard some good, too, but the anger was consuming, and it hadn't been long before the camp began talking about how tense he was now that his woman had arrived.

The questions were blunt—some of them outright provocative—and it only toned down when he grabbed an offender (Danny) and shoved him into the side of a truck. Kenn had walked away by picturing Adrian's reaction, and word had spread faster then.

By late afternoon, there wasn't a person in Safe Haven who wasn't growing more and more curious at the lack of answers.

5

The next few hours were a dusty blur for Angela as they talked to people whose names she quickly forgot. She was astounded by everything Adrian had going on here. There were driving and sewing classes, kids and adults in teaching circles, groups of women changing tires, karate and archery near the livestock area, kickball where the football had been earlier. Everywhere, she found healthy, nearly normal people coming and going, talking and laughing, living.

It was almost overwhelming to someone who had been alone with one man for eight weeks. The longer she and Adrian walked and talked, the further that trip here seemed. She was overjoyed to be with her son, but all the noise and new people made her nervous, uncomfortable. She thought about telling Adrian that

she wanted to go to her tent, but forced herself to hang on instead. These hours were an evaluation and the reasons why his opinion should matter to her, were everywhere.

Adrian truly cared if people lived or died, and she already had great respect for him and the parts of the dream that he had shared with her so far. The open nosiness was difficult compared to the quiet and privacy she'd had on the way here, though, and some of the questions were outright nasty. It was hard to keep the old Angela from saying the wrong thing as the day wore on, but she held herself and the witch in check, needing once again to prove that she could.

Adrian was pleased with her. She was polite and interested, easily sidestepping questions about Kenn and the Wolfman, as Marc was being called. She was very adept at distracting even the most persistent, drawing them into discussions of things closest to their hearts. Adrian was certain she would win them over if given enough time, but Kenn was going to have problems.

Angela wasn't even close to the weak, inept little woman that Kenn had recently hinted couldn't possibly have survived, thus his reason for not undertaking the hazardous trip to Ohio. The Marine had left her to survive on her own, rather than go back for her. People would recognize that quickly. At the very least, it would cost him respect and leave unanswered questions, like why wouldn't he want her here? She was smart, useful. What hadn't he wanted the herd (Adrian) to know? From there, clues would fill in the blanks if people searched enough. The Eagles were already becoming aware that Kenn had lied to all of them. After watching Angela, it was hard to miss, and Adrian felt the anger at Kenn growing.

The Angela they were meeting was also more alert-minded than the other females here. The only time Adrian had noticed her hesitate (except when around Kenn) was as they headed to the shooting area.

Dusk came on suddenly around six, heavy rainclouds rolling over the dusty South Dakota landscape like a solid wall. The center pool was lit and was blazing, along with eight charred garbage cans around the corners of the long camp, and it drove away some of the darkness, but not enough. Angela stopped at a feeling of cold danger, hand dropping to the deadly gun on her hip.

Adrian took notice of the intense stare she shared with a nearby guard. He wasn't surprised when the radio lit up a second later.

"Permission to double the sentries and roll in the camp?"

Adrian pushed a button on his belt. "Roger, ten and two."

Angela was once again grateful to Marc as she asked, "Channel switch?"

"Very good. What did you tell him?"

Angela lit a Marlboro, studying the darkening shadows. "There's someone spying on this camp from one of the houses on that hill."

The only hill in sight was at least five miles away, and Adrian relaxed visibly. He still sent a quickly tapped out message to Kyle, not needing to ask if the person spying was bad. He knew from the way she'd reacted.

Adrian got them moving again, wondering if it was coincidence that Seth was who she had alerted first. Did she know Seth was his secret protection, or had they formed a bond this afternoon?

"Both. Why aren't you keeping me out?" Angela asked suddenly, bluntly.

Adrian returned her frank stare. "I don't feel like I need to. Couldn't if you wanted in anyway, right?"

"There are ways," she muttered, staring at the ground.

"I won't use them. It's all or nothing with me. I believe in what I'm doing, and I believe you will too, in time. There will be more hardship and sacrifices; I have no doubt of that. Our

journey has really just begun, but we'll hold them together with our belief."

"You've seen these things."

It wasn't a question, and he smiled, sure she would settle into it quickly once he had her under his wing. Why hadn't Kenn done it?

"Every night shows me more. Will you come by my tent in the morning, around eleven?"

Adrian felt her tense as a large group of people walked by, staring and whispering.

"Give it time. That feeling will go away."

She looked at him with a frightened girl's alluring trust.

"You promise?"

Adrian felt the plea for trust and gave it without hesitation, eager to lend comfort. "Yes. I'll handle it personally."

A volley of gunshots rang out from the training area, and Adrian noted the way she flinched, thinking that too would go away.

How quickly can I settle her in here?

Depending on her restlessness, her need...less time than it had taken with Kenn.

They continued toward the loud noise, one that Angela was dreading, knowing it was the sound of many people. Adrian said when the fires were lit, all but one activity was ended, and that the fires usually drew a crowd to the final entertainment of the evening. There was laughter, voices raised in conversation and support, and dogs yapping excitedly in the background. They were all things she'd been longing for the whole time she was on the way here, and now that she had it, she suddenly wanted to be alone again.

The breeze was cooling off, but Angela forced herself to leave her sweater around her hips despite the chill, sure it would be viewed as a sign of weakness if she put it back on right now.

Huge spotlights sat on the roofs of long trucks and lit the baseball field where gunshots echoed almost continuously amid the cheers and moans.

The crowd parted to let them through and Adrian leered at Tonya as he stepped by, but didn't talk to her or any of the others. It had been a good day.

Angela was tense and tried to handle it as Marc would have. Cool, calm, and observant.

Drawing in a breath, Angela struggled to control her emotions. She and Adrian were in the thick of over a hundred laughing, talking, whispering, pointing, yelling, staring people, and it was almost too much...

Easy, Adrian sent. In time, they'll be like family.

Angela was drawn along, his silent words helping, and she pushed the fear away.

More shots rang out as they neared the shoulder-high, chain-link fence. Angela saw three tall men waiting by a small row of bales, aware of everyone stealing peeks at her as she came to a stop on Adrian's right.

One of the men was Doug. He and Neil were chuckling at something Kenn had said, and it came to her strongly that when he'd called them his men, her Marine hadn't been lying. How would she ever convince them to give Marc a chance?

She couldn't. They would have to judge for themselves.

Maybe you should examine your Marine again, the witch coaxed. *Be sure.*

She did, searching hard, and the things that came to her were surprising, disconcerting. *He's more relaxed than I've ever seen him,* she thought first. Also, more attractive despite the anger she could still feel. Concentrating on the targets, Kenny was tall, dark, and handsome, beer belly gone. Angela felt a stray curl of lust that was an unwelcome reminder of her naivety. She had been physically attracted to him when they had met and had assumed that because it had been magical with Marc, it would be

that way with any man. It was a reminder of when she'd been young and dumb, easily fooled.

Her thoughts were interrupted by more gunfire, and it occurred to Angela that she felt safe enough with Adrian next to her that she had gotten lost in her own mind with a large crowd of people around. Eager to be distracted from the choices she knew were coming, Angela stepped closer to the fence, missing the surprise of his men when Adrian followed, assuming the bodyguard's place behind and to her right.

"Bull's-eye!"

The crowd cheered, and Neil groaned, eliminated. As the targets were replaced, he joined Adrian and Angela.

"You remember Neil."

She noticed that Adrian hadn't reminded her of anyone else's name. She caught the hint that Neil was someone important here, but didn't need it. It was clear by all the attention he got and how he was everywhere, like Kenn, doing a little of everything.

"Now it gets good," Neil said, subtly watching Angela. He hadn't heard all the stories when he'd met her earlier, and while he wanted to believe that Kenn wouldn't hit a woman, there were witnesses. Not members yet, their word wouldn't matter publicly, but it would to the Eagles.

"No fair! Kenn's got his wife here!" Kyle complained jokingly. "No good luck charms!"

Angela blushed at the mobster's joking protest, but before she could respond with a joke of her own or deny the title, guns crashed again as Kenn unloaded his mag.

"Eight bull's-eyes! We have a tie!"

A loud cheer went up, and Adrian gave Neil a motion before quickly climbing the fence.

He dropped to the ground with an easy grace that made Angela's stomach tighten. *Sexy.*

"Too late for another shooter?"

Kenn and Doug groaned as the people cheered in approval, and Angela could feel them behind her, whispering, staring. She

couldn't help resting her hand on her gun, hating having so many strangers at her back. She could hear too much of the conversations, most of it about her. Marc and Kenn were being mentioned, but there were also words about the quarantine rule Adrian had broken...and her carrying a gun. Apparently, none of the other females had passed the class yet. Angela also understood that she was the first woman he had shown this much interest in and some of them were wondering if it was personal. After a minute of consideration, she decided those few were idiots. Adrian only wanted her gifts.

"Those three outshoot everyone here. Adrian schedules these contests every few weeks, and the camp loves it."

Neil had slid a little closer so she could hear him through the fence, and Angela was glad to have someone to talk to.

The three remaining contestants lined up—first, second, and fifth in command—and began checking their weapons. As everyone fell silent, she wondered how many reasons Adrian had for doing things like this, and was curious if even his army knew half of them.

Doug was first, and as he stepped forward, hoping to rattle Kenn, he waved to Angela, thinking the Marine had better try to patch things up with her before his replacement was made official.

Angela returned his greeting with embarrassment, and the crowd roared at the big man's tactics.

Kenn wasn't amused, was determined not to miss a single shot. Right now, he knew where to put his anger.

"Bull's-eye!"

Doug grinned as Kenn moved forward. Before he could tease, the Marine pulled the trigger again and then emptied the mag.

The crowd muttered in surprise and then quieted, everyone waiting for Adrian's reaction.

“Put Doug’s targets back up after the call,” was all Adrian said. The leader shrugged at the big man who was now the one rattled. “You started it.”

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

The crowd was boisterous in their approval, and as Kenn leered at Doug. “I get the title and the girl.”

Doug was still chuckling as he took his place.

As Kenn joined Angela along the fence, he gave Neil a nod, but they exchanged nothing else, and Angela understood they weren’t friends.

Following unspoken orders and eager to observe, Neil stayed close.

When Kenn immediately scowled at him, Angela caught his attention. “What title?”

“Best gun in camp.”

“Who has it now?”

Kenn was cocky. “You’re looking at him. Doug gets a chance to take it back tomorrow.”

Angela was instantly flooded with bitterness. She had been fighting for her life, struggling to get here, and he’d been in all this safety, shooting for meaningless titles.

Doug’s shots rang out, and he studied the new woman openly. She seemed upset, and he recalled more of the rumors. Anger hunting for a target, his mind zeroed in on the Wolfman. That wound had to be from her new man. Kenn wouldn’t break Adrian’s rules that way.

“Eight bull’s-eyes! Tie!”

The crowd quieted as Adrian stepped forward, and Kenn glanced at Angela. “He tell you how things work here?”

Angela didn’t glance away from Adrian, who was now lining himself up with the targets. “Enough.”

Her tone was full of warning. His bluff had been called. Adrian was an ardent supporter of women’s rights, and Kenn let out a sigh, hoping she would still keep her mouth shut. “Want a better view?”

Angela nodded, but before he could help her, she swung her body up and over, the movements almost an exact copy of Adrian's.

Kenn scowled, knowing Neil had understood that she didn't want him to touch her.

Angela did stay close as they viewed the shooting, but Neil sensed it was only to soothe Kenn's ego, not because she wanted to.

Unlike the rest of his men, Adrian didn't hold and aim but left his weapon in the holster, long fingers dangling alertly above. He drew in a graceful blur and the 9mm thundered, bullets slamming into the targets in rapid succession.

"Eight bull's-eyes!"

The crowd's enthusiasm was catching, and Angela let herself be carried away. When Kenn stepped forward, she wished him luck, and he smiled at her, the first friendly moment they'd exchanged.

"He doesn't need any more luck!" Doug protested.

They all laughed as the targets were relocated, the tension was instantly gone in that moment. Though it was only a brief second, Adrian recognized it.

Kenn pulled the trigger gently, repeatedly.

"Eight bull's-eyes!"

The crowd went wild, and Angela was glad she was now on this side of the fence as they pushed and shoved closer. Neil was right. The mob loved this. Marc could easily match anything she'd witnessed so far. Would that help him here?

Doug limped up, not joking anymore, and wiped an arm across his sweaty face before raising his gun. Bullets flew, and the immediate slump of his shoulders said he knew it wasn't good enough.

"Seven hits. Four bull's-eyes!"

The people cheered, many chanting Kenn's name, and Doug shook his hand as he'd done the last time he'd lost to Kenn,

though, now he didn't feel so bad. Kenn was just better with a gun. There was no changing that. "You're gonna win."

Kenn picked out too many of the men glancing at Angela's long, dark curls blowing in the cooling wind. "True that."

Angela winced, slapped with flashes of their past from that hauntingly familiar expression, and again, Adrian and Neil weren't the only ones who noticed it. People here especially, but survivors period, were much more alert now. They had learned a harsh lesson.

There was silence as Adrian stepped up, shooting straight from the hip. The noise was deafening when the call came.

"Eight bull's-eyes!"

Their worries gone for a small instant, the people roared their approval, and Angela was sure most of them didn't care who won. This shot-for-shot competition was what mattered.

The targets were relocated again and Kenn returned to Angela's side, grinning at her in the rare, playful way that had never failed to get her to smile at his antics. He added an eye-cross, suddenly wanting to hear her laugh.

When she did, men noticed, drawn, and his scowl emerged again.

Adrian recognized the spark between them and felt obliged to at least try to help his right hand, thinking it would be so much easier if those two stayed together. Would a win here help the Marine? Kenn's happiness mattered too, and his loyalty had been steadfast... Adrian didn't think it would be enough to sway anything. Angela knew what she wanted, and it wasn't Marine number one. Still...

Adrian drew suddenly and began firing. When he stopped, he met Kenn's surprised stare over the crowd.

"Seven bull's-eyes!"

There were cheers and groans, and Adrian shrugged. "Can't be perfect all the time."

Kenn took his place. "Just practice anyway." He blew out a breath and began firing.

“Eight bull’s-eyes!”

Kenn was locked onto Angela across the short distance.

“Boo-yah, baby!”

“Nice shooting.”

Adrian shook his hand, pulling his attention away.

Angela trembled as nightmares rushed over her. Kenny was always inventive when he won something he really wanted.

Neil had been watching her, but was pretending he hadn’t as the crowd began to breakup. He didn’t like any of the things he noticed.

“I’m sharing a tent with Charlie?”

Neil gave her a confused stare. “We assumed you’d be with Kenn.”

Fire flashed. “Assumed because he said so?”

“Yes.” Neil felt like he’d done something wrong.

Kenn locked eyes with Angela over the men congratulating him. *I’m almost in charge. Do what I say or you’ll regret it!*

Angela turned to the frowning sentry at her side. “Will you take me to Marc? The man with the wolf?”

6

Neil’s lips were tight as they climbed the fence. He didn’t offer her a hand over as he might have with the other women here. He could sense her reluctance to touch or be touched. His time in Adrian’s army had made him, all of them, more sensitive. Neil’s scowl grew. Except for Kenn, apparently.

Angela stayed at Neil’s side, able to feel his disapproval. She leaned closer. “He has my medical bag.”

Neil continued, feeling no better. He had respect for Kenn, even though he couldn’t say he liked the arrogant son of a bitch. He wasn’t afraid of him, but he was scared of destroying all Adrian had going, of losing his second chance, his place. They were walking alone now, and Neil did hope no one would stress

to Kenn that he had escorted his wife to another man's tent. He didn't need that type of drama.

Angela picked up the thought, was unable to stay quiet this time. "We're not married."

She said it firmly, but Neil only shrugged, not realizing he hadn't spoken aloud. "That doesn't matter. Common Law counts."

"We weren't that either."

"That's the way it appears."

"Why? Because he says so? They don't even know me."

"We listen and watch. Kenn introduced you as *his* Angela, and you began talking to Adrian with no denial. Kyle even called you his wife, and you laughed with the rest of us. It's how we judge 'lady or tramp' here."

"It's not like that, and I'm already tired of saying it!" she insisted. "I haven't even been here a full day yet. They know nothing."

"What Kenn says, his respectability, gives it credit," Neil explained as he steered them toward the QZ. "If Adrian hadn't taken you under his wing today, you might have been viewed as a mother trying to get to her son by cheating on her husband."

She was angry, he could see it, but more than that, he could feel it. Neil was sympathetic. He couldn't wait to observe her in real sun, and happy, rather than the darkness and fear she was trapped in now. He thought Adrian would handle it faster with this one than with the other women who had joined Safe Haven.

"Sorry, but I never sugarcoat the truth to people I like," Neil stated. "Things are different now. You got a chance to show that you can be one of us, and you did well, but your Wolfman... It could get ugly for him if people think Kenn's been reunited with his wife, and she has another man hanging around. Be careful."

Angela sighed in frustration, clearly not understanding the rules yet.

Neil was stopped from any further explanations by the tent flap opening.

The wolf padded out, studying the trooper, and he crossed under the tape with no signs that it existed to him. Angela wasn't sure that was the case, but she would never tell on Dog.

The wolf was followed by his master, and Angela dropped to one knee to greet the animal, lingering when she knew she shouldn't.

After a minute of tense silence, she stood up and took the bag Marc had brought out, being careful not to touch him.

"Thanks."

"Sure."

There was another awkward silence, and Angela tried hard to sound normal, aware of eyes on them in the dim light of the fires. "Guess you'll be out in the morning?"

"Yeah." Marc silently asked what was wrong, but she didn't respond. He wanted to say something, needed to comfort her, but knew he couldn't, not with the guard standing alertly behind her. He clamped his lips shut. *Just be cool.*

"I'll see ya, Brady." Angela said sadly, feeling like this was goodbye for some reason that she refused to identify.

The desperation had Marc opening his mouth without knowing what might come out, unable to ignore her need twice.

"I'll wait until you decide, Angie, and I'll accept it. If I can't, I'll go."

Neil witnessed her freeze in mid-step and then actually stop herself from responding... From begging him to stay?

Angela forced herself to move, too aware of Neil missing nothing. He and Adrian were right. She would have to be very careful.

Following Adrian's pattern from the contest, Neil walked a little behind and a bit to her right as she went to her son's tent, thinking hard about what he had just seen and felt. The pull was strong, undeniable, and it had taken less than a minute to recognize. Did Kenn love her that way?

Like his boss, Neil thought women should be happy and treated well. Everyone was wondering about the angry wound on

her mouth, especially since the couple had gone all day without speaking to each other, though, they'd been apart since before the war. Had Kenn really hit her?

These things bothered Neil. He wanted to ask questions, but knew he would get no answers from her. He would have a hard time believing anything she might say, anyway. It would force him to do something, and a mere "sit down" with Kenn wouldn't be enough. For beating on Angela, Neil wanted Kenn killed.

Neil admitted to himself then that he was attracted to her, might even want her, and made himself think of the expression on the Marc's face when he'd blurted that he would wait for her. *Complete devotion*. It was what a woman like Angela needed, and he envied the man a little. Marc Brady... *Maybe I can get some honest answers there*.

7

Immediately noticing the odor of gun oil, Neil tapped on the tent flap and had to wait for the wolf to move from the doorway before he could step inside. Soft, sad music came from a radio near a threadbare, camouflage sleeping bag, and the broad-shouldered man in the middle of it looked up from a stack of notebooks with a genuine grin.

"Thank God!" Marc gushed. "Company!"

Neil nodded casually, thinking his first impression still held, even when the man was relaxed. It was "old west cowboy" crossed with "modern day soldier," and Marc wore it comfortably. The long black coat and faded hat were draped neatly over the chair that Adrian had them put in each tent, and everything was folded or stacked neatly at the end of his bed.

His rack, Neil corrected himself, noting that the beautiful guns were off the man's hips, but within finger's reach. The new guy was more of a Marine at a moment of ease than Kenn had been when he'd first joined them.

“I was here before it was a rule, but everyone says being in the Quarantine Zone sucks.”

Marc motioned to the empty tent. “Have a seat.”

Handing over one of the two bottles he had talked the cook out of, Neil sat. He crossed his legs to the left of the wolf now viewing him with mistrustful, golden eyes from the shadowy corner.

“What can I do for you?”

Neil stared him in the puffy, purple eye. “I’ve got some free time and thought I’d come meet the man who has Kenn so upset that he didn’t miss a single shot, even though it was only practice. The real contest isn’t ‘til tomorrow.”

Marc grew cold, and set the beer down unopened. “You saw me earlier.”

Neil leaned closer, thinking the discolored jaw and scabbing knuckles added to Marc’s image. Was the man the hard-ass he appeared to be?

“I’ve had time to think.”

“She only came to me to get her doctor’s bag. She hates to be without it,” Marc explained, knowing it was more. Something had upset her, and he had been unable to help.

“Bullshit. She was fine until Kenn looked at her after he won. Then she got scared and asked to be brought to you. The bag was the excuse most convenient to her.”

Marc didn’t answer. Kenn was already testing her new nerves. *Lovely.*

“What’s going on between you two?” Neil demanded.

“Nothing. Don’t ruin her chances here over a reaction you probably imagined,” Marc advised coolly. “You don’t know them, not really. And Kenn certainly isn’t the saint you all think he is.”

Clearly, he’d spoken to people despite being in quarantine.

“Did he give her that split lip?”

“Ask her,” Marc answered quickly.

Neil frowned. “She won’t talk to me yet. Right now, I’m on his side as far as she’s concerned.”

Marc was glad to hear genuine distaste in the guard’s tone. “It’s her business. If she wanted it known, she’d tell you herself.”

“Why are you protecting him? If he put hands on her, Adrian will punish him. He’ll lose his *place*.”

Marc blew out a frustrated sigh, waving a hand, “So I’ve heard, and like I’ve told the others, it would only make things harder for her. She hasn’t made up her mind about what she wants, and I won’t force her.”

Neil took a moment to think it over, respecting him and glad for Adrian that these two didn’t seem to be eager to cause trouble. In the silence, he gave the orderly tent another scan, searching for clues. Gear stowed, boots at attention, even his sleeping bag was perfectly neat. Marc was a lifer, unlike Kenn, who never talked about his old world, something people here did a lot. Marc was open, honest, in love with a woman that he couldn’t have, and Neil felt a connection to him beyond his own dislike for Kenn.

“He hit her?” Neil asked in a whisper, almost unable to believe it. If not for her lip and the fear she was incapable of hiding, he wouldn’t have.

“She didn’t fall down or run into anything, no matter what she says later,” Marc muttered.

Neil was instantly full of disappointment for Adrian’s dreams. Deep down, though, he could see the abusive nature Kenn had hidden. It came through in the flashes of arrogance and possessiveness that were almost jealousy when it came to Adrian.

Noises came to them suddenly, and both males responded alertly. When the muffled sounds cleared into laughter and excited voices, Neil relaxed.

Marc’s heart was thumping. She was out there, alone. “Will you help her? Show her how things work?” he asked suddenly, heeding the instinct that was saying Neil was one of the good guys.

“I already have been, she just doesn’t know it. She’s important to Adrian somehow.” Neil now had a much better idea of what that was.

Marc hoped that would be enough. He was an outsider and wouldn’t be able to get close to her again for a while.

“You’ll try to keep your distance?” Neil asked.

Marc’s expression betrayed nothing. “Yes, even if she chooses him. I won’t stand in the way of what she wants.”

Neil carefully got up and held out a hand that Marc was glad to shake. The last three people he had talked to hadn’t cared at all about the truth.

“I’m Todd O’Neil. You’ll be busy for a bit, I imagine, but I might be able to pass an occasional hello. You’ll have a lot to prove if you hope for a chance here with her.”

Marc was relieved that at least one person was offering friendship rather than cleverly worded threats. “Marc Brady. You say there’s a shooting match tomorrow?”

“You’ll be out in time for it.” Neil raised a brow. “You any good?”

Marc ran a throbbing hand over his swollen jaw. “I usually hit what I’m aiming at.”

Neil grinned, thinking he would likely take the man under his wing the way Adrian had done with Angela, only more aggressively. His amusement increased. Doug flirting with Angie hadn’t rattled Kenn, but Marc surprising him, might. Especially if the man was good. For some reason, Neil liked the idea of Marc and Angie together, and it was wrong of Kenn to keep them apart if they loved each other.

“Appearances mean a lot here. You’ll never be accepted if you chase her.”

Marc looked at him with open honesty. “I’ll stay back and follow the rules, but the minute she wants or needs me, I’m going, and I won’t be stopped.”

Neil felt his respect grow. It took courage and self-belief to say something like that to a complete stranger.

“You want someone to hang with tomorrow, to show you around?”

“Absolutely,” Marc accepted gratefully, curious where Neil was in Safe Haven’s chain-of-command. There was no doubt that he was.

The wolf was watching with red-tinted ears perked, and Neil wondered how Marc had earned such loyalty from a wild animal but didn’t ask. Stories like that were shared with friends, and that, they weren’t. They would be, though, Neil was suddenly sure of it, and he was anxious to hear the tale.

“I’ll see ya in the morning.”

“Yes, you will.”

It was an odd response, and Neil could tell from the tone that it meant something, but again, he didn’t question, sensing that, too, would require real friendship to share.

He left Marc alone with his thoughts.

Marc wasn’t bitter that Angela hadn’t been quarantined too. He only wished he were out there, watching over her. Being her protection was something he did automatically again, and it hurt his heart not to be able to do it now, when she was surrounded by strangers and facing old dangers.

Chapter Forty-One
Dark Revelations

Night One

1

When Angela stepped from Charlie's tent, he was waiting for her. She grabbed him for a quick hug that he tolerated with flushed cheeks.

"Sorry, boy, but I missed you!"

Charlie felt the same way. "Couldn't tell."

The mess lines were short, most of the tables empty. Angela was very aware of the twenty or so people still eating and staring at her openly.

"We're late?"

"Only by twenty minutes. You'll get used to the schedule."

She nodded as they got in line, thinking that he sounded older than he was. She wanted to talk to him, to find out how he'd been, but the eyes were constant, persistent. For one brief second, she wished Kenn hadn't found them yet so she could have one more quiet night alone with Marc.

You still can! Charlie shoved the words angrily at her.

Angela said nothing. Later, when they were alone, they had a lot to discuss.

The sullen boy took two trays, handed her one, and grabbed a pair of green cans from the icy cooler. "Come on. Adrian saved you a seat."

The whispers followed their progress, and increased in volume when Adrian slid over to clear the place to his right. *Again.*

Kenn's good mood vanished.

Angela quickly sat, feeling like a fish in a glass bowl. *Don't they have anyone else to gape at?*

"I have to deliver trays."

Charlie's tone was agitated, and they all sensed it was directed at her.

Angela only said, "See you in a while."

"Yes, you will."

The men heard the boy sigh, felt some of his anger go with her response. Neil and Adrian both recognized the words, understood it was a bond.

"He's a good kid. He does a lot here."

Angela smiled at Adrian's words, thinking Charlie, too, would have to adjust. She opened her pop. "He's so grown up, so responsible."

Angela gave Kenn a warm glance that most of them were surprised to see. "Thank you. I meant to say that right away. I'd be lost without him."

"He's my boy, too." Kenn managed to sound uncomfortable and arrogant at the same time.

Fire flashed, and Angela took a long drink to keep from asking when that sentiment had started.

Neil and Adrian noticed her reaction, and both thought it was too bad that she had passed up the perfect opportunity to get free. They respected her for not wanting to cause Kenn embarrassment, but a public breakup was the only kind that would free her. "He said, she said," didn't exist here.

"Have you checked in with the perimeter?"

As the men talked, Angela ate and wondered if Marc had been fed yet, if he was okay, if he missed her as much as she did him. It hurt to be away, and Angela forced herself to pay attention. The sooner she figured out how things worked here, the sooner she would know how to handle things.

"Jeremy found everything on his list and says he has pictures of an entire town that's undamaged. Cherry Creek. Says it's completely deserted, but the stores and malls are still intact.

Figures the whole town just evacuated in a neat, orderly fashion.”

Adrian grinned ruefully. “Be the first one of those we’ve run across. Okay, that’s it.” He closed his notebook. “You’ll put the dogs out?”

“Yeah. Chris says Star’s gonna have a litter come May.”

“That’s great. We need all the babies we can get,” Kyle stated. He glanced at Kenn, speaking before he thought about it. “Didn’t you tell us that you had one on the way?”

Angela froze, heart ripping open, and every man at the table scowled when Kenn flushed and turned questioning, embarrassed eyes her way. He hadn’t asked that yet? They’d been alone in his truck for hours!

Angela couldn’t hide the hate as the awful pain dug into her chest. *My baby!*

“I lost my other son.”

Her voice was like broken glass, and no one was surprised when she stood up.

“Excuse me.”

The entire mess was full of condemning murmurs, and Kenn knew they were all thinking he’d been too busy giving her a fat lip to ask about their baby.

His cheeks were scarlet, and he got up without a word. That was it. The first actual blow to his ship, and she hadn’t even fired it. A few more of those, and he would quickly go under.

Angela knew Kenn would follow. He’d been waiting all day for the chance to be nasty to her, and she chose a public place. There was only one woman in line for the restrooms, though, and the tall brunette went in as Kenn stopped at her side.

Angela braced herself.

“I’m sorry. I should have asked.”

She was almost shocked, and Kenn shrugged bitterly. “Things have changed. I’m not the same man here. It’s not allowed.”

Angela said nothing, but her eyes screamed vile profanities at him.

He reddened further, embarrassed gaze on her split lip. “We can work it out. I’d never do that here.”

Silence.

Kenn blew out a sigh, shoving down on his anger. “We’ll make a new deal.”

Angela raised a brow, thinking she’d won the second battle before it had even started. She chose her answer carefully. “No more deals. If we stay together, it will be because I want to build a future with you.”

“You can’t end it with me. I won’t let you do that!” he hissed violently.

Angela could almost feel the rage as he grew madder. She wanted to get away from him, but knew it would be a mistake to run.

“You don’t own me anymore!”

Kenn came forward, his body blocking most of the camp’s view.

When her hand slid to her hip, the brunette coming from the restroom noted it and gestured to the nearest guard.

“You belong to me for another six years. Do what you’re told or *people* will get hurt, come up missing!”

Angela turned away, realizing he barely had control of himself. If she didn’t get out of his sight, he would become violent.

Kenn grabbed her arm, roughly spinning her around and drawing a lot of attention. He kept from hitting her only by sheer willpower. Kenn sucked in air...control.

“Don’t make me kill you!” he growled lowly before letting go, making his feet leave.

Kenn was aware of the displeasure of the sentries. Some of those, he had just shared a meal with. He knew he was causing a lot of unrest. People were openly questioning him about her lip now and all he could say was that he didn’t know. It was an

answer the camp never heard from him, but Kenn couldn't fight the rage of the past. He still had six years to get her love—her power—or break her. Either would do.

2

“Coming in with dinner.”

Charlie carefully ducked inside the dim tent and Marc noted the boy's first quick glance went to the wolf. He took the opening.

“That's Dog.” Marc introduced.

Charlie set the tray down and kept his attention on his target, trying to use the techniques he'd witnessed Adrian and Kenn employ on men they weren't sure about. Silence and a cool stare.

The father waited patiently, impressed that the teenager didn't fidget. Charlie didn't resemble the small boy Marc had viewed in the pictures. The male in front of him was approaching maturity.

“Why are you here?”

Marc blinked at the adult tone despite what he'd been thinking, impressed again. The truth was easy to give. “Your mom needs me.”

“You want her,” the boy accused.

When Marc nodded but said nothing else, Charlie's anger deepened. “Adrian and Kenn will take care of her. You can't stay here.”

Marc shook his head, thinking the child had his mom's courage. “Only she can get rid of me.”

“You don't know these people. If they want you gone, you are,” Charlie insisted. “I've seen them do it.”

The teen's smirk was a good copy of Kenn's and Marc instantly hated it. He shoved some brutal truth into the moment.

“They're already trying. I had hoped you would be on my side, but hear me and be clear. Only your mom can get me to go

away. Not another person on this planet can do it. They'll have to kill me."

Hoping it wouldn't come to that, but not so sure now that they were here, Marc stood up to get his tray.

Charlie cringed.

Marc stilled, mind slamming that obvious clue into place. It was the same reaction he'd noticed in Angela during the first weeks of their cross-country journey, and sometimes even now, when she was startled.

"He hit you too?"

It was a guilty, horrified whisper, and the boy's face crumbled with the truth.

Charlie shoved the tray at him and spun out of the tent.

3

Angela flipped the radio off and lit a smoke. She was waiting now, writing in her journal and killing time until Kenn would be on duty. She hated it that Charlie's tent was next to Kenn's. She had her gun resting under her thigh, planned to sleep with it in reach in case he came for her during the night.

Hearing voices go by that she identified as Adrian and Doug, Angela mulled over the fast kinship she'd felt and worried over what the leader would want from her later...and what he already wanted.

She sighed. Two questions had been answered, at least. It was only Kenn she still feared, not all men, and it wasn't just Marc that she could respond to. Both Adrian and Seth had tempted the witch.

Angela let out another sound of frustration. It was good here. She had found things she could help with, but Kenn was high up, with serious responsibilities. He was very different from the man who'd kept her so upset during her pregnancy that she had been having pains long before the war. Even now, he hadn't cared enough to ask what had happened. She got the feeling it was a

side of him these people didn't often witness, but that would change, was already starting to. Kenn had been normal all day, and then morphed into a nasty SOB while they were in plain view of everyone. Was he fighting old demons, or was he putting on the act of a lifetime?

Marc's worried words suddenly came to her.

He's headed your way, and he's upset. Sorry.

Angela tensed, drawing her gun.

She was relieved when her son came in and not Kenn. She slid the weapon into her holster before Charlie discovered she'd had it out.

"You okay?"

"No! Why did you bring him here? This will get you in big trouble!"

Charlie was crying, and she went to him, held him as much as he would allow.

"I have some things to tell you. A story," she stated, knowing it would be a censored version of the truth. There couldn't be more until she made her choice.

"About...my dad?"

"Yes, and about you."

4

Adrian studied Kenn's approach through the open tent flap, able to feel the awkwardness invading the cool night air.

He thinks she told me everything, the leader thought, and chose to encourage the idea while staying as neutral as he could. He needed Kenn. Angela didn't.

Kenn dropped into the empty chair with a grunt and put the envelopes on the table. He didn't meet Adrian's eyes and tried to get right to business. "We're short on—"

"Wait." Adrian's voice was like stone. "We have something else to discuss first."

Kenn wasn't sure if he would lie when asked if he had put his hands on a woman in anger. He wasn't sure if he could.

“Are you mine or hers?”

Kenn's head flew up, mouth opening, hesitating. “Sir?”

“You can't serve two masters. You were the first one here, the first true member of my command, and you have the most active part in everything I do. You're my right hand. What happens to a man if you cut that off?”

“He'll bleed to death,” Kenn muttered.

“He, and all his dreams. Here, that would mean the death of Safe Haven. That alone would be unforgivable, but worse, what else would we lose?”

Kenn's reason warred with his anger, and he struggled to find the right words. “Our last chance. Our way of life...America.”

There was genuine regret in that last one, and Adrian was satisfied for the moment. He studied Kenn before speaking, no longer staring at his even tempered XO, but at the short-fused, mean-mouthed, second-in-command that people were already starting to avoid—after one day. He needed to get this under control if he could, but Adrian suspected it had already gone too far. Kenn didn't believe that Angela and Marc were just friends either.

“Because she asked me not to, unless someone comes to me, we won't discuss this after tonight. So long as it never, *ever* happens again.”

Kenn was shocked...stunned that Adrian would protect him. It went against everything they were trying to build here. Kenn was filled with guilty gratitude.

Adrian, however, was furious. All the suspicions were confirmed by Kenn's reaction, and he spelled it out angrily.

“The war changed life for every living thing on this planet, including her. She has the right to pick her own future, and you will back off.”

Kenn was humiliated. Now Adrian knew who he was. There was no longer a reason to lie.

“We were happy. She’ll settle in.”

“No!” Adrian barked. “She doesn’t want that, and the rules here are for everyone. She knows it now.”

“She and that boy are all I’ve got left.” Kenn gestured in frustration. “I can’t let him have them.”

“Give me a yes to this question and you’ll have my support,” Adrian said evenly. “Ready?”

Kenn already knew it was a trap.

“It’s easy to detect that Marc would do about anything for her, maybe even die. Would you? Do you love her enough to give your life for hers?”

Kenn didn’t respond.

“Let her go.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“You have to. We all know you gave her up for dead, while Marc found her and protected her. That alone, gives her the right to end things. So what? You have a good life, a firm place. You’re admired, treated well, and then there’s a certain redhead sniffing around, giving out samples. That’s always fun.”

Adrian’s words worried Kenn, surprised him. He hadn’t thought the boss knew about his trysts with Tonya.

“Think on it, but understand me, grunt. You can’t make it work. You can try, and you can destroy lives, but you cannot have this position and *that* woman. I’ve met her. No man could balance the two,” Adrian warned, ignoring the male heart insisting that he could. “Let her go, Marine. I need you so much more than she does.”

“I’ll try to do what’s right,” Kenn said, desperately wanting this conversation to be finished. “I will.”

“Good. Let’s move on to the important stuff. Schedules—put her with John for now and add her to Neil’s class. Can she use that .357 on her hip?”

Kenn nodded reluctantly, humiliated mind flashing to the ride here. “Probably the least of what he taught her.”

Adrian ignored the bitter tone, but responded to the impression that Kenn knew Marc better than he was letting on. It wasn't a good sign of things to come. "Tell me about him."

Kenn lit a smoke, his thoughts chaotic. He couldn't tell the truth without giving all of it, could he?

"We served together. Same platoon for a few years. He's a good Marine. I don't know him personally."

Adrian raised a brow, waiting for the details he knew were there.

Kenn hated it that he had to give more, but he couldn't refuse Adrian's need, couldn't deny the observations that he had stored over the years. It was part of the job, and he already knew Marc better than he knew any of the people he'd reported on since getting this position.

"He's quiet, likes to work alone. Stickler for the rules during regular business hours, but I've seen him get drunk and beat the hell out of men off base. He wasn't close to any of us that I know of; usually wanted the corner table alone, but he always supported us in brawls. When we lost two members of our team in Iraq, he retrieved both bodies and helped the widows financially, out of his own pocket."

Kenn let out a sigh, hating that it was the truth. *Damn Boy Scout!* "He's one of the good guys."

"So are you. The past is dead. Try to leave it there."

The Marine nodded, but Adrian was sure he had wasted his breath as he handed Kenn a cold beer from the cooler. "You have things for me?"

Grateful, Kenn opened his notebook. By all rights, he should be on the way to pack his shit and get out...or to the side of a dark road with one of Kyle's happily fired bullets in his brain.

When Kenn left Adrian's tent, he was calmer, but the ball of anger remained, waiting to be ignited. It flared to life once again

when he got to his tent and found it empty. Had Angela broken their truce and snuck out to Marc?

No. He could hear the soft murmur of voices nearby. She was in Charlie's tent, and there was no way he could jerk her out of there by that long black hair like the rage was demanding. What to do?

Find a release.

Tonya moaned, wrapping her arms around Danny's narrow shoulders as he pushed her against the boxes. Images of her night with Adrian flashed through her mind, increasing the heat.

Danny thrust against her, shoving her anxiously into the corner.

Tonya grimaced, thinking he wasn't half the man that Adrian was.

"Yeah...ohh...yeah!"

Danny's bare hips flashed in the dim lantern light, and Tonya arched up to meet his wild thrusts, already knowing he was going to blow before she could. *What a waste of time.*

The man dipped his mouth to her ample chest, nearing the edge.

Tonya froze as a menacing shadow stepped up into the semi and closed the door.

"What?...uhhh!"

A cold draft hit Danny's twitching flesh as he was spun around. Milky white splatters sprayed the truck floor, boxes, and Kenn's boots.

Danny, caught in the moment of climax, didn't even try to avoid the meaty fist that flew toward him. He hit the metal floor with a loud thud, fading, and Tonya cowered in the corner.

Kenn stepped over Danny's limp body toward her. The redhead had obviously found something (someone) to do during his short absence.

Tonya wisely kept her mouth shut. When his big hands slid to the buckle of his jeans, heat and relief flooded her.

Kenn grabbed her arm, shoved her down over the boxes she'd been leaning on, and Tonya, unsure about him at this moment, felt a tremor of fear and an earthquake of lust. She had written him off when she'd caught a glimpse of his woman. She knew her limits, but apparently, things weren't peachy in their world.

The angry Marine kept a hand on her arm, holding her down as he nudged her thighs further open. When he rocked forward, sinking deep, Tonya pushed against him in pleasure, body clenching around his. This was what she'd wanted when she'd discovered Danny alone by the fire.

Needing her to know who was boss, Kenn pulled out of her hot heat and pushed into the next opening, wrapping a hand around her mouth to stop the scream from following the surprised breath she'd sucked in. He slammed in deeper, leaning into it as she struggled against him, and he pulled her by her arm, dog tag swinging against his chest. He thrust hard, filling her, and Tonya moaned softly against his hand, sounding a lot like the man slowly coming to at their feet.

Kenn pushed deeper, her gasp of pain swelling him, and then he pulled out, spinning. He hissed in satisfaction, seed falling on Danny's bruising cheek.

Kenn delivered a nasty kick to the moaning man's side. "Find your own whore!"

He glowered at Tonya and fastened his jeans. "Get this shit cleaned up and get to your tent. We're not done."

6

Before ten, most people were inside their tents and Safe Haven was quiet.

Angela slipped out, eager to get a shower without standing in line and being stared at. She shivered at a gust of wind sweeping by and traveled faster, finding Adrian and a group of guards at the center mess table. His words of knowing everything that

went on rolled through her mind. He was a man to take at face value for sure, but there were wells in him deep enough to get lost in.

Gun in reach, Angela let the hot water beat down on her. She hadn't had a real shower with water she could adjust the temperature on since December, and it hadn't felt nearly this good. She took a few extra minutes to groom, delighted that the water was actually hot. She soaped her hair twice, humming the whole time as some of the stink from her journey washed off and went down the drain. She'd made it. She was here.

Angela was frowning by the time she flipped off the water, wondering if Marc had gotten a shower yet. She hated being away from him, hated how empty her heart felt, but she didn't call out like she wanted to. She was afraid people would feel it, but more than that, she knew it was wrong to encourage him. They would have to be careful or leave, but every time Angela thought of that, of being alone with Marc and their son, the witch whispered of death and unhappiness. She knew better than to ignore the warnings. She had Charlie back and some of her freedom, and there was a sense of being in the right place at the right time that made her want to stay. She was sure she would unless Kenn forced her hand.

Angela lingered on the dusty camper's top step, the gentle breeze cooling her skin, and swept the camp. Safe Haven. *Is it really?*

"Show me," she commanded softly.

The flickering lights from the can-fires began to form movies, revealing dangerous rescues, defenses, and...secrets, lies. It made her frown as she swept the mostly darkened tents. Black-clad shadows patrolled the well-lit group of weary travelers, but they were surrounded by a violent, unknown world nonetheless.

He'll protect them with all he has, the witch informed her as doors rattled in her mind—*forbidden, locked doors to the future. We could open them with his help. The future waits.*

As if called, she turned around to find the object of her thoughts nearby.

Adrian slowly went to her, trying not to stare. He gave her a polite glance, the scent of vanilla thickening in his nose. “You have everything you need?”

Her heart screamed, went straight to spending the night without Marc.

Adrian stored that wild need. “I’ll rephrase. Do you have everything you need that I can give you?”

“Everything’s fine,” Angela answered quickly, sorry she wasn’t hiding it better.

Adrian grunted, knowing it wasn’t true. “Good. So, have you chosen to stay and help us? Me?”

“Kenn will get in the way of anything I try to build here. My dreams don’t mean shit to him,” she stated bitterly.

Adrian responded, “But, he does believe in mine. He’ll realize the benefits of having you here.”

“Only if you send away my protection.”

There was a desperate plea in that last word, a cry for reassurance, and Adrian gave it firmly. “Never. Marc belongs here too. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Neither do I.”

“You will. Give it time, give *me* time.”

Angela sighed, looking over the peacefully settled people. “I’ll need to keep busy.”

“I have work for you.”

Angela felt her heart leap at the offer, needing something to replace her time with Marc. If she waited, if she thought about all the trouble it would cause, she’d never do it. But right now, with Adrian’s patient attention on her, she felt this was her chance, her place in time, and she wouldn’t get another.

“Yes, I’ll stay, but give me real work, something that matters,” she said, unknowingly echoing her son’s words to him.

“Make me feel needed, wanted, and then maybe I can also follow where you lead.”

7

“I’d like to talk, if you have a minute.”

Samantha jumped and spun to find Adrian standing by the camper she’d come from. She had been hoping the intimidating leader would have other fish to fry right now.

“Sorry. Busy?”

Flinching again at a trio of loud, curious members moving by, Samantha quickly shook her head.

“Good.” Adrian motioned toward his tent. “Let’s chat.”

Sam went slowly, thinking she wasn’t ready to have this conversation with frayed nerves and a sleep hangover from the sedatives. When they walked in silence, she was glad for the moment to collect her thoughts.

Adrian left the flap open, but she was still reminded of her time in Cesar’s camp—of José’s attack—and Samantha’s stomach twisted painfully.

Feeling her tension, Adrian gestured to the small table and chairs. “Have a seat while I get us a drink. Soda, water, or tea?”

Picking the one hardest to tamper with came easily to her as she sat in the chair closest to the doorway. “Soda.”

Adrian subtly observed as he poured himself a cup of tea. She was worried. Too worried for someone who’d just found safety?

He joined her at the table, hating her flinch when he set his cup down a bit too hard. He suspected she and Angela had a lot in common, but where Marc had been there to help Angie, this woman had been alone and had survived as best she could.

“There are rules here, and you’ll learn them, but one is more important than any of the others. We have no violence against women and children. The penalties are too high. I know you’ll feel better with this, but you don’t need it.”

Butt first and slowly, Adrian extended the .45 from his boot.

Sam took it reluctantly, not wanting to offend him, but eager for the comfort it would provide her tonight while she was sleeping alone. No one could take away what the boss had given her.

“Keep it close until you feel you don’t need it anymore, and then give it back for the next abused woman who comes here.”

She was clearly surprised, and he inquired casually, “What did you do before the war?”

His unexpected change of subject caught Sam by surprise, and she froze.

“Your career? What did you contribute to society?”

Cesar hadn’t recognized her value. Would this man? “I was a storm tracker.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“I chased the wind, played with the equipment, and tried not to get myself killed.”

Adrian’s tone cooled a little. “If you have a gift, Samantha, now’s the time for using it. We need you.”

His chiding tone sank into her loneliness, and some of the truth was out before she knew she was going to tell him. “I can sometimes predict them, from the data. I had a pass to the Essex compound. My chopper crashed.”

Hiding his pleasure, Adrian leaned forward. “We would have a place for you even if you only babysit. What matters right now is one question. Are you a spy?”

“No. Never.”

“What about the man you came in with?”

She looked away. “I don’t know...maybe.”

Adrian was surprised, had expected a firm denial. They were both already under watch.

“Can I have a smoke?”

Adrian slid his lighter and mostly full pack toward her.

“Keep those. Why don’t you think he’s good, like you and me?” he asked.

Sam felt better, as he had intended. She recognized the ploy, but it still succeeded.

“Because he was a slave, and we never should have been able to ride out. I think it was too easy, like he was waiting for me to suggest escaping.” She drew in a lungful of smoke that shot out as she spoke. “I told Kenn everything I could remember, and that Rick got me out, but I wonder what he used to buy our freedom. There’s no way we escaped, and the only currency Cesar takes is blood. I have no proof...but I think Rick risking his life as the man on the inside is what’s going on. They made a deal, and I fell for it.”

“We have good security here. He’s already being watched.” Adrian’s words betrayed none of his increasing worry. “We’ll catch him in the act if he is a spy, but for now, we wait. Myself and the Eagles, not you. It’s my job.”

Sam knew she was being manipulated, but agreed without hesitation. It would keep her from being responsible, and she felt a heavy weight leave her shoulders. She was giving that chore up. To this man.

“Will you have me watched too?” she asked suddenly.

“Do I need to?” Adrian shot back.

“No, of course not, but I know I would if I were you.”

The calm, reasonable tone made Adrian crack a real smile, and he changed the subject again without giving her an answer.

“Tell me more about your job, Sam. What exactly is a storm tracker and why did it earn you a pass?”

8

Back in her tent a bit later, Samantha lay on her sleeping bag, tired but unable to drift off. The sedative the dark-haired woman (Angel?) had given her hadn’t faded until her shower, and now she was wide-awake. The shrewd doctor or his sweet wife would have given her a pill, but she hadn’t asked, knowing there were

things going on in Safe Haven that she would need a clear head for.

Sam still thought this could be a slaver camp, with prettier edges. Some of the people here were bad, like Kenn. He beat on his woman. She and Marc had been in the medical tent together for a while, Rick separated from her, and while she recognized Marc for what he was, she suspected Kenn was a lot like Cesar on the inside. It was only after witnessing from the tent flap that she had realized these people didn't know that side of him existed. Or at least they hadn't until his woman had shown up. There was no way they could have known, because there was no fear, no one avoiding him—the opposite in fact. Kenn was everywhere, respected and high up. Adrian's right hand.

Sam frowned at that thought. There was something familiar about the leader, something that made her think of Washington. Had she seen him there? A flash of a man getting out of a cab in the rain? It didn't matter to her who he'd been before, so long as he was a good man now, but she was curious.

Sam curled her arm over her cheek, other hand caressing the gun under the blanket. She did feel better with its cold comfort, and she was glad to have found people that were decent, but Rick was dangerous. She knew it and wished she had more experience with guns, other than knowing too clearly that they were the difference between being free and being a slave.

The worrying was in her nature, and it nauseated Sam that her body was yearning for Rick's warmth. They'd traveled hard and fast, and he hadn't talked to her at all unless he had to, hadn't answered any of her questions, not even about where he was from or what he had done for a living before the war. He'd kept moving them northeast by day and crawling between her legs at night.

The fact that they hadn't made a single detour told her that Rick had known these people were here. He had wanted Angela too, but if he'd noticed the men with her before it was too late, he

would have kept going. His weren't the actions of someone searching for good people to join. Rick was infiltrating.

Has, she corrected herself. There was no proof of that, but she knew it anyway and was glad Adrian was a strong leader, freeing her from the heavy chore of watching Rick's every move. Now she had to distance herself from him, (preferably publicly, so it would get back to Adrian), and then pull herself together. Rick had taken advantage of her, and she never wanted him to touch her again.

Really? her body challenged. *What a liar.*

She was hit with erotic images of them on the way here: bent over the hood of a limo, pushing frantically against each other in his sleeping bag, straddling him on the horse as it thundered under them. His touch had been like fire to her, and she felt her body responding to thoughts, followed by that familiar ache that eased her mind a bit. At least she hadn't gotten pregnant. Samantha had worried over it a little in the last week, not quite sure if she was late or not, and it was a relief to know she wasn't about to have Rick's or José's child.

Sam rolled over, cradling the gun. He hadn't forced her, hadn't abused her, and deep down, she hoped she was wrong.

I'll rebuild my life, either way, Sam insisted firmly. *I will survive.*

She was finally able to sleep, but in her dreams, the voices whispered that she and everyone else was now in danger because of her lover's loyalty to a vicious killer.

9

Rick paced the floor of his tent, nervous and confused. He had spent all day in here.

It was well into the evening now, and he was still being quarantined by the elderly doctor who had taken his time coming and then had left as fast as he could. The disapproving healer had given only evasive answers to even normal questions, and Rick

was tense. He hadn't handled this level of alertness before, but he knew something wasn't right. Someone should have been by to talk to him, wanting information Samantha wouldn't have. He'd expected her, some guards, Kenn, and their leader (knowing instinctively that the blond man was the most dangerous one here), but no one had come.

Why not? A trick? Unlikely. Just didn't recognize the threat, even with all the alertness? Maybe. Most of the people he had viewed so far were the prey. The fear was obvious to Rick after existing with the slavers for all this time, but there were also men here who were as dangerous as Cesar. Rick didn't like how many armed, uniformed sentries there were. He already had an idea of how their shift changes worked, but gathering more information would have to wait. Suspicious glares returned to him repeatedly whenever he opened the flap.

He would have to be more careful here than in the other places he'd helped Cesar gain control of, and there was no way he would be able to contact the Mexican on time. He would have to lie low for a while and blend in, try to be forgotten. This was a large, well-organized group, and judging from the almost constant gunfire, they were learning to defend themselves. He would have to find their weakest point, or Cesar and his nasty men might not be enough for these people.

These people might be good, Rick. We have to warn them about Cesar.

Samantha had told him that from the passenger seat of the Blazer, saying she knew he'd made a deal with the slavers, but that it wasn't too late to do the right thing. It was, of course. Rick didn't like fearing for his life because of the color of his skin (oh my, how the world had changed), but he did like Cesar's way of life and had no intentions of backing out.

He would give the Mexican this camp, and then he and Samantha would go away for a while. She was never far from his thoughts now, body crying out to him from two tents over, and he cautioned himself to be patient. Even if she reneged on their

deal—and he already knew she would—he'd have her in the end. If he could tread lightly. The leader here had a warden's gaze, the coolness that watched and waited, knowing his convicts would offend again if given the opportunity. Rick planned to stay out of Adrian's line of sight for the duration of his stay. He had received a copy of the rules within his first hour of being here and understood the warning. He was suspected of being the enemy. If caught in the act, he would pay with his life.

10

Adrian began his rounds with the small sea of sleeping tents that surrounded his and frowned when he saw that one hadn't been put up for Angela. Kenn's doing? *Probably*. His unease stayed with him as he went to the perimeter.

His stops were brief and full of comments about Kenn's behavior. The only place he lingered was the QZ, where Neil was pulling extra hours to cover the doubled sentry posts. Tomorrow night Neil would sleep like a baby, but tonight the trooper was their eyes and ears, and Adrian went to him for information. He'd witnessed the cop ducking into Marc's tent, and since Neil wasn't one to break his rules lightly, Adrian wanted to know what had happened, what he had missed.

Adrian advanced through the darkness beyond the perimeter tape and realized that Neil's post was the one without a second man. *That explains the extra man two stops back*, he thought as he stopped near him. "What happened to your help?"

"He got on my nerves."

Adrian was almost certain Zack's words about unfaithful women had almost caused a fight. Zack was a notorious woman hater, didn't matter who she was. *Makes sense now*, Adrian thought. Perfect right hand for Kenn.

"Broadcasting again when he should have been tuning in?"

Neil chuckled as he swept the dark and deadly landscape around their sleeping people. "Been one of those days."

“Yes, it has. Put a twenty-four-hour on Danny. He’s our thief.”

There was total confidence, and Neil’s thoughts went straight to Angela. Had she told him that? Did it matter?

“I’d love to be the guard on him at the trial.”

Adrian knew there wouldn’t be one if the thief were caught in the act. Another problem with the clogged legal system, fixed. If there was absolute proof, then why have a trial? Guilty didn’t change because someone forgot to sign a paper or read them their rights. They were the criminals. They didn’t have any.

The cold wind gusted by, bringing drizzle, and Neil carefully swept the dark landscape again, satisfied for the moment. He drew in a breath. “What’s our penalty for hitting a woman?”

Adrian chose his words carefully. This was definitely Neil’s chance to get rid of Kenn, but it would destroy Safe Haven. “A trial, and if found guilty, the camp votes on a second chance with harsh punishments or for the person being branded and banished.”

“What if it’s one of *your* circle doing the hitting?” Neil asked angrily. “Do the same rules apply?”

“Yes. Our laws are for all of us. Is there something I should know?” Adrian asked, stomach twisting into a hard knot. Had Neil seen something? What else had Kenn done?

“Just suspicions.”

Clearly, Neil didn’t want to say more, and Adrian pinned one of his most trusted men with a hard look. “Your instincts are part of why you’re here, Neil. If you know something, especially if it concerns a woman, I expect you to tell me. Even when you know I don’t want to hear it.”

Neil sighed, torn. He understood what was at stake. “I didn’t witness it, don’t know those who say they did, but I believe it.”

He gave Adrian a brief run-through of the encounters he’d had today, lingering on the scene between her and Marc.

“He does love her, and he’ll let her go if that’s what she wants, I’m sure of it. He’s already following our rules, and he

doesn't even know what they are! Then, there's Kenn, trying to force her back into a relationship she doesn't want. He didn't even give her a tent—told Charlie not to put it up, that she would spend her nights in his bed where she belongs. He plans to put her in all of his classes and activities—so he can keep an eye on her is my guess—and he's telling people that Charlie is his biological kid.”

Adrian remembered Kenn's words to him when they'd first met. He had asked if that was his son, and Kenn had said... “*He might as well be.*”

They had all assumed he was caring for a child that wasn't his, and it had impressed them.

As he knew it would, Adrian realized. More than the Eagles would be pissed over this. Either Kenn had lied then to get closer to the camp, or he was lying now to hold onto Angela.

“We're gonna give them a chance to settle in, but I won't let either of them force her into anything,” Adrian stated, ignoring his own guilt. He was about to herd her, in a way, and while it was for the greater good, that didn't make it right.

Neil kept his voice low. “Good, because I don't think there are many left like her.”

“Pretty, isn't she?”

“Beautiful, but it's more than that,” Neil stated, thinking of the way she had read his mind to start their conversation. “She's special, and more than because she's a doctor. You know?”

Adrian did and wasn't surprised the trooper had noticed too. Neil wasn't as quick as Kyle was on most areas of their training, but about people, he was quicker.

“I'm going to look after her when I can, maybe ask a couple of the Eagles to quietly do the same,” Neil said, not needing to see Adrian's frown to know it was there.

“Got hopes, Neil?” Adrian asked. He was relieved when the cop shook his head.

“No. Marc asked me to, but I had already decided I would before I talked with him. She’s got a strong pull, a gift we need, and a lot of men will want her, not just those two.”

Adrian didn’t betray how much those words pleased and bothered him, because they were true. He was glad Neil was planning to take Marc under his wing. He hadn’t said so, but Adrian had spent months getting to know Neil, and it was encouraging that at least one of his own was willing to give the man and his wolf a chance. Almost everyone else was talking of making Marc’s life rough if he got between Kenn and his wife. With Marc now cleared, but told not to roam until morning, the tension would increase.

These people wouldn’t accept him easily. To stay and have a chance at rebuilding his life, Marc would have to prove himself. Neil could definitely help him with that. The auburn-haired guard was popular, and there would have been serious trouble if he had taken a stand against Kenn in the beginning and made the people choose.

“You’ll let me know how your day with him goes?”

It hit Neil again how grateful he was for Adrian. Anyone else would be using it all to their advantage, and things would have to be spelled out. With the blond man, he saw it before it was a problem, handled it quickly and quietly, and knew his people well. Considering what they had done to the old world, what others had been allowed to do, Neil thought Adrian was more than they deserved.

“You know it.”

Adrian was almost smiling as their long day ended. “Yes, I do.”

Chapter Forty-Two
A Troopers Welcome

Day 2

1

You know what to do, Kenn told himself, moving purposefully through the zone.

It was barely five in the morning, and Kenn was hoping to catch the quarantined man unprepared.

When the crunching boots stopped in front of his flap, Rick's eyes flew open and his grip tightened on the gun he had gone to sleep with.

"Hello in the tent? Got a minute?"

The voice was hard, as was the tapping on the flap, and Rick grunted, rolling off the cot. He slipped on his boots, but waited for a second tap and call to convince whoever it was that they hadn't woken him up.

"Yeah! Hang on!" Rick didn't bother buttoning his shirt. He shoved the gun into his waistband and fished for his smokes. "Come in."

Kenn moved quickly, letting in a blast of chilly wind that only cleared a little of the nervous sweat-reek that hit him. The Marine immediately scanned the messy floor and even messier man, and then flashed a sympathetic smile that he didn't care if Rick saw through. The man had only been here one day, and he'd already filled a tent with trash. It said a lot.

"I know it's early, but I'll be busy later," Kenn explained.

Rick lit a smoke and dropped into the only chair. He raised a brow as he adjusted the dirty black bandana around his throat.

“Thought someone would be by sooner with all the security you guys got here.”

Rick forced himself to act normal. He was glad the leader wasn't coming, but if Kenn suspected something, Adrian would be by shortly.

“Big camp, lots of shit to handle.”

Rick blew a disrespectful stream of smoke in Kenn's direction. If this dog-tag-wearing putz was all he had to deal with, he'd gotten lucky.

“Is this the part where I get warned to follow the rules or hit the road?” Rick questioned in a bored tone that he didn't even remotely feel.

Kenn didn't like Rick at all in that instant. “Something like that. We always check out the new people, but you came from a known group of killers, so yes, there are questions and things to be said.”

Rick picked up a half-full can of pop from the dirty floor. “Samantha told you everything we know.”

Kenn lips thinned in disapproval at the tone.

Rick cautioned himself to ease off a bit. There was a reason this man was second-in-command here, and it wasn't because he liked to hit women. Though, in Cesar's camp that might have earned him a high place too.

“We need other things, like where you hail from, what your career was, and also why not one white male has been spared by that group. Except you.”

Rick tensed even though he was expecting it and he didn't meet Kenn's eye for more than a second or two as he said, “I was a janitor at a minimum security jail in southern Arizona.”

Rick knew how to make Cesar appear less of a threat. He'd done this before.

“When the power went off, the generators didn't come on, and there was a riot. The guards were outnumbered. It was during exercise time, and most of the men were out of their cells.”

Kenn believed that. It had been the same across the country. Almost none of America's prisons had held. "Where were you?"

"Hiding in the basement at first, then I realized I could get out if I could start the generators."

Kenn's words were sharp. "Yeah, you could go, after setting all the killers loose."

Rick didn't flinch at the accusing tone. He'd heard that one too many times before. "Their crimes were minor. I wasn't going to die for them. I had to get out, and I did."

"You were caught?"

Rick said, "They let me live because I set them free. They *owed* me that."

Kenn tried to pierce him with the hard stare that Adrian used, and Rick casually emptied his soda can.

"I was the leader's slave from there. If I had insisted on leaving, he would have killed me."

Kenn was able to see the truth of that. "So, how did you two get away?"

Rick dropped his butt into the soda can and set it on the filthy canvas floor, controlling the nervous tremor. Instinct said they already knew. Why not use it?

"His men think we escaped, but Cesar knows where we are. I gave him this camp for our freedom."

Kenn's gun came halfway out of the holster as he stepped forward, anger blazing.

Rick fell over his cot in his haste to get away. He landed with a loud thump, hitting his shoulder hard.

He held up a hand as the angry Marine came toward him again. "That's what I told him to get away!"

Kenn hesitated, and Rick let fear bleed through his voice, knowing it was expected. "Come on man! I'm an American too! I said what I had to so we could go."

Kenn took a minute to pick the right response, but he didn't relax or put away his gun. When he spoke, Adrian's words flew out of his mouth.

“A real American would have died before releasing them. Every life they’ve taken is on your hands!”

Rick flinched. *That* he hadn’t heard before, and it echoed in his head, even though he already knew he was damned.

“Will they follow you? What was the plan?”

“Already on the way, I would think. He told me how to get here and to report to him in two weeks. When I don’t, he’ll know I told you everything. That I betrayed him.”

“Don’t leave this tent for anything except the bathroom,” Kenn ordered. “You already know to use the ones in here. If you need something, tell one of the guards, not the doctor or the people who bring your food. They won’t talk to you. Leave the Quarantine Zone for any reason, and I’ll shoot you myself!”

Kenn ducked outside before Rick could respond and marched straight through the sleeping people to Adrian. This guy was no good—from his pack of lies to his insolent, smug eyes—and Kenn would make it clear to not only the boss, but to the sentries as well. When Rick left that tent, he would have dozens of eyes on him.

2

As the very dim and distant sun began to rise behind the gritty sky, Angela headed to the livestock area, nodding friendly greetings to the surprising number of people also out and about so early. Inside, she was fighting the urge to hide in her tent. Being around so many people made her very uncomfortable, and she stiffened her chin. Intimidated or not, these people wouldn’t detect it. Not when there was so much at stake.

Angela had woken to a note on Charlie’s pillow saying he had to deliver trays. She understood he was giving her a teenager’s coldness because she had refused to make Marc leave. Charlie was afraid of what Kenny might do, and so was she, but she couldn’t back down now, not when she was already making real progress. One day, they might both be free of him.

The rift between her and her son so soon after being reunited bothered Angela, but she knew it would take time for him to come around. She wasn't going to push and she wasn't going to hide. She and Marc had done very little wrong. Kenn was the problem, and from this moment on, she would build a new life. That meant showing she could do the dirty work and that she didn't wait to be asked. Her plan was to help the vet today and be close to her boy. Hopefully, they would be too busy to talk (and avoid those harder questions that Charlie hadn't thought to ask yet), and she would be asleep as soon as she hit the pillow. Anything to avoid all the tossing and turning she'd done last night.

Angela didn't glance at the QZ or Marc's tent as she went by, but she knew he was there, awake, and was comforted by it.

She entered the dark animal area with a small gasp of surprise. With the curling fog and tall green trees sharing space with sporadic clumps of lush grass, it appeared like their old world.

But she knew better, didn't she? The croupy chirping of a lark nearby was the only reminder she needed. War had come, and nothing was the same.

"I guess I'm all yours today."

The vet glanced up from his lantern-lit papers and grunted. *New girl got in trouble already. Doesn't surprise me.*

"I brought you a cup of—"

"Don't drink coffee!" Chris snapped.

Angela slammed the mug onto the metal table with a bang that made him glare up at her.

"Good. I brought tea."

She dropped down onto the damp ground nearby and lit a cigarette without saying anything else. She smoked and sipped her coffee, satisfied she had his attention.

Angela hid a snicker when he put the paper down, anchoring it with his glasses.

"You gonna sit there? You're supposed to work."

“You gonna give me something to do?” she retorted. “You’re supposed to teach.”

Chris blinked, stood up with a scowl. “Come on,” he ordered, stomping into the shadows of the small zoo.

Angela noticed he took the mug.

She realized her time with Marc had been everything she needed to handle being around people, no matter how uncomfortable she felt. Whether this cool shield held all day though, was another story.

They labored mostly in silence, watering and then moving the animals to different pens so those could be cleaned, and she didn’t hesitate to get dirty. She was eager to lose herself in the labor. The wind gusted occasionally, blowing her braid around, and she was glad to be somewhat isolated as she listened to the sounds of the sprawling camp behind them. Pots banged, dogs barked, tents flapped and zipped. They were all sounds she’d missed, needed, and they were a comfort as she did what the sullen vet told her to, but they were also a source of tension. Marc was out there somewhere, and so was Kenn.

Charlie arrived not long after they started, and the mother greeted his surprise with a wiggle of her tongue that got him to snicker.

I love you, boy, she sent. We’ll make it work out somehow. I promise.

Charlie shrugged unhappily. *How? He gets angrier every second you let that man stay here.*

Angela sighed. There was nothing she could do about that, and now that Marc was out of quarantine, the tension was only going to get worse.

Neil was at Marc's tent at six thirty, ready to wake him up. The new man's lantern had been on until well after midnight, but there was no sign of Marc or the wolf in the dim, foggy morning.

Neil scanned for the nearest sentry and motioned to the empty tent.

The Eagle gestured toward an area outside the caution tape, where Adrian had netted off a bathing and laundry area.

Neil turned that way, frowning uneasily. The forest was covered in a blanket of knee-high, gray fog, and he moved faster once he was out of sight of the main camp. Who would pass up a hot shower for a frigid (and maybe dangerous) dunk in the open?

A man with something to prove, Neil thought, increasing his pace again. Marine or not, Marc would need help today. He was about to learn...Neil crested the small hill, clearing the thickets of pines, and stopped.

Danny, one eye a nasty shade of purple and black, along with two of his lazy friends, were huddled miserably behind a moss-covered spruce tree. Wearing only boxers, all three men were shivering in the morning chill. The trio heard his steps and looked up, but none of them moved.

Neil gaped when he discovered why.

The wolf sat alertly a few feet away, studying them while Marc, Seth, and Billy (one of Kyle's Level Six Eagles), enjoyed a leisurely swim.

Neil burst out laughing. Those three had meant to rough Marc up, and the wolf had made them into fools.

Dog's rigid ears twitched at the cop's arrival, but his eyes didn't leave his targets, and Neil thought they were lucky not to have been bitten or worse.

"Tell him to call it off, O'Neil. We're late for duty."

"Yeah. It's not funny. He's getting us in trouble," Danny whined.

Neil pushed his cover up a bit to reveal amused scorn. "First, I think I want to hear how you got like that."

Neil wondered who'd beat on Danny yesterday. He knew from the coloring that it had been at least eight to ten hours ago, and Marc had still been in the QZ then.

"All right, Dog. Let 'em go."

At Marc's order, the wolf advanced on the tree instead.

The men behind it jumped, tripping over each other and then flushed in embarrassment when the burly animal hiked a leg and let go of a long stream of urine.

"Dog says piss on you," Marc translated.

Neil and the men in the water laughed hard.

Dog, who had been waiting for his turn to enjoy the water when trouble had started, padded to the bank and jumped in.

He paddled toward Marc, who splashed him and swam away. They began to chase each other, diving around the two men in the creek with them.

Neil kept an eye on the sullen males hurriedly dressing and casting furious glares at the animal in the water. Kenn had gained three weak allies. How would Marc do today?

"So, no one's going to tell me what happened here?"

The tone of command was clear, even to Marc, and the three men gave the answer Neil had expected—silence. They obviously regretted it now and wanted only to slink away but couldn't. His place here was too high to be ignored.

"Get out of here children, and try to play nice next time."

The bored sarcasm made them move faster, and Neil stepped to the muddy bank, where lush green ferns and brambles lined the steep sides of the clear creek.

"Well, you've met the welcoming party. Ready to discover how the other half's been living?"

Marc slapped water toward Dog, who obligingly ducked it and slapped his own paws down, drenching his human.

Marc shook his head, cold water flying as the guards laughed again.

"They gonna play any nicer?"

Neil snorted, watching the animal with pleasant surprise. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

He exchanged a glance with Seth and Billy as Marc climbed out, and turned in time to see the detailed tattoo on the man’s hip as he stripped off his boxers and used his shirt to dry himself with. Kenn had one like it on his arm. Except...damn! Had that said “Angie”?

Marc slid on his jeans and guns, aware that the savvy cop had discovered a vital clue. He waited for the questions with a cool facade.

“How long were you recon?” Neil asked as the wolf padded purposefully into waist-high sticker bushes on the opposite bank and disappeared into the thick fog.

“Eight in recon. Fifteen in the service,” Marc said, pulling on his socks and boots in seconds. When he knelt down to tie, Marc was ready for the bigger questions he saw coming.

“You’ve been in longer than Kenn. You guys served together, right? Same unit?”

Marc used the lines he’d drawn last night; honesty as much as possible. “I was team leader. We didn’t see eye-to-eye on most things, but he followed my orders, so it worked out.”

“You were his boss?” Neil gasped, mental alarms blaring. Kenn hadn’t told Adrian that, and even lying by omission was forbidden when it came to their leader.

The two men in the water were also staring in shock, and Neil knew Seth and Billy would pass the word.

“For the last four years.” Marc slung his wet shirt around his neck like a towel.

Neil stored the information, pretending it didn’t matter when obviously it did. “Kenn was your second?”

Marc adjusted his gun belts with practiced movements. “He was my right hand most of the time: communications, explosives, organizing. He was the go-to guy. Like him or not, he always got the job done.”

Neil was a little surprised to hear Marc say something good about his rival. “He still does. All our CBs and radios have been installed or upgraded by him, and he’s trained all of us on this new hands-free system.”

Knowing that was child’s play compared to the temperamental explosives Kenn had manipulated before the war, Marc volunteered nothing else, asking about their first stop instead.

Neil thought it was interesting to see Marc in the daylight without the long gunfighter’s coat, but those matching .45s slung low on his hips said not to be fooled by how normal he seemed in jeans and a camouflage shirt.

“Self-defense class is next. You’ll need it while the wolf’s out running.”

Marc made no complaint as they strode down the muddy path, giving eye contact and casual nods, but no conversation to the few souls now coming to brave the frigid water.

Neil led them through the cover of the thick trees and swirling fog, preferring to work behind the direct view of the camp for as long as possible. He was glad to see only six people at the defense ring when they arrived.

A large circle, it was made from double-stacked bales of straw, set up at a distance from the main camp in order to distort the noise and hide the intense training that took place with the Eagles. Neil often wondered how many of the Eagles realized Adrian would lose command of Safe Haven if his secrets were exposed.

As the dim orange sun began to brighten the area, the two men settled on overturned water buckets to watch, and Marc understood this was the teaching staff, gathered to practice before the students came.

Three men, all stocky and dressed in black, were lined up across from a hulking, redheaded man in a dirty vest. Towering over them by at least six inches, the giant wore dusty jeans and a black Harley Davidson shirt under his red vest. The big man

appeared eager, and Marc hoped they didn't plan to use body shots.

I've driven softer trucks, he thought, already interested in the coming show.

The trio of men moved together, working as a team, and they all threw solid punches that landed but appeared to have no effect.

The huge man nailed the center fighter in the neck, and he dropped like a stone, struggling to breathe as the giant's arm flew out again. He spun, and the other two joined the first on the ground, blood dripping.

"You're done. Get out." The big Irishman wasn't even winded.

The two men picked themselves up and exited. The third was already on his feet despite the hit to his throat, and the waiting challengers took their injured colleague's places.

"That's a rule here," Neil told Marc quietly. "No shame in bleeding, only in not following the rules. Especially against Doug. We want people to learn to defend themselves. When he's the teacher, you're all right, but only men with a death wish or something to prove will challenge or accept one from Doug. He's brutal. Few here are better."

Marc stored the information, automatically putting Adrian, Kenn, and Neil (hesitantly—there was something about the way the cop carried himself that said he could be deadly if he needed to be) into that category of "few" as the three men went down hard and fast.

"Maybe four-to-one next time, eh, boys?"

The big man laughed as he stepped over them and out of the ring.

Doug had spotted Marc when they emerged from the trees and he came toward them now, frowning darkly. Why would O'Neil bring him here?

"Come by for a lesson?"

Thunder cracked in the distance, as if in response to the menace in Doug's voice.

Neil shook his head, surprised. "I'm showing the newbie around. Marc, this is Doug, unofficial fifth in command. Doug, this is Marc Brady. He came in yesterday."

"Yeah, with Kenn's *wife*." This had to be the man who'd hit her. Doug still couldn't accept that Kenn would do such a thing.

"Her name is Angela, and she's not his wife," Marc corrected.

The two men shook hands and Doug lit up when Marc didn't flinch or pull away from the harsh grip. "You may not need a lesson, Neil, but your friend does."

The words were angry, and Neil shook his head again, aware of the sudden tension and the five men witnessing. Even those who were injured didn't want to miss what might happen.

"New people get a few days to settle in, you know that."

Doug smirked. "Yeah. The boss don't wanna scare off the new sheep." Sarcastic, Doug gave Marc a glare. "I think home-wreckers shouldn't be allowed here!"

There were murmurs of agreement from the others, but Neil was shocked at such hostility from the war vet, who was usually hard to rile. He and Doug were friends, and Neil wasn't sure how to handle the situation.

Marc was. His first encounter with Safe Haven's people had been bad. Why should this one be any different? It was what he would spend the coming days and weeks doing—proving himself.

"What are the rules?" Marc asked, stepping forward suddenly so that the big man was forced to retreat a step.

Doug's anticipation faltered a bit as he noticed the dog tag and recon emblem on Marc's arm as he unstrapped his guns. The new guy was a Marine.

"Rules?" Marc insisted. He was suddenly eager.

"It's normally over when someone bleeds, but for you, Jody, it's done when you agree to leave Kenn's bitch alone and get out!" Doug sent forcefully.

“Deal.”

Lightning flashed, closer this time, and Marc handed his weapons to a protesting Neil.

The cop was worried at the hard looks the two men were exchanging. Hadn't Marc heard him say only men with a death wish or something to prove...?

Neil snapped his mouth shut, almost certain Marc was in over his head.

“And when I win?” Marc asked, getting into the ring.

Doug snorted, trying to pretend Marc's lack of hesitation didn't bother him. Only one guy here had that kind of sand: Adrian, who had been able to bring him down. Even Kenn had been leery. “Don't worry about that, wife-stealer.”

Marc's fury was a hard pit of ice as he swept his opponent. He evaluated, chose, got set as Doug joined him.

“Get ready, *boy*.” Doug taunted.

Marc felt his streak of violence.

Doug's confidence faltered as Marc's countenance filled with the need for blood, but it was too late to withdraw the challenge. The big man lunged forward, making Marc jump out of his reach.

Doug laughed. “Leave now. Last chance.”

Vaguely aware of rain sprinkles evaporating on his hot skin, Marc's response was calculated.

“You talk a lotta shit. Where's the action?”

Doug's advance was fast, but Marc jerked his fist up as he sidestepped, catching Doug's nose. He leaned his weight into it, but didn't give the final, killing shove as he wanted to.

Marc felt the bone give way under his hand as the Irishman's heavy hit glanced off his wounded shoulder with a painful thud.

Blood sprayed, and Doug dropped heavily to his knees. Cradling his bleeding nose with his hands, he struggled not to cry out again or puke from the pain.

Marc leaned close, and Doug flinched back, unable to stop from moaning.

“Don’t ever talk about her that way! You don’t know her, and he’s not worth your loyalty!” Marc straightened up. “He doesn’t own her. She’ll make her own choices.”

He stepped out of the ring, and Neil was there to hand him his guns as the others gathered around Doug in surprised concern.

Marc lit a smoke as he waited for someone to throw him out or call Adrian.

“Wow!” Neil was beyond pleased. Even Adrian had taken a vicious hit and had to use both fists to win.

The state trooper let out a cheer that the other men wanted to echo, but didn’t out of respect for Doug. That kind of skill was admired here.

“Did you break his nose?”

Marc was relieved, but still pissed. “Probably. Angie can tell him for sure. Unless she finds out what he said, and then she might add to it.”

Thunder boomed, the storm missing them as it raced by, and Neil snorted. “You sure aren’t what you seem.”

“Neither is she. I hope she isn’t being treated to this kind of welcome,” Marc vented. “She doesn’t deserve it.”

“Adrian won’t allow it here among the females, but until she makes a public choice...” Neil let the words trail off.

“Until she chooses, they’ll try to get me to leave.”

Neil was sympathetic. He liked Marc. “It’s a very close group here, and most people like Kenn almost as much as they do Adrian. They view you as a threat to the only security they’ve had since before the war.”

“All I want is her happiness. No matter who she’s with.”

“People will realize that.”

Marc hoped he was right, the anger slowly fading into frustration. One thing was for sure: it was all going to be as hard as he’d thought.

Neil turned to the men who had been helping a dazed and bleeding Doug to his feet while listening and not pretending

otherwise. “Two of you get him to John, and the rest of you finish setting up. People will start arriving soon. Alex, you’re in charge.”

Neil raised a brow at Marc, knowing this story would spread like wildfire. “Ready?”

As they walked through the woods, Neil made a mental note to tell Adrian in his nightly report that the man should be considered deadly with his hands. It was a classification only five men here had, and Marc had just dropped one of those with a single hit.

“I’m gonna ask a dumb question now,” Marc warned.

“Shoot.”

“How do so many people know so much? I was in quarantine, and I know she isn’t saying anything, so how do they know?”

“Kenn,” Neil explained. “His behavior changed, says something’s different, that he’s unhappy—and of course, there’s his mouth.”

“Damn. He sure didn’t waste any time.”

“Can’t blame him. I’d put up a fight too.”

“She’s even prettier on the inside.” Marc raised a brow. “So, what’s next?”

“Single women and guns,” Neil supplied.

“Sounds dangerous. I’m in.”

4

They walked a short distance through the trees to a softball field, where about twenty women in jeans sat on bleachers behind the gate. Inside the fenced area, men dressed like police were setting things up on home plate.

They watched as Doug came by, being helped to the medical tent.

“Come on. We’ll see Billy. He’s running the class this week, and then I want a seat next to little Becky,” Neil stated with a leer. “Her smell drives me nuts.”

Marc chuckled, matching Neil’s confident stride.

The men (off-duty sentries?) were putting up targets and sharing smirks, but they kept their attention on each other and not the females. Except...*they are making subtle eye contact*, he noticed, quickly understanding that Adrian picked “nice” guys to teach this class. Probably everyone wanted to do it because all the students were women and, Marc was guessing, single. No need of a dating service here.

Even the setting was ideal. Towering mountains and thick green forests surrounded Safe Haven, and Marc realized it was that way through the entire camp. Not one remnant of the war was visible. He understood it was likely intentional, but he didn’t agree. The truth was always better. Right?

“Hey, O’Neil! Who’s your friend?”

The question came from a cute teenager with a firm, young body, but the trooper only threw a smile over his shoulder and kept walking. “We’ll stop by.”

She nodded easily and went back to her conversation with the others near her, but Marc could feel her keeping track of them. They headed toward the ponytailed man (Billy?) he had briefly met at the creek, and Marc wondered if Neil knew how badly the teenage girl wanted his attention.

“Hey, Billy, got time for a Level test?”

“Sure...” The Eagle grinned. “Yours?”

Neil snorted at the joke. “Funny. This is Marc Brady. You guys met this morning.”

Their handshake was short, civil, and Marc waited as the guard scanned him from hair to boots before looking to the trooper at his side.

“What Level?”

Neil considered, letting Doug’s injury influence him a little. He had planned on a two. “Level Four.”

There were murmurs at that from the women close enough to hear. Six was the highest they had so far.

“You got it. Come on over here. Marc, right?”

They hadn’t spoken at all earlier. Everyone had been too busy witnessing the wolf corner Danny and his friends.

“Yes.” Brady followed casually, not sure what to expect as they stepped over to a small stack of hay bales that were neatly lined with guns, ammo, hand wipes, and a first aid kit. Smart, organized...it made him uneasy.

“First, take your gun apart as fast—”

Marc was already moving, hands almost a blur. Seconds later, he slapped the magazine in and handed it over, butt first, for inspection.

Billy hit the timer. “New record, though it won’t make the books without enough witnesses. Pass.”

Billy handed Neil a black handkerchief, very curious. Had Marc done that to Doug? He and Neil had come from that direction.

“We do one simple shooting test for each Level. You have thirty seconds to hit as many bull’s-eyes as you can, blind of course. Seven or more to pass to Level Four, but a bulls-eye in the farthest target is an automatic go.”

Marc lined himself up with the roller-bound boards and motioned for Neil to tie the blindfold.

In his element if only for this moment, Marc fired once from where he stood and gave his gun a single twirl, unable to resist. He could have made it from twice that distance with only a brief glance.

“Bull’s-eye! Farthest target!”

The women cheered loudly, clearly taking an interest in the new man.

Marc reloaded and holstered in smooth movements that drew more respect.

“Man, Kenn’s gonna hate you being here,” Billy observed, snickering. “Nice. Pass. Give him his paperwork, Neil.”

Billy peered at the sheet on his clipboard. "All right. Class has started. Samantha Moore, please. Adrian said you go first every day until you can hit seven of nine targets with one magazine."

Neil was all smiles as Marc joined him, and they stayed on the bottom row of the sturdy bleachers as the tall, skinny blonde moved toward the targets. She barely resembled the woman who had stumbled from a mostly dead horse and asked them for a gun. She had cleaned up nicely.

Great eyes, Neil thought. Not like Angela's, which changed color, but still strong and attractive.

"Hey, Neil. Where ya been? Me and the girls looked for you at breakfast."

Becky drew Neil's attention back to her, marking the new blonde woman as an enemy.

Neil reddened, and waved a hand at Marc as the women whispered and giggled. "I've been showing the new guy around."

There were ten of them, all between thirty and forty-five except for little Becky. They wore tight jeans, hair bows, and flowery perfumes that made it clear the women knew this was a matchup class. They had come prepared to snag a man, and in Marc's book, that made it time to go.

"This is Marc Brady. He has trouble making friends. Anything we can do about that?"

Neil ignored Marc's embarrassed protesting.

Becky glanced at an older woman that Marc's mind said would fit perfectly into a Nazi documentary.

"Hilda?"

Becky's voice was respectful, and Neil gave Marc a nudge. "Stop glowering," he hissed, struggling not to ogle the bare thigh of the teenager in cutoffs next to him. Like the rest of the people, she was enjoying the warmer weather, and the sight of bare flesh was an instant draw in this camp.

Everyone was quiet, waiting for the pale woman to speak. She reminded Marc of Dog as she scanned him.

That deeply evaluating look is going to wear thin, Marc thought.

“Is he useful?” Hilda paused, cracking a toothless grin. “Single?”

Neil was glad he’d thought to include her as everyone snickered. The old woman didn’t have any official authority, but when the better cook had come, Adrian had made Hilda a sort of den mother to the new women. Those she had helped now followed her lead and if he hadn’t included her, she could have caused trouble. Neil knew she wouldn’t have, though. She was a Kenn-hater and not quiet about it. With her support, Marc would have a better chance at winning over the rest of the people. Keeping the females happy was a priority in Safe Haven.

“He’ll be one of Adrian’s, I’d wager, and he keeps company with a wild wolf. As for the single part...” Neil shrugged. “That’s undecided, I think.”

“Then it’s true. He lusts for Kenn’s wife.”

Neil held up a hand, dismissing Marc’s anger. “They aren’t married. Kenn lied. Marc loves Angie, Hilda, and you know we don’t get to choose that.” Neil’s gaze flicked to Becky and back. “It chooses us.”

Hilda’s countenance was hard. “You speak truth, but if they are already sleeping together—”

“That’s none of your business!” Marc broke in hotly. “What the hell gives you people the right to ...”

He stopped at Neil’s expression of horror.

Most of the women were disappointed, sure he had blown it, but the den mother only waved a hand. “Must be love. Too tense to have gotten laid.”

Marc’s mouth dropped open as surprised laughter rang out, and he was unable to keep from chuckling. He saw that many of the females around the old woman were subtly offering to help him with that problem, and he looked away, cheeks scarlet.

Hilda turned to Neil. “The females will not follow Kenn’s lead on this. The man will be judged by his actions here.”

“Thank you. Anything I should tell the boss?” Neil asked instinctively.

Hilda gave Brady another once-over. “Tell our guardian to search again. He is not seeing the true value.” The woman raised her voice to include the guards, who had come closer to listen. “Now, when does this class end? *Accidentally* shot Kenn’s tire, my ass! Making me do this again is cruel and unusual punishment!”

“For the men running it,” Neil joked, making them laugh again. He leaned toward Marc as the women chattered and stared. “We’re done here unless you want to stay for the show. Probably be funny. She’s in good form today.”

Marc shrugged, still uncomfortable. “You’re my agent. It’s your call.”

Neil didn’t deny it. “We’ll go. She doesn’t need a bigger audience to play for.”

Marc noted the satisfied glint in the old woman’s expression as they stood up, and knew instinctively that he had pleased her. Because she saw Kenn for what he was and was glad someone had finally come who could give him a run for his money?

Marc sighed, nodding a polite goodbye. *It doesn’t matter*, he thought, watching Becky—still facing Hilda—hold a hand behind her back and pass Neil a small note that he betrayed no sign of receiving. *Ah. So that’s how it is.*

“It’s been a pleasure, ladies. We’ll see you at the contest?”

There were promises and more giggles at Neil’s question. Marc was glad when they were out of sight of the hot, female stares that were burning holes into him. Angie wouldn’t like this.

“That was fun.” He grinned suddenly, wondering if she would be jealous, but Neil only heard the sarcasm.

“You’ll learn to use things to your advantage too, but first, you need a foundation here, and roots only come from one of three ways. Adrian’s attention is the quickest. Working hard and

fitting in are good, but slow. The last option is FND. Foot-in-the-door. Add the women's approval to any of them, and it's an almost indestructible place."

Marc was a little confused and thought again that it didn't matter, since he wasn't staying. He had no problem with what Neil was trying to do, though, and was glad he had a friend in the guard, who clearly had pull here.

"The parking area is next. I need to find out if Kenn got the other refer truck running. Adrian plans to butcher today, so we need to get a rig ready."

They neared the area quickly, and Marc hated to admit that he was a bit nervous as the lake of vehicles came into sight. He wasn't afraid of Kenn, but with the exception of a few, these were definitely Kenn's people. Everything that had happened so far confirmed it, and the fighter inside didn't like not knowing what to expect.

The wide area was filled with rusty, dusty, older, and mostly American-made steel. Almost every driver door sported a flag, some cars covered in red-white-and-blue, and it gave the area a feeling of sad honor. It took only a second for Marc to understand that the vehicles, big and small, dented and pristine, were not randomly parked. Some were being shielded, and again, Marc was impressed. It was hard to steal or destroy what you didn't know was there.

He drew in a steady breath as they neared the group of eight men standing around the front end of a faded-blue semi with an open hood—all smoking, talking quietly around the two men sitting half inside the engine compartment.

"Hey, guys. Any luck yet?"

Knowing anything he had to offer wasn't welcome, Marc hung back as heads spun at Neil's call.

Cold attitudes appraised him. Kenn was one of the men under the truck's greasy hood, and the mood was already aggravated.

Seth was the second man inside the truck, and Marc took a chance by nodding hello. Seth had protested when Danny started on him at the creek, but Dog had handled the problem before anyone else could.

Brady was relieved when the guard returned the gesture, and then looked around for the wolf.

Marc shook his head, shrugging as Kenn answered Neil in short tones.

What the hell is O'Neil doing with him? Kenn's eyes asked it, and Marc was a bit surprised at the challenge in Neil's expression. The cop knew Kenn was on edge, was trying to push him out. Adrian had missed it, but this quiet officer hadn't? It was hard to swallow.

"Compressor's shot on the trailer and there's a short in the engine wiring. We'll have to strip it down," Kenn said.

Neil noted Marc's motion to Seth, was glad he had made a friend on his own. "We'll help."

Kenn wiped a greasy hand down his dirty jeans so he could light a smoke and suck in enough air to sound normal. "Chris is bringing the truck around. Adrian wants a count."

The Marine bent back over the engine, pretending Marc wasn't there. Giving Tonya a workout had settled him down a bit, returned his control.

Seven of the men watching tried to do the same, while listening for every word the new man might say.

Neil stepped over to Marc. "Keep track of how many boxes and crates you carry. You'll be asked when we're done."

"Should I count each one out loud so no one can bitch when my numbers match up?"

Neil continued as if he hadn't heard, but he liked it that Marc was telling them, he too, was irritated. They'd been warned, and while Neil was hoping Kenn might be goaded into doing something that would get him in trouble, he agreed with Marc's side. She loved him and he loved her. It was simple.

“We’re moving food,” Neil said. “Crates of bread and dough mostly, but we still have some potatoes, cheese, and oranges. Adrian got most of it right after the war, at big factories. A lot of what we find now went bad weeks ago.”

“Smart to check the warehouses and plants. Most people wouldn’t.”

“That’s Adrian.”

“So you need more refrigerated trucks?”

“Yeah. The dust clogs everything up. We go through a lot of compressors and haven’t found a big enough auto store that hasn’t been destroyed or too looted to have what we need.”

Marc said nothing. He knew where one was. He and Angie had spent a night there a week ago, doing tune-ups. It was a small solution to one of this camp’s many minor inconveniences, but Marc wasn’t sure yet who he would give his ideas to.

“You don’t happen to know anything about wiring or compressors, do you?”

The question came from Zack, Kenn’s right-hand man, according to scuttlebutt. Marc hesitated before shrugging, aware that none of them, Neil included, wanted him to fix this in front of Kenn.

“Very little,” Marc hedged, sure the most loyal ally wasn’t going to let it go. Zack was hoping for an opening to a fight, and he’d given him one.

“Okay, then. We’ll—”

“He didn’t say no,” one of the other men interrupted before the truck driver could.

Neil shook his head, sure members going by had stopped to observe. Tension was detected a lot faster now. “Don’t start shit, Jeff.”

The Level Two Eagle gave him a cold glare. “Shit started when *he* came here.”

The stocky man glared at Neil in a way that said he wanted Adrian to get involved, and Neil knew he couldn’t stop it. Marc would have to handle this one on his own, too.

“So, how about it, *Wolfman*? Kenn won’t mind this time because it’s not behind his back.”

There were murmurs of agreement, and Marc snorted. “I’m sure he can take care of it in either case.”

Jeff hesitated at the cold tone of warning, thinking of Doug’s nose, but Kenn was listening, waiting. The sentry pushed harder, eager to be the one Kenn thanked, not Zack, when the new man was made to leave. “Come on. What’s a truck compared to a wife?”

“Once you turn your back on something for so long that you’ve created a whole new life, it no longer belongs to you but to the one who cared for it while you were gone,” Marc said, thinking he’d done the same thing to her all those years ago. It gave his voice a tone of regret all the men were surprised to hear. “As for the truck, if Kenn says it’s done, then it is. There was no one better at shit like this on *my* team.”

Marc lit a smoke, heart thumping with awareness that he was revealing secrets and bringing to light realities that Kenn didn’t want known. He waited for the Marine’s reaction with steady, ready hands.

“You guys talk more than women,” Kenn said. “Here comes asswipe with the truck. Let’s get it done.”

Kenn’s tone betrayed none of his anger and embarrassment, but his red face did and a few of the men began to wonder more than they already had been. They wanted to be loyal to Adrian’s XO, but only if he was worthy of it.

Except for Zack, who didn’t have much of a moral line yet, but even he was forced to admit that Kenn had been keeping secrets and telling lies to keep those secrets. If all that stuff wasn’t true, Kenn would have argued, right? *In a heartbeat.*

Everyone except Marc marched to the truck as it came to a jarring stop, and he waited for Kenn to climb down, letting the others get out of earshot.

The two men stared at each other with cool dislike.

Marc didn't want to deal with the fight he noted in Kenn's expression, not unless they could end it all right here. "Her choice, not ours. I won't influence her."

"You already have. She's changed."

"You're the one who changed her," Marc insisted. "This is how she should have been."

He held up his hand again when Kenn's eyes narrowed with more questions. "We don't want to do this now. I wanted to tell you we saw an undamaged AutoZone in Lincoln, Nebraska. It's a super-center, still had glass in most of the windows, and it should have some of what you need."

Marc stepped past him, and was surprised when Kenn wrote it in a small, glossy black notebook with lettering on the front cover that he wasn't close enough to read. He hadn't expected the sullen Marine to listen, had thought he would tell Neil later, but knew he had to try to show these people that, he too, could follow the chain of command.

The group of quiet, tense men began unloading bags, crates, and boxes, and Marc was silent, shut out of their occasional jokes and taunts. As he kept pace, he wondered what Angie was doing and if she knew the price that he would pay every day that he stayed here waiting for her.

5

It took them a lot longer than Marc had expected. They stripped the rig—all of it—from gas to brake pads and headlights, neatly packing and marking. When it was done, all of them were greasy and sweaty. They split up with little talk.

"We've got a bit, if you want to put up your tent now," Neil offered as they traveled in the opposite direction that Kenn had gone.

"Sure. Where?"

The pleased trooper led the way. “See the two big tents in the middle? Men’s and women’s. Now, the empty corner on the left? That’s where mine was. Put yours there. I’m on your right.”

Not understanding but almost sure Neil hadn’t gotten permission first, Marc asked, “This gonna get you in trouble?”

“Those are defense slots and can only be assigned by Adrian or a couple of other people. Angela’s is directly across the bonfire from yours, next to the one the women are putting up for the blonde... Samantha, I think,” Neil said, studying the rippling waves of corn silk hair being blown wildly by the cool wind. *She’s actually kinda cute.*

“Won’t that cause problems for you?”

Neil was thinking Sam needed to gain a little weight. Hilda would help with that once he mentioned it.

“Maybe with Kenn, but it will tell the camp that you have support in the chain of command. As long as Adrian doesn’t overrule it, you’ll get more respect.”

Marc met Neil’s eye at the confirmation of his earlier suspicions. His friend did have a high place. “It’s a blow to your authority here, right, if he says to put it somewhere else?”

“He won’t,” Neil assured. “Let’s get your new home up.”

As they carried things from both Blazers, his and Angie’s personal stuff mixed up, Marc wondered what Kenn had thought about the nearly identical vehicles, and knew coincidence wasn’t it. He counted it as a double hit, personally, picking an identical replacement. It was fate that a second match to hers had been there at all. He and Angie had always been alike, and all those years apart had faded for him the minute his lips had touched hers.

A half-hour later, they were done, and Marc was glad the men’s area had stayed mostly empty, because the guards covering the inside of the camp were anything but accepting. The people moving by were also frowning, whispering as they stared

in disapproval. He hoped Neil didn't get into trouble with them too.

Marc glanced at his watch, and Neil caught the movement. "You won't be late."

Marc kept his tone even. "He must find you handy to have around."

Neil got them moving again. "That's the idea."

"And where do I fit? What do you get for helping me settle in?"

Neil's face was open, serious. "Exactly what I have now—Adrian's respect. He asked me a long time ago to watch out for people like him. I might have overlooked you if not for Kenn's behavior and her fear. Not many people here can compete with all he does for Adrian, can't rattle his cage much. If Kenn considers you a serious rival, and clearly he does, then you must be one of them."

6

Marc waited outside Adrian's tent, able to smell himself and hating it, but he had to give them credit. They had dealt him a tough couple of hours of labor with the heaviest boxes, the weakest bags, the crates with the cracked, sharp corners, and the leaking cans of gas. But what exactly could he say if he had any intentions of complaining? Which he didn't. They had all worked hard and felt like it when they were done. The only difference was that he would smell himself for a while, since his boots got most of the pungent fuel.

"Penny for one of those thoughts?"

Marc rotated to find the breeze flirting with the high hemline of a red dress and remained silent, willing himself to feel something, anything, for the sexy redhead. He'd noticed her around, the bright clothing an instant lure that he was sure was intentional.

"Like what ya see?" she drawled invitingly.

Nothing. *Damn it!* “You’re very pleasing to look at,” he offered. It was the best he could do.

Tonya’s smile faltered at the disappointed tone. “Only ta look at?”

“Beauty is skin deep comes to mind. I wonder why?” Marc asked. He trusted his first impressions.

Not expecting that response, Tonya wrinkled her nose as the heavy smell of fuel came to her on the stiff breeze.

“Because it’s never been truer than with Tonya.”

Adrian ducked into his tent, leaving Tonya to wonder how much he’d heard.

“She’s trouble. Untrustworthy...the bottom rung of Safe Haven life,” Adrian called loudly, her sputtered protests music to his ears. “Come on in, Marc. The whore will keep.”

Tonya stomped away furiously, muttering.

“You probably shouldn’t turn your back on her,” Marc said, stepping into complete organization and the light smell of smoking. *I might fit in here*, he thought as he sat down in the chair Adrian motioned to.

The table between them was covered with small, perfectly aligned stacks of paperwork, and Adrian removed a little brown box from the long footlocker by his perfectly made-up cot.

“Good instincts. Tonya is just as dangerous as the slavers, maybe more so. When they attack, I’ll have a small chance of seeing it come. She’ll try hard to blindside me.”

Marc grinned uneasily, thinking she was the only one he’d met so far who wasn’t happy with Adrian’s leadership.

“What’s her problem?” he asked, as Adrian rolled a thick, neat joint from the green buds in the box.

“Power. She wants it and can’t find a better way to get it than by spreading her legs.”

Marc thought the mirrors sewn into the tops of the canvas walls were a clever way to illuminate the tent. “Neither you nor Kenn are interested, and she’s pissed?”

It was a very observant question, and Adrian shrugged, automatically listening for and hearing the calm, reassuring footsteps of guards walking their posts outside.

“I can’t speak for Kenn, but me, no.” Adrian lowered his voice and began the bonding process that had never failed. “At least, not anymore.”

Marc chuckled, understanding the boss man had been there and hadn’t been impressed.

Adrian lit the joint, inhaling deeply. He met Marc’s eye, got things started. “Before we talk about anything else, I have a single question, and a lie will get you an invitation to leave. Are you sleeping with Kenn’s wife?”

Marc went cold, and the Marine inside sat up, began storing information.

“She’s not his wife and no, not that it’s any of your business. She’s not like that.”

“Don’t tell me it’s only friendship.”

“I won’t.”

“Sex, then. You want to sleep with her.”

Marc snorted at the obvious. “You’ve seen her. What man wouldn’t? She’s beautiful, inside and out.”

“It’s worse than sex. It’s love.” Marc said nothing, and Adrian leaned in, passing the joint. “You brought her here, and you’ll stay to be close, even though you’ve already begun to realize you may never have anything more.”

“I’m not the only one with good instincts,” Marc muttered. “When it gets too bad, I’ll go.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

Marc inhaled, passed. “It’s the only thing left to me now that she has her man back.”

Adrian considered, thinking he would probably end up liking Marc despite the unwelcome tension that had come with him. He was obviously miserable, and Angie was right. Marc would need to be kept as busy as possible if he were going to be able to settle

in. They definitely needed him, even if he did have an ache for another Marine's woman.

"Backing off is the right choice. They were together for a long time before the war," Adrian said, taking the smoldering weed as the tent flap rustled in the wind.

"And if I told you I knew her before he did? That I grew up with her? Would that help me here at all?"

"If people knew, yes. Childhood sweethearts?"

"Something like that," Marc responded bitterly. "I was the first hands under her shirt, the first blow-job she ever gave. I taught her to use a hammer, to swing on a tire, to smile. The first love letter she ever wrote was to me, and I still have it. It almost killed us both when we were...split up."

The two men finished the joint in silence as Adrian put the unspoken pieces together. He had thought Kenn had the clear claim on her, but Marc had been her first love, and when war came, Marc had found her, protected her...while Kenn hadn't searched at all. He now knew how the boy fit in, too. What a mess.

"Kenn know any of that?"

"No. She doesn't think he could handle it, and I agree."

"I don't."

"You don't know him."

"Let me tell you what these people know. She's his. He's been telling us that all along, and we've had no reason to doubt him. And she was on her way to him when he found her."

Adrian's gaze was hard, and it was one the note-taking male inside Marc wanted to answer. "If she was coming to him, then why is she avoiding being alone with him? She spent the night in Charlie's tent. She came for her son and was hoping to find people she could build a life with."

Adrian knew it. He knew Angela longed for a place that would accept her for what she was—special. But he also needed more of the past, more of the truth, and he said nothing, waiting to see if Marc would reveal it to get his point across.

“She spent a lot of years unhappy. She deserves the chance to start over if she wants to, the chance to be loved and protected. None of those are things your heavy-handed pet can give her.”

Adrian’s face became stone at the words.

Marc blew out an angry breath. “I apologize. No matter what it looks like, I shouldn’t have said that, but you don’t know how special she is.”

“Yes, I do, and she’ll help as much as either of the men who want her.”

“Not under Kenn’s rules,” Marc denied. “She can’t go back under his thumb. I won’t allow it.”

Adrian didn’t doubt the man would do something drastic if it was called for. “The females have the power here. She can do what she wants, if she can settle in and be accepted.”

“With Kenn.”

Adrian lit a smoke. “The herd would be calmed faster, but I mean it when I say the women’s choices are what matters. We need them happy and spreading around all the good things that come with them.”

Marc almost believed him. If not for Kenn having such a high place here, he would probably be sold. The things he’d stored suggested Adrian was obsessive, territorial, and maybe even dangerous, but he was also one of the good guys.

“You’ll look out for her?” Marc asked suddenly.

“Yes.” Adrian almost wished he were getting her with the responsibility. “As will others.”

Marc was still unsure what kind of place they had found, but he was willing to give them the chance that most of this camp was already denying him.

“So what’s the plan?” Adrian asked, handing him a soda from the cooler at his feet.

Marc opened it. “Nothing. It’s her choice.”

“And if she chooses him?”

Marc was full of pain that he didn’t bother to hide. “Try to make a life here, I guess. For a while.”

“So you can stay close to her?”

“For a while,” Marc repeated himself. “It’ll be hard to leave either of them.”

“My next question is all about you. What does Marc Brady need to be content?”

“Beyond getting her here, I hadn’t thought much about it, wouldn’t let myself.”

“It’s here, Marine. The life you want is here, but you’ll have to fight for it.”

“You have no idea what I want,” Marc warned coldly.

“Don’t I?”

“You may think so, but you’d be wrong. I’m a loner. I don’t fit.”

“That won’t get you what you want. Neil told you about FND work?”

Marc sighed, annoyed and yet impressed with the ambush. Adrian definitely knew how to accomplish his goals.

“Being a loner won’t get you anything here, but if you have something to prove, I’m offering you my support.”

“Why?”

The tone demanded honesty, and Adrian gave it willingly. “Because she doesn’t want him, she wants you, and that tells me you’re one of us, even if you don’t know it.”

Marc liked the words but only shrugged. “You talk sweet and make a lot of promises, don’t you?”

Adrian nodded seriously. “Yes, and I deliver. Ask any of these people. All you have to do is what you’ve already have been. Be patient, pay attention, and react to each situation as it deserves.”

He paused pointedly. “And be useful to me, of course.”

Marc had expected it. “I can do that.”

“Good. FND is the hardest and most respected way to earn a place here.”

“I don’t understand all of it yet, but after this morning, I’m pretty sure I owe Neil a case of beer.”

Adrian crushed out his smoke, buzzing pleasantly. “Neil is a good guy, with a cement place here. You couldn’t have a better reference.”

Marc knew. “Except yours.”

Adrian leaned down to pick up a manila envelope from his open footlocker. “You’ll have that when you need it, but I have to ask that you stay away from her until she makes the choice. I have great and shitty work for you, though a lot of it will be behind-the-scenes things that you won’t get much credit for.”

For Marc, the decision was an easy one. There had to be something to take the place of his time with Angie. “You mean like being a Marine. Shut up when someone asks a question that they shouldn’t have, and fight until you win or die. Been doing it for a long time. See no reason why that should change here.”

Adrian was pleased. “Good. We’ll start with the FND.”

Marc took the twin of Kenn’s notebook when it was held out to him, reading the word “Eagle” in glossy print on the front. Kenn would be pissed about this too.

“Let me guess. You need someone to shovel dog shit?”

The observant leader snorted. “Close enough. I need a complete inventory and organization system for the supply trucks, and maybe an alarm of some kind.”

“How many trucks, and do I only count supplies?”

“Just the rigs for now. I’ll also need to know what’s being used: a sign-out system or something. Until its ready, Kenn, the cook, and the doctor will give you their lists.”

“Kenn?”

“He’s above you in rank, but on some things you’ll report directly to me. This is one of them.”

“Sounds like fun,” Marc said, not anxious for all the awkward moments.

Adrian shrugged ruefully. “Highly unlikely.”

“Start in the morning?”

“Yes, the earlier the better. Now, the no-credit work. I need a lethal defensive plan.”

Marc heard the tone. “You’re worried about being attacked.”

“Yes. We have food, water, fuel, and women. Someone will eventually try to take them, and I intend to be ready... But I don’t want a battle plan to trigger or escalate a war.”

Images were stirring in Marc’s tactical mind. “You want a plan to *end* one.”

Marc knew Adrian was thinking of someone specifically. Did Safe Haven have enemies? Was that why there were undercover guards lurking in the shadows?

“I want to catch them by surprise, and then kill as many as I can.”

Ah, the slavers. Adrian has big ambitions, Marc thought. “Give me a few days.”

“My eyes only.”

“Not even Kenn’s?”

“No, but he did give me the idea to talk to you about it. Said you were good at shit like this.”

“We worked well together, but we were never friends.”

“It’s too bad you both want the same woman. You guys probably would have been great here together.”

“It’s more like ironic,” Marc said, standing. “Can’t wait to see how fate screws with us next.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Sergeant,” Adrian joked and warned as he held out a hand.

Marc didn’t hesitate to shake. “You know it.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Testing...

1

Marc wasn't surprised to find Neil waiting for him as he came from Adrian's orderly tent. "What's next? Roof jumping? A visit to the lion's den?"

Neil chuckled. "We have time for one more stop before we get a shower and lunch."

Marc snorted as they passed small clusters of people going to the mess, none of them friendly.

"You must enjoy your days off," he joked.

"This is it for the week," Neil answered. "I just can't sit on my ass when there's so much to be done."

"Point taken. So what's next?"

Neil leered. "My tent for a beer and a joint."

Marc laughed, relieved. Finally, something he could look forward to!

"Deal. You lead, I'll follow."

Neil gave him an odd, searching stare. "Probably will be the other way around before long. Come on. Let's get stoned."

When Neil and Marc stepped into the short mess line a while later, they were cleaned up, a little high and talking comfortably, both ignoring the openly cold and curious stares as they got to know each other.

The wind had died down, removing the chill, and Neil noted Marc scanning their surroundings (for escape routes?) subtly

sweeping the forty or so people talking quietly while having lunch. Searching for Angie, Neil had no doubt.

They got their trays quickly, and when Neil led them around Adrian's crowded center table, Marc was aware that the number of people frowning doubled.

"You usually sit with Adrian?"

Neil nodded as they sat down side-by-side, backs to the truck's wall. "First time I haven't since the day he changed my life."

Neil squirted gobs of ketchup onto his fries.

Marc frowned. "Changed your life?"

Neil was aware of how many hostile glares he was getting, not only from Kenn, but also from the camp and the Eagles. "The day he invited me in, asked for the help I'd been waiting all my life to give. For you, that's today. You just don't realize it yet."

Marc acted as if he understood, and he almost did. Adrian had handpicked these men, given them authority and respect. That kind of bond ran deep.

"So shouldn't you be over there?" Marc groaned as the crispy fish melted in his mouth. "Mmm...haven't had fish since December. This is great."

Neil salted his messy fries. "We found a farm in Utah, spent three days cleaning and freezing. We also kept some live tanks for when we settle down."

Marc was impressed, and not just with Adrian's leadership skills. He was surrounded by order and efficiency, and like Angela, he was a bit overwhelmed. There were women wearing fake nails and too much perfume, dogs with bright collars walking the trucks, picnic baskets and coolers being filled, voices, barking, dishes rattling, engines revving. But there were other signs too, like the heavy security that said it hadn't always been this way. There were tables full of men dressed as construction workers and old people sitting at nearly every table, but it was the office types that Marc hadn't expected. These very different people were not only tolerating each other, but also

bonding and finding friendships, and it was amazing. How had Adrian managed it?

“You okay?”

Marc snapped out of his thoughts. “Checking things out. Won’t Adrian be upset you’re not eating over there?”

“I’d be surprised,” Neil answered. “He knows what I hope to accomplish, knows I won’t tell you or the camp anything they shouldn’t hear. But I tell him everything. You should know that now. I’m more Adrian’s than I ever was my mother’s.”

Marc heard the warning, but he was an open book. “What about Kenn? He has a lot of friends here.”

Neil tried not to frown, almost succeeded. “He didn’t at first. It was mostly what Adrian saw in him. He’s been in the thick of things since we found him, and he got as close to Adrian as fast as he could. Some of us grumbled when he became the boss man’s shadow, but when we understood how much Adrian needs him, we settled down, learned to get along.” Neil sighed. He and Kyle had to pin their hopes on somebody. “To be fair, Kenn’s earned his place here. He worked hard, and as soon as people benefited from it, he had plenty of pals. Though I doubt he knows why. Probably thinks he’s popular because of his winning personality.”

“It’s because he’s so helpful to Adrian?” Marc guessed.

“Yes. He frees Adrian’s time, keeps him from being overloaded and keeps him content with the progress we’re making. Anything that keeps Adrian in charge, this camp will agree to. He’s our strength, and no one, except Tonya, wants him to leave.”

“Would he? This is a great setup.”

Neil shrugged, constantly watching for problems the way Adrian did. “Kenn might be able to answer that, but not me. He threatened to once, in the beginning. Said if we didn’t pull ourselves together and do things his way, he’d go, and no one wants to take the chance.”

Marc leaned in, kept his voice very low despite the roar of the dozens of conversations going on around them. “Sounds a bit like a dictatorship.”

Neil wasn’t offended. “With any other man it would be, and we wouldn’t care if he left, but Adrian’s a true patriot. He loves this country, and as long as he keeps giving back what was taken from us, we’ll follow him anywhere.”

Neil paused, gaze going to where Kenn sat on Adrian’s right. “That’s Adrian. Kenn, well, some of us have always suspected there’s something wrong with him. You’ll have allies here simply because of your rivalry, and when you can tell right off who they are—the allies, not the friends—talk to me again about Kenn and his secure place here.”

Marc was already able to guess where this was leading. “I don’t want it.”

Neil didn’t believe that, but didn’t call Marc’s bluff. “You’ll have more friends that way, but never what you really want.”

Marc was heartened to think he would even make friends, and he was able to give a cheerful welcome to Seth when the man sat down across from them, mug in hand.

“Ain’t that fish great?” Seth asked playfully.

Neil shook his head at the mischievousness as the murmur of the voices raised another notch at his actions. “You’re going to piss Kenn off. He’s sure you’re his.”

“Guess it’s time he knew better.” Seth’s disgust was clear.

“He’ll make you pay.”

Seth snorted at Neil’s warning. “Kinda hopin’ he will. Take some of the heat off our friend here. Besides, it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve stung his pride.”

Neil shrugged. “No, but being sent to babysitting class had to suck.”

Seth leaned forward, leering. “Not the teacher, though, I did try. Yummy, yummy, Miss Peggy!”

They all burst out laughing, drawing attention to how well the new man was fitting in, and it took the trio a moment to realize there was total silence from the tables around them.

Unaware of the connection that had already been made, but responding to it instinctively, Marc found their leader in the tense crowd. He followed Adrian's line of sight.

Dog was padding steadily through the tables, following the same route that he and Neil had taken.

"Is he hungry?"

Marc nodded at Adrian's question, shoving the fighter inside back to his place. "Probably. I have what he likes in the Blazer."

Adrian was impressed when the beautiful wolf passed fingers holding scraps without even sniffing.

Dog sat down at Marc's feet and stared at him with nervous, golden eyes.

"We feed them at night so they gain more weight. Stop by the vet today and pick up a collar so he doesn't get shot," Adrian instructed.

"We'll do that as soon as we leave here," Neil quickly answered.

Adrian stood and moved their way, much to Kenn's displeasure. The center table had gotten tense when Seth revealed what most of them had already known, and Adrian was almost glad to be away from the simmering man.

"Okay to touch?"

Marc shrugged, not lighting the smoke he wanted in case he needed his hands free. "Dog loves Angie. She could ride him like a horse, but he tried to eat some of your guys earlier."

"Our guys," Adrian corrected and didn't need to look to know that Kenn had gotten up, was storming away from the mess. "You're one of us now."

Adrian let that ring and sat on the bench across from Marc, slowly extending his hand.

Marc slid his own toward his gun, knowing he would have to shoot his friend if Dog bit Safe Haven's much-loved leader. The

camp would demand it, and he tried to tell Dog that silently, but wasn't sure it had gotten through without Angie nearby to direct things.

Adrian also understood the risk, but he had to show the people that he approved of both man and beast, and that they, too, would fall in line where they belonged.

Dog flinched as Adrian tried to touch him, the skin around his teeth drawn back, and Adrian understood. Like its owner, the wolf wanted things on his own terms.

Adrian put his hands on his knees, palms up, and almost immediately, Dog advanced to nudge his fingers with a cold nose.

The witnesses were able to breathe again, and Adrian glanced up as his hands caressed the softest fur he'd ever felt. "Tell Chris at least purple."

Marc knew Neil would fill him in.

Adrian's next words were sharp and clear in the watchful silence of the mess. "Do you plan to let him roam free? Not worried he won't return?"

The double meaning was obvious.

Marc chose his words carefully, aware of the wolf placing himself between Adrian and the rest of the camp. What was with this feeling, this need to serve Adrian that everyone else felt?

"You're the boss," Marc conceded evenly. "So his roaming free is up to you, but no, I don't worry. I've never chained him. Who am I to keep him if he doesn't want to be with me?"

Adrian liked the answer and so did everyone else who heard it. Kenn was right about this one. Marc was definitely fast on his feet.

Adrian stood slowly, sweeping the curious mess as the wolf stayed by him. At least he'd converted one of the two today. The man would take more effort.

"Level tests tonight and then the poker tournament." Earning scowls from Kenn's allies, Adrian included Marc by jerking a

thumb toward Dog. “Bring the wolf. We’ll see if we can get him drunk.”

Marc laughed with everyone else, but noticed that the minute Adrian was out of sight, the mood of the quickly emptying mess became cold again.

“They’ll come around,” Neil comforted, drawing his attention. “What you should worry about is that collar. Red is the most dangerous, with purple right below that. Only four dogs here have made it that far. If the wolf doesn’t pass, you’ll have to chain him up when you’re not with him.”

Marc blew out a sigh as he patted Dog’s chest comfortingly. “Sorry boy, looks like I’m not the only one doing tricks.”

Marc noticed Seth was scanning the shadows of the camp. *And checking in with an undercover guard? Yes.* Marc stored it, raised a brow. “Wanna come along?”

Seth nodded eagerly as he stood up. “Yes, but I have a shift right now.”

He stared at Neil for a brief second where Marc read an agreement on something.

“I’ll hear about it, heard a lot already,” Seth commented.

He faded into the shadows near the path Adrian had taken.

Marc was relieved. He’d made two friends here, and that could be all the difference between sticking it out for a while and running in two weeks or a month.

Marc sighed, cleaning up his place like Neil was doing. If he wanted to settle in with these people, he would need to earn a place by Adrian. That was clear. Marc didn’t actually want it, just longed to be alone with Angie and their son—who was avoiding him so far—but he already knew she wasn’t leaving. This was a good place with good people, strong survivors who needed what she had to offer, and she would be stupid to go now that she knew there was a place for her.

What about you? his selfish, male mind asked, and Marc pushed it away. He wasn’t Kenn. His needs and wants didn’t come before hers. Never would.

“Damn. I have to go.”

Angela pulled off her gloves as the surly vet glared up from his tray.

“Shift’s done anyway. Whatever you did wrong, it’s okay now.”

Angela wiped at the sweat rolling down her neck as Charlie gathered their trash. “I didn’t get sent here. I’m on my own time, and I’ll be back.”

Angela enjoyed the surprise on the vet’s face. For some reason, she had found herself determined to show him that all females weren’t useless.

When she arrived at Adrian’s tent, he was sitting inside the open flap at a small card table, an empty chair across from him. Angela hoped she didn’t smell like what she’d been doing all morning.

“You’re late,” he said, thinking she was easily the prettiest woman in camp. Tonya had been replaced, and Adrian was aware of how male eyes followed her, lingered.

“Sorry.”

She unbuttoned the filthy white overcoat, leaving it outside.

Adrian saw her careful look around before coming in. Checking for threats? An escape route? Would Marc have taught her things like that? How much did she already know?

“We were doing the pigs, and I lost track of time,” Angela explained.

“He has you on a schedule already?”

Adrian’s displeasure was obvious and she hurried to explain, “No, I volunteered. Chris needs help.”

Distracted, Adrian observed that her jeans and tank top was still almost indecent. It was what the other women here wore, but on Angela, it was so sexy that *obscene* came to mind.

“That’s one of the best excuses I’ve heard. Have a seat.”

She did, noticing his tent was impeccable, with not a thing out of place. He clearly liked things to be in their proper place. So did she, but not to this extreme. There were no personal items in sight, not a speck of dust or trash, but there were two guns on his pillow. What a contradiction Adrian was.

“How’s the first day on your own been?” Adrian asked. He was guessing it hadn’t been great.

“I’ve had worse.”

He lit a smoke, and as their eyes met over the dancing flame of the flag-draped lighter, Angela could feel doors rattling and voices whispering.

Adrian didn’t want to let go. He could almost feel something trying to happen, but the sounds of people moving by outside said everyone could view them.

He leaned back, setting the hot lighter upright on the small table.

Angela blinked. The witch had been telling her about the new doors that had just appeared and then vanished. Doors to their future.

“Sorry. I didn’t get much sleep,” she stated, wondering how much he knew about her gifts.

“I won’t keep you long.”

She smiled, a genuine one this time. “It’s okay. You’re better company than Chris.”

Adrian noted her occasional glance toward the flap that reminded him of Neil and Kyle. She was very alert for a female. Marc had done well with her.

“I’ve heard that. It’s why he usually has no help.”

“I’d mention it to him, but I’m pretty sure he already knows.”

“He should. We’ve all talked to him about it.”

Angela tensed, but didn’t draw her gun at a loud bang outside. “I haven’t settled in with all the noises yet.”

Adrian raised a brow. “That sounded military.”

“Marc taught me a few things.”

Her tone was almost hostile, defensive, and Adrian quickly changed the sore subject.

“Are you and Chris getting along?”

Angela shrugged. “He ignores me until he needs something, and I roll my eyes a lot. Does that count?”

Adrian chuckled. “Most people take a few days to settle in, but we can start your schedule tomorrow if you’d rather stay busy.”

She nodded right away, glad he’d recognized her need and saved her from asking. “Yes, please.”

“Good. You’ll be with John for a while, but you’ll move up to be our second fully checked-out doctor soon. It will help the women here come to us with their problems. On top of all the other benefits, of course, but females are a top priority. I’d like you to encourage them to tell you about any problems they’re having, medical or otherwise.”

“Sure.” Angela understood he also expected to be told. He was smart to do it that way and superior to most other men because he realized it would succeed. He understood females more than even Marc did.

“You’ll pull four shifts a week with John, a self-defense and gun class twice a week, and eventually you’ll teach something, probably first aid. After that, if you have energy to burn, you’re free to volunteer for anything you want. That work for you?”

Thoughts of what those classes and interactions might be like came to her and Angela was again grateful to Marc that she could do more than hold her own. “Yes.”

“If you find something that fits, a certain shift or day off, tell me or Kenn, and we’ll put it on your schedule permanently, he told her, already knowing she would come to him, not Kenn. “Anything else you need?”

“Yes. I have a tent I’d like to put up. Does it matter where?”

“Neil told me he took care of that a little while ago,” he told her and changed the subject again. “You’re welcome to sit with us at mess.”

Angela bobbed her head in acceptance, storing that. She had needed two things when she’d awakened this morning, and Adrian had taken care of both without her having to ask. “Thanks. What are we having?”

“Tuna helper today, beans and ham tomorrow.”

Angela raised a brow. “Real ham? And cornbread?”

“Yes.”

Angela sensed he wanted her to stay longer, but also didn’t want to push her too hard. He was obviously a complicated man.

“Happy butchering.” She paused. “You have one? A butcher?”

“Says he was for twenty years. We’ll find out.”

She waited for more, and when there was only silence, she took the hint. “Well, I guess I’ll go find out if Chris has any fingers left to flip people off with.”

Adrian chuckled, wanting more, wanting to talk, but he remained silent. He’d pushed her yesterday and had chosen not to bring it up today despite asking her here to talk. She needed time. He was impressed that she’d already been helping, though. He had expected her to hide in her tent or at least join Neil and Marc, whose adventures this morning he’d already heard about. Adrian was sure the level of those escapades was a bit more than even Neil had expected.

Three camp members had already come by to express their displeasure at having Doug hurt, but they had conveniently forgotten that Kenn had done the same thing when he first came. Adrian had reminded them of it.

Angela paused at the flap, drawing his attention. “You okay?”

Surprised by the question, Adrian answered, “5-by.”

The witch jumped forward. *Less stress. Heart needs a break.*

Adrian blinked, caught off guard and Angela left before he could respond.

3

Neil and Marc were in the animal area shortly after leaving the mess, walking by animals that grazed and dozed.

Marc picked out sheep, goats, a small herd of cows, deer, and chickens. In the corner of this small farm was a pup tent with a big desk in front of it and a large metal examining table under a canopy that was attached to the side of the mud-splattered vinyl. Surrounded by thick green forest, the area had the feel of a petting zoo. There were moos and clucks and meows and barks, and under it all, the voices and footsteps of the sentries and camp members constantly moving by.

In the center ring of this circus was a tall, angry-looking man in a dirty white coat, wrestling with a big, orange cat on the metal table. He was trying to examine the cat's bloody ears and getting nowhere.

Marc automatically came forward to help, holding the tom still, soothing and rubbing. The husky cat calmed down, letting the vet smear a thick, yellow salve over its wounds.

In response, Chris walked away, leaving him to keep the restless feline on the table.

Marc shot Neil a scowl as the vet disappeared into the tent without a word. "A little help?"

"What you get for jumping in without asking first." Neil snickered. "Besides, it's just a little pussy."

Marc laughed with him, trying not to be scratched as the cat bushed up. The tom had spotted the wolf.

Marc quickly blocked its view, wincing as a sharp claw pierced his wrist like a needle, then another.

Before the next one could, he followed his instincts. "No. Stop. Stay."

Dog dropped to his haunches, and the cat slowly withdrew its claws from Marc's stinging skin.

"Is he full-blooded?" Chris had come from the tent with a syringe and a small, blue collar.

"No. At least, I don't think so. He looks the part, but sometimes he acts too much like a dog."

The vet's hands were gentle and quick with the cat as he relieved Marc of the contently purring feline. "You're good with animals."

Marc saw Neil's surprise at the compliment and explained, "They're easier to make friends with."

The vet didn't respond to the hint, just carefully took the cat to a small stack of carriers and put him inside.

"You'll have to register the wolf or one of the camp's young guns will shoot him by accident," Chris called over his shoulder.

"That's why we're here," Neil said quickly to the sarcastic words. "Do you have time now?"

"Sure. Was about to take a break anyway."

The words carried annoyance, and Marc wished Angie were here to tell him what the man's problem was.

"I had to leave for a while, and even though I told him I would, he didn't think I was coming back."

Angela flashed a smile as she joined them, heart thumping when Marc said a silent hello. She had missed him!

Only Marc noticed the vet's countenance brighten, before it was quickly hidden away.

"Sorry. Long lines."

"I'm used to not having help."

The bitter tone was hard, and while Marc frowned at him, Angela only pulled her dirty overcoat on.

"I mentioned that to Adrian. So what's next?"

The vet snorted. "Next were the cats that I did while you were gone," he stated coolly, pretending he didn't care that she had spoken to Adrian about him. That was something Kenn or Neil should have done. "Now is the wolf. We'll draw blood and

give the same vaccinations as the dogs. It's all in the tent. Think you can find it?"

Angela moved that way without answering, aware of Marc glaring.

His scowl grew when Chris stole a quick peek at her retreating rear.

"I'll do the physical exam first."

Before Marc could tell him anything, the vet bent down and got busy, fingers gentle, knowledgeable.

Dog stayed still, not growling but very tense, until the man's hands slid between his legs. Then he jerked back, baring his teeth.

"Easy, boy." Marc rubbed Dog's rigid ears and hoped the vet planned to hurry.

"He's in good shape," Chris said, feeling the sturdy neck and the muzzle. He didn't bat a lash when the wolf nipped at his fingers. Instead of fear, the vet flicked the animal on the nose, drawing a small, surprised yelp.

"No. Stay."

The vet continued with the exam, and Marc was impressed that Dog relaxed.

"Beautiful. Stud or worker?"

"What's the difference?"

"We don't have any pets here. Animals are either food or security, unless they're breeders. Studding means being chained up."

Marc was frowning, "And the workers?"

"He passes an obedience course and gets put to labor. You can do both, but the workers are harder to breed for some reason."

Chris turned to go get what he needed from the tent, and Angela was there to hand him a syringe and a long, plastic tube with a blue ring on the end.

"Very organized system you've got in there. Even an idiot can find what he needs."

Chris sniggered, but said nothing as he drew blood from the wolf's leg.

Neil was surprised when the big animal didn't budge, didn't seem to feel it.

The vaccinations did draw a reaction. All done at the same time, it caused Dog to bare his teeth, but he didn't snap or bite.

Neil wondered if Angela's glazed eyes had anything to do with it.

"What's the course he has to pass?" Marc asked, fighting to keep his gaze from Angie as she took the tubes to the tent while writing on them.

"Commands first. Have him do the basics. I may add some."

Marc pointed at the wolf. "Heel, Dog."

The animal immediately came to his side, and Marc threw an arm out. "Up and over, by three."

The wolf leapt almost straight up, easily clearing Marc's arm. Upon landing, he repeated the exact movement twice more before returning to his master's side.

"Pass."

The vet studied the alert animal thoughtfully for a moment and then turned for the tent without a word.

Neil blew out a frustrated breath at the man's rudeness and Marc nodded his agreement.

A few minutes later, they both stepped closer to the tent at the sounds of clothing rustling and grunting.

"Pull on the damn thing! It doesn't bite!"

"I'm trying not to rip it off. It's old."

"That sucked! Next time, I'll do myself!"

The vet stomped out of the tent, and Angela came out behind him, snickering at Marc and Neil's expressions.

Chris was wearing a very thickly padded training suit and had no weapon, just a size advantage, and he suddenly swung around toward Angela.

All three men detected her flinch at his raised hands, clearly going for her gun, and then the wolf was moving past them, responding to Angela's need without a single word being spoken.

Those who had stopped now gasped in alarm at the quick blur Dog became as he streaked toward the vet.

Dog jumped for the throat and got a padded arm instead. He immediately let go and lunged upward, latching onto a small swatch of padding and then skin as his teeth broke through.

When Chris dropped to his knees, struggling to push him away, Marc gave a sharp whistle.

The wolf let go, backed up a couple feet. They all saw the blood on his muzzle and on the outfit that Angela immediately began helping Chris pull it off.

"So, we're done?" Neil asked, almost glad when the vet shrugged away from Angela's doctoring touch. Marc didn't like it.

"I hope so. He already needs stitches."

Angela handed him a large gauze pad to hold over his shoulder, and the vet's face tightened. He immediately retreated from her smell. "Not the first time."

He approached the wolf without any fear, something Marc respected and would remember.

"Good boy." Chris gave the wolf a solid pat to his chest and a quick rub of the tense neck, then went to the desk to write in a thick notebook, holding the gauze in place.

The bystanders began to move again, murmuring and muttering.

"Red collar. Adrian will want him classified as a worker, but I'd like to try breeding too."

Angela pulled a scarlet collar from her pocket. She handed it to Marc with careful fingers, not meeting his eyes but wanting to badly. She turned to the vet instead. "Next?"

Neil grinned, thinking she sounded like Marc.

Chris snorted. "A bandage maybe?"

She went to get one from his tent, and Chris turned to Neil. “What’s her story? I’ve been busy. I haven’t heard anything yet.”

Neil and Marc both frowned at him.

“She’s going to be our doctor,” Neil said cautiously.

The vet snorted again. “I knew that already. Is she single?”

Marc rotated toward the path, scowling.

Neil followed. “Have to ask her. Thanks. Catch ya later.”

Marc pointed to where Angela was coming from the tent.

“Stay. Guard her.”

Dog immediately padded to her side.

Chris understood this man was someone to her and recognized the sharp tone of command. He instinctively bowed to it. “She’ll be safe here. It’s *you* we’ll hate.”

The vet turned away before Marc could respond.

Marc caught up with Neil, still not sure about this place, these people. Angie would be good here, he knew that already, and the wolf could defend himself. As for Marc, he had spent most of his life taking care of number one. These sheep may need a shepherd, but he didn’t. Just because he had agreed to help with some things, do some quiet labor for Adrian, didn’t mean their boss had his true loyalty. So far, that honor belonged solely to Angela.

Marc sighed, trying not to be mad. The sour vet hadn’t told him anything he hadn’t already known.

“I thought we’d join a game next. Right now there’s soccer, corn-hole, and darts.”

“Darts?”

Neil took them toward the yells and thuds coming from the opposite side of the sprawling camp. They both ignored the hard, unhappy glares of those they passed. “He likes to have something on hand for everyone. Tomorrow is football.”

The field was spacious, freshly mowed and almost empty. Only twelve men were there, with no referee and even fewer spectators, giving them one corner of the area to themselves. The field was surrounded by thick trees and ankle-high grass. There

were real goal nets at each end, outlined in painted white, and Marc waited eagerly as the game restarted. He had briefly played as a kid.

“New soccer is better,” Neil stated, wondering if the Wolfman had a weakness other than Angie. If he did, these men would find it.

Marc watched as the teams—one side with their shirts off—yelled and charged the ball as a group. They taunted and screamed, cheeks red as they tripped, were punched. There was bleeding, sweating, serious blows, and Marc’s heart picked up a bit as he followed the violent game.

“You still can’t touch the ball with your hands, but you can do whatever it takes to get it. First team to ten wins,” Neil said, thinking it would be interesting to have Marc and Kenn on the field at the same time.

The wind gusted, blowing a cloud of dust over the dim field, and a group of men rushing for the ball got tangled up and fell hard, drawing blood.

Three of them left the game, and Neil raised a brow in challenge at Marc as both teams waved toward them. “We can still play darts. Hilda’s probably there.”

The men exchanged a snicker, and Marc pulled his shirt off and led the way onto the field. Others came from the sidelines, and he noticed they automatically adjusted the teams. Not for the first time, Marc was curious as to exactly how high in the chain of command Neil was.

There were no greetings as they lined up, no chatter, and Marc also wondered how much these particular men disliked him.

It may get a bit uncomfortable, he thought. Then, someone blew a whistle, and he was forced to concentrate on staying on his feet.

Marc was hit hard, again and again, and not only when he got to the ball. He ducked punches and jumped over outstretched arms and legs, but didn’t retaliate the way he had with Doug. He

made contact but tried to be neutral about it, though, they let themselves go and brought him down every time they could.

There were few taunts in the game, and Neil hung back, let him continue to do what he'd done all day. Prove he belonged.

There were big hits, as well as a couple of dazzling steals and attempts that caused men to yell and people to point and cheer. The small crowd along the sidelines continued to grow.

A while later they stopped for a quick break and an injury that would need stitches. The score was five to one, with Marc's team losing. The crowd had grown to about thirty, and when play resumed, Neil was at his side again.

"You're back," Marc said, sweaty and bloody. He had scratches and bruises on his arms, back, and chest.

"You've shown 'em you can hold your own alone. Now, we'll show 'em you're also a team player. Stick close."

Marc wasn't sure what Neil had in mind until he slammed into the first guy to challenge their progress with the ball, sending him out of the game with a nose gushing blood. From there, they were unstoppable; alternating as they traveled the field, one moving, the other protecting from as many sides as possible.

When the game ended, seven to ten, Marc wasn't ashamed of the loss. They had played hard, and he'd loved it. He was bruised, scraped, and sweaty, covered in grass and mud stains, and eager for the next game. He'd missed this! His teammates hadn't protected him, but they had been impressed that he would defend them when they had the ball.

When they reformed for game two, Neil and Marc had more men on their side than they needed. They both welcomed him when Seth and his very pale chest lined up with them, and again, Marc saw the others automatically adjust teams. So... Seth was someone here too. It appeared he had lucked into two powerful friends.

"Threesome?"

Seth nodded as the wind gusted, bringing the scent of rain and decay. “Neil and I have been hoping for someone who can keep up. Too bad they won’t let the wolf play.”

They shared a laugh.

“Stick close, gentlemen. I’m in the mood.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “That means he’s set to piss people off. Get ready to really be hit.”

Marc’s grin widened, thinking he’d been hit pretty real already, and then the whistle came and they ran together, shoving through the pack that included some of their own men.

Neil kicked the guy with the ball, knocking him out of contention so Seth could get it, and he and Marc ran blocks, taking and giving nasty hits. Losing their worries in the competition, they scored repeatedly, and each time, there was a roar from the crowd that was now yelling, betting and forgetting—for a little while—all the hell they’d survived.

4

“Preparing your own meat, class one. Today, we’re slaughtering a pig and a cow. We’ll put ropes around the hind legs, pull them up, and slit their throats so the blood will drain. Tomorrow we’ll skin the carcasses, clean them, cut them, and freeze it all. First, is equipment and preparing the area. We need rope. Measure it by the weight of the animal. For a cow, the rope should be how thick, XO?”

Kenn grunted, digging strong, yellowish coils from the various boxes stacked neatly in front of the trees they were about to use. “At least three inches. Measure it with your three middle fingers side by side, like this.” Kenn held his hand up.

“And for a pig?” Adrian asked.

“The same. Pigs are smaller, but not lighter,” Kenn explained. “It’s mostly fat.”

Men were sitting on truck bumpers, hoods, and the ground, smoking and listening. Adrian’s classes were always full of an

energy that most of their other instructors lacked. Their leader was always the first one to start new things, try some new setup. When he personally taught a class, everyone wanted to be there, no matter the lesson.

“Tell us what’s first, Doug,” Adrian instructed.

“Canopy over the top,” the big, bruised, and bandaged man answered quickly, still very embarrassed but determined not to let it interfere with his normal place.

“Protecting your food supply begins by protecting the area where it’s processed.” Adrian dug out a very large green tarp and two staple guns as he talked. “We’ll have to refine this, like we do everything else now. Two important things are bird shit and predators that will be drawn by the smell of blood. Who knows why the shit is more important than the predators?”

“Because of E. coli?” one of the rookies asked.

“Exactly. No shit of any kind near the food. One piece of infected meat will kill everyone in this camp.”

Adrian let that sit with them for a moment. This was his newest group of rookies, but after tonight, a fresh level would take their place. He had no doubts about their passing. This was one of the strongest groups he’d put together since Seth’s team.

Adrian scanned his camp. *Not calm*, and the short bathroom and shower lines told him people were missing. The faint, excited voices said it was something happening in his camp, though, not outside of it. Kyle would handle it or call for assistance.

“Who can tell me how we’ll put the tarp over that first limb? Without climbing.”

The fourteen men considered, exchanging ideas, and again, Kevin had an answer. “We’ll staple ropes to each side and shoot it over with arrows.”

Kevin was among the few men he was currently considering for leadership, and Adrian was pleased. It was exactly what Kenn had come up with.

“Any other suggestions?”

There were, of course, but none as simple. No one spoke.

“That’s what we’ll do. Who are the best shooters here?”

Everyone glanced at Kenn, and Adrian gestured him forward. “Who else?”

Daniel, a tall, bald, private investigator from Utah, stood up nervously. “I’m next, I think. Kenn only got me by one shot on the last test.”

Adrian nodded as another roar echoed from the camp behind them. Louder this time, it made his gut tighten. “One miss is all it takes. Okay. Let’s do this.”

It went about as smoothly as the taking of a life by amateurs can go: Adrian’s cut was deep enough to kill; the steadiers were a little squeamish but willing; the pulling was a little too rough, too hard. But the branch held, and the tarp directed the pungent mess.

Less than ten minutes had gone by, and the cow carcass was staked three feet off the ground, steadily draining, and fires had been lit in the corner cans.

Adrian and his men took a minute, careful not to put bloody fingers on their mouths while they smoked.

“We’ll have two guards here and motion detectors, so remember that when you come for your tests tonight.”

Adrian swept the area and was a bit eased by the motion he got from Kyle, who had come to the edge of the caution tape. Everything was under control.

“All right. This time, Jeremy and I will supervise. Who’s cutting and who’s steadying?”

It didn’t go as smoothly with the cow, or nearly as fast. The crew had to fight to get the ropes around the animal’s sharply stomping hooves. The mess was considerable, but they got the job done, and as the men were washing up, Adrian signaled Kyle over.

“Class is dismissed. We’ll resume at dawn.”

Waiting until they were alone, both men frowned when Kenn left without a word to any of the joking, blood-splattered Eagles.

Kyle's tanned face deepened to a scowl, and he blew out a frustrated breath. Where had this Kenn come from? He was nothing like the helpful, resourceful XO they were used to.

"Where do you think he's going?" Adrian asked.

"Where he shouldn't be." Kyle caught the attention of the nearest Eagle, who immediately followed the angry Marine.

"Observe only?" Adrian asked, turning to avoid a strong gust of wind as he lit a smoke, irritated.

"Not anymore. He's been over there three times today, watching while she doesn't know. I changed the order on my last round. If there's a problem, the Eagle will interrupt and say that you want him, but not why."

Adrian thought Kyle was wrong about Angela not knowing Kenn was there. "I don't want the Eagles to oppose him openly if we can help it, but pass the word among the higher levels. She's under my direct protection and I want her to be treated as if she's my heir and doesn't know it. Stress the secrecy part. If it gets out too soon..."

Adrian stopped, and Kyle shook his head, mind racing. "It won't. You can trust us."

Adrian filled with pride. "I do, most of them. I trust you completely."

Kyle didn't need to ask. He was reading it in Adrian's face. "It's true, then. Kenn thinks he has that honor sewn up."

Adrian was watching the clouds gather in the west. For a change, they appeared to be moving below the thinning layer of smog that backdropped the beautiful Black Hills, instead of behind it.

"Right-hand man," Adrian intoned. "No higher for Kenn. Ever."

Kyle felt a heavy weight roll from his shoulders. It had only been a single, short conversation with Neil one foggy morning shift, but he had felt terrible since then—like their pact to

challenge Kenn for leadership if anything happened to Adrian made them traitors.

“I always knew.” Adrian’s tone was compassionate, approving. “You have great instincts, like Neil, but your secret isn’t one and wouldn’t be a betrayal anyway. The natural order is already in chaos. Kenn in charge would tilt us over the edge. He’s where he belongs. He just hasn’t realized it yet.”

Adrian sighed at another loud roar from the gaming area, sure Neil and Marc were involved. “Did everyone check in? Where are the other new people?”

5

“He’s waiting for you at the ball field. Says to hurry up,” Charlie announced, sticking his head into the tent.

Angela tensed, causing the pregnant orange cat to sink a claw deep into her wrist as Chris took its temperature.

“He said you’ll go to dinner with him after that.”

Angela hated hearing Kenn’s orders coming from her son’s mouth. “I’d rather stay. Do I have to go to the contest?”

“No.” Charlie stared at her with eyes saying *yes*.

“I can grab a sandwich later?”

Charlie nodded, clearly not wanting to be the one to tell Kenn.

“Bring a double tray.” Chris didn’t look up from the clipboard. “She’ll eat here.”

“Deep six that!” Kenn marched into the large, smelly tent, glowering angrily. “You’ve hidden here long enough. It’s time to go.”

The dogs started barking furiously, reading the tension. The vet wasn’t the only one who noticed, though he thought he was.

“I’ll eat here. We’re about to start with the kittens.”

“Leave now, and maybe you’ll come back later.”

“I’m not ready to go yet.” Angela was shaking, her voice full of nervous tremors.

The animal doctor frowned. Who was Kenn to her? Wasn't the Wolfman her owner?

"You'll do what you're told!" Kenn growled.

"I'll stay as long as I want!" Angela retorted, hating him as much as she ever had. When she'd told Marc she didn't want Kenn dead, she had lied. She just didn't want to be responsible for it in any way.

The open defiance made Charlie gasp.

Kenn's hands curled into fists before diving into his jacket. "Angela."

It was an ugly tone, hinting at violence.

When Chris detected her subtly going for the gun on her hip, he stood up, drawing attention as the dogs continued to bark and transfer their unease to the other animals around them.

Soon it will raise the guards, the vet thought, but he didn't wait for backup. He didn't need it. He knew how to handle this.

"Wonder what Adrian would say?"

Kenn's face was a surprised mask of anger as he glared at the annoyed doctor. "Stay out of this! It's none of your business!" he snarled.

Chris shrugged, sensing the Eagle now in the doorway. He always knew when he was being watched. It was a side effect of being in a POW camp for seven years. "You brought it in here, not me. She said she's staying. Get lost!"

The vet clearly wasn't afraid of him, and Kenn knew if he pushed any further, the surly doctor would put it in his nightly report to Adrian. Grunting, Kenn spun and stomped out of the tent, furious profile promising retribution.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. He had been checking up on her all day, sending hostile waves of warning. She'd known she would have to face him eventually, she hadn't expected the woman-hating veterinarian to defend her.

Before she could thank him, Chris shoved another pregnant cat into her gloved hands, taking the orange one. "When it's

time, bring a double tray here and do it openly so he can't hassle you."

"You sure?"

Angela gave him a tight smile, and Charlie left with worry in his heart that she knew he was right to feel. The old Kenny was a dangerous foe who never forgot a transgression, and in case all this self-control was play-acting, she would avoid being alone with him and knew Charlie would as well. Kenn was on the edge, and she pitied the person who finally sent him over. They probably wouldn't survive the encounter.

Chapter Forty-Four
Right on Target

Night Two

1

Neil and Brady's team won the second game. As the dim sun started to sink below the grit, they left the third match, up by two points.

Invitations to join their teammates for the meal were accepted, and as they walked toward the shooting area, Marc raised brow at Neil. "So, did you plan all these...encounters?"

He paused to adjust his gun belts, still trying to get his breath back. "Or, did you get lucky it turned out so well?"

The sweaty cop shrugged, met the eye of a nearby guard for a check-in and got a nod in return. *Clear.*

"Both, I guess. Really, I just set up the hands. You played 'em."

Marc grinned. "Thanks. I need all the help I can get."

"That's what Adrian said. Come on. Let's see how you handle yourself under pressure."

Marc fell in step, tired, sore, and not nearly as wound up as he had been. "Today wasn't pressure?"

They laughed together, moving with the thickening crowd toward where he had taken his gun test. The sound of people, of a large crowd, floated toward them on the cool breeze, swelling into a din.

The fighter inside Marc tensed as the mob of people came in sight, perceiving guns, hostile attitudes, and hard bodies wanting to back up the glares. On top, these sheep were nice and normal with their jeans, jackets, and pain-lined expressions, but

underneath, was a glint of madness that Adrian hadn't been able to erase yet. The leader still had a lot of work to do.

There was no time for a shower, and Marc was a bit self-conscious as they merged with a constantly shifting group of about a hundred, being careful not to bump anyone but also not shying from those who intentionally got in his way. There were blondes, brunettes, and older, slower blue-hairs everywhere, but no Angie.

People were in lawn chairs and on blankets, the two rows of bleachers packed, and the males were stopped many times for congratulations on the games and for introductions to those who had heard about it or about Doug. The people were only a little friendlier, though, and a lot nosier. Marc could hear them whispering about him and Angie, and about Kenn.

Neil gave him a sympathetic look and gestured at home plate, where bales of hay were stacked in a neat half circle, two deep. "We have to sign in."

They went around the chain-link fence, and Marc felt an immediate change in the atmosphere, especially from the front row of camp members. These were the people who had been here for hours to get a good seat, the real fans of Kenn and Adrian, and every other shooter except him. Their stares were hard, disapproving, and it surprised Marc when they let out a cheer as he and Neil got into line. Then he heard their words.

"New blood. Hard lesson. Get what he deserves."

Letting out a resigned sigh, Marc tried not to be upset that most of those here would be happier if Kenn shot him instead of the targets, eliminating the problem.

As it was, Kenn was already talking angrily to Adrian, casting a furious glower toward where Marc and Neil were standing. Clearly, Kenn didn't think he should be allowed to shoot.

Marc dug for his paper as Neil held out a hand for it.

"Wonder how red he'll get this time?" Neil leered.

Marc chuckled. Kenn had certainly rubbed the trooper the wrong way.

Neil handed the green sheet to Adrian, and when he locked glares with Kenn, Marc was impressed again. It made him try harder to conceal his anxiety. *Being alone hasn't been healthy for the Marine inside*, Marc thought. He'd become skittish around people...again.

"He's good. Get signed up." Adrian handed Neil the paper back, waving off Kenn's protests.

The furious Marine stomped to the far end of the line, face like thunder.

"If he didn't hate you before, he does now," Marc observed, putting the paper in his pocket.

Neil nodded, both of them turning toward the field as four spotlights came on. "He did. Still worries I'm after his place at Adrian's side."

Marc tested their new bond a bit. "Are you?"

Neil grinned at the furious Marine from across the line of shooters. "Negative, but since it bothers him to think it, why should I say differently?"

Marc laughed. "I knew I liked you."

They signed up and got in line. While they waited, Marc noticed there was a lot of space between them and the other shooters. He was glad Neil stayed with him. There were several hard stares coming from the other side of the line, but especially from those surrounding Kenn. Zack's glares were bordering on dangerous. *I might have to watch out for that one.*

Seth was a few people down, talking quietly with Doug, whose taped nose and discolored face was still drawing a lot of attention. Marc took a breath, found the smell of fresh powder comforting. Nothing to lose, right?

He met Seth's eye, nodded to him. His gut tightened when both Seth and the burly man next to him almost immediately stepped out of line and strolled his way.

Marc's hand tensed, and he knew a little more of how Angie had felt when he had to fight not to draw on the pair. He really had lost some of his edge.

The first few rows of people went still. Marc could feel them waiting to be avenged, as if he was a part of the old world that still needed to be punished.

Tension rolled over the crowd, drawing more people. The sounds of practice fire stopped as Doug locked glares with him. The big man's eyes bored into his, searching as he and Seth stopped a few feet away.

"This time, no flinching," Marc warned icily. "I'll finish it."

Doug held out a hand. "Welcome to Safe Haven."

Marc automatically shook his hand, as surprised as the disappointedly muttering crowd was.

"Good luck. You'll need it."

"Thanks. You, too."

It wasn't much, not in the grand scheme of things, but it was significant to these people. Marc could tell by the fury on Kenn's face. He'd thought Doug was one of his too, especially after hearing Doug had tried to stand up for him.

Wondering if Doug had been testing him earlier just to discover if he was able to match Kenn, Marc watched the big man take his place in line.

Seth stayed with Marc and Neil, enjoying Kenn's anger.

They all laughed when Kenn spat toward the big man and Doug flipped him off in response.

It's been an interesting day with Angie's Wolfman out of the QZ, Neil thought.

"Doug's never been knocked down with a single hit," Neil said. "Only two men have brought him down at all, and some think Kenn cheated with the kick to the balls."

Marc was easily able to imagine Kenn doing it that way. He would have been declared the winner when Doug couldn't get up, but Marc was almost sure Adrian hadn't liked the way he'd accomplished it. Adrian also probably didn't like how openly his

men were deserting Kenn, but Marc loved it. Let the Marine suffer a little of what he'd dealt out over the years. How many new recruits had Kenn sent packing with stupid jokes and extra labor? How many female Marines had he sexually harassed until they'd transferred out? What did Adrian see in Kenn that outweighed all he'd done?

Marc couldn't think of a single thing.

Kenn was having another bad day. Though he'd managed not to put his hands on anyone, he had a sinking feeling those teetering edges were about to fall. The feeling of doom had arrived when Brady had stepped into the shooting line, and he glared at his former team leader with bitter hatred. Kenn now wished he'd shot them both through the window.

Marc picked out his son threading his way through the crowd and subtly locked gazes with the boy who was clearly surprised to find out he had entered the contest.

Charlie looked older than fourteen, countenance carrying the same lines of horror as the rest of these people. His jeans and black jacket couldn't hide the pain he'd suffered while away from his mother...and father.

How's your mom?

Charlie stiffened, stopping well away from Marc.

Marc sighed. It was so unfair that he'd never gotten the chance to be Charlie's dad. It was years they would never get back.

I'm sorry. You're the only one I can ask. Marc could feel the battle raging inside the teenager and let his pain bleed through their connection. *I love her, always have. Does he?*

The other shooters were warming up now, and Marc lit a smoke, still waiting, hoping...

He clamped down on a victorious thought when the response came.

She's tired and lonely and scared, and I hate it. Let her go so he'll stop being mad! Charlie hesitated. He'll hurt her. You have to leave!

Marc didn't answer. When the MC asked Marc if he wanted a few warm up shots, obviously eager to discover what he could do, he refused. Knowing Angie was unhappy, *in danger*, had instantly put him on edge again. Marc watched the setup activities and smoked, nerves now under an icy wall of control. This was when he was at his best.

Adrian stood on the pitcher's mound and faced his people. Slowly, everyone quieted to a low murmur backdropped by tents flapping softly in the cool breeze. His gaze was calm, reassuring, and clearly happy with the way things were progressing. His pleasure was their light in the apocalyptic darkness and they always responded to it.

"Who will your winner be?" Adrian shouted the question, and the crowd roared in answer, Kenn's name easily the loudest.

"Well, let's find out. We'll eliminate one person each round until Level five, a single shot each, then it's two shooters gone each level until we have a winner or need a duel." Adrian gestured to Kenn. "Our previous winner will go first. Kenn Harrison, best gun in camp!"

The crowd let out another loud cheer as the Marine stepped up to home plate, and Marc could hear betting now going on behind the fence.

"Can I use my own weapon?" Marc asked quietly.

Neil nervously swept the shadows at the edges of the tape. *Crowds and noise draw trouble, lesson four.* "Most of us do. Any piece is okay as long as it fires. Adrian keeps extras on the bales for those who don't have their own yet."

Kenn pulled the trigger once, arm barely moving.

"Bull's-eye!"

Clearly a favorite by the shouts of approval, Kenn flashed them a peace sign.

They roared in response.

The next man up was someone Marc hadn't met yet, a sandy-haired man with the feel of a laborer.

He couldn't match Kenn's shot. Almost none of them did. When Doug took his place, only Seth, Neil, and Marc were left to shoot in round one.

Doug found Marc and again gave him a nod of recognition, doing it for the camp's view. He'd been wrong and wanted to show everyone that Marc now had his respect. Maybe it would help a bit that Marc had proven he was at least a physical match for Kenn.

Doug drew in a tight breath and fired. His shoulders immediately slumped.

"Out of bounds! No hit!"

The crowd groaned and cheered, and the big man came to stand with Neil and Marc as Seth took his turn.

"Vision's still a little blurred," Doug confessed, amazed that someone smaller than Kenn had brought him down with only one hit. He had previously considered the arrogant Marine to be his only match. He had too much respect for Adrian to even compare. The leader would always come out on top.

"What did John say?" Neil asked.

Doug frowned and then grimaced in pain. "Said next time I should think about shutting up before I speak."

Neil laughed, and Marc watched Seth pull the trigger gently.

"Bull's-eye!"

The crowd voiced their approval again as Neil took his place, smirking happily at Kenn's open glare.

Neil counted silently to three, blowing out a calming breath. He wanted to still be in it when Marc and Kenn went head-to-head.

Neil pulled the trigger.

Marc knew it was good.

"Bull's-eye!"

The noise was deafening, louder than for anyone else, even Kenn.

Neil blew jokingly on the barrel of his gun for their amusement.

Marc realized Neil was as much a favorite as Kenn. Neil was high up here, had to be. Fourth or better, because Doug was fifth (unofficially—what did that mean? Was there a vote?), and Marc had already met both first and second. Who else here was in Adrian's service?

"Is there another shooter?"

Doug gave him a firm nudge, and Marc stepped not to home plate, but to Adrian. As he handed his weapon—butt first—to the boss for inspection, he was aware of how many men had tensed at his action, perceiving it as a threat.

Adrian checked the Colt and held it out to Kenn, who did the same, only much slower.

Kenn gave it back, *barrel first*, to its owner.

Marc took it without hesitation, feeling but not responding to the silent threat that made the crowd stiffening.

Adrian frowned and waved them on impatiently.

As Marc approached the plate, he rechecked his weapon, unable and unwilling to pretend he trusted Kenn.

His actions drew frowns from those who understood what was going on, but it also showed that he was used to keeping himself alive. He was a survivor, like them, whether they wanted him to be or not.

Thinking about Charlie's words, Marc saw the bullet slam into the center of the target, and then his hand was a blur, drawing and firing in a fast, smooth motion.

"Bull's-eye!"

The response of the crowd wasn't a cheer, but a mix of surprise and disapproval. The men in front, Kenn's men, exchanged uneasy glances. So far, the new guy was a match for the Marine in every way.

Marc smirked at Kenn's unhappy glare the same way Neil had, and joined the chuckling trooper.

Adrian held up a hand for quiet. “Doug is eliminated. Move the targets.”

Marc listened to the people around them betting their chores, shifts, guns, and other luxuries, and while he didn’t hear his name (at least not with any support), he didn’t let it bother him. There was plenty of time to become popular. First, he had to show them he could hold his own if he chose to stay. He had to make a lasting impression.

“What’s the duel?” Marc asked as they all lined up again and the crowd continued to mutter and murmur.

“Just that. Adrian usually picks the target, but the shooters can challenge each other to something more specific, like rocks or cans. They go until someone misses,” Neil explained. He reloaded, still smirking. “I have a feeling we could witness one tonight.”

2

At the start of round two, Kenn got another bull’s-eye and Marc forced himself not to scan the crowd. He wasn’t sure whether Angie was out there, but he knew any contact between them was forbidden. He could feel their son’s regard, but wasn’t sure if Charlie might be rooting for Kenn too. It made Marc more determined to drive in the point he had been making all day. If he decided to stay, he would *not* live in Kenn’s shadow.

The rounds went quickly. By the fifth turn, it was clear that Kenn, Seth, Neil, Marc, and Kyle were the best. All but the trooper had scored perfectly on every shot.

“We’ll eliminate two each round now, and every bullet in the magazine counts. First shooter will go last, last shooter goes first.”

Marc blinked at Adrian’s words, caught off guard. As he moved to the plate, he was aware of Kenn’s smirk and wondered at it. Shouldn’t he be mad to go last?

He doesn't care so long as it rattles you enough to miss. Charlie's message was thrown in a hesitant blur of hope and confusion.

Marc also picked up the unsent plea.

Be good, Charlie was thinking. Be what we need.

Marc got set. *I am both of those, son.*

He drew in the same easy blur he'd started with from the first shot.

Adrian and every member of his command knew it was good shooting.

"Eight bull's-eyes!"

There was a small cheer from parts of the crowd this time.

Marc didn't look at Kenn as he switched places with Neil, knowing the Marine was not only ready to pick a fight, but would now do it openly.

Adrian also felt it and exchanged a moment of warning with Kenn that had his XO glancing away, ashamed. Good sportsmanship was also high on Adrian's list.

"Eight bull's-eyes!"

The crowd let out a roar of approval as Neil and Seth traded places, and Marc wondered why Angie wasn't coming. He knew she wasn't in the crowd and was a little disappointed despite the excitement of the match. He'd missed stuff like this, but he would much rather be wherever she was.

3

As the tenth round came, it was down to the five of them; Kenn, Kyle, Neil, Seth, and Marc. The targets had been moved each round, and Adrian was pleased when all five men again scored perfectly. They were good. What a force they would make against the slavers.

Aware of it getting late, Adrian called out, "We're having a duel!"

The crowd cheered, and Marc listened as Adrian explained.

“We’ll do saucers first, five in ten seconds, then five in five if needed.”

Seth stepped forward to begin the round, guns crashing. Marc watched him struggle to hit the small white plates as Adrian gently tossed them up.

“Three hits,” Adrian called, noticing that his bodyguard rejoined Neil and Marc. “Who’s our next shooter?”

Realizing they could go in any order, Marc stepped forward, and everyone fell silent. Not as many hostile gazes were on him now, and he motioned to Adrian that he was ready.

Marc shot the plates out of the dark sky and didn’t struggle, didn’t miss. His Colt cracked rhythmically as he aimed and fired, fired, fired. He pulled the trigger twice more, and china exploded.

Marc gave his gun a twirl before holstering and was pleased with the small cheer he got in response. He could hear his name being bet on now and joined Neil and Seth happily. This part of Safe Haven he could come to *need*.

“Five hits. Next shooter?”

There was deep pleasure in Adrian’s voice, the kind each of them longed to be the cause of.

Neil quickly stepped forward. He wouldn’t be able to match that kind of shooting and hoped Kenn couldn’t either. The man was better than good.

Neil was ready for the first two plates, but the third fell too fast, and he missed it, along with the fourth. He got the last one just before it hit the ground. Ceramic dug into the dirt as it shattered.

When Kyle came up, Marc narrowed in on him. The stocky guard had been quiet all during the contest, not hanging with Kenn’s or any other group, but mingling between them. As Marc watched, the mobster picked off four of five plates, and he placed it. That was Adrian’s other officer. Kyle was the missing link in the chain of command.

Everyone fell silent as Kenn prepared to shoot. The contest was Marc's if the Marine missed even one.

He didn't.

"Five hits!"

The crowd pushed against the gate and each other, screaming, red-faced, and even as Marc wondered how Adrian would calm them, the spotlights went off, throwing them all into darkness.

Marc dropped down low as panic swelled through the crowd.

The lights flashed on, showing Adrian in the center of the field with cords in his hands. He unplugged it once more to make sure he had gotten his point across, and then lit them back up.

His demeanor said to settle down, and they all read it, moving back, helping people who had been knocked down.

Adrian jerked a hand toward Kenn and Marc, both men in much the same crouched, ready position. As were most of the other shooters, none of whom had left yet despite being eliminated.

"We'll do five in five now." The leader took a half dollar from his pocket. "Reigning champ picks. Call it in the air."

Adrian tossed the coin gently.

"Heads."

Adrian picked it up. "Heads, it is!"

Kenn took his place as Marc joined his small group of allies. Instead of pushing the jealousy from his mind, the Marine stole a glimpse of the four of them, recognizing the friendships he'd been fighting for but hadn't won. He really had thought differently with Seth and Doug.

When Kenn turned to Adrian, his hands weren't quite steady enough for this task, and he knew it.

Kenn was unable to think of a delay, and the plates began to fly.

The throwing was smooth, one each second, and Kenn nailed first three. The fourth shattered only when it hit the ground, and

he picked off the fifth with slumped shoulders. Marc was better than that after half a bottle of Jack. *Damn it!*

“Four hits.”

The crowd’s cheer wasn’t subdued. Marc knew he should let Kenn win, but the thought of all the taunts he would have to endure and the renewed respect everyone would have for Kenn made a cold band of determination seal his choice. If he wanted to make a life here, one he could tolerate, he would have to show them that not only was he not after Kenn’s seconds, he wasn’t second to the man himself either. He needed to win.

Marc motioned immediately as he came forward and let his hands take control. When the plates went up, he blew them out of the air almost as soon as Adrian tossed them.

He spun, fired, fired, fired, not missing, and the last slug took out the final plate just as Adrian let go, making the leader retreat to avoid the flying shrapnel.

“Five hits! New Champion! Marcus Brady!”

The crowd exploded again, and Kenn advanced with his hand out and his rage held in. They shook quickly.

Kenn left, he and Zack pushing their way through the dozens of people who had rushed the field.

The mob congratulated Marc, yelling and patting, and the three elated Eagles with him protected Marc from the hands.

Adrian relaxed a bit. One day out of the QZ and Marc had already made a name for himself. Things would start happening now. They would be hard and dangerous, but worth every risk. Kenn was pissed, but it would make him try harder, and that was the XO they needed. There was a lot of work ahead of them, and Adrian wondered how high Marc would eventually climb. Based on what Adrian had observed today, that was unknown. Settling in and expanding his goals from Angela to including the rest of the camp would be the turning point. When that happened, Marc might go a lot higher than anyone, except maybe Neil, was expecting.

Marc pushed away his tray, yawning.

“Don’t wimp out yet,” Neil warned. “You still have two stops left on the tour.”

“Why?” Marc asked ruefully as he scanned the crowded mess. *No Angie*. “Haven’t we pissed everyone off yet?”

He met cold stares and threatening glares as his gaze traveled the brightly lit dining area, and he swallowed a sigh. Winning the contest meant little to these hardened survivors now that they were off the field.

“Almost everyone. We’ll attend the bonfire party for a few minutes, and then we’ll spend some time in the far south corner of camp. That should get the last of ‘em.”

Marc had begun to frown as he spotted Rick in line, a few places behind Samantha. That was another problem Adrian had. Marc understood there wasn’t any proof, but he didn’t agree with the saying about keeping your enemies close.

“The south end, isn’t that area off limits to me?”

Neil shrugged, glad Marc had paid attention to the map and rules he’d been given yesterday. Neil met Adrian’s stare across the crowded, noisy mess. “You need to be a part of everything he’s got going on here. Your first day with us will be the one we remember clearest. We’ll hang at the bonfire and then go observe the rookies taking their Level Test.”

Marc swept the perimeter and found guards searching him with speculative expressions.

Marc nodded to them, and as if on cue, the men all faded into the shadows at the same time, vanishing without a response. What the hell was that?

“You include the beer and joint in there somewhere?”

Neil laughed. “Right after we’re done here. Hurry up, will ya? I need a buzz.”

Marc chuckled and let Seth draw him into a conversation about the wolf at their feet. Seth’s welcoming wave when they

had arrived had caused Kenn to grit his teeth and pass the mess instead of joining Adrian's raucous center table.

The picnic table Neil and Marc were at was a double, and they were surrounded by the men they'd played soccer with and against. In the seats next to them were the females from the gun class, Samantha now sandwiched in the middle and looking like Marc still felt—a bit uncomfortable.

There was a lot of flirting between the two tables, and Marc saw little Becky's gaze go to Neil repeatedly. *Something about the note*, he thought, and couldn't stop himself from scanning again for black hair and blue eyes.

"She's not coming." Kyle sat on the bench by Neil, his back to their table as he studied the one he had just left—Adrian's. "She's with the vet. Said there's a lot to be done."

Marc heard the approval, the admiration. "Let me guess. Kenn said she couldn't, so she stayed all day to prove that she could?"

Kyle's lips twitching as he scanned the sentries, doing a fast check-in. *Clear*. "That's the story. I'm sure it's true to a point, but really, I think she's avoiding him."

Marc sighed. That was his Angie. She wouldn't rock the boat unless she had to.

"Congrats by the way. You've made it to the top of his list." Kyle assessed the new man ruthlessly. This was Angela's chosen mate, if he was reading things right. Was Marc worthy of her, of that honor?

"What list?" Marc asked.

"Kenn's death list," Neil explained. "When he snaps, we'll all know it."

Kyle slapped the trooper on the shoulder playfully, and Marc understood they were good friends.

"Neil here made it to second after today, and Seth has third locked up, so at least you're in good company."

There was laughter as Kyle moved toward the line for a refill, and it drew more attention to how well the new man was fitting in despite Kenn's complaints and warnings.

5

Adrian was pleased. It had been a good day. Marc had made real progress, Angela had shown she wasn't afraid of labor, and his people had come through another change together. They had realized his choice for second-in-command had some serious flaws. Now, it was up to Kenn to prove he could control the things that had broken him in the old world. He would either accept that Marc and Angela would have a place here together, or endanger his own.

Lingering over a third cup of coffee as the mess emptied out and the camp went about their nightly rituals, Adrian was glad when it was only the cleaning crew left. Quiet minutes to think were hard to come by some days.

Adrian hated it that Kenn hadn't come to the table, but it was great that Marc was handling himself so well. That man now had friends in high places, and Adrian couldn't help but ask himself if maybe it wasn't too late to remove...

No. He stopped himself. There was no way that Marc would ever give him the total commitment that Kenn already did. The Marine was born to be his right hand; Adrian had to believe that. When Angela made her choice and Kenn dealt with it, things would settle down. Until then, there was plenty of work for all of them.

Cold air spun through the mess, carrying a thick chill. Adrian was suddenly exhausted, but there was still a bonfire party, a Level test, a poker game, and rounds. He sighed, draining the last dregs of cool coffee from his mug. Then, there was the gleam in Neil's eyes that warned he wasn't done getting Marc noticed yet. A small smirk playing about his lips, Adrian opened his notebook and searched for anything he might have missed.

“Tell me more about how things work here,” Marc prompted as they headed for Neil’s tent, both keeping a subtle eye out for Kenn and Zack in the shadows.

The camp wasn’t settled by any means, was a flurry of activity as they got ready for the night, but it was also calm, routine, and comfortable in the cool air.

“What would you like answered first?” Neil asked, curious as to what was at the top of Marc’s need-to-know list.

“How often do you travel, where are you going, and who decides what?”

“We’re usually on the road three or four days a week, sometimes more. We have camp meetings every month to pick where we search next. As for the decisions, that’s all Adrian. Where he leads, we’ll follow.”

Marc nodded. That, he got. “When are you on the road again?”

“*We’ll* be moving out at nine am, day after next to collect food supplies that one of the scouting missions found.”

Marc kept his voice low. “Is it a secret, where you’re going? Is that why you avoided my question?”

Neil wanted to celebrate. Kenn had a lot more competition than he knew, and not just for Angie. The man was beyond sharp. Marc was the edge of a well-tended razor. Definitely a better match for Adrian’s right.

“It’s more unknown than secret,” Neil said. “We search, we vote, we search some more.”

“But...”

Neil frowned. “We don’t know. He hasn’t made a final choice.”

Marc realized Neil was uneasy about that. Did Adrian know?

“You guys have been searching for what? A safe place to start rebuilding since...February?” Marc asked, trying to give the file in his mind a creation date.

Neil finished his Mountain Dew and hooked it neatly into one of the two flaming cans they were passing. “Kyle and I have been with Adrian since almost the beginning. Doug came in January, Seth the first week in February. We’ve been searching the whole time. We average a month in each state, picking up supplies and survivors. We’ve come to trust Adrian’s instincts as much as you do Angela’s. If he says we go on, we do.”

Marc’s scowled. It bothered him that people were already noticing her strangeness. How would he ever protect her here if things went bad?

Neil felt his new friend’s sudden worry. “She’s safe. Adrian is very careful with the females, and he hasn’t picked a final destination yet because we haven’t found one that he thinks we can live in. It’s only one of the things he has us watching for. Adrian is building a future for us where one doesn’t exist, but he can’t do it alone. He needs strong help who will support him even when the unpopular choices are made.”

“You mean like going into the caves.”

Neil blinked. There was that razor again.

“Yes. He loathes the idea the same as the rest of these men, but there will be winter this year, whether it comes in August or January. If we can’t find a place and get it ready, we won’t make it until spring, no matter how well he cares for us. The first winter will be hard, probably longer than we’re used to. We have to prepare, and he’s teaching us as fast as he can, but there are still nights he doesn’t sleep. Can’t, I think. He wanders, thinks, and hunts.”

Marc didn’t meet Neil’s eye as they stopped by his dark tent. “I can help. I have ideas. Things I’ve noticed since I came in.” He paused, reluctant. “Should I give them to Kenn and keep proving I can follow the chain of command?”

Neil motioned him to follow as he ducked inside and flipped on the dome light. “Give it to Kenn if it’s small shit you can’t believe he missed. Otherwise, always Adrian. Have a seat.”

Neil’s tent was a copy of their fearless leader’s, but for some reason Marc was glad to discover jeans on the floor and papers scattered about. Adrian’s perfectly neat canvas made him think of a library, and that bothered him, especially the lined-up change. Who would spend the time doing it when money was no good now?

“Why not give them to you?”

Neil handed him a dripping beer from the cooler and a paper towel. “Because I’m not trying to climb those ranks. I can’t fill Kenn’s shoes, and Adrian knows it. I suspect you could, though.”

Marc shook his head, and Neil waved it off. “You don’t now, but that’s because your mind’s already taken. Our understanding came quicker. The things we loved the way you love Angie were gone, and he was exactly what we needed, always full of hope to balance our grief. Once he helps you find happiness, the need to repay him, to serve him, will overwhelm you the same as it did the rest of us.”

7

Kenn had ditched his pals and spent mess in his tent, breaking in the new punching bag he’d put up but hadn’t used yet. He didn’t bother with the gloves or tape, though he had both in his duffel bag. Kenn cast fast, furious shadows on the canvas walls as he let out the humiliation, anger, and guilt.

If only I hadn’t hit her!

That’s what had his own people turning on him. He shouldn’t have corrected her physically, no matter how much she needed it. His old temperament fought with the new man he was becoming and when Kenn finally headed for the showers, his breathing was hard and he was dripping sweat.

Kenn saw the two new tents up on the women's side, one of them directly across from where Marc's had been set up, and fresh rage churned into his gut. People would suspect she had done it because she was scared. Would they be right? Was she? Then how could she keep resisting? She had avoided him for the two days she'd been here, and even now, the whispers around him were awful. The waves were sloshing over the sides of his rocking boat.

Kenn sighed, handling friends and those who wanted to offer condolences and support, ignoring the questions and hard stares. He had roughly five days before Angela confirmed what everyone was thinking. Five days to keep it all from blowing up.

How? What would it take to keep her mouth shut and get her to return to his side?

Nothing, his mind insisted flatly. She might not tell them, but in return, you'd have to give her Brady.

Kenn flinched at even the thought, letting the cool water beat on him. He couldn't do that.

His icy heart spoke up. *Lie. Tell her that she's free and try to win her back. Use her boy. She owes you. The voice was ruthless. Release her and then beg her not to split up the only family you have. Don't actually say she owes you for keeping Charlie alive, but think it so that she'll hear.*

Kenn's mind kept talking, and he began to feel better, putting the words together. He could do that. He'd been playing roles all his life. While he wore her down, he would keep Brady busy with nasty chores designed to at least make him complain and be known as a whiner. Kenn would hope that it would run Marc off too, but deep down, he knew it wouldn't. The only one who could get the wife-stealer to leave was Adrian, and that wasn't happening.

Kenn sighed, drying off. He would help with the Level tests like he always did, and then he'd spend a couple of hours on schedules and wait for Angela to hit the showers or bathrooms,

which he would be able to observe from a dim corner of the mess. She would expect him to be on duty again, like last night.

First, he would suck it up and do rounds, along with anything else he could think of to earn points. Adrian was also a wild card, as well as an ace in this deck, and he would have to be careful not to make the boss think about giving his place to Neil or Brady. Both men were definite rivals as far as Kenn was concerned, and while he was glad there would be only one of them for the next two hours, he was still dreading observing them together in Adrian's tent for the poker game that he wasn't entirely sure he had been invited to.

8

"This might get ugly. More men will support Kenn right now, but Adrian has the final say," Neil had to add a warning. It was only fair. "There's always a chance he'll side with Kenn."

"Shouldn't you ask him first?"

The two men stood in the darkest shadows behind the row of semis that hid Adrian's fort.

"He likely already knows. He doesn't miss much."

Marc was unable to keep from comparing all this tension to the nights spent happily around the campfire, alone with the only woman he'd ever loved. "We don't have to keep doing it. I've been a loner all my life. Why should now be any different?"

Neil rounded on him with a tight voice. "Because of the war! Why else? Our country needs us."

Neil studied him, trying to find the right words. "Don't you feel that sense of duty anymore? The one that kept you in the Marines for so long?"

Marc didn't answer. He couldn't lie and say he felt nothing.

"You stayed for the highs and the adventure, but mostly because you believed you were making a difference in the world, that you mattered. You can have that here, but its better because *Adrian is* worthy of that kind of respect and loyalty."

Marc still said nothing, not wanting to argue with his new friend.

Neil sighed. “It comes down to how badly you want a chance with her.”

That got Marc’s full attention. “I don’t understand how swearing myself to someone I don’t know or trust will give me a chance with Angie.”

“But I do. Would it help to know that she has? Sworn to him, I mean. She’s already been...looking.”

Marc wanted to be surprised but couldn’t be. “This is what she’s always longed for. If she’s using it, then she’s foreseen something, and has no doubts. I can recognize that an abusive man is in a high place of authority here.”

Neil gestured. “That’s Kenn. Doubt him, like the rest of Adrian’s circle, but never Adrian himself. He would give his life for any of us. Kenn hid it well. Adrian will take care of it, but in his own time and way.”

“I’ll try, I will, and I appreciate what you’re doing for me,” Marc conceded. “God knows I need it, but if she chooses him, I don’t know how long I’ll stay. You may be doing all this for nothing.”

“You’d leave behind the love of your life and your son?”

Instead of the lie that sprang to his lips, Marc let the survivor inside handle it like any other hostile situation. “That means Adrian knows. Does Kenn?”

Neil was impressed with Marc’s reaction and pleased with himself for figuring it out. He hadn’t been completely sure. Kenn and Charlie really did look alike. “Negative, and not one of us would ever tell him.”

That remark caused Marc to frown. “Us?”

“Adrian’s circle. Kenn’s the only one who hasn’t put it together.”

Marc spent a moment considering and then said, “The Marine I know would have suspected it by now. My bet is that he

does, but he thinks it will tip the camp in my favor. He's acting like he doesn't, so it won't come out."

Neil's mouth was hanging open, and he shut it with a snap. Hadn't he often thought there might be devious things going on inside Kenn's mind? The way he was always "accidentally" in the right place to earn points with Adrian or the camp.

"You know him better...does he have that much self-control? Shouldn't he have at least confronted you or her about it?"

Marc scowled, wondering if maybe that had been the rage behind the slaps on the way here. "Maybe he has. You should ask her, so we'll both know."

Neil repeated his earlier question. "Would you really leave?"

"Yes. I'd rather die than be here for that."

Neil wasn't sure he believed the man, but wasn't sure he didn't either. "I'll still take my chances, and in return for all my hard work, I'd ask that you not talk about anything you discover tonight and that you try to read between the lines until you decide what kind of a future you want. Two days is hardly enough time to know."

"I agree, and thank you. On my own, today would have been ugly."

"It's not over," Neil warned. "Kenn will put up a fight the second he sees you here, but just so you know, Adrian won't let him back-shoot you. neither will I."

Marc snorted. "You didn't like Kenn on first sight, did you?"

"Nope. I know a problem when I smell one." The Level Five Eagle waved a hand. "Welcome to Fort Haven."

9

Kenn was enduring all the remarks by pretending Seth had won. The ball of anger that had been festering was mostly gone now that he had a plan of action. He didn't expect Angela to give in quickly, not with all the support she had here, but he had things left to try. Kenn wasn't sure if he could start over.

However, it was significant that he was even considering it, and his heart thumped painfully in denial when both of his rivals came from the trees and into the training area.

The two men were laughing and talking as if they'd been friends for years instead of a day.

Probably about me, Kenn thought. It was yet another slap in the face for Neil to bring him here, and Kenn cautioned himself to be careful. Adrian was also here. He couldn't lose control. He could put up a fight though, and he would. "He's not allowed to be here."

Every head swiveled as Neil and Marc stopped by the flickering bonfire.

Neil's frown was harsh. "Says who?"

Guards murmured in surprise at the direct challenge, and the three dozen men chose that moment to get a better view.

Kenn tossed his butt into the fire. "The rules. He's not one of us."

"Yet," Neil stated firmly.

Kenn said nothing, just waited for Adrian.

Everyone except the trooper was surprised when Adrian only shrugged.

"You don't need me for this."

His bored tone made Kenn flush.

"The rule is no unauthorized personnel. Marc's authorized."

"By who? You?" Kenn demanded.

"Adrian. The rules he made before you came still exist. The contest winner gets the title, no toilet crew while he's the champ, and he's offered a place with the new rookies." Neil's voice sharpened. "He's going to be one of us, whether you want it or not."

"I've never heard that." Kenn's voice was as cold as the wind, but inside, he was burning.

"We have the crews mostly covered now. Back then, we needed warm bodies on posts any way we could get them. Once they were shown the fort and evaluated, they were put to use. All

of them are still Eagles. We don't use some of the old rules, but we still need good men. That much hasn't changed."

There was no note of accusation in his tone, but Neil's countenance overflowed with contempt.

Kenn hated him for it, knowing he had lost again. "He hasn't been evaluated."

Neil blew out a frustrated breath at having to drive in his point. He enjoyed drilling people. He didn't like being cruel. "He's as good as Kyle and his team. You just don't want anyone to know. Give him a test. He'll pass."

"Not right now," Adrian interrupted, admiring Neil's ambush. "We're busy. Marc stays. Let's get going."

Kenn snapped his mouth shut on another complaint, and every man waiting to be tested suddenly hoped desperately not to draw his name for the Cage.

"Who has inside?"

Doug motioned at Adrian's question, swollen nose starting to fade into deep shades of purple and green. "Me. Kyle traded."

"Good. Pick your first sacrifices."

The big man pointed at waiting guards, and Marc stayed with Neil, taking a minute to do as the cop had asked—gather information.

The tent behind them was gigantic, shut on three sides. The outside area was lit by lanterns and the bonfire, as was the smaller tent to their left. Marc saw efficient organization and no boredom or signs that these men were being forced. There was only a strong determination to succeed that he recognized from the green recruits on the base and from himself, as well. These men wanted to be here.

"There's a reason we're here." Adrian's voice got everyone's attention. "There's a reason we made it this far when so many of those we left behind did not. There's a reason we were spared."

Aware he would have Marc's ear for the next thirty seconds, Adrian used it as much as he could.

“It wasn’t luck or coincidence or even skill that brought us here. It was fate. We were meant to carry on, chosen to save our country.” He met Marc’s eye before glancing at his men. “More are coming. We’re not complete, probably not even by half yet. Together we’ll be strong enough to start over, to keep America and some of her people alive.”

Adrian paused to scan them. “Now, if that’s too much for you, or you don’t want to think about the future, don’t care, then you shouldn’t be here. Doubts are normal, but they don’t belong in my army. When you’re done, want out, it’s okay, with no fights or bad reputation. These are things that I tell the rookies during their first tests. You’ll hear it repeatedly as you pass through the levels because I need you to believe in it as much as I do or this won’t succeed.”

Adrian gave Doug a gesture. “They’re all yours. Be gentle. It’s their first time.”

The other men laughed as ten nervous guards followed Doug into the privacy of the tent.

“I’m out here for a while, and then we’ll go in.”

Marc nodded at Neil’s words, watching a large black hat be passed around the remaining males. Each one drew a slip of paper from it, followed by groans or grins.

Marc hung back as Neil joined Kyle and Kenn by the smaller tent that sported a number of banners, an American flag, and a simple name: *The Cage*.

“Trainers.” Adrian held out another black hat to Kenn, who drew a paper and passed the hat to Kyle. Neil also drew a slip from that one..

“I have...number one,” Kenn growled for drama.

Kenn snickered at Kevin. The rookie had just gone green.

“I’ve got Kenn too. Shit.”

“I’ve got Neil.” Seth, full of arrogance and unintentional disrespect, called, “You’ll take it easy on me ‘cause we’re buddies, right? You scratch mine, and I’ll do yours?”

“Maybe, if you blow me first,” Neil taunted. “I’ll only give special treatment to my bitch!”

There was loud, mocking laughter from the listening men, and Seth’s amusement faded, hearing the tone that said Neil wasn’t kidding. “I thought we were friends.”

Neil took off his gun belt. “We are—the best—but here and now, that means shit. I’m what stands between you and Level Three status. I won’t just give it to you or anyone else.”

Neil finished his warning as Kevin and Kenn entered the cage.

“What we’re doing here matters, Neil; I know that. I was running off at the mouth,” Seth tried to apologize.

Neil’s frown didn’t change. “Yes, you were.”

He left Seth off balance and unsure what to expect.

Marc saw Adrian’s glance of approval and understood that here in Fort Haven, it was all about the lessons.

“This is simple. My dog tags are in a corner of the tent. Return them to me, and you pass. The limit is ten minutes.”

Kevin’s fight was almost an exact copy of Seth’s first test, and Marc, too, felt that moment when the cab driver realized he wanted this bad enough to keep going despite the pain and the odds.

When Kevin’s bloody hand finally held up the metal tag, Adrian was there to take them, and Marc joined in the cheer, connected to them in spite of himself.

“Time?”

Kyle had the clipboard and stopwatch, and he glanced up from writing. “I forgot to hit the button. Do it again.”

Kenn spun toward the tent, and Kevin’s face fell, making men laugh.

“Four minutes, fifteen seconds. No record.”

“Pass. Go to Doug. Next match.”

True to his word, Neil had no mercy on his friend.

Marc was impressed with Neil's command of his body, as he smoothly blocked, tripped, and kicked. When Seth finally got mad and started to really fight, Adrian gave Neil a subtle signal.

"Where's our friendship now?" Neil questioned snidely.

Seth shrugged, dripping sweat as they circled. "Rules are rules. I'll follow 'em."

Neil crooked an insulting middle finger, "Come on, then!"

Seth came in low, sidestepping at the last minute to avoid the trooper's swing, and he landed two hard fists to Neil's gut that had him retreating.

Neil recovered fast and delivered a roundhouse kick that knocked Seth to his knees.

"Do it again! Do it right!" he shouted.

When Seth tried to, Neil got him in the shoulder with a knee.

Seth's reflexes kept him in the battle, sweeping with his own leg.

Neil used Seth's momentum to slam him to the ground. "Get up! Be an Eagle!"

Seth was on his feet a second later, and his angry swing made Neil grunt.

Seth hesitated to hit his friend again, though, and Neil's uppercut was brutal. It sent Seth back to the ground. "Never hesitate! Don't you want this?"

The cops were both bloody and drenched in sweat, but Neil didn't even sound winded. *Third in command and definitely on that dangerous people list*, Marc confirmed for his mental files. Neil was also a lot more than what he appeared to be.

It took Seth almost the full ten minutes, though Marc was sure Neil could have held him longer.

Everyone except Kenn was glad to witness the two men sharing grins when it was over, instead of harsh words.

“Pass. Go to Doug,” Adrian instructed. “Kyle’s next. If you drew his number, hold it up and he’ll pick one of you. If you just came from inside, pick a number out of the hat and get ready.”

Kyle indicated the larger of the two men who had his number, giving the stocky rookie a menacing stare as Neil returned, bottle of water in hand.

“This should be interesting,” Neil said. “Kyle and Adrian suspect he’s gay and want to expose it to the Eagles.”

“How, by beating it out of him?”

Neil snorted unhappily, took a long drink as Seth ducked inside the tent. “It’s not funny how some of the worst shit never changes, always seems to have a place, but here, it does. If you can’t fight, this is definitely the wrong career choice. Better if he finds that out now.”

“It sounds like the same old shit.” Marc’s voice was low, telling Neil he hadn’t forgotten where they were, but his tone was offended.

“Try it from another angle and it might help you to understand,” Neil suggested. “What happens in the future, when we settle down? Do the problems go away or start up again?”

“It gets right into what it was, but it’ll take time for that to happen,” Marc predicted. “There’s no need to handle it now.”

“Adrian’s vision of our new world does not include the problems of the past,” Neil pointed out the difference. “He’s tackling *all* of them at the start, trying to plan and eliminate the threats to our survival. This is one of them.”

Marc could feel himself getting angry. “How did the gays cause the end of the world?” *The things these people told themselves!*

“The same way the wars that we were fighting did, the same way immigration and economic threats did. Smoke to blind us, and it succeeded. No one knew what the government was doing for those years before it all fell down. We were too busy being part of the problem and killing each other over the scraps from

their table. And it was the same around the world. We let the war happen because we let our differences divide us.”

Adrian heard, and he stopped a frown at Neil’s limited understanding of the master plan on this issue. Only Kyle knew the truth, that eventually, both women and homosexuals would be a part of his army. There was only one way for either of those things to happen—a representative would have to step up and carry the heavy duty of being the first.

Adrian moved toward the cage, giving Kyle a negative motion when the mobster would have enlightened the talking men. Like with Angela’s gifts, homosexuals in his army had to be handled one stage at a time. First, was exposure. After that, was reaction and possible recovery from the lie, with the benefit of respect for not quitting. If Ray got that far, more could come of it.

“But beating them? What comes next, banishment?” Marc was struggling to keep the conversation private. “How will that fix a future problem?”

Neil ignored the sarcasm. “It won’t fix it, but it will eliminate it from *this* group. And not by bad methods, either. Ray volunteered to be an Eagle. He wasn’t singled out, and if he honestly thinks he can be one of us, the truth has to always be the truth.”

“Why not talk to him?”

“Because he already lied by pretending otherwise. He leers at women, says he has a thing for Becky. It’s gone too far for a simple conversation. He’s hiding.”

“And the camp agrees with Adrian handling it this way?”

“The camp doesn’t know there are homosexuals here!” Neil was horrified. “If they knew, they’d kill them, and Adrian wouldn’t be able to stop it. That was a part of the old world, and these sheep will turn into wolves at the sight of it.”

Marc let that sink in. Adrian was trying to protect them?

No. Adrian was one of the wolves watching for the old world too. He just didn't want his sheep to turn into a lynch mob and maybe lose leadership.

"Why not tell them to leave when you find out? Why go through all this?"

Neil let out a disappointed grunt. "You're so quick on the pick-up that I forgot you're a rookie. Look around, Marc. What does Adrian's leadership scream, more loudly than anything else?"

Marc clearly wasn't sure what to say, but Neil waited, certain the Wolfman would get it. They all did.

Struggling, wanting to understand how they could all be okay with such horrid reasoning, Marc pushed past his anger to think about the Safe Haven he'd distinguish but hadn't wanted to acknowledge.

"Light...hope...he cares about them."

"Not just about the ones already here, *all* life. You'll recognize it in time," Neil said. "Even those we turn away, he misses."

"He wants them to stay," Marc realized.

"More than that. He hopes for their differences to be admitted to and conquered." Neil understood more than Adrian or Kyle thought he did, but Neil didn't think it would ever happen, and he'd given Marc that view first.

Neil signaled toward the cage, where Ray and Kyle had started their challenge. "That one, however, probably won't. He's lied too many times. For anyone to be accepted in Adrian's army, that's the number one thing you never do to the boss. We won't forgive it."

Both of them were thinking of Kenn now, and they turned to view the match.

Eight minutes later, Kyle hadn't taken a single hit, and the rookie was on the ground, bleeding and gasping for air. The dog tags were still in the far corner.

“Get up!” Kyle ordered. “Get up or get out!”

Ray struggled to his feet, and gestured angrily, all pretenses gone with the pain and blood, as the trainers had known it would be.

“I belong here too!”

“Prove it. Be a man!”

Ray came in too low, letting his anger at the insult drive him, and Kyle used it to throw him back to the ground. He smirked in satisfaction when the rookie let out a cry that was much too feminine.

Marc detected Adrian's signal, and when Ray got up, swinging wildly, Kyle let the hits land, and the football coach darted for the tags.

Metal now in hand, Ray's fists clenched when he realized he had to get by Kyle again in order to give them to Adrian.

“Don't hesitate. I'm just a man,” Kyle coached, surprised the bleeding rookie hadn't given up yet.

“Yeah, one who loathes me.”

Kyle shrugged. “It doesn't matter. All of our enemies will hate you. Your belief in yourself has to overpower that fear. If you can't control your need to hide or beg for mercy, you won't survive here, and neither will any of the others who think we don't know about them.”

Ray started to lie again and Kyle got angry. “Why don't you quit, leave? Take your friends with you!”

Ray's eyes glazed over with fury as he advanced. “You keep them out of this!” He drove his head into Kyle's gut, bringing them both to the ground.

As the buzzer sounded, Adrian was there to take the tags that the panting rookie held up.

“Stand up.”

They both did, Kyle moving toward where Kenn stood.

Adrian gestured at the rookie. "Pass."

Ray stared at him in disbelief, his breathing rough. Blood dripped from numerous cuts and small gashes. "What?"

Adrian's voice softened. "You'll pay a higher price for it than my other men."

"Because I'm gay."

"Because you're not really one of us yet."

The rookie's face fell at the words, and Marc listened closely, thinking everyone felt this urge to serve the blond. Was it in the air? The food?

"The war came and blew it all away. We've started over. You're still lurking in the past, not sure which way to go," Adrian exposed his shame. "People know the difference, they feel it. You'll work twice as hard as any man will in my army, and you may still never get the peace and acceptance you long for. Be sure, Ray."

Adrian's gaze shifted briefly to Kenn's unreadable countenance. "You can survive here while continuing the old ways. A lot of things that are discreet will be tolerated, but unless you change, you'll never be an Eagle."

Ray's voice was icy. "You mean go straight."

"Change is different for every man in my army," Adrian said. "The only wrong choice is lying about it. The truth always shows up at some point."

He turned back to the men. "See Doug. Next matchup in the Cage is Kenn. If you just came out, draw a number from the hat."

An hour later, Marc and an exhausted Neil entered the big tent, the pungent smell of hay filling their noses.

Doug held up a lantern. "We'll match for a few days."

The two men gave Marc a pointed stare, and he understood it was another way they would be able to help. Conversations over black eyes wouldn't be about just him and Kenn now.

"The small hay room is an improvising test. The men have a certain amount of time to make something from what's there,

usually a sort of communications device. The cubicles are much the same, but each Level's goals are harder."

Neil pointed things out as Doug went by, supervising.

"Do you use your own list of ideas or what Adrian and Kenn provide?" Marc asked, watching Seth's fingers fly over a nice 9mm that his blindfold kept him from viewing as he did it.

"Both. For Doug, who served, it's okay to invent his own."

Neil gave him a glance that said Marc, too, would use his own experience when he got this far. "The big hay room is memory, alertness, and thinking. They may have to stare at doors and use the clues on them to find someone or something. Another level might be asked to view people or things, and then be hit with questions when they come out, like what color were his socks, which window had curtains, or even which one had the hidden grenade. The higher the level, the harder the questions are. Each member of the team must pass six of seven parts. If two or more fail, none of them advances, and they all repeat the course with the next group. Adrian's goal is to have all the camp's men in training by the time we settle somewhere for the winter."

"And the women?" Marc asked quietly, but they were both distracted by Doug's loud words in the drafty room. He was ambushing a pair of guards who had thought they were done and drawn his attention with their high-fives as they started to leave the tent.

"Eight ways to start a car with a dead battery. Now!"

The two men stammered answers, and Neil pointed to a dark corner that wasn't being used. "Let's go over there so he doesn't get us next for distracting them."

Marc thought about repeating his question but realized he didn't need to. After watching all of this, he knew the answer. There were no women here because this was man's work. Few females would have the courage to try, let alone be strong enough to actually succeed.

Angie does! Angie is! his heart defended her, and Marc pushed it away uneasily. She wouldn't want this...would she?

"I've counted six tests. What's the seventh?" Marc asked, not wanting to explore that any further. He wasn't sure he could take the answer.

"Adrian's approval. You either have it or you don't."

Marc frowned, confused. "He didn't give it to Ray, but he passed."

"Ray earned it by the rules, but there are some things that will not be accepted by these people. What the camp is against as a whole, I am, too," Adrian's voice rang out as he and the last group of men came into the dark tent behind them. "He passed the tests, but the camp's approval and mine go together."

Marc nodded. They had his back, and he had theirs. God help those caught in between.

"Have you decided to accept the place with my Eagles?"

"Of course," Marc answered easily. "If you'll have me."

"I will, but I must ask. Why the change of heart?"

Marc was keenly aware of Kenn's furious visage in the group of thirteen black-clad guards. "I haven't had one. I just think it's a good way to spend my time. I like to stay busy."

"Not enough," Kenn sneered, stepping past them. "That's not enough to get you your own team. They won't follow you for that reason."

Marc snorted, ready for the big confrontation if it was to be now. "You're the only one still hoping for power and control. The rest of us just want to survive."

There was a thick silence as most expected a fight because of the dig, but Kenn only raised a corner of the flap.

"I'd never betray Adrian that way, and he knows it. He's my first priority and you'll never be a true Eagle until you can say the same. Your only loyalty is to a woman, and that won't be enough to make a place here." Kenn stepped into the cool night air, voice a low mutter. "I'll see to that."

Angela was more than tired by the time Chris said they were done. She had stayed for many reasons, but the biggest was his standing up to Kenn for her. The vet hadn't given the impression that he wanted to talk about it, which was good with her, because everyone else sure did. He clearly didn't want her "thank you" either, so she'd given him her help instead. By eleven, every animal had been watered, fed, and bedded down in clean areas, and they had finished repacking everything and putting it all away.

"It's late," she commented, using lotion on chapped skin.

The vet blew out their light, and then gave her an unexpected smile that revealed a quietly handsome man.

"Not for me. I'm usually here until two or so."

"Hi. I'm Angie." She held out a hand, feeling like she'd made a little progress, and was pleased when he didn't hesitate to shake with her. He even added a heartfelt apology as the wind blew garbage from the forest around their boots.

"Yeah, I'm Chris. Sorry. I'm not sociable. It's why I treat animals and not people."

"You do all this once a week?"

He nodded, and she turned to go, wolf heeling smartly. "I'll be here next week, as long as they don't have me scheduled for something else."

Chris stared thoughtfully as she and the wild, yet well-trained wolf vanished silently into the dark forest. She was smart, quiet, and hardworking, and he was already anticipating the next time.

Every single male here will want her, the vet thought, reluctantly including himself. He wasn't worried about her getting into his doors. His secrets were hidden deeper than she could go and they were always guarded.

Most of the camp was in their tents for the night, and Angela was glad to find no lines for the showers. Gun within reach, she lingered inside the dim dampness, wishing for Marc's comforting presence outside the door instead of Dog's.

It had hit her hard while she was laboring with the silent, sullen veterinarian, that this was how her days would be now. No more little moments, no more small gestures, no jokes. Certainly not the occasional brush of Marc's strong hand against hers, but it was the loss of their nights alone that hurt the most. She wanted so many more of those, and she may never have even one! Being separated from Marc was horrible, and though she was forcing herself to handle it, it was hard. She missed him so much!

Marc saw Angela emerge from the shower camper and slowed, but didn't go where he'd wanted to be all day—her side. Instead of studying her, Marc noted how many men were staring, hoping she would respond. These were the proven, the accepted males and they had a place here that Marc might never have, if Kenn's words were true. Hadn't the silence afterward said they were?

Marc couldn't help the self-doubt. Why would Angie pick him over these men? Would their time together hold her while he earned a place? Was there a chance for them at all?

As if she sensed him (Marc thought later that his pain had drawn her) she stopped and turned.

Angela couldn't stop the open need and despair, and was hurt when Marc turned away. He pretended he hadn't seen her and ducked into his tent.

She could feel him wanting to take it back, but he didn't, and she got moving with a heavy heart. She'd loved Marc all her life, and while she knew he would fight for her freedom, she still wasn't sure if he'd fight for *her*.

Angela pushed it away, concentrating instead on everything she'd done today as she headed to the mess. Male eyes followed, including Adrian's from his dark tent, unable to help himself. Her hair was down past her cheeks, wet, shiny, black curls that a man longed to have wrapped in his fist as they made love. She was beautiful, and when she went by, men noticed, whether they intended to or not.

The sense of a job well done followed Angela, even when she recognized the lone man at a corner table of the dark, deserted mess. She ignored him as she walked toward the front, starting to feel the chill now that her hair was wet.

"She's off duty, and the boy covering the mess is asleep in the cabin. I've got a thermos over here."

Angela considered how badly she wanted the coffee.

"I can leave if you want."

Kenn's offer surprised her, and she slowly joined him at the table. She was comforted by the sounds of guards walking by, and though she couldn't view the moon, Marc, or Adrian, she knew all three of them were there, two of them watching her.

A little less nervous than she had been, Angela sat on the opposite bench, at the far end. As he unscrewed the lid, she studied him. He certainly looked different from the Kenny she'd known before the war. Back then, his hair was neat and trim, never a beard, and his fingernails were always pristine. He had worn designer fashions bought at the most expensive shops in the mall and always sported the latest athletic shoe. She had hated the ones that were solid red. They appeared covered in blood and after a rough day at the hospital, it wasn't something she'd needed to see every time she'd gone into their closet.

The man who gently set her coffee down bore little physical resemblance to that person. This new Kenn wore dusty jeans, muddy boots, and a filthy army jacket that had clearly seen a lot of wear. He had a thin goatee, jaw was covered with a couple days of stubble, and there was dirt under his nails—all things he used to pride himself on avoiding.

“Sugar?”

Angela shook her head and caught his surprised expression. She started to tell him that she no longer needed to seek comfort in food but thought better of it. He wouldn't understand. The Kenny she had come to loathe was a lazy, cruel man who was only happy when he was the center of attention. He hated kids and pets, had nothing good to say unless it benefited him somehow, and he had been a slob. She'd picked up after him for a decade, and he had never once helped. He said it was woman's work and he meant it.

If the man across from her pretending to read his papers was what he appeared to be, then Kenn had changed and the slaps were...what? Twitches from the past? This man was helpful, sought-after, and when he'd said he did a little of everything, he hadn't been lying. Angela was sore about how high up he was here, but not surprised by it. She hoped he wasn't secretly after Adrian's job. Those shoes were way too big for Kenn to fill, no matter how many friends he had.

Angela sighed. Safe Haven's XO was calm, easy-going, and patient, and she was suddenly filled with cold resentment for the man now lighting a cigarette. Why was Adrian worthy of that kind of strength, but not her and her son? Kenn could stop himself from hurting some drunken camp member who'd taken a swing at him this morning, but he couldn't keep from shoving her eight-year-old son into a wall for jumping on his bed. *For Adrian...but not for me.*

Angela shivered, recognizing the moment. She had made up her mind, and it had little to do with Marc. She would feel this way if she had come alone, and it wouldn't go away, even if Kenn never mistreated either of them again. She hated him for his weaknesses before the war, and his being so different now made it clear. She didn't love Kenn. She couldn't forgive him, and she certainly couldn't abide the thought of him touching her ever again. It was over.

The door in her mind swung shut with a final thud that echoed, and she could feel the witch applauding.

“You’re quiet.” Kenn had been trying to let her speak first so that he could get a feel for her mood, but he didn’t like the resolve he was reading. He wanted to know what was going on in that pretty, brainless head.

“There are decisions to be made,” Angela informed him icily. “I can’t think if you’re talking.”

Her tone suggested bad news for his plans of reconciliation. When she said nothing else, just sipped her coffee, Kenn felt that ball of rage return. “What decisions?”

Cool and untouchable in the flickering glow of the big bonfire, Angela delivered a warning at his tone, “A lot of things, though, I must say, most of the votes have been counted.”

Kenn’s face fell, and sadness overwhelmed the anger for a moment. He was going to lose it all. It had been so good here, so *perfect*.

“That’s it, then. You’ve picked him.”

The words were full of hurt, and she chose to fight the guilt. Kenn couldn’t be allowed to spot a weakness like sympathy, and she was acutely aware of people spying on them from shadowy tent flaps. “My choices are based on our past.”

“But things are different here. I’d never be like before.”

“It’s too late.”

Kenn was quiet for a long minute. He had known as soon as he’d recognized her show of force. Brady had always been better.

“You want to be with him?” He pushed.

Angela forced an angry tone to cover her fear. Marc wouldn’t let him hit her more than once, and neither would Adrian or his men. Kenn’s words had been a bluff. “Right now, I only know what I don’t want.”

Kenn flushed angrily, controlling the violent need to slap her openly for her defiance. “You don’t have to be such a bitch about it!”

“Why should I tiptoe?” Angela’s eyes were like chips of ice. “You never cared for anyone’s feelings until now, until *Adrian*, and that stings for me. One day, it’ll be old news, and maybe we’ll even be friends, but not now!”

She shoved herself away from the table and Kenn let her go, still wanting her body but hating her for reminding him of his mistakes. He was changing, was ashamed of most of his behavior toward her and the boy, but a bigger part of him still wanted to make her pay...wanted to hurt her.

Kenn had always been skilled at giving people what they wanted. Before, it had always been act one way and think another, but the war and his time with Adrian was working on him, changing him. If not for Angela and her Wolfman, he wouldn’t be feeling like an outsider. *Why can’t she be happy I’ve changed? Why can’t she give me a chance? Why didn’t she just die on the way here?*

14

“I wasn’t sure if you’d let me come.”

Becky was breathless, and Neil frowned, wishing she were older and longing for an hour alone with the hot little piece. His post was farthest from camp tonight, and he had worried about her coming out here all day. They were surrounded by thick trees and almost total darkness, but alone? He was never sure, thanks to Adrian’s setup.

“I shouldn’t have,” he stated. “This isn’t safe for either of us.”

“There’s no other guard here.” Becky came to him in the cool darkness, heart pounding in her chest. “That’s why I chose it. We’re alone.”

Neil tried to fight the arousal when she swept his body with innocent desire. This was the furthest that their flirting had gone so far.

“Don’t play games with me, Rebecca. I’m not one of the little boys you like to toy with,” he warned.

She regarded him with a guiltless gaze full of challenge. “*Playing* is not what I had in mind.”

His body responded, but he scowled. “Tell me why we’re here.”

She blushed prettily, and Neil realized she was working up the courage for something forbidden, but didn’t stop her. As long as it was her doing the actual touching, his place was safe.

“I need to ask you something.”

Neil’s body responded again to the invitation. “Go ahead.

Becky moved even closer, putting them inches apart. “Do you like me? ‘Cause I sure do you!”

Before he could speak, she edged forward and pressed her soft lips to his.

Neil froze, very aware of the rules as his body strained to get to her.

The teenager felt his coolness after only a few seconds and stepped back, face scarlet. She turned away. “Sorry, guess I misread.”

Her muffled voice was thick with humiliation, and Neil moved toward her even as he told himself he shouldn’t.

“Wait.” Neil pulled her gently around and into his arms. “You didn’t misread.”

He leaned down. “Can I kiss you?”

Her blush deepened as she nodded, and Neil placed a long, chaste kiss on her mouth. Her arms went around his neck, and he held himself still with iron willpower. *God, it’s been a long time!*

He broke the embrace, carefully tilting her chin up. “I am interested, but this is forbidden right now, and I won’t break Adrian’s rules again, not even for you.”

When he slowly pushed her back, she let go.

“But in October...”

Neil sighed, body tight. “Come fall, I’ll be one of the many tapping on your tent flap.”

Before she could swear he was the only one she wanted, Neil held up a hand. “No promises from either of us. That’s still a long way off. There’s a lot to be done.”

“And I’m gonna help. You’ll see.” She beamed at him. “October, Neil, and then I expect at least a real kiss.”

Neil was thoughtful as she left. He wanted the flirty teenager, but right now, there were other, more urgent things, and he wouldn’t miss them, not even for her.

“You know, there can be exceptions to my rules.”

Neil jumped, startled, and turned to discover Adrian coming from behind a nearby tree.

“She’s made a very adult choice. If you want her now, you have my approval.”

A little embarrassed and not about to tell the truth, the trooper swept the thick, black hills around them. *Clear.* “She’s not ready yet.”

“She thinks she is.”

Neil frowned and pushed his hat further onto his head as the wind gusted sharply. “She’s fifteen. What does she know?”

“She knows you’re attracted to someone else. I imagine she saw the way all my army was gawking at Angela, and she wanted to stake some sort of claim on you.” Adrian raised a brow. “Did it succeed? Are you marked?”

Neil blew out an awkward laugh, shrugging. “Not as much as the Wolfman, but yeah, Becky’s got some of my attention.”

“Good. It’s a great match for her, a solid start to this side of being an adult. Tell me when you’re ready, and I’ll set it up.”

Neil nodded, always grateful to have Adrian. He was the solution to so many of their problems. Their population was mostly male, and to keep the men from fighting so much, the age of consent had been lowered, but it went deeper than that. Adrian knew they needed babies to keep their country going. Without new life, they were doomed.

“You spent the day with him.”

Neil was glad of the subject change. This was what the boss had really come for. “Yeah, he should be at the showers now. I told him I’d meet him at your tent.”

“What’s the verdict?”

“I think Marc is one of those special few you asked me to look out for,” Neil answered without hesitation. “He’s already starting to win people over.”

“While my right hand has spent the last two days pushing everyone away,” Adrian noted grimly.

“If Kenn doesn’t back off, the camp might file a charge and vote for punishment,” Neil warned angrily.

“He’ll come around. I hope.”

Neither man thought it would be easy.

“What about Rick?” Neil asked.

Adrian scowled this time. “He’s out of quarantine now, with a twenty-four-hour guard.”

“His schedule starts tomorrow?”

“Yes. Come morning, all the new people are on company time, though, I’m sure that will come earlier for some than others. Kenn will be hot-to-trot for a while.”

“Did you see his face when we got in line at the match? I thought he was going to choke.”

“Yes, I did.” There was no answering mirth from Adrian. He wasn’t the least bit amused by it. “Kenn didn’t want me to know how good Marc is, didn’t tell me that Marc was his team leader. What else is he hiding?”

Chapter Forty-Five

Past Demons

Day 3

1

Before dawn, Adrian walked through the quiet camp at a fast pace, heartburn keeping him from feeling the chill in the wind as it pushed at him. Sickly leaves blew from the twisted trees, the scent of rain thick in the air, but he didn't notice.

Adrian stepped under the mess canopy and strode to the table where his best men were eating but not talking. The mood was still tense over Marc's victory last night and the silent but hard declarations of loyalty to the newcomer by so many in the chain of command. It was one of the things about to change. This would bring them together. Danger always worked that way.

"We need more water. The tankers are shut for testing."

Adrian had undivided attention as he sat down in his waiting place.

"The dogs are acting funny, foggy. Someone may have tampered with them and our supplies. Hopefully, they only stole water, but we'll take no chances."

His full table was now covered with opening notebooks, and one stack of half-finished trays piling up in the center. They all wondered how much of what they'd already consumed might be contaminated.

"Morning and lunch are drawn the night before, so we're okay for the moment, but dinner and tomorrow will have to come from the reserves. John's testing those now."

Everyone held in questions as Adrian lit a smoke, knowing he wasn't done. The quiet watchfulness of his men drew the attention of the half-dozen sleepy-eyed camp members around them. Many still in robes and housecoats, they began to spread the word. *There might be trouble.*

“Kenn found an untouched water tower last week. I had hoped to leave it for an emergency, but we need it now. It's toward our last known location of the slavers. This has to happen, highest security procedures. No one below Level Three goes.”

Kenn was thinking of the slavers that had to be furious over their rescue of the Cheyenne survivors. “They'll be waiting for us, maybe.”

Adrian had also thought *trap*. “We'll send our best men. You will stay, though. I need you here. We'll push travel back, instead of leaving tomorrow. One of us will change the schedules as we go.”

Adrian spotted Rick getting into the line, and stood up. “Kenn has Point. I'll be around.”

Kenn kept his relief to himself as the other black-clad men left the table without a word to him. Kenn was more than glad that Brady's new friends would be leaving for a couple of days. Maybe he could get some time alone with Angela and talk some sense into her.

Kenn picked out a flash of long black hair (*down, again!*) coming through the fog.

Or whatever it took to get through to her.

2

Angela's third day at Safe Haven dawned damp and foggy, the sun a distant shadow clouded over by the thinning layer of grit. She was thankful for the blue, button-up shirt over her white tank top and jeans as the cool wind gusted harder. She got into the coffee line, viewing this as a new beginning. She wondered if

Samantha might be too, having spotted the blonde further up in line, looking quite normal in her slacks and soft brown sweater.

Angela was hoping to run into Marc, needing any brief contact. When heavy boots crunched next to her, she knew who it was by the way the people around her turned aside. *Lovely.*

“I was searching for you,” Kenn whined.

The tone was grating, and Angela instantly wished she’d skipped the mess. She was glad to hear Dog’s soft paws come up behind her. He made her feel safer.

Kenn’s visage tightened when he noticed the wolf.

“I wanted coffee,” Angela grunted, very tired. She had gotten little sleep these last nights without Marc at her side.

“I would have brought it to you.”

“Since when?” Angela raised a brow, challenging. If he wanted to start shit, she would help today. The mood she’d woken in was ugly, and she found herself silently warning him to *back off.*

Kenn flushed, pleading, “I’ve changed. Can’t you give me a chance?”

The dish noise and conversations died down suddenly, alert camp members wanting to hear her response.

Angela’s thoughts were on her nightmares. “Not unless you can make me forget. As long as my ghosts scream, there won’t ever be forgiveness.”

Kenn choked down an angry snarl and shoved a folder at her. He noticed Adrian coming through the other side of the mess—frowning.

“That’s your schedule. Follow it!”

Kenn stomped off at a fast pace, and people got out of his way, not wanting to draw his ire.

Angela sent a quick message to Charlie, warning him to stay out of the angry Marine’s path, too, but got no answer. She sighed unhappily, ignoring the frowns around her. They thought she was being a hard-ass, trying to get something she wanted...and she was. Her freedom.

Angela pulled out only the top two sheets and read the first note, this one handwritten by Kenn.

I am sorry for the past. I know it's hard to believe, but I do care for you, want you. Please don't tear apart the only family I've ever had. Here's my truce. I release you from our deal. You're free to go to him.

Angela wanted to be happy, but she couldn't believe it. If he had put love and need instead of care and want, maybe she would, but it wasn't just that. After everything he had put her through, a note wasn't enough to settle things between them. He was a fool if he thought it was.

As she walked with her mug to the food line, Angela skimmed the schedule for what she was supposed to do today... She was with the doctor. *Finally! Something I can do without being so careful and bored!*

Angela glanced up as the three dozen or so people around her went quiet.

Samantha had left her place in the front of the dim, foggy food line and was heading toward Rick, who was in the shorter coffee row. Samantha took a small envelope from her pocket, and Angela stared with everyone else as the tension thickened.

Samantha didn't meet Rick's eye as she held out the Dear John letter. She made sure her voice carried to where Adrian was standing, mug of coffee in hand.

"I'm sorry. It's over."

She walked away without another word, and Rick flushed nervously at all the stares and whispers.

He shoved the letter into his shirt pocket until he got his food and found an empty table, and he was very aware of Adrian studying him as he read it.

Rick,

I've decided not to tell them you took advantage of me, or about the deal I believe you made with Cesar because I hope I'm wrong. This is a good place, and you can make a new life here. We both can. I won't ruin your chance unless you make me. Please leave me alone. You're a part of the past I need to forget.

Rick put the letter in his pocket, careful to appear sad but not angry for his audience.

When they saw he wasn't going to blow up, the stares and whispers switched to the other hot story—Kenn and his cheating wife. It wasn't as bad as Rick had feared anyway. He would keep blending in and do as Samantha asked, for a while. And then he would make her pay for breaking their deal as soon as she thought she was safe among her own kind.

3

Danger! Pay attention!

The voices whispered of grave peril as Angela stepped to the tailgate. She noticed a plump cook wearing a brown poncho and dirty overalls. Was the feeling coming from her or the jilted man sitting alone at the rear table?

Angela gave the cook a friendly smile, pushing gently. “Two plates, please. One is for the doctor.”

The woman didn't respond, just frowned as if she didn't understand.

Angela's brow creased too as she picked up a sense of furious betrayal from the Mexican. “Two plates. My schedule says to get them from you.”

“Ees schedule?”

Angela held out the paper and the cook's expression lit up with triumph as she reached for it.

Angela snatched it back and shoved it into her pocket, scowling openly. It drew a lot of attention from those in the lines around her.

“What evil are you hiding?” Angela barked, aware but uncaring of the surprised curiosity of the bystanders or the guards moving closer. “How long have you been here?”

Maria shrugged again, still acting confused, but she hurried to get the plates, now wishing she had given the dark-haired slut what she asked for. Cesar would kill her for blowing her cover over something as petty as jealousy of how beautiful the newcomer was.

The cook’s silence and foreign mind were hard to read, and Angela forced the witch down, sensing Adrian was coming toward them. She wondered vaguely if Charlie had picked up anything from the pudgy cook.

“Is there a problem, ladies?”

Adrian had stopped behind her, blocking the camp’s view. He didn’t want to interrupt, but these sheep weren’t ready to know what she could do. It would have to be careful, slow, but this was what he needed, that little edge. He would help her sharpen it.

“No, not yet.”

Adrian took the plates the anxious cook was still holding out. He stayed at Angela’s side as they left the too-quiet mess.

Angela gave one last, long glare at the cook before she turned to him with a grim warning. “Beware of her, or you’ll lose your highest team.”

Angela couldn’t give him more details and told him so regretfully. All she’d seen was Maria and the bodies.

Adrian held his emotions in check, perceiving how her eyes slowly lost their glassiness. With discretion, there would be so much they would accomplish!

“Does it hurt to see into people?”

Angela was amused at the question. It wasn’t nearly what she’d expected, and while she was glad he wasn’t upset, she was aware that more people were staring at her than before. Word traveled fast here.

“No. It’s like that gray area between sleep and awake, where you feel like stretching forever and a loud noise can make you cry.”

Adrian was now the one amused. He handed her the plates. “You can use it when you want? Control it?”

Angela nodded, feeling strange and yet wonderful to be talking about it openly.

There was a lot more he wanted to say, but there were people walking all around them. “Will you come and talk with me about this tomorrow?”

Meaning he would want to really talk about her gifts this time. Despite wanting to earn a place where she could use her abilities, Angela hesitated. In the wrong hands...

“Just to talk,” Adrian soothed. “Give me a chance to show you that I can be trusted.”

His excited eyes belied his calm tones, and Angela let her schedule influence the choice. He had listed her as a doctor with no proof. Even Kenn called her a well-paid nurse, and it seemed a fair trade. This way, she would be using both of her talents. “I’ll talk. I won’t promise anything more.”

“Great, my tent after lunch mess.”

There was eagerness, and Angela leaned in. “Doesn’t it bother you to let someone else like you have free run of your camp?”

“I have no doubts about you,” Adrian swore with a passion he couldn’t hide. “Your heart is purer than mine, and just so you know, there’s no one here like you. You’re unique, *special*.”

Adrian delivered a brilliant smile that made her heart feel tight.

“Come on. Let me introduce you to the slave driver we call an MD.”

Samantha hesitated. She was on her way to the gun class, and the sight of Eagles loading up in the parking area had drawn her attention. Their weren't the slow and casual movements she was already coming to expect in Safe Haven. Their quick actions and worried glances said there was trouble.

Sam's mind went straight to the slavers, and she let herself wander toward the parking area. Unable to hear, she tried to appear busy studying the dreary sky instead of the leaving crew. She couldn't pick up anything about their mission, but her eyes stayed on them anyway. There was something about the man in charge...

Neil didn't turn to find out who was burning holes into him. It could be anyone. None of the people liked it when the shepherds were away, but this was a priority. They had to have water.

Neil motioned to his team that he was ready to go, striding through the loading men, and Samantha's gaze followed. She'd seen Neil around, knew who he was and what position he held here, and knowing he was about to leave bothered her.

Why?

Samantha didn't like the immediate answer.

I'm safer when he's here.

Neil swiveled at that moment and caught her staring.

It was the last person he'd expected. The new woman had avoided contact with all of the Eagles as far as Neil knew, and he looked back, drawn... Her hair blew in the wind, giving him that flash of corn silk again.

Sam didn't realize Neil had turned, too shocked by her discovery. What was it about the males here that made a woman want to fall in behind and be protected?

She snorted, turning toward the gun class she was now late for. She stood behind no one. The war had changed everything.

Neil was now the one staring. What had she been thinking? It had been about him, he was sure of that, and it was something she hadn't been expecting.

Curiosity awakened, Neil's gaze followed her until she disappeared behind the bleachers of the gun class. When he got home, maybe he'd dig into that.

Kevin glanced up as the other students turned to frown at the late arrival. Teaching the class today, he only motioned toward the front. "We waited."

Kevin had noticed her pause to watch the loading crew, but didn't call attention to it. Samantha was still settling in, trying to figure out her place. That she had one, the rookie didn't doubt. She and Angela wore the same expression of determination that his sister had gotten whenever she wanted something.

Kevin sighed. Safe Haven was a great place. His sister would have liked it here. "On your mark, shooter."

Mind on the man she could hear now rolling away, Samantha drew and fired without her usual flash of Cheyenne Mountain.

Against her will, she wondered if Neil would be gone long. She'd already gotten used to seeing him around.

5

Driving in from the south, the wind had begun to pick up, and storm clouds rolled behind the grit. It cooled sweaty necks and ripped papers from careless fingers. Increasing steadily, by midmorning it was coming at them in long, gusting swells that made everyone glad the dustier places were behind them.

The parking area was mostly deserted, only three guards on the cars since it wasn't a travel day, and Adrian nodded to each of them as he headed for the supply trucks. Approving of the stacks of neatly packed and labeled boxes around the semi, Adrian still found himself frowning. Nerves on edge, it was a struggle to smooth out his expression as he pulled himself up into the rear of the mostly empty rig.

He returned the greetings of the men coming out to take their first break, and his unease grew with the wind. The sounds of his

flock were normal, but not everyone was here. Something was happening. Had it been wrong to send the water crew? Were his men in danger?

Adrian tried to push it away. They had to have water, and there was no way he could have put Kenn in charge and gone himself. Kenn's one small chance at leadership had passed with the appearance of Angela and her busted lip.

"We're almost done with this one. Did you know there was a crate of grenades in here?"

Adrian shrugged distractedly as Marc stood up from a stack of boxes on the semi's mostly empty floor. "I wondered what the key went to. Kenn and Kyle do most of the pickups, and they take anything they think we might need later. Hard telling what you may find."

Marc lit a smoke, and Adrian forced himself to pay attention. This mattered. He had to make sure Angela stayed.

"I had it put in the weapons rig, along with the ammo we found."

Adrian was pleased by the way Marc swept their surroundings, like his other men. With his unfriendly attitude, people would be less accepting...and that would work to their advantage. Providing, Adrian could find Marc something to do while he prepared Angie and his people for what came next.

"You've gotten a lot done."

"I spent some time last night figuring out the best way," Marc said.

After being awakened by Kenn's angry voice at the crack of dawn (what a different, unwelcome start to a day!), Marc had discovered four rookies waiting for him at the trucks. They'd made it clear he was in charge, and while Marc could have supervised, he'd done as much as any of them and was pleased with the progress.

Adrian pushed gently, wondering if Marc might be immune to his gift. He would be the first. "Before or after Doug and Kenn took the shirt off your back?"

“After. Now I understand why Angie turned into a card shark.” Marc smiled ruefully.

It had been rough at moments, like when Kenn had joined the poker game, but it hadn’t been nearly as bad as he’d expected. Adrian had done a great job of controlling the situation when it got tense.

Adrian stored that information and used his boot to squish a spider with too many legs into the floor.

He ground it in a way that made Marc frown with recognition. Angela had the same reaction to mutations.

“I understand why you have the wolf protecting her, but it’s not necessary,” Adrian said. “She’s safe here.”

Marc immediately felt better knowing she had some protection. He didn’t tell Adrian that Dog was guarding her on his own.

“So, a day each?” Adrian asked, switching to a safer topic. He would keep trying to reach the stubborn man.

“A little less if I spend my free time on it, which I probably will,” Marc answered. “I’m going to hang and then fill the baskets and shelves with what your people use most.”

“Our people... Great idea.”

Against his will, Marc liked how that felt and continued, “As for the stored items, you could—”

“We could,” Adrian corrected him patiently. “They’re your people now, too.”

“*We*...could limit access and have people sign out what they take and when. After certain hours, lock it up and set alarms that only a few people know how to remove.”

Marc didn’t want to argue, but his demeanor said to ease up.

Adrian stopped pushing, observing the thick, black clouds starting to roll in. More rain. “What kind of alarms?”

“Basic stuff. Like the discs you already use, but these will give the person a shock they won’t be able to hide, because it will knock them out. I also thought maybe a hidden video

recorder wouldn't be hard to hook up with the equipment you have here."

"Absolutely. Sit with us at lunch, and we'll go over it."

6

"John said you needed this ASAP."

Two of the men glanced up from their potted-meat sandwiches, and Angela held out the envelope, eyes on her feet.

Aware of her before the other two were, Marc didn't look up at all, but he did listen. Was she okay? Did she miss him anywhere near as much as he missed her?

"Thanks. Grab a tray and join us," Adrian invited.

Sure that Marc wouldn't still be at the table when she returned, Angela got into the short line. The eyes on her weren't hostile anymore, but there was no friendship in those glances either, and she stiffened her shoulders.

I have my son, and my Brady, when I'm ready for him. To hell with the rest of you!

Adrian stiffened at the ugly tone, catching Angela's thought. He would have to do something about her mood. What would settle her down? Where would she go to try?

"Are we good?" Marc dared Kenn to say it wouldn't succeed.

Adrian regarded the sullen Marine, understanding Marc's need for escape as the damp wind blew a sweet hint of vanilla around the table. "You got what you need?"

"Yeah." Kenn hated the source but loved the plan. With Brady's setup, thievery would be a thing of the past. "Are those the results from the dogs?" Kenn changed the subject.

"Yes. They tested positive for sedatives, but none of the water is missing or contaminated, and Danny's excuse is tight. We all saw him out cold by the fire."

Marc stood up and adjusted the edges of his coat around his Colts. He would stay at the table if Angie gave him a sign that he should.

There was only silence, and he sighed unhappily. "I'll catch you guys later."

He was gone quickly.

Adrian glanced at Kenn with hard eyes but said nothing as Angela took Marc's seat, something that drew mutters from those in and around the crowded lunch mess. She'd sat with the boss every day that she had been here. *Why?*

"They'll be here for travel time?"

Kenn nodded, ignoring Angela and the big wolf that settled onto its haunches at her side. "Barring trouble, the water crew will be in around eight in the morning, day after tomorrow."

Adrian sipped on the fresh mug of coffee she'd brought for him and Kenn, noticing she hadn't wasted her time bringing one for Marc. She'd known he would be gone. "We'll leave as soon as they get in," Adrian instructed. "You'll do the driving schedules?"

"Yeah. Seth went with them, so I told Doug to take charge of the new Eagles."

Adrian's eyes traveled the murky sky beyond their perimeter, worrying. "They'll want him back when Kyle starts on them. He's every drill instructor I've ever known."

They laughed and continued to discuss business, and Angela kept quiet as the drizzle began to fall, still lonely and feeling very much like an outsider despite sitting at the "in" table.

7

"You probably shouldn't get so close. Odd things come out of high water now."

Samantha jumped and turned fearfully, only relaxing her defensive stance when she realized who it was.

“Thanks.” She scooted back a little as the chilly wind blew her curls around. Bugs crawled happily near her feet as she stared at the leafy trees blowing wildly, and Samantha shut her tired eyes. It was pleasant here until you saw a rabbit with three ears and only one front paw hopping through the grass. Then, reality sank in. For those who’d been through what she had, not seeing the bodies wasn’t enough. Any little sign was a reminder, a flash of hell, a tortured slap, and she sucked in a breath, pushing her crimes away. What else could she have done?

“You okay?” Marc asked, carefully filling two milk jugs of sludgy water to scrub the trucks with. No way was he going to the mess to eat with everyone there. Not without Neil. Marc wondered if Samantha might be feeling the same...only she didn’t have a friend high in the food chain did she?

Samantha stood up, brushing the dirt from her tan slacks. “Mostly I’m bored and a little uncomfortable around so many people all at once.”

Marc met the eyes of a small group of men moving past, delivering a hard glare that kept them going.

He turned to Samantha. “Most of us spent some time alone, but I’m guessing you spent all of it that way. It’s hard to adjust.”

“Will you tell him I need a job or something? I’ve got way too much free time.”

Marc took a minute to write it in his new notebook, his first entry. “Just give it some time, Sam. The feelings will ease.”

“Will they?”

Marc sighed, picking up the jugs. “I hope so. Otherwise, it might be what pushes me out of here.”

Sam watched him leave, distracted for an instant from her own problems. Marc seemed as unhappy as she was to be back in the arms of society, but he didn’t have the weight of her burdens. She resumed her seat on the bank. No, he only worried over his love, his heart.

I care for all these people, Sam clarified. It doesn’t make me better than him, only more of a threat.

Samantha's time alone had forced her to take hard looks at herself and her role in the war. She hadn't pushed the button, but she hadn't lifted a hand to stop those who had, either. Instead of using her gifts for a heartless government, she could have been saving the lives of her fellow countrymen.

That need to atone, the one she already suspected Adrian of carrying, was heavy. She'd ended things with Rick and made a couple friends among the women for her outspoken views. But that also made it clear she was different, and it had limited her companionship. Right now, she could be with the other females at the gun class or the mess, but even though Safe Haven held her kind...

Sam stopped herself. Two days wasn't enough time, she knew that. It was just hard. Who among these recovering survivors would understand the choices she'd been forced to make?

Samantha swept the camp, spotting happy, relaxed faces and "normal" life continuing.

Not them.

She turned to scan the area behind her and found three guards standing together nearby. Each made eye contact, then moved into the trees, vanishing.

Before she could form a question, a fourth Eagle stepped forward. He'd been so still that she hadn't noticed him.

Jeremy didn't avoid the searching glance, her almost desperate need to connect. As an Eagle, he'd observed it enough times to know it for what it was, but he wasn't sure he'd ever seen it so clearly.

She's haunted, the Level Five Eagle thought. *I could help with that.*

Samantha felt his gaze digging in, searching her as she had him, but it wasn't invasive like she'd expected. It was sympathetic, caring even.

The emotions were so foreign that Sam snapped her eyes back to the water, heart thumping. That one understood too much.

It was a relief to glance over a few minutes later and not distinguish him, though she thought she could still *feel* his stare. Who was he?

Unaware of how she'd been manipulated, Samantha stayed there, exploring the feeling of his gaze on her. Thoughts of fleeing to her tent had been replaced with a human trait that the Eagles were being taught to use. Curiosity was a powerful distraction tool.

8

Angela hesitated outside the open tent flap, hating how it made her feel to know there were eyes on her constantly. She lifted her chin, thinking that while her words and clothes fit in, she didn't, and they knew it. It was in her wary eyes and hesitant interactions. She wasn't adjusting well and wasn't sure how long she—

“Should I come out there?”

Angela flushed, frowning at herself. “No, sorry.”

She ducked into the scent of musky cologne and was struck again by how neat Adrian always kept things. She also wondered what it was about the precisely aligned dimes, nickels and quarters that had bothered Marc so much. She'd caught a flash from him as he left Adrian's table and knew he didn't trust the blond. The coins had something to do with that, but she wasn't sure what.

Adrian knelt down by the cooler and examined her as she examined his home, thinking she could have been a model even with the heavy bags under her eyes. Instead, Kenn had hidden her away.

“Have a seat,” he invited, bringing two tin cups and a red thermos to the table.

“Thanks. What are we drinking?”

He handed her a sweaty green can and a paper towel before joining her. He had a small brown box in his other hand.

Angela took the pop eagerly, thinking she hadn’t had cold Mountain Dew in over four months.

“It doesn’t have a name. Rum, rehydrated berries and bananas, sugar, stuff like that. Oh, and ice, lots of ice.”

People moved by in the cloudy afternoon, gawking at them through the open flap, and she guessed he didn’t smoke with camp members...or maybe just not with women? Angela took a swig, enjoying the caffeine-riddled soda. It was her favorite.

“You’re off-duty now?”

“Yes. John’s good. Nice. Anne is too.”

Angela shifted restlessly as loud whispers about her and Marc floated through the flap. She adjusted her sweater to cover her unease. Let them talk. What did she care?

“They’ll appreciate the help.”

“He has me doing his notes right now, catching up.”

Adrian smoothly sealed the thick joint. “And making sure you know what you say you do, before he lets you near his patients?”

“Yes. He likes to throw trick questions.”

“He won’t test you long. A month from now, you’ll want the paperwork again.”

Angela shrugged, wondering if she would be here then. There was something pulling at her, but was it enough?

“I can tell you why you’re here.”

That got her full attention and a frown. “I’m here for my son.”

“I mean on the planet.” Adrian already knew he could trust her with these things despite her hesitance. “Why you’re so different. Why you survived.”

Uncomfortable, Angela bit her tongue on the sarcastic remark that flew to mind.

“You would be extremely welcome here anyway because of your medical skills, but there’s so much more you can do. You’re like me and the Eagles. You’re a Runner.”

“A runner?”

“Little kids are told not to judge people on wealth or looks, that the inside is what matters, but they don’t understand, and why should they? It’s confusing. They should all be told there are three types of people they can choose to model themselves after—those who Sit, those who Stand, and those who Run.”

The words carried a simple ring of powerful magic, and Adrian let it linger. He hit the joint and passed it to her, noticing how careful she was not to touch him at all during the exchange.

“Those who Sit are society’s burdens. They’re mostly uneducated and shiftless, with no ambition. They don’t give a damn about the greater good. They serve only themselves, or worse, no one at all. They won’t even try to make it on their own, and the old world took care of them at everyone else’s expense.”

He poured them both a cup of the reddish liquid from the thermos, impressed with the hit she drew into her lungs before passing the joint.

“Those who Stand are the workers. They fight hard for what they have, but few reach independence. They trudge back and forth their entire lives and keep the world turning by just showing up. These are the drivers, the servers, the doers.”

Angela could tell how much he believed in what he was telling her and felt her stomach tighten as he opened his mouth to continue, but she wasn’t sure why.

“Then, there are the Runners. The literal one in a million that survive whatever fate throws at them. Tolerating the world and usually unaware of how important their roles are, these are the tortured, the mocked, the exiled. They are feared, abused, and yet they push on. Runners are fate’s wild cards. They uncover, discover, question, lead, create, challenge, and no matter the

pressure or threat, there is a part of them that won't fit in. It won't allow them to conform or bend just because someone says to. This camp is full of Standers, thankfully, but there are also at least a dozen Runners here now, all gathered in the same place. The odds alone on that many one-in-a-million people all finding each other are astronomical. *We* were born into this time to help save our people, our country, and our very way of life. We have to get them to a place where they can Sit and Stand in safety. That's why you're different. That's why you're here."

Angela was speechless, mind slamming it into place with a fit that was perfect. When it turned and fastened down into an airtight seal, a wave of completeness rolled over her. All those years she'd hidden, questioned, been through hell, and Adrian had perceived it in only three days.

Adrian actually felt it, the instant her loyalty shifted to include him and his dreams, and a heavy weight slid from his overloaded shoulders. The one he needed most was here. She would take his place if anything happened...at least until Arkansas. After that, it might be someone else's duty.

"What am I supposed to do?"

Adrian soaked up the sense of partnership that filled the tent. "Help me. There's so much we need that I don't know where to begin."

"Whatever you need."

Adrian held out the smoking roach. "Always read the fine print. It's a hard job, and our survival will eventually come down to blood. You learned that on your way here, I suspect."

Angela blanched, shaking her head at both his words and the pungent weed. "I won't do it again. Ever."

Adrian wondered why she'd had to, what had happened, what Marc had done wrong. "That's my job."

"And mine?" Angela asked through the thick smoke as he exhaled.

“Look, listen. If it’s broken, show me how to fix it. If it’s coming, warn me in time to deal with it. Advise me. Be my Merlin, and together we’ll save our people.”

She stared at him for a long moment, breathing shallow, and Adrian felt the air thicken around them.

And if we can give you none of what you ask for?

Adrian spoke directly to the witch. “That’s an unfair question. I already know that you can.”

This is not a deal to be made lightly.

She paused, and Adrian blinked at the bright glow. Incredible!

There is always a price.

The tremor of greed in the words was easy to hear, and he agreed without hesitation. “I’ll give them everything I have. As long as they survive, there’s no price I won’t pay.”

Your name! the demon demanded angrily. *Tell me your real name!*

Adrian froze as his father’s face slammed into his mind.

Angela’s gasp floated through the tent. His father was Robert Milton...the man who had destroyed their world!

Adrian waited for her to call the others or at least start accusing, but there was only a heavy silence that he unwillingly broke.

“When will you tell them?”

Angela stared with a devotion that stunned him.

“Never. You’ve given me terrible, powerful knowledge, and I’ll guard it with my life so that it does not cost you yours.”

Adrian allowed himself to smile, not doubting her words. “Kenn be damned. Your place with me is set.”

9

“She’s a whore, like Tonya! Anyone can have her!”

The boy’s voice was cruel, and Angela quickened her pace.

Thud! The sound of skin-to-skin contact echoed.

“Don’t ever talk about my mom like that!”

Angela rounded the corner to discover her gentle son standing over a much larger teenager. The would-be bully was bleeding from his nose, and the fury coming from her son made her stop, duck out of sight.

She had left Adrian’s tent filled with a surprising peace, but that was gone now. She’d missed so much of him becoming a man. Who was he now?

“You hear me?” Charlie leaned down and grabbed the older boy by the front of his shirt, then gave him a harsh shake that rattled the handsome boy and sent red drops flying. “You want me to hit you again?”

The bleeding teenager shook his head quickly, and Charlie shoved him as he let go. “Keep your fucking gob shut then!”

“What the hell’s going on here?”

Zack’s eyes were full of anger at finding his son on the ground, bleeding.

Angela stepped around the corner, but didn’t say anything yet. She wouldn’t interfere unless she had to.

“He hit me, dad!” Eric whined, holding up a hand with blood on it.

When Zack went for Charlie without asking why, Angela drew her gun.

“I wouldn’t.”

Zack spun, startled.

Angela raised a brow as his hand slowly inched toward his own weapon.

“You gonna shoot me in front of all these witnesses?” she taunted. “I understand why Kenn chose you.”

The lifelong woman-hater glared, aware of the wolf snarling at her side. “You better control your boy!”

Angela shrugged, eyes like flint as people stopped and stared. “Looks like he’s already got it under control. Maybe your boy should be careful about what he says.” She flicked eyes toward her shocked son. “Come on, Charlie.”

“I don’t need your protection! I can take care of myself!”

To her surprise and embarrassment, the teenager had flipped on her angrily.

“Fine.” Suddenly furious, Angela holstered and stared at Zack, aware of the tense guards around them. “As you were. Maybe a good punch in the mouth for both of them will fix the problem.”

She left them all staring in surprise, heart a bit broken. How could he treat her that way? She’d almost died coming for him. Didn’t that matter at all?

“He’s a kid, honey. He doesn’t understand.”

Angela turned to discover Marc and Dog walking a few feet behind her. “Are you following me?”

Marc was happy about getting a second alone to talk. “Just happened to hear the same thing you did.”

“And see?”

He nodded. “Yeah, you two are definitely related. Zack sure didn’t like having a woman pointing a gun at him.”

Angela didn’t respond to his attempt to distract, thinking it didn’t matter. This was hard on them both, worse than she’d expected. She spun around and moved away from Marc, knowing the more they were witnessed together, the harder things would get for him.

Marc let her go, aware of the Eagle trailing her. He didn’t agree with everything Adrian had going on here, but he did with that. Angie needed a guard right now. Not for her defense, but for the camp’s. Zack had no idea how much she had wanted to shoot first and ask questions later, but Marc had read it.

He strode toward the showers with an uneasy heart. Something was happening with her, another change, and he was too far away to be sure what it was or what it meant for them.

Kenn was the man in charge today. He was on Point, which made a great excuse to go where he wanted to without question. He'd trailed Angela from a distance all day, and now he was almost as confused as he was angry. *She's so different!*

The Angie he'd ruled for so long could never have bluffed an Eagle, wouldn't even have thought about pulling a gun, let alone be able to do it with such menace. Kenn recognized it now that he had seen it from a distance and understood she would have pulled the trigger on both him and Zack. Judging from her reactions and cold eyes at times, she already had at some point.

His Angie had killed. That was partly responsible for his confusion. The respect that came with it was new and unfamiliar, and Kenn wasn't sure what to do with such a foreign emotion when it came to his timid little woman.

Kenn couldn't help a distracted feeling of pride when he thought about how well Charlie had handled himself, though. Kenn had called Zack when he saw the man's sixteen-year-old son slam Charlie into the wall of the showers. Like Angela, he'd also felt the intent in Zach's reaction, and another layer of mystery was added. He was now feeling protective of her and Charlie?

Kenn sent his relief on his way as the sun began to sink. He wasn't done evaluating, sorting, and planning. When he was, he would probably do something that would either get him banished or forgiven. He wasn't sure which yet.

Furious at Kenn for his mouth, for causing everything to be so hard, Angela stomped toward Adrian's secret base. Would she be let in without the leader with her? There was only one way to know.

Angela met the eye of the nearest guard, gestured toward the training area, and then raised a brow.

She was surprised by the instant permission that came. Had Adrian told them that she might be by? Maybe, but he wouldn't want anyone else to know, she was suddenly sure of that.

Angela headed for the defense area next to them, feeling the cute guard's confused eyes on her.

There was no one at the hay ring. After a quick glance to make sure none of the camp was observing, she ducked behind a big tree and felt the Eagle's approval as she moved into the training area without witnesses.

She heard the faint crackle of a radio and knew those inside had been told she was coming. She recalled the vigilance Adrian had spoken of on her first day here and when the witch whispered a workout was what she needed, Angela agreed. The skills Marc had taught her were basic, and she needed to practice. After three straight days with no use, she felt like she was starving for this, and the fighter inside came fully awake. Being able to sneak up on Adrian's army would definitely be a challenge, and she swiveled to stare at the guard who had given her permission.

After a minute of consideration (and another to reassure himself he had indeed heard her soft voice in his mind), Billy was positive that Adrian would love the idea. Their leader had spoken to him last night about her...differences, and the laid-back limo owner couldn't wait to find out if she was worthy of the respect he detected in Adrian's eyes. Billy nodded once, doubting she could infiltrate the base, but hoping for it anyway.

The training tent was full of shadows, and Angela chose the tall tree by the left side of the canvas, where the thick trunk was wrapped in strong elastic ties. She climbed it slowly so as not to make noise, but also to keep her nerves steady and to prevent the tent's vinyl walls from vibrating. She had no doubt that it was one of the things Adrian covered with his men, considering they spent most of their time under canvas.

The three sentries able to view her were perimeter men, and the Level Four Eagles were impressed. All of them had done something like this on their last test, but this was a woman succeeding at infiltration, and it was not only a confirmation of

Adrian's words, it was also a turn-on. Even when she made a big mistake, they were still rooting for her. She wasn't like the other females here. The boss was right about that.

Angela used her knife to ever so slowly slit a tiny hole in the tent to peer through. *So far, so good.* The men were no longer working, all watching the doorway, waiting for her arrival with sweaty towels and curious faces. None of them winced as she did at the loud static-whine from too many radios being on in the same place.

"The Eagle who finds the spy is invited to sit at my table for evening chow."

There was a flurry of activity as men grabbed their gear and rushed outside.

Angela let the witch dim them, not wanting it to be over yet. It was only an illusion, though, and she wondered who might be able to distinguish her anyway.

Adrian's voice in her head came a second later.

They'll spot your shadow.

Angela frowned at her oversight, hearing the patrol they had formed coming around to her side of the tent, and she reacted quickly. She'd forgotten about the sun, wasn't used to having to include it in her plans.

Angela slit a larger hole over the one she'd made and dove through the new entrance just as the patrol rounded the corner. She rolled to her feet in the empty tent and slid her blade into her boot before smoothing her clothes and hair into place.

Moving toward the door as she lit a smoke, Angela let Adrian's happiness wash over her like water on burning feet, soothing her pain.

Beautiful. That's on the infiltration test. These guys don't usually take that until around Level Five. Well done.

Angela inhaled as she stepped to the open flap, letting that feeling of approval soak in. Regular doses of that would be good for her. What were the chances Adrian would let a woman into his army?

“So, who’s sitting at my table tonight?” Adrian asked the still-searching patrol as he joined them.

Angela emerged. “Me.”

They all turned in shock to find her waiting contentedly by the flap.

“Again, some other time, to be sure you’ve got it right?” Adrian’s voice reeked of happiness.

“Absolutely!” Angela flashed a smile at the stunned guards around them. “Thank you. I needed this.”

Angela moved into the woods, going back the way she’d come, so the members would witness her emerging from where she had disappeared and not know she’d been here.

The shock she left in her wake lasted only a short time as Adrian began to speak. When Kenn dropped by a few minutes later, hoping to discover what she’d been doing in the training area and why he hadn’t been called, he found them all strangely smug and silent, even his boss. Like they knew something he didn’t. What had Angie told them...? Done for them?

11

“Fate thinks hard on you.”

Angela’s words caused silence to fall among his joking men.

She met Adrian’s eye across the suddenly tense center table as Dog rose to his feet, head cocked to the side as if he too had sensed it. “Something comes.”

An instant later, the entire mess of nearly one hundred people went from loud and good humored to silent and worried. The sound of feet running through the evening dimness was always bad news.

The fog parted to reveal Matt flying toward them.

Startled people moved aside as the teenager found Adrian.

“There’s a call... Dad says to come quick!”

Adrian did, thinking he would be pissed at Mitch for scaring everyone if this was a false alarm, but already knew it wasn't by the fear on Matt's face. First contact with the enemy was about to be made, and the tense leader didn't feel the chill in the darkness as he moved quickly to the communications truck.

Mitch started talking as soon as Adrian was close enough to hear. "It's the slavers—said they have news about the group of men that left us today."

Adrian lit a smoke, mentally preparing. He instantly hated the voice that came over the radio.

"I am tired of this waiting. Who speaks for you?"

Mitch saw Adrian and Kenn exchange a dangerous glance, and he stepped toward his boy, tossed an arm around Matt's neck. "Come on. We're on dinner break. If people ask, and they will, it sounds like a bad joke. Adrian can handle it. Nothing else."

Adrian nodded at him and climbed into the seat as they left.

Kenn got in, too, neither of them bothering to shut the doors. Many of the members carried scanners on their belts, and a large number of people had followed them from the mess.

"This is Eagle. Go ahead with your message."

There was an amused chuckle.

"Here's my message, *gringo*," the hard Mexican voice mocked them. "I have your men. To get them back, you will swear your allegiance to me and send out half of your women and supplies. Tonight."

"Get off this channel!" Adrian's response was sharp, commanding. "I'm expecting a call."

There was a stunned silence as Kenn (and the rest of those listening) worried, but not Adrian. He knew a bluff when he heard one.

More laughter floated through the radio, backdropped by the roar of a camp that was clearly bigger than Safe Haven.

"Ahh, a hard-ass, but you care for them, I know. Send out the females first."

Adrian made no reply, waiting, judging. When the radio lit up again, there was an edge of frustration in the killer's voice that muted the screams and foreign voices bleeding through the transmission.

"I will hurt them! I'll cut them up and make you listen!"

This time, Adrian's response was menacing. "Be careful, Cesar, or *your* people might be the ones conquered. Back off! We're not the easy target you think we are."

"I'll never back off!" the slaver screamed, caught off guard and furious at not only the defiance he heard, but also the open use of his name. "I will have the witch! You will not stop me when I come for her!"

The radio died, and Kenn turned expectantly. "What are we gonna do?"

"Nothing."

"But what about our—"

"He doesn't have them. They're listening, though."

Kenn's eyes narrowed as a short Morse code message lit up the radio, telling them Kyle and Neil's team were 5-by and almost to their destination. The XO hadn't known Adrian was still having private lessons with the Eagles. Kenn had thought he was involved in everything their leader had going on.

"How did you know?" Kenn asked.

"Because they're well-trained. They don't give name and rank—they lie, the whole time. If that evil bastard had even one of our guys, he'd be demanding we turn over the dozen Mexican females we're holding hostage or the location of the fuel tankers we hid. But he didn't."

Kenn understood, and his lips thinned. "Instead, he wants the witch. Angela."

Adrian frowned at the loudly spoken words, and his eyes warned his XO to be careful. "Send her to me early. She either had contact with them on the way here or one of us is a traitor, and I don't believe that."

Kenn nodded, wondering if his boss now wished she hadn't come. The slavers had followed her, and they were all in danger.

Adrian read it and his response was brutal.

"She has every right to be here. I know you don't like it, but these people need them. *I* need them. We can't keep doing it all alone, but more than that, she's as much the reason we're here as these sheep are. She's one of us, and I'll die before I turn her or any of them over! You'd better get on board with that at least, or resign now."

Adrian turned toward his terrified people. "Stay here until Mitch comes back. I'm gonna go sing to the herd."

12

Rick blew out the flame on his lantern and lay down, heart thumping despite the simple chore he was about to perform. The security here was extreme. He had been stared at all day long as he played football and then corn hole (what a stupid fucking hillbilly game that was!) and he was very aware that no one trusted him. He'd had empty conversations with enough sharp-eyed people to make the nervousness stay with him like an old friend.

Rick waited only a couple of minutes before easing out of his bedroll, hating it that he had been told to put his drafty tent where the bonfire would reflect his shadows. Staying low to the ground so the other tent shadows covered his movements, he tensed each time footsteps crunched and voices rang out.

It only took a minute with his knife, two minutes with a spoon lifted from the mess, and another sixty seconds to place the plastic-wrapped beeper into the ground and cover it up. He slowly repaired the small hole in the floor with dark green tape and pushed the dirt crumbs into a small pile that his bedroll easily covered.

He'd buried two letters with the remote (one of them his Dear John from Samantha), the spoon, and an exact copy of his

schedule that had the next day's travel route marked on it. Cesar would only have to hit the button on his remote locator to find which spot had been his.

With the chore complete, Rick lay back down, carefully cleaning each grain of dirt from under his nails while contemplating his next move. Cesar had told him there was another spy here. He would make contact soon and deliver a reminder of their deal. This time he would definitely need help.

Rick patted the small lump under him until it was flat. It was a simple method of communication that he and Cesar had used before. By the time Adrian broke camp, the disturbed earth would be settled down and mostly unnoticeable, unless someone were hunting for it.

These precautions hadn't been necessary with the other groups he had helped the slavers conquer, but these survivors were harder, stronger, and much more alert. Rick now had serious doubts about Cesar's ability to emerge as the victor.

He had begun the usual campaign of fear, though, drugging the dogs and hopefully forcing the leader here to react rashly. Every guard Cesar could pick off would mean fewer that they would have to face later. Next, would be a rash of accidental fires that destroyed food supplies, but Rick was already sure it would take something huge to not only get past these defenses, but to crush Safe Haven's will too.

Rick had tried to make that clear in his letter. If Cesar attacked recklessly and lost, it would strengthen not only Safe Haven, but also every other town of survivors waiting to be attacked. It would give them hope where there had been none before, and they might all try to fight back. The human spirit was hard to predict sometimes, and Adrian obviously knew how to handle his people. Cesar wasn't nearly as good.

“He doesn’t believe us about the witch because he hasn’t seen her do anything.”

Dean rubbed at the unreachable ache in his wrist as they took turns observing the large, well-protected camp through their scopes. Safe Haven’s lights were a beacon in the night.

“It won’t matter. The leader called his bluff and didn’t run. Cesar wants him now.”

Dillan glared at his brother in the cold darkness of the drafty house they were using for shelter. “I have it covered. Cesar’s got the tank by now. He’s on the way to hit them. When he does, she’ll be unprotected. We’ll get her then.”

“Why won’t your plan succeed?”

Dillan set the dart he’d made onto the table, brushing aside a dusty pile of encyclopedias. “Would, if Cesar gave it time, but he won’t. He’s seriously pissed now, and we can’t be caught off guard again. We’ll hit her and the boy with these knockout slugs and take ‘em to that cabin where we found the last group of slaves.”

“And if he wins, comes after us?”

Dillan’s voice was cold. “We’ll use her against whoever shows up to claim her. She came across an entire country to claim her son. She’ll do whatever we want to keep him alive.”

The assassin moved away from the dirty, glassless window. “Come morning, we’ll relocate. If we get the chance, we’ll take it. Search for holes in their defenses. We only need one mistake.”

Chapter Forty-Six
Pawns and Plans

Day 4

1

Though it was only seven in the morning and the damp fog was rolling thickly, Angela had to wait for the people at Adrian's tent to finish their business before she could confirm why he had sent for her. Kenn had given nothing by words or thought, but she knew. The call from the slavers was all anyone wanted to talk about, and Angela tried not to cringe every time someone said *witch* and looked around.

Adrian was sitting at a fold-up table next to his tent, shielded by a green canopy as people waited to see him.

Angela knew the call was the reason for them being here too. People were scared and hoping for reassurance. There were more members wearing guns today, and the line at the target practice area was already long, though it was so early and so chilly. The sounds of gunfire rang out almost continuously.

After listening to the first three people—older, nervous women—ask about defenses and joining the gun class, Angela tuned them out, wondering if Adrian was going to make her leave. *Might be for the best, her heart seduced, then you could have Marc.*

Angela picked up Adrian's thought and went to sit on the damp grass, content to wait, though more people had joined the line. Some of those now regarded her differently, more respectfully, and she listened, impressed with the way Adrian handled them.

It was nearly nine before they were alone, and Adrian waved her into the empty seat as the last of the members left, satisfied, "Sorry."

Angela shrugged, brushing at her damp jeans. "I didn't mind."

He only looked at her, and she dropped her eyes to the lifeless dirt under her feet. "I don't know how they know. We saw almost no one on the way here."

"*Almost* no one. I need you to tell me about all of them," he prompted.

Angela frowned in concentration, trying to tune out those walking by, whispering and staring. "There were people everywhere at first, but by the time I left Ohio in early February, even the group living at the college had torn themselves apart. I had to...convince them to let me go. They discovered a lot more than I wanted to show, but there were six of them. When Marc came, their leader, Warren, ambushed him and died for it. Once we were on the road, I..."

Her face drained of color, and Adrian hated the ugly fear that came into her expression.

"I was stalked by two men in Indiana, near Martinsville. I defended myself. They witnessed things. They might have gotten me, if not for Marc. They said they'd follow, but they were both seriously wounded, and I thought we'd lost them. I wouldn't let him finish them off. Said something stupid like, 'they're hurt, that's enough,' but I knew better." She stared at the fingers lovingly caressing her gun. "I was attacked again in Versailles, and I...killed him. We saw no one else except for a Mountain couple we spent the night with in Nebraska. It has to be the twins from Indiana."

Adrian read between the lines and his respect for her doubled even as his worry grew. "Can you...no. Will you show me?"

Angela was scowling, but she nodded, not looking up. She didn't want to experience it all again, but she had led them here

and she had to give Adrian whatever he needed to make them go away.

“Yes. We’ll have to be touching.”

His heart thumped, and Adrian stood up. “Bring your chair.”

2

Adrian sat back, hand still tingling sweetly from the innocent contact. Her skin was so soft!

Do my fingers reek of her scent now?

It was a struggle not to find out.

“They saw the fire and energy, nothing more?”

“No.”

“Good. They know very little, then.”

“But they suspect more, and if it is the twins, then they’ve followed me, and I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” Adrian calmed. “We need you here.”

“You’re not asking me to leave?”

His tone became passionate. “Never! You’re one of us now, one of my Council, and I’ll handle this. Here’s your driving schedule. Hope you like older people.”

He changed the subject abruptly, and she let him, skimming the paper.

Adrian knew she would assume he was putting her with the coal miners to discover if the elderly people had a need for anything. It was actually Kenn’s doing.

Angela had no idea about the arrangements going on behind her back. She was just happy she would get to drive. She hadn’t realized how big a part of her life her Blazer had become until she went without it for a few days.

As she moved toward the flap, Adrian said, “You did well yesterday. You’re always welcome to stop by the fort.”

Angela left, but inside she doubted his men felt the same.

3

“It’s hurting her.”

Charlie looked up from the basket he’d been sorting.

The sullen teenager was not happy to be laboring with Marc. Adrian had insisted Charlie knew the things that people used the most since he was usually the one to hand stuff out or to deliver boxes, and there had been a tense four hours of silence.

“What’s hurting who?” Charlie asked sharply, thinking it wasn’t enough to be good with a gun, but he was glad Marc was.

“Your mom, when you won’t talk to her.”

There was another tense silence.

“See, this I expect. Hate me, but give your mom a break. She went through hell to find you.”

Charlie had been thinking about it all morning, unable to drift off again after her nightmare had woken him, but he still didn’t respond. What could he possibly say to make this stranger understand that if he stayed, she would probably be killed? That he was trying to keep his mom alive by making her pick between them?

They worked in silence for a few more minutes, the other men already gone for lunch. The boy felt Marc wanting to talk, to explain. Charlie was glad when he didn’t try. Kenn had said many things about his mom, things his mom said weren’t true, and even at his age, Charlie knew who he could trust. He also knew how dangerous Kenn was.

“Can I ask you something?”

Marc paused to light a smoke and knew he would have to repay Adrian somehow for this precious time with his son. “Shoot.”

“Is she telling the truth? You would have come for us if you’d known?”

Marc’s gut clenched. “In a heartbeat, boy. I used to fall asleep hoping to hear her calling for me.”

There was another long pause and then:

“I wish she had.”

Marc could have cried in that moment, one of the few times he'd ever felt such an emotion. "Me too, boy, me too, but she made the only choice she thought she had."

"And we got Kenny."

The bitter tone made Marc frown. "Yeah, some great joke, huh?"

Charlie nodded angrily, dropping the small box he'd been about to start unpacking as Dog appeared in the wooded shadows around them.

There was a brief, intense moment of concentration between the wolf and teenager that had Marc scanning to see who might have noticed.

Only the guards. Their eyes were glued to Charlie, not in surprise, but in concern for the willful child.

They know. Which means Adrian does too. None of our secrets are safe.

"I probably won't be able to come back." Charlie let out a sigh, and then, "Sorry. I wanted to talk a little more."

The teenager was gone a second later, vanishing silently into the late morning shadows around them.

Marc continued to work, now worried. Charlie was so much like his Angie that it was scary. Whoever the teen was about to confront had better know how to handle him.

4

"Where the hell have you been?"

Angela gave Kenn a cool glare as she left the long bathroom line, going scarlet at how many people had turned to stare. He'd snuck up on her while she was busy thinking about what Adrian had said about her being welcome. She hated it that she hadn't been paying attention, but after the call last night, the witch had to be let out carefully. As a result, Kenn had startled her, and she was surprised to discover her anger was stronger than the fear.

"Well?" Kenn pushed. He'd been searching for a while.

“With the doctor and then Adrian, as you damn well know, so get off my ass!”

Kenn moved in front of her at the lie. He knew she hadn’t been with John—he’d been there twice already.

Angela shifted around him as the witnesses muttered. “Go away, Kenn. I’m not in the mood.”

The Marine ignored her order, fell in step as the sentries scowled, fingers on radio buttons.

“Where are you going now?” Kenn demanded as she left the crowd and passed the tents.

“I’m off!” Angela snapped. “Wherever I want.”

Kenn stepped in front of her again, drawing attention as she flinched and went for her gun.

“I just wanna talk!”

He reverted to whining, and she went around him again as two guards moved closer. “Not now, grunt!”

The tone of command coming from her mouth had Kenn in shock, speechless to discover he had to obey. He watched her go with a concern that was unusual. She was seriously upset. What had caused that?

Kenn started to glance at the nearest Eagle, like he would have done before she came, then stopped. They were against him already, surprised and angry that Adrian was letting him off without a punishment.

Kenn headed for the trucks instead.

5

Angela wandered for hours before lining up to wash for lunch mess. She’d lied to Kenn, hadn’t wanted him to know exactly how long she’d been alone or with the blond, but now she wished she did have duty with the kind doctor.

Yesterday hadn’t been enough of a workout to calm her, not with everything that was happening. She knew she would be glad of the free time after the shift on guard duty tonight that she’d

volunteered for, but right now, she was searching for a distraction from her fears. The twins were coming for her, and these people would be in the crossfire. *Unless I give myself up to spare them.*

Terror filled her at the thought, and she returned to her roaming, clearly agitated. She wasn't hardened enough yet. She wasn't a trained killer, and when she turned herself over to the slavers, she would have to be. She'd told Adrian she wouldn't ever take another life, but if the Mexicans came here to Safe Haven, Charlie and Marc would be murdered.

Angela's heart screamed and she raised her chin in defiance. She would turn herself over before that happened. Surrender and then try to kill them all.

Her gut twisted again, but her mind went straight to the Eagles. Did Adrian welcome female fighters? Would she be allowed to try out? Could she? She had heard about the Level tests, the physical requirements that always drew blood, and while the fear was there, waiting to evolve into panic, she found herself considering asking him anyway.

Angela's feet slowly took her to the off-limits area. She wouldn't do anything like she had yesterday. The witch was locked up tight now, but she could still watch them, right? Angela stopped abruptly. *Watch...*

The twins are watching us! That had been her feeling of danger on their first night here. They would have seen her reunion with her son. They wouldn't take her without him, not with it being such an obvious method of control. *They know about Charlie!*

Panic erupted, fear ordering her to get her boy and run hard. She turned as if in a daze.

Concerned guards moved her way.

Adrian came from the shadowy doorway of his tent, and even Kenn, on Point, saw her distress and responded.

Angela wanted only Marc, and he was by her side before any of the others could reach her.

"What is it?"

She sent him her thoughts in one horrifying picture of a gun being held to Charlie's head by one twin, while the other ordered her to destroy these people.

In Marc's expression, Angela discovered no surprise. He had already thought of it.

"Will you take us? We'll go right now. Adrian won't let Kenn stop us."

"It won't do any good, honey." Marc's words were regretful. He'd considered it again after the call, but the twins had followed them for a thousand miles, and he'd only known because of a trim on his bumper.

"They're coming. We have to get ready."

"But we could lose them—"

"No."

Her fear cleared a bit at the hard tone, and she read his thoughts.

The brothers are too good.

She caught a flash of the fire, of him finding a bullet mark, and gasped. "They were there? They shot at us, and we didn't know?"

"It's what changed my mind."

She sucked in a breath. "I'm scared, Brady."

"I know."

"What are we gonna do?"

Marc locked eyes with the man now standing tensely behind her. "Trust Adrian to protect you both."

Angela stiffened but spoke what was in her heart. "And when he can't?"

Marc turned away, waving at Dog to stay with her. "I'll do what I should have already. Hunt them down and end this!"

Angela spun to find Adrian, wanting to say so much that she didn't know where to start.

Adrian's tone said he knew. "I can. He won't have to."

She scanned the livestock area and found her boy in a shoving match with Zack's other son, this one younger but much wider than his brother.

Matt was lying on the ground nearby and Angela swung back to Adrian with desperation as guards rushed to break them up. "I'd send him away and give myself up."

"I don't doubt it," Adrian leaned in. "But will that succeed?"

It would keep them away for a while, but make peace with them, it will not, the witch answered immediately.

"Good!" Adrian grinned savagely. "I don't want to make peace! I want them eliminated."

Before she could respond, he gestured toward the fort. "Let's go observe the Eagles training. We'll both feel better."

6

They entered the tent as the bell for evening mess rang, and every head turned, all of them surprised to find her there once more.

Angela nodded to the people she recognized, attention settling on the far corner, where three men—one of them Doug—were practicing what was clearly a hostage-rescue scenario.

She turned to Adrian, daring him to lie. "For me, right?"

"In case we make a mistake," Adrian responded without hesitation. "We'll come for you."

His voice lowered so only she could hear. "*I'll* come for you."

Rather than protest as she might have done, Angela was grateful, listening to the witch insist that Adrian meant it. If the twins somehow kidnapped her, he would be at Marc's side for the rescue.

"Can I help?"

Adrian felt fate take notice. Her asking was the first stage. "Depends."

“On what?”

“They’re using live rounds.”

When the witch said she would cover it, Angela nodded. “I’m in. You want me to play myself, right?”

Adrian subtly judged the reaction of his men. This would be a crucial test of their lessons, and he could feel their unhappiness. He wasn’t certain that they were as ready as he would have liked, but he bit his tongue before he could tell them to switch to blanks. He would wait a minute and observe how they reacted to using the real hostage in their lesson. Right before it started, he would have them switch to training weapons.

Angela joined the three men who had stopped to listen and were now frowning. “You want me to sit pretty or do what I would if I were a hostage?”

Adrian was impressed at the question. “Being still would be best for now. They’re already spooked.”

“You got it.”

Angela sent him a quick flash of being inside a shield of energy. She felt his immediate relief, and knew he had been about to tell them to switch to paintball guns.

She took her place in the chair in the center of the room and Billy handed her a set of earplugs. He had been the one to allow her into the training area yesterday, and she felt a spark of interest for the ponytail-wearing blond that she wasn’t sure of. Was he trouble?

“Be careful, will ya? If I get trimmed, the wolf’s gonna want to talk to whoever did it.”

There were snorts and chuckles at her words, and the use of laughter to break the tension was a technique that drew Adrian’s attention. Surprised, he watched her handle herself and the males around her as if she’d been doing it all her life. While they set up, she casually held conversations with the men, waving to those across the room, and Adrian felt his plans shift. *She is ready for more now*, he thought, and settled against the far wall of the warm canvas room to let her prove it.

Angela couldn't believe she was doing this, was shocked to find herself here and more than stunned that she wasn't afraid. She had gotten used to letting the witch guide her through the more challenging things in this new world, but being here was all her own doing. She smothered a wide grin at the feeling of freedom. She could never have done this before the war.

The training exercise was short. Three guards against three targets, set to randomly pop up, and of course, the hostage was in the middle with the bad guys using her as a shield.

Billy and Jeremy exchanged a long, tense glance. When Billy bobbed his agreement, Jeremy turned toward Adrian. "Request permission to change the team?"

Adrian nodded. "Granted."

Jeremy turned to Doug, expression pained. "I'm sorry. Doug out, Daryl in."

The big man took it better than Angela thought he would. The other guards didn't think he was that good, were making the best choice for the mission.

Angela switched her attention to the three men getting ready to roll and felt the witch inside smother her in layers of protection.

"Team one, set."

"Targets, set."

They looked at her, and she smiled sexily. "The innocent maiden, set."

Instead of jokes, all hell broke out.

Not using suppressors, the deafening barrage froze Angela with her eyes shut tightly. She was determined not to move an inch as the slugs flew, tiny missiles punching into targets near her.

When there was only silence, she opened her eyes to witness all of them staring at her in horror. Even Adrian was scowling.

"What?" She glanced down, suddenly terrified she would discover blood, but there was only a hot piece of metal in her lap.

Angela picked it up with fingers that didn't tremble or flinch from the heat. "All right, whose is it?"

There was a tone of command to her voice that made Adrian's inner Marine applaud in admiration.

When Jeremy held up a hand, she tossed him the piece of hot lead. "Do it again and get it right this time."

Angela slid her ear-buds back in and froze, waiting.

A second later, they were resetting it for another run. They all assumed it would have been a trim, but it had been worse than that. If not for her shield, she would have been hit in the chest, and Angela felt the witch's pleasure when she didn't bat an eyelash, just took it all in stride.

This time, there was that feeling of magic in the air, of perfect shooting about to happen, and Adrian watched them roll it in surprise. They hadn't looked to him for confirmation.

Angela kept her eyes open this time, and their careful, practiced movements were like a smooth play. When the bullets stopped flying, she repeated what Adrian had said to her yesterday.

"Very nice. A couple more to be sure you've got it right?"

There was no hesitation, and the groups of Eagles in the tent were stunned as the three men ran it again. Why wasn't Adrian saying something? She must have his approval. It was the only thing that made sense, and the men studied her closely to confirm it. What did the boss have planned for the black-haired beauty? Was it personal?

7

Angela stood up as they finished round five, all of them good, and knew by the tension in the tent that something had shifted. When she frowned in concentration, her three would-be rescuers responded.

"You okay?"

“You hurt?”

Being slapped with thoughts from their audience, she waved off the concern, and headed for the open flap. “I’m gonna hit the showers.”

“I’d say she picked up on not being welcome here,” Adrian stated. He saw their regret at interfering with his plans, and insisted, “*We* need her.”

That one word cleared things up for the Eagles. Whenever Adrian said *we*, it was a greater good issue and they had no reason to doubt him. Time had proven him right before and they understood he was saying it would do the same with Angela.

When Adrian strode into the darkness, he knew his wishes would be carried out. She had to stay. They would now help with that.

Adrian took a quick glance around. *Where is she?*

He caught a flash of the caution tape and frowned, moving. He recognized the spot, and it wasn’t in camp. As he walked, Adrian became aware of being trailed but didn’t send his shadows away. This time, they needed to hear what was said.

Angela threw the rock as hard as she could and was gratified to hear a loud *thunk!* as the stone hit the creek nearly twenty yards away. When she felt eyes on her, she didn’t turn.

“It won’t always be this way.”

She didn’t answer, determined not to let Adrian discover that she was on the verge of crying. The thoughts of some of his army had been mean, and she’d been slapped with a dose of reality. Good at it or not, this was a man’s world, and it would be a hard fight to be accepted.

“Angie?”

“I’m okay.”

“It’s not safe out here. It hasn’t even been reconned.”

She didn’t answer and heard him sigh.

“I’m sorry. I thought they were ready for this much.”

Angela shrugged, listening to the soothing ripple of the water as it rushed by in the darkness. “Most of them are.”

“Will you tell me who isn’t?”

“No. It doesn’t matter. They’re right. I don’t belong. I’m...different.”

Adrian’s heart broke for her. It was the soft side she hadn’t shown yet, and he felt his heart respond to her misery. “Give me time, and I’ll change that, my word on it.”

“There’s not much time left. Marc will leave soon.”

She didn’t say “*and we’re going with him,*” but Adrian knew and gave her a minute, let her breathe. She didn’t want to go. He felt that clearly. She needed another, bigger reason to stay, and he had it.

“You were good in the tent. Solid,” he said, changing the subject.

“It was good for me.” Her tone grew bitter. “At least this was a situation I could get out of.”

Her thoughts were weak, vulnerable, and he caught a quick glimpse of her pulling a trigger and being splashed with gore.

“What happened?”

Angela sighed, hating it that she still had flashes, hadn’t fully recovered. “He tried to rape me.”

“Then he got what he deserved.”

“I think so too. It’s what lets me sleep, sometimes.”

“Killing isn’t always murder. Surely you know that?”

Angela took the smoke he offered her. “I do, but it still eats away at me some nights.”

She sighed restlessly. “This will probably be one of them.”

“You’re the strongest female to join us so far, and you have the determination I’ve been hoping for,” Adrian said, letting some of his plans escape. “The women here need someone like you to help teach them, help *lead* them.”

Understanding came for her and for the trio of men listening while covering them in the darkness and Adrian waited for a reaction, treading lightly. It had to be her idea, but he could lead

it, set it up as he always did and let her fall into place...on his right.

“You want me to train them? You want a female army too.”

Damn, she's quick! He had purposefully not been thinking it so that she couldn't pick that part from his mind.

“Yes.”

Angela was quiet for a long moment, considering the consequences, but in her head, the witch was reminding her that she had told him to put her where he wanted.

She slowly gave the answer that the men listening understood. It was Adrian. What else could you say?

“I'd love to.”

It would be something she could lean on during the nights when the dreams insisted that she was now stained forever. If she kept helping other people, that would be a small, steady payment on the debt she now owed for taking a life.

“What about the men here? This won't go over well with them.”

Adrian chose his words carefully, knowing they would be repeated. “It would if they understood how useful it can be to have a woman on the team. She'd have to be different, though, and it would have to be all or nothing from her, or they'd never accept it. It's one of those things that can't be asked for, but has to be figured out to have meaning, earned.”

Angela acknowledged the hints. When he turned toward the quieting camp, she let him go without asking more questions. First, she had to decide if what she wanted would be possible with so many of her past demons here. Adrian's request wasn't a complete surprise. Why else had he shown her his army in the first place?

It would mean separating herself even further from Marc, who was only here because he was hoping for another chance with her. He would leave tomorrow if she told him that she wanted to become an Eagle and help teach the women here to do the same. He'd know it wasn't possible for her to be his mate and

a leader, too. Not when she added in teaching the others. She'd always be pulled between the two, and both of those things were all or nothing. Marc wouldn't want to share.

Angela felt the wolf and the sentries lingering, waiting for her, but instead of returning to her tent, she settled herself on the damp grass and began to sort through her mind. What did she really want now? Adrian was tempting her with a new life, with possibilities she hadn't even considered, and she was suddenly afraid that her time alone with Marc hadn't been enough to keep them together. He wanted a mate, a part of the past returned, and she...she wanted the second chance fate was offering.

Angela lay on the ground, staring at the sky as full darkness settled over the broken land. Was there a way she could have them both, if only for a little while?

8

“Maria.”

The cook flinched, bumping into the door of the dark supply truck. This side of the mess only had a few people in sight and was almost pitch black except for her lantern.

“Who ees there?” She held up her light and sucked in a sharp breath at the shadow next to the rig. “Dio.”

Rick chuckled at the name, moving out of the shadows. “Sometimes.”

He held the door open so she would have no choice but to go inside or draw attention. When she hesitated, he uttered three words.

“Cesar says hello.”

Rick clicked his tongue at her near panic to get inside. He shut the door behind them. “They have a monthly meeting. You've known where they'd be, and yet, no word since he sent you here. Not a single call. Why is that?”

“I couldn't. The radio is guarded!” she hissed.

Maria was trapped. Cesar was holding her sons, sparing them if she would infiltrate the Americans they had heard on the radio, and now, he'd sent this...this evil Gringo to what? Kill her? Scare her?

“Can we trust you, Maria? Or are you a convert too?”

His scorn drew a reaction, but not the timid one he had expected.

“If you are here, then you owe him too. Maybe we help each other and both stay alive, yes?”

“That’s what Cesar said.” He moved closer, big body intimidating. “But understand this. I am loyal, and if I get caught, I won’t go down alone.”

He slipped around her, reaching for the handle. “I’ll be in touch. Soon.”

She frowned, voice low, scared. “Cesar is near?”

Rick stepped out into the cool night air, aware of a nearby guard eyeing him suspiciously.

“Don’t wish for the devil if you owe him money you don’t have.” He glanced back pointedly, eyes glittering. “Especially when you never intended to repay him.”

9

“It is late. You sleep now, ja?”

Angela ignored the woman, slipping on her boots. She scowled when the den mother slid in front of her.

“You sleep.”

“You move. Now!”

Hilda considered, shook her head full of pink-and-green curlers. “He says keep them women healthy.” Her face softened. “You no sleep, no eat. Not good.”

Angela felt her anger fade, but not the sense of urgency that had woken her. “Thank you. I’ll try harder. Later.”

Satisfied, Hilda moved, and Angela went outside, pulling her sweater shut. She knew the woman cared about the females here.

She was also sure something in the German's past was driving her, but Angela didn't push for that answer right now. She darted between tents; sure she knew where he was. She had to show him—

“Just tell me what's going on. Why are you so determined to become my pal?”

Tonya's voice was unmistakable, even without the usual fake accent. Angela slowly made her way past the showers, easily avoiding the three men subtly guarding their perimeter. The Eagles were too far away to hear the women, but Angela stored every word.

“Because I'd know! He has secrets. Who was he?” another voice hissed angrily, also familiar.

“Not a clue. I know I've seen him before... A politician maybe?”

That one was definitely Tonya, voice muffled a bit from running water.

“I've already run through that list. Not on it.”

Angela tried to figure out who the other voice was as she crept by during a thick silence, and then realized they were talking about Adrian. She felt her blood heat with the urge to defend him.

“Maybe we could team up while he's distracted with Barbie and her Wolfman.”

There was pleased, cruel laughter from the other female. “I knew I read you right. Let's grab some coffee at the mess and talk.”

Angela was full of rage. How dare they plot against Adrian! She wanted to confront them but kept moving, evading and pushing herself to use the skills she feared were beginning to rust without a daily workout. This couldn't wait.

The creek bank had four sentries that she had little trouble sneaking around since she was inside the tape and they were watching for trouble from every other direction. As she rounded

the curve and the spruce tree, she caught sight of Adrian and gasped. He wasn't alone!

Hot, searing jealousy burned a path down her throat, and she pushed it away, face flaming as she turned her back to them, listening.

“What?”

“I'm sorry. I have to go.”

There was the sound of a soft kiss being pressed to an even softer, younger cheek, the rustle of bodies becoming untangled, clothing being adjusted.

“But we're— “

Adrian left the anonymous female without an explanation.

As he stopped behind her, Angela could feel the sexual tension running the length of him. He'd been on the edge. She caught another hot flash that sent a chill of surprised need floating into her gut. He'd been pretending it was her.

“Something's wrong?”

Angela swallowed a nasty remark, frowning at herself. “There's something you should see.”

She spun toward the caution tape, and the sentries on the area dropped their hands to their guns at the noise of her no-longer careful steps.

Adrian was impressed, pulse still racing with need. They hadn't known she was here. She'd gotten past Level Three Eagles, and he hadn't known either until her feeling of pain echoed through his heart, calling him a traitor, a betrayer.

Aware of the wolf paralleling them on the right, Adrian waved away the men who tried to follow them and then wished he hadn't when she didn't stop for nearly a mile. She didn't talk, just moved with a surety and grace in the unknown forest that sent his mind not to the embrace that had been interrupted, but to the fantasy that it had been her in his arms.

Adrian swept the area and then turned to her, noting the way she'd learned to keep herself under tight control as they walked quickly through the forest. Fantasy wasn't even close.

"This way." She led him to a steep cliff that overlooked the route the Safe Haven had traveled to get here—west. "Use these. You'll get better details."

He stared through the night vision goggles she took from her belt, stifling a moan at the sweet hint of vanilla lingering on them. He stiffened when she leaned in, using a gentle finger to guide his sight.

Adrian felt the thrum of raw energy, and then he froze, understanding why she'd brought him here.

Angela turned her back to his, almost touching, hand resting on her gun as she protected him. It gave him time to witness everything that mattered, and she knew he was pleased with her actions as well as this warning. After a long minute, she heard him light a smoke, and she stayed alert, assuming he was now choosing what to do.

"Hell of a fight down there."

Adrian was studying the glow of a huge fire, the explosions. "Surprised we can't hear it."

Angela didn't tell him that she could. To her, the cries of the dying were loud.

"They're coming for me soon." She hadn't meant to say it.

The tremor of fear made him turn toward her instinctively. "I'll protect you."

She didn't answer, clearly not sure if she could trust him, and Adrian gently put his arm around her shoulder, tugged her into his warmth.

He didn't say anything, just held her, and Angela allowed it as they observed the flashes of light in the distance. There was a battle for survival going on down there, and she could feel him wanting to help, hurting because he couldn't.

"The witch says it's not your destiny to save them all. Try to relax. Stress is bad for the heart."

“Don’t I know it.” Adrian retreated a bit as the scent of sweet vanilla began to steal his thoughts. He handed her the goggles. “Let’s get back.”

Angela noted Dog patrolling the darkness around them as she answered, “I overheard a conversation tonight, one I think you need word for word.”

Before he could ask, she took his hand.

Adrian felt her response, her fear, and then he was in her head as she dealt with Hilda and then slipped past the showers.

When she let go, Adrian had to clamp his teeth shut to keep from protesting and hoped she would take his silence for anger at Tonya and Cynthia. It had been a long day, and his control wasn’t at its strongest.

“You’ll punish them?”

“No.” Adrian snorted, leading the way. “They never quit.”

Angela raised a brow, again marveling over the fact that she was using her powers so openly for him, after only four days. “Care to share?”

“You’ll get the full soon enough. These people love to gossip. Thank you.”

“It’s what I’m here for, right?” she said.

Adrian thought of his dreams, of the goals now expanding further than he had ever hoped possible, and let the longing fill his tones. “Among other things.”

Angela turned away to keep from asking if he would now finish what he’d been doing before she showed up. It was none of her concern.

Yet.

Angela frowned at that thought as she headed for her tent, full of confusion about these new, unwelcome feelings.

Chapter Forty-Seven
A Man Down

April 5th, 2013
North of the Rapid City Airport

1

Adrian was waiting at the QZ when the water crew pulled in, and he knew by their faces that they'd had a narrow escape.

They'd gotten the precious liquid too, though. Adrian could tell by the way the tires on the tanker were pushing out from the weight, and he was relieved that at least one of their bigger problems was solved for a couple weeks.

Neil and Kyle came to the tape, directly to him.

"They followed us openly from the state line, tried to surround us while we got the water. Rough count is sixty. Jeeps, trucks, machine guns. We didn't engage, but we did put a timer on the tower so they couldn't have the rest of it. Maybe we took out a few when it blew, but it's not likely since they were watching us the whole time," Neil said tiredly.

"You did exactly right. How did you evade them?"

"Can't attack what you can't find. We cut through a storm drain and rolled up the mill creek for a few miles like Kenn had us do after Cheyenne. They never saw us come out."

Adrian was pleased but not relieved, and the odd whine to the wind mocked him. Something else had happened. "You eluded, they got no water or hostages, and you've brought back valuable supplies and information. Why are my top men still so upset?"

It was Kyle who answered, clearly worried. “Because another city’s burning, boss. They’ve taken Casper. The smoke will be visible to everyone when we clear the trees.”

Adrian dug into the pockets of his jacket for a smoke, acting as if he hadn’t known. “So they have enough men to scout this camp, follow you, and sack a city—all at the same time?”

Neil came alive as he picked up Adrian’s thought. “We can do it. We’re ready.”

Adrian sighed, noting that Kyle had clamped down on a protest. He already knew it wasn’t true. They were good, yes, but that good? Not yet. They needed another six to eight weeks.

“These people aren’t ready. If we did it now, we might as well keep going. We’d be starting yet another war we can’t be sure of finishing, and there will never be support here for that.” Adrian shrugged resignedly. “For now we’ll double the security, increase the number of Levels we start each month, and get out of sight for a while.”

Both guards heard the tone and knew Adrian was thinking of all the people who would likely die in their place. Neil was sure their leader would change his mind, but he didn’t.

“We need to make some real distance. Don’t hold anything in when people ask about your run,” Adrian instructed.

“They’re going to keep following.”

Kyle nodded his agreement.

“This is your job, gentlemen. Protect her quietly, though. The herd can’t find out yet, not like this. We have to buy her time to win them over.”

“How have things been here?” Kyle asked, seeing Kenn was busy getting everything ready to roll.

“Interesting.”

Adrian’s tone caught their attention. They followed his line of sight to Angela, who was sitting at his center table, laughing sweetly at something Doug had said.

“She’s one of us—an Eagle in disguise. I want you to encourage it, let her have the lead if possible. I need to know how strong she is.”

Both men were wondering the same thing, but neither was able to imagine the other men accepting a female.

“I have it covered,” Adrian assured them.

“What about the slavers?” Neil asked.

Adrian’s face tightened. “I’m working on it.”

Feeling like he’d overstepped, Neil was apologetic. “His people won’t travel as hard as ours will when they discover Casper’s gone.”

Adrian shrugged again, knowing guilt would keep him up tonight. “He’ll send men to keep track of us, maybe even try to slow us down. We’ll have to scout and clear before we roll.”

“My team will handle that personally. We’ll take support, but only Level Six Eagles will clear the road,” Kyle stated.

Adrian nodded again, thinking the mobster had grown into his destiny faster than anyone else so far. “We leave in one hour. You two should talk to Billy and some of the others before we go, catch up on what’s been happening here. See Kenn for your driving schedules and adjust where you need to.”

“What about today’s route?”

Adrian’s tone was pleased as he turned away. “We’re not taking a road. We’re gonna roll right through these Black Hills.”

Adrian spotted Marc and the wolf walking through the small crowds of packing people, and signaled them over.

“You have things for me?” Adrian asked.

When Adrian wasted no time with small talk, Marc understood he was worried, and found that he didn’t like it any more than the rest of Adrian’s camp did.

“Yes. After the call, I finished that plan you asked for. It’s good.”

“How good?”

“For us, the casualty rate is three to four percent. For them, ninety-five percent at least, but it’ll have to be set up just right to get these kinds of results.”

The three pages were quickly put into his pocket, and Adrian planned to read them while Kenn drove. He’d told Neil no for an attack now, but they had to start getting ready for it. The battle was inevitable, and when the time came, he would kill every one of the foreign invaders or die trying.

2

Trouble!

Jeremy strode to the shower camper in an alert manner that the other guards took note of even in the chaos of a travel day. The new woman was surrounded by a group of females and all of them looked ready to fight.

As he neared them, Jeremy noticed the new woman—Samantha—wasn’t backing away. She didn’t give the impression that she was scared, only angry, and Jeremy obeyed the instinct that said to wait and see how she handled it.

“You can say that because you weren’t there!” one of the women stated, hand on her hip. “You didn’t almost die there!”

“I escaped after being raped, you snotty twit!” The truth rolled out of Samantha’s mouth with a harsh snarl. “And I still say we should fight!”

Silenced for a moment, the others scrutinizing her in disbelief.

Samantha read their thoughts with ease and let out another rough sound of private misery and dangerous fury. “Call me a liar! I dare you.”

Jeremy wanted to wait, but he knew two of the females lurking in the rear of the group were about to accept that challenge.

“Is there a problem, ladies?”

He sounded so much like Adrian that all of them flinched.

Samantha stared. It was the guard from the creek. She hadn't run into him again since then. He was closer now, enough for her to discover the attraction he held for her, and she felt a blush spread over her cheeks. Really?

"Just getting to know the newbie," one of the girls answered.

"Play nice," Jeremy warned. "Or maybe Adrian will reverse his choice on female punishments. You could end up digging toilet holes with Kenn."

There was an immediate flare of hatred, but no response other than short glares thrown toward Sam.

Instead of thanking him, Samantha turned away. She didn't need anyone to defend her. She was learning to do that herself.

Jeremy watched her thoughtfully. She needed a friend.

3

Angela blew out a restless sigh and gently braked as the semi in front of her came to an almost complete stop, before shifting gears and crawling along again. They were driving through a wooded area with nothing but thin trees and brown weeds, and while she applauded Adrian's choice, it was frustrating and almost painful for her.

They were going so slow that the emotions (ghosts) of the places they were creeping by were coming to her in strong, hurtful waves. They were full of death scenes and madness, but the cries of the living were worse. Overflowing with heartbreak and desperation, Angela had to force herself not to reach out to them, unsure what to do. This door was usually shut to her.

She planned to talk to Adrian about each thing like this that came up, but she couldn't tell him over the radio. Charlie would hear and she couldn't allow that yet. Charlie and Dog were riding with the vet, the teenager still giving her, and now everyone else, the cold treatment after his day of hard labor for fighting. Something like this was exactly what he didn't need to know

how to do. It would put him at risk because he would use it without caution in his anger, and people would discover the truth. That meant toughing it out.

The truck braked again, and Angela clamped down on a four letter word, sweeping the two men riding with her. Kenn's initials on her schedule told her he had been the one to put her in the vehicle with the mining men, and he hadn't been happy when Neil and Kyle had traded their places in sleep-n-ride bunks to the older men she was supposed to be riding with. It had been a neat switch, though, no time for her Marine to argue. Like Marc, Angela had been trying to place the chain of command since they'd gotten here. After this morning, she now knew she was looking at third and fourth in Adrian's army. The question was, what were they doing with her? Adrian's orders? Marc's cautions? Curiosity?

Angela tensed as a fresh swell of agony hit her. This one was a small group of starving kids, and it was a struggle to keep her foot on the gas pedal. She didn't want to pass them up. *I want to help!*

"Are you okay?" Kyle asked tiredly from the backseat.

"Fine. Why?" she asked quickly.

Kyle sat up, looking at her in the mirror as Neil stirred restlessly in the reclined passenger seat. "Because we feel it, strongly."

Angela cringed, and switched her vision to the truck that was finally moving faster. "Feel what?"

"Something is bothering you," Neil answered. "Spit it out, so we can get some sleep."

She flushed, and Kyle frowned at Neil, held up a hand. "He doesn't mean it like that. Tell us what's up. It's why we're with you."

Both of them were staring at her expectantly, and Angela kept her sight on the truck in front of them, not wanting to witness their disbelief.

“He’s passing up people and supplies, and I can’t tell him over the radio.”

Kyle hesitated, raised a thick brow. “You can’t...send it to him?”

Angela was struggling to breathe at the openness. “Not right now, and since it’s my fault you’re all in danger—”

“They were already coming for us,” Kyle interrupted firmly. “It’s not anyone’s fault. If we’re passing things you think Adrian wants or needs, tell us, and we’ll handle it.”

Angela was stunned. Where were the questions and snide remarks?

“College kids and fuel tankers.”

Neil sat up and immediately took the mike from its holder. “Three to Base, request leave to pull out for a short recon.”

“In sight?”

Neil looked at Angela, who shook her head, surprised that they not only believed her, but also that she could go along.

“Negative.”

“Roger. Cars six and eight will provide escort. Half hour check-ins. Happy hunting.”

“Copy, out.”

Neil hung up the mike as two jeeps fell out of the line ahead of them, waiting. “Let’s go. The fuel, not the people. Adrian will send a team for them.”

Angela didn’t glance at Marc as she passed him and the stinking livestock truck he’d been put behind, wondering if he would stay here and let these strangers care for her.

“We’ll need you to tell us what you can,” Kyle said, checking gear in the kit at his feet.

When Neil gave his agreement, hands busy doing the same, Angela felt a large chunk of that outsider shell crack and fall off. Adrian had known instantly how much she had to offer, and she would start helping right now, by giving him something he wanted—more sheep.

Passing derelict beef ranches and wheat fields, Angela drove confidently over roads she had never been on and used her gift, pushing, trying to get the kids into position. *Move to the tankers. Help is coming.*

“Angie?”

Kyle’s voice was so much like Marc’s at that moment that she responded as if he were, forgetting her fear. “There are five of them, three women. One of them is pregnant, but I don’t think she knows. The fuel is at an airport near them.”

Both men were thinking that her voice didn’t sound right.

While Neil studied the maps, Angela got Kyle’s attention in the mirror, sure he would be sympathetic. “They’re just kids. No threat. I want to help them.”

Kyle shrugged, willing enough, but Neil frowned. His orders were clear, and they came from more than one man—keep her unharmed at all costs.

“No. We get the gasoline and let a team come through later.”

Angela was determined to help the starving survivors. “They’ll run. The three of us won’t feel like such a threat. I’ll be able to talk to them.”

“What about the two jeeps of men behind us?” Kyle asked, wondering if this would be the time Neil used his higher rank.

“Someone has to get the tankers,” she suggested.

“No. They’ll both be pissed that I put you in danger.”

Angela glared at Neil with a tight annoyance that Kyle recognized from his months with Adrian. She would deliver the final blow next. The stories they’d been quickly told hadn’t been exaggerations.

“Yes, your ass. Let’s talk about that, Neil. Will he take a bigger chunk if we do it now and bring in more people, one of them carrying the next generation of Americans? Or if we don’t, because I might break a nail, and they’re gone when you come back, taken by the slavers?”

The silence was deafening.

Kyle regarded her with new respect.

Neil blew out a frustrated breath. The only sheep Adrian wanted more than females were pregnant females.

They were both shocked that she understood how powerful a weapon she'd chosen.

Neil began unbuttoning his shirt. "At least put on my vest so they don't think I'm a complete idiot. Pull over. We'll wait outside."

Angela did it quickly, suddenly feeling a bit nervous, and a short five minutes later, they were traveling over a weed-dotted, two-lane road. The Rapid City airport rose out of the gritty skyline like a dark omen. Nothing moved except glints off broken Christmas bulbs that framed dark and dirty windows.

Angela felt their tension growing as the wind picked up, whining eerily. The Eagles didn't like it here at all.

They rolled slowly over pieces of the twisted, rusting, airport gate, and the row of fuel tankers were the first thing they picked out, all the way in the rear.

"We'll be checking 'ports from now on. I never even thought about it."

"Yeah, makes sense. Have to have normal fuel for their trucks and things."

The two men swept the shadows. When they were near the middle of the vast lot, Kyle held up a hand. "Stop here."

Angela kept her foot on the brake as the two jeeps flanked her, and she tried hard to perceive what they did.

There were two long, empty, grassy runways, and a large, dark main terminal building with many shadowy doorways. Three big, faded, red and white passenger planes were lined up near the fuel tankers like forgotten toys, and numerous small outbuildings and vehicles littered the area, most damaged. There were also charred places on the weedy concrete and an overturned security car in front of the burnt frame of a city bus.

Angela saw the two Eagles exchange worried glances.

"We need more men," Kyle stated.

“But they’ll run awa—”

“We cannot secure an area this size with only eight Eagles.”

Kyle’s voice was firm, and Neil handed him the mike, letting the guard do his job.

“Four to Base. We have six A3’s and need drivers, plus two full Levels for security. Someone is on the way to meet you where we left.”

“Copy, Four. Cars seven, ten, fourteen, and twenty-one are on the way.”

The jeep to her right pulled away, able to feel their relief at having more men coming, but she wasn’t sure what they were so worried about. Yes, there was a bad feeling here, but it was mostly like the other places she’d been. Empty.

Are you sure? the witch questioned quietly from her cell.

Angela frowned. No, she wasn’t. After the call, she’d forced the witch into her cage, scared of the camp finding out. Except when she was with Adrian, she hadn’t used the power at all.

“What is it?”

She concentrated, but there was only darkness. The rustle of her jeans was loud in the silence as she shifted restlessly. “Something might not be right here.”

“What?”

Angela turned to view the driver on their left. “Not sure yet.”

Seth, the driver on their left, flipped off his engine, and she did the same.

The silence was thick as they waited, listening to the total nothingness around them.

“The kids are here. I got them to come,” she said suddenly. “Don’t let anyone shoot. They’re not the danger we feel.”

Angela unsnapped her holster with a smooth movement, and the two men exchanged looks again, thinking of their conversations with the Eagles. Definitely not the same as the other women in Safe Haven.

“I can’t wait,” Angela said suddenly. “They’re about to run. There’s still too many of us.”

Kyle noted only a single shadow near the planes as Angela opened her door.

“Stay here for a minute so she doesn’t take off. That’s our soon-to-be mom. Try not to get out until you have to. I’ll be quick.”

She slammed the door on their protests. This was the Angela from the hospital, the one who couldn’t possibly have been curled into a corner the night before. She had lived two lives before the war, but now, she was free to be herself, and it gave her a subtle swagger the shadowy people recognized with longing. It was the stride of someone who wasn’t living in fear.

Both Eagles were relieved (and instantly jealous) when Seth got out and fell in on her right but wasn’t sent away.

Neil hit the button on his belt. “She never leaves our sight!”

Seth nodded at the hissed order as the doors on both sides of Angela’s Blazer opened in case Neil and Kyle needed to get out fast.

Angela stopped about twenty feet from the stairs of the first plane and didn’t stare up into what was sure to be another ugly scene.

Right behind her, Seth keyed the button on his own belt so that the other men could hear.

“Can we help you?”

The shadow flinched but didn’t respond, and Angela stayed where she was.

“We’re from Safe Haven. It’s an American refugee camp. You’ll be safe with us.”

The shadow snorted, and Angela took a few steps closer, denying Seth this time when he wanted to follow.

They were by rusting gates and an enormous field of waist-high grasses where anything might be lurking, and the black-clad cop’s tired eyes swung continuously.

“I can prove it,” Angela told the slender female, who had no skin showing beneath her dark, heavy clothing. “He did what I wanted, right? If they were bad, I’d be a slave.”

The girl shrugged. "It could be a trick. Slavers are smart."

Her voice was nervous, hopeful, and young. Angela pushed comfort again. "Safe Haven follows the old rules. You and your new family would be well cared for there."

Angela felt the scowl and hoped she had chosen correctly as the whine in the wind increased.

"How did you know I'm not alone?"

"Maybe I didn't." Angela's became as cold as the air around them. "You told me."

"You tricked me!" the girl cried angrily.

Angela could feel the others nearby. Her group was warmly dressed and blended well into the surroundings as they listened. This fragile-looking chemistry student had done a good job of teaching them to survive.

"Hardly. You speak for the group?" Angela switched to an authoritative voice, making the disbelief thick in her tone. She hid her relief when the girl stopped, hand going to her hip angrily.

"I resent that! I've done the best I could!" the girl stated indignantly.

"Then, it's time to get them out of here. Hand that burden over to our guardian. In return, you'll work and follow the rules. We have two doctors, real MDs, and none of us are starving." Angela gestured behind her. "They came from all over the country. We can also give you answers."

That did it—Angela read the interest clearly.

"You know about Nevada?"

"Doug does. He was trapped under a bridge there for almost a week," Seth said quietly, thinking that for a woman who had only been with them a few days, Angela had sure picked up Adrian's style fast. He had snorted at the things he'd heard while Safe Haven packed for travel, but now he wondered.

"You have a lot of people?" The girl studied them mistrustfully.

“Yes, doctors, lawyers, farmers, soldiers, and housewives. We follow a set schedule, and we travel a lot. Most people pick their own jobs, but with your education, I’d think you would want to be helpful to our leader.”

The girl missed the fact that Angela knew she had been a student, sneering. “Yeah, in exchange for being allowed in.”

“No. You’re welcome even if you’re not useful at all.” The tone was just right—a little patronizing, a little insulting, and implying laziness—and the girl clearly felt it.

“What a load. You’ll take our guns and be in control. No thanks!”

“We are not slavers!” Angela’s voice thundered and she only lowered it a little at their fear. “We help anyone we can, and we’ve risked a great deal to come get you. The rules are simple. Pull your own weight!”

“What’s the crime rate?”

Angela wasn’t expecting the question. “Uh, there’s been one thief since I came. That’s it. No rapes, no murders. It makes them think twice when the penalty is death.”

The girl nodded, wanting to believe, and Angela pushed gently as rain clouds rolled behind the grit. “We’re American survivors who help our own, and you are that, honey. Come with us. We’ll help give back some of what was stolen from you.”

The girl glanced over her shoulder. “I think we should go with them.”

Other shadows beside the plane moved, stood up, and Angela knew by the way the girl flinched that the Eagles behind her were rushing their way with weapons drawn.

“It’s okay. They’re not sure about you, either,” Angela explained, waving a hand.

Again, she felt flashes of envy when the others stopped but Seth was allowed to stay.

The two males in the small group of strangers were flanking the very thin, younger girls who would have been called nerds

before the war. Angela was suddenly sure the guys had been athletes, all of them flying home from some kind of state contest.

“They’re right to be worried,” the tallest teenager said, pulling his gloved hands from his pockets when Seth’s pointed gaze remained there. “We’re in danger.”

The others cast long, worried looks at the dark main building.

Angela followed their line of sight, frowning. “There are people living there?”

“If you want to call them that,” the tall boy said.

The pregnant girl waved her hand in agreement, voice low. “Radiation victims. There was an explosion near the Canadian border. We were shielded by the plane.”

“We need to get the gas and go,” Angela said. “Now.”

Seth checked his watch and signaled to Neil, who immediately held up one finger.

“Ten minutes for the support,” Seth translated.

“We are offering you a home with us. In ten minutes we’re driving those fuel tankers out of here, and we’re not coming back,” Angela told the college kids. “The slavers are coming this way. They’ve taken Casper.”

The girl shook her head, ignoring the mutters of her group. “You can’t get the gas. It’s half the reason we haven’t left yet. When you get near the trucks, the walking dead attack. It’s like they’re guarding it. Every time we’ve tried, we’ve lost people.”

Seth picked out things around the tankers that made his stomach roil. Three boots, oily stains, and was that a skirt by the landing gear? Seth nodded. This was exactly what it felt like—another place of death they couldn’t get away from soon enough.

“We’ll handle it,” Angela told them. “Why don’t you guys go wait in my Blazer? There’s probably going to be some gunfire.”

The small group of kids moved slowly toward her vehicle and the waiting Eagles. They stayed together as the guards escorted them, exchanging nervous greetings.

Angela joined Neil and Kyle, ignoring the looks they gave Seth. “How does Adrian usually handle radiation victims?”

Neither man wanted to answer her question because they expected her to have a doctor's outraged response.

"Sorry if I stole your thunder, but they were going to run," Angela said. "You heard everything. I suggest fire. It will prevent further contamination, but don't even get a scratch. Got any masks?"

The kids were frowning, leery again at her emotionless words, and Angela went to them, calming, soothing. "We can't save them, and we can't leave them for someone else to be hurt by. It's our duty to do something because we can."

She continued to sing to them as she got them into the Blazer, and the three Eagles exchanged equally impressed glances.

"She's a natural. Just like us."

Kyle nodded at Neil's comment, thinking Marc was right to want her so badly. She wouldn't just be someone's woman or spouse. She would be a mate, some lucky man's other half.

Marc's? Kyle frowned. He wasn't sure the man was *that* good.

"He knew she would be," Kyle commented. "That's why we have code Raven already. Adrian knew she was one of us the second he laid eyes on her."

"No, one of him," Seth corrected quietly. "She's like Adrian."

Kyle grunted in understanding, remembering riding out the sandstorm. "Kenn's gonna shit."

Neil didn't echo their mirth. "He's going to mess it up for her if he can. We'll need to keep things under control, help her out."

The other two agreed, and Neil sighed. "Come on. Let's have a gander. Maybe we won't need our guns. Be nice not to do it so up close and personal this time."

Kyle followed, Seth stayed, both thinking of the last few mercy missions. They had been messy, ugly, and the memories had lingered.

The men were back a minute later, resigned. They met the others at the front of Angela's Blazer, aware of her talking calmly to the kids, keeping them under control like Adrian would have done.

"We'll do the whole building. She has three full cans, and Seth has two. That's enough to create a barrier, and then we'll run a tanker in. Bullets, if any of them make it out." Kyle looked at Angela, who was now standing by her open door, listening. "You'll have little protection while we do this. You should go and meet the other men. They'll be your escort."

Angela slowly got into the driver's seat, not sure if they had missed something important that might explain the warning bells suddenly blaring in her head. She didn't want to leave, but they had gotten the fuel cans out and were waiting for her to go.

She rolled to the gates, stopping out of sight. What had she—?

"Get down!"

Marc's order over the radio got Angela to duck just as the well-aimed dart plunged through her open window and stuck into the seat instead of her neck.

Angela instinctively hit the gas pedal, throwing them all back in their seats as she sped for the safety of camp, for Marc! Her fingers fumbled for the mike as bullets slammed into the Blazer.

She jerked them to the other side of the two-lane road, putting up the windows to protect the screaming kids. "*Help! Sniper!*"

The call went over both mental and CB waves, and every man she had a connection with felt it, including those who were too far away to assist.

More bullets ricocheting off the ground in front of them had her veering violently, and she dropped the mike as the Blazer's tires lifted.

Angela turned them in a sharp arc and was relieved to feel earth slam into the rubber. Before she could get out of the sniper's range, a faded green army jeep appeared on the narrow road ahead of her.

“Hold on!” She slammed her foot against the brake, throwing them all forward as the jeep rolled closer, cutting off her escape. The grinning madman behind the wheel was sickeningly familiar.

Brady! Angela slammed it into reverse, vaguely aware of her CB blaring with panicked male voices. *Brady!*

Get to Neil!

Leaving a cloud of dust, she flew backwards into the ravaged airport, and the men coming to her rescue scattered as the sniper switched targets.

The guards returned fire, and Angela slid to a stop in the middle of them. Dillan’s jeep was coming fast and so were the slugs, the Eagles now using her armor-plated Blazer as a shield.

Angela searched hard. Where was he?

Tell the boy about me.

Her heart sank as she picked up Marc’s thought, realized what it meant.

“No!”

Her scream drew attention, and the men followed her line of sight to the muddy Blazer flying at them from a nearby access road. The vehicle picked up speed, flying toward the lunatic who hadn’t seen him yet.

Love you, Angie. I never stopped.

No, Marc!

Marc swerved out of the decaying trees, and the Eagles saw a rare glint of sun flash off his dog tag, bright enough to hurt. His Blazer lunged onto the cracked airport street as the army jeep reached the road too.

Before Dillan had a chance to react, Marc slammed into the driver’s door.

“Nooooo!”

Flames and heavy smoke immediately billowed into the air from the twisted wreck, and Angela immediately rushed toward it, unmindful of the bullets punching into the debris-covered ground around her boots.

“Marc!”

Chapter Forty-Eight
Forbidden Power

1

Angela and Neil were there to catch Marc as he stumbled out of the crushed Blazer, and the Eagles rushed to be sure Dillan wasn't a threat anymore.

“He's dead. Jeep's a total loss.”

Their extra men rolled into view as Kyle's words gave them their answer, and the bullets stopped as suddenly as they'd started, leaving the sounds of burning, cracking wreckage.

Doug pulled up next to Neil, but it was Angela who took charge as she assessed the damage to the glassy-eyed man leaning against the trooper. “There's a sniper. Take care of the kids in my Blazer.”

Gaping, Doug waited for the next vehicle to go around so he could pull over and climb out.

“Get her down!”

Seth's shout at a glint of light had Marc reacting automatically. He swung Angela around as the shot echoed and he jerked, grunting.

He fell heavily against her as the Eagles returned fire, creating a line of vests between them and the sniper.

“Marc!” Shoving his long coat out of the way, her hands plunged under his shirt, expecting the worst.

“You wore the vest!” Angela exclaimed in relief when she felt only dry cloth.

Marc tensed against her as his lungs throbbed with sharp, heavy hurt from the wreck. “Eagles are...required to.” He gently

wiped the tears from her dark lashes, smiling when the pain increased. “Anything for you...”

Fresh tears spilled over. “I can help! Hang on!”

Marc’s eyes shut, breathing labored. “Not this...time, honey.” His eyes shot back open, but they were glazed with coming death. “Always love you!”

Angela held out her hands, and those around her saw them begin to glow a deep blue.

This can only be done once without payment. You would continue?

The Eagles heard only her answer.

“Yes! Quickly!”

Doors in her mind opened, and power exploded from her outstretched fingers.

The Eagles watched in stunned silence as thousands of tiny, brightly colored orbs flew from her like shooting water. They hit Marc’s chest and sank into him, covering his body with a constantly changing flash of synchronized red, blue, and purple light.

Those witnessing it were torn between his injuries disappearing and the fierce concentration shining from Angela’s face. She was the magic Adrian had been searching for!

When her shoulders went from tense to tired, Kyle got the new men up to speed about the airport threat but didn’t look away from the miracle happening behind the line of vested Eagles. “Top two up high, next five low. Go!”

His team quickly set up the ordered guard.

Angela stumbled as the orbs swarmed back, and Neil was there to steady her. He drew in a breath. Her skin felt like it was frying, but there was no sweat. When she trembled under his fingers, the need to comfort her, to hold her, was nearly overwhelming.

Neil retreated instead. That wasn’t in *his* job description.

Marc gasped, sucking air into a lung that hadn’t had any a moment before, and he immediately coughed, rolling over.

Angela felt the weariness sinking into her, drifting toward the darkness. She'd done it! She'd...shown her true gifts in front of strangers. The fear returned with that thought.

When Marc slowly rose and steered her toward a truck, she didn't protest.

Marc opened the door and glared at the driver, Billy. "Take her to Adrian. Don't stop...for *anything*."

Angela got in without looking at them, and her heart throbbed when Marc shut the door. Now he knew what a freak she really was and so did the Eagles. Marc would stand by her. That's why he'd put her in here, to be safe from the others, but did he need to? Would Adrian's men be able to accept how different she was or would they drive her—

"Recon team, check in!"

Angela jumped at the radio call. She waited to find out how the men with Marc now sounded during the report, but her driver only waited expectantly, and she understood. Everyone else was out of earshot, and Billy wanted her to answer the call.

"Recon team, check in now!"

Angela picked up the mike with a feeling of authority that she wasn't sure she wanted. Being careful with her words came naturally as she hit the button. "We had a...delay run into us. We're okay now. Hang on for one of the guys."

"Do you need more men?" Adrian asked quickly.

Angela heard his real question clearly. *Should I come? Do you need me?*

Watching most of the guards, including a limping Brady, pick up gas cans and head for the main terminal, Angela was relieved. Still set to get the fuel tankers and eliminate the walking dead taking shelter here, the Eagles didn't appear to be treating Marc any differently. Maybe they wouldn't her either.

"No. They're about to blow this place, literally."

"Copy on the noise coming. You found survivors?"

"Yes, and I'm sure they could use a good meal and a hot shower. What's for lunch?"

Angela wasn't sure where that had come from, but knew instantly it was the right way to help him keep the listening members and the new kids calm. She felt Billy's approval next to her and realized he'd had her answer the call to calm her down.

"Ham and cheese sandwiches, applesauce, chips," Adrian responded. "The entire team is 5-by?"

She knew that one. "Roger."

Doug pulled in behind her, driving the Blazer full of nervously talking youths.

"Copy. Hurry home."

"You know it." Angela hung it up, knowing she'd impressed Billy, but better than that, feeling more like herself. The short words with Adrian had told her he would handle whatever had happened.

Her driver returned a small grin, and Angela settled back. "Home, please. You drive."

Dark eyes set in lines of sorrow and alive with hatred watched the jeeps and fuel trucks roll out of sight. Dean was furious and hurt beyond words. His brother was dead! It was the first emotional pain he had ever felt. Even physical wounds were viewed with apathy (at least they had been until the witch had taught him fear), and Dean was unprepared for how awful it was.

The sense of loneliness, of complete failure, was undeniable, and Dean was stunned by the tears that fell. He would bury his brother and then he would make that bitch suffer! If he couldn't get to her on his own, he would take over the slaver's camp and attack.

Vengeance was on the way. It might take a week or a month, but it burned with a red-hot fury that nothing would calm.

The guards were unable to keep from talking about what they had witnessed, and the story flew through Safe Haven despite the mandatory quarantine. Overheard while setting up for lunch, small, worried whispers of magic began circulating, and Adrian headed for the taped-off QZ.

The gossip lacked details and would be quickly forgotten without fresh fodder, but Adrian was curious about the reactions of Angela and the Eagles. The panic in her voice had run through Adrian with a horror he would never forget. Would she now back out of the ideas he'd planted? The life he foresaw for these refugees was no picnic, but as an Eagle, she would face dangers like this regularly.

He spotted her at the center table with the rest of his chain of command, Marc on her right in his crisscrossed gun belts and appearing as if he'd taken the worst of it.

The wolf appeared at his master's side for an inspection and a quick rub of confirmation. From there, Dog went to Angela and curled up at her feet, letting her gentle fingers stroke his soft fur comfortingly. The big animal was bonded with Marc. Losing him might have sent Dog out into the wild, and he was grateful to the woman and her witch for saving his master. She would be well protected, and so would their pup.

Adrian let his sight reach out, the part of him that was sometimes able to view what was hidden, and Angela mentally rushed out to greet him.

The girl in the parka leads their group. She doesn't know she's pregnant.

Was she right to be worried about their reactions? Adrian scanned the new people, noting them putting away the food and talking easily with the Eagles around them. They were thin, strong, and young. Smart too, he realized, noting mended glasses, walkie-talkies, and loaded weapons with extra ammo staying in reach. They were survivors.

And my men?

Adrian recognized the satisfaction on their faces, the kind that came from winning a battle, and relaxed. He was now anxious to hear the unabridged version the herd would never get. Surprising only them, Adrian went straight to the college kids, eager to welcome the first new people that Angela had risked her life to help.

It took only a few minutes to realize the kids were already won over. Adrian sat with them, pushing more food toward the girl in the parka as he stored every word of their vivid story. When he began to speak of quiet loyalty and of helping, they hung on every word.

Angela felt very exposed. Both sides of the caution tape that lined the camp were full of those eating, but Marc had almost died for her, and she wouldn't hurt him by moving away. She worried over it though, knowing Kenn would see it and be sure there was more than friendship between them.

He already knows that, Adrian stated. I'll handle it.

Adrian sounded pleased, and Angela was glad he wasn't upset that she'd risked so many of his men for so few people. She sent him an apology, telling him she just couldn't leave them.

Adrian turned to her in a silent communication that made the man on her right, Marc, very unhappy.

Please don't feel that way. Each life is without price to me, and I want them all. You won't be punished. The need to help them is what makes you one of mine.

Adrian looked at Marc, who tensed, also expecting the leader to be mad about how he'd taken over.

Same with him. He just can't accept it yet.

I'll work on that, Angela said.

Me too, and when they find out he saved your life today, so will the camp, Adrian promised.

Hoping to calm things down, Angela looked at Kyle and Neil. “Sorry for putting you guys in a hard spot, and I’m sorry Marc’s so pissed at you.”

Marc let out a sigh, understanding she wanted him to let it go. “I’m cooling off, but yeah, they fucked up. Adrian wouldn’t have let you go alone.”

Adrian slid onto the seat across from them. “No, I wouldn’t have, but I’ve served all my life, learned the tricks. Now they know. It won’t happen twice.”

“Because you’ll train them better or because she won’t be there?” Marc’s response was fast.

Angela waited to find out if she was as free as Adrian claimed.

“Neither. She’s to have full reign among my army, though, I prefer only the higher people know it for now. As her protector, I expect you to teach them not to make these mistakes. Who better for that job than the man who brought her over a thousand miles through this new hell?”

Marc’s heart fell. There was no way she’d turn that down. Stupid, Angela was not.

“Kenn won’t let this happen without a fight.”

Marc could feel Angela’s growing anger, her annoyance with the conversation, but didn’t take back his observation. “You have that covered?”

Adrian gestured toward the college kids. “It’s already begun. He can’t stop it. He can only interfere. You’ll have roughly twenty-four hours to act openly, while you’re in quarantine.”

When Marc said nothing, Adrian pushed. “Would you deny the others like them a chance at life?”

“I’m not that selfish,” Marc replied scornfully. “But she’s going to keep putting herself in danger, and I’d have that stopped!”

Angela’s protests were ignored by both men, and she inhaled a calming breath as they continued.

“I won’t hold her back or tell her no on the things she wants to try here, and neither will my men, unless they have to.”

Marc understood the promises he wanted weren’t coming. “Don’t get her killed, Adrian, or the men she’s bonding with might turn on you.”

His warning drew scowls from the Eagles, but Adrian held out his hand. “If I lose her, I’ll resign, and the people here will vote in a new guardian. I wouldn’t be worthy of leadership.”

Marc relaxed the tiniest bit. “You believe in all this that much?”

“It’s everything I am.”

Marc reluctantly shook with him. “If I only have a day, I’ll need some boundaries.”

Adrian smiled ruefully. “So do I. We’ll talk, and then you and the Eagles will draw up some plans. We’ll do switches where we need them. She’s never to be alone.”

“I hope you two are done!”

Angela stood up with a frown. She was angry enough to fight, and Marc doubted Adrian had adequate leverage to get her to agree. They had both forgotten to account for her reaction, but things were happening fast.

“I have defenses. I’m not some helpless pup you guys picked up on the side of the road!”

“I never said you were,” Marc muttered, drawing fire from Adrian without even realizing it.

Angela’s lips tightened into a dangerous line. “Our deal stands!”

Some of the listening Eagles exchanged looks. A deal? There wasn’t love between them, but an arrangement?

“Not above your safety.” Marc squared his shoulders. “If you mean to do big things here, and I can already see that you do, then you’ll accept the protections we come up with...”

They all felt the ultimatum coming, and Adrian respected Marc even more for continuing as her hands clenched at her sides.

“...or I’m leaving. Tonight.”

There was a shocked silence as tension crackled violently.

It was broken by Dog’s low whine.

Angela didn’t try to hide how much that hurt. “You mean it?”

“I do. Next time, the bullet will get through, or I won’t be close enough to save you, and I can’t take that.”

The words surprised her, hurt her again, and none of them—Angela included—knew if he was bluffing.

“You’d leave me?”

“Yes.”

“Then I agree!” she sneered. “I need to piss and dunk my head in some cool water before I explode. Should I pick a guard?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Marc and Adrian spoke at the same time, and both males saw the flames shoot through her eyes.

Angela chose Seth by giving him a tilt of the jaw and a questioning brow that both Marc and Adrian felt deep in their gut. It said, *“I need an ally and no one else will do.”*

Seth noticed Adrian’s expression was a bit harder than he was used to and tensed reflexively at the curt nod. But he didn’t hesitate to follow Angela from the little mess. He would have accepted her invitation without Adrian’s words of giving her free reign. Her pull was strong, though not all sexual, and Seth hoped she wasn’t planning on going against Adrian. There might be real trouble if she did that.

“He has my support, but my freedom, I will always fight for,” she stated.

Seth took careful stock of their surroundings, aware of Marc gesturing the wolf after them.

Paranoid about her safety, Seth thought, and wondered how long Marc would be able to stand watching from the sidelines as she built a life in Safe Haven. It was already clear to Seth what

Angela would become, and he couldn't wait to help her achieve it.

“Complete freedom doesn't exist. It's a myth, and I think you already know that.”

Seth received silence, and kept coaxing, drawing on that spark of kinship he knew she'd felt too. “You're gifted, special. Men will kill to take you away from here. Adrian will give you as much freedom as he can.”

His blunt words dulled some of her anger, and Seth saw fear take its place.

“You're so eager for me to give him what he wants, but when it gets someone good killed, maybe him, will you still want me then? Because these things always come due in blood—he's right about that.”

“America surviving, that's what matters, and there's not one of us who wouldn't lay down his life to make that dream come true, including Adrian,” Seth answered firmly. “He needs you. He knew you were coming, and he hoped you would be strong enough to stand for the women, and you are! Don't let what might happen or will happen, if you already know, get in the way. The lives we'll save, change, are worth the price. *Adrian's* worth it.”

Using a part of himself not employed since before the war, Seth pinned her with a sexy grin, oozing charm she had little resistance to. Seth was ruggedly handsome at the worst of times, but when he flashed those dimples, he was lethal to the camp's women and he knew it.

“His Eagles need you too, Angie. Together, we'll keep him alive.”

Angela sighed wearily, leaning down to stroke the wolf. She would agree and follow blindly like the rest, but she had to be careful. For the new life she was creating to succeed, she had to keep Marc around while she put the pieces in place. There was a chance for them somewhere in the future, and she intended to take it when the time came. He'd more than earned it.

“Was it the slavers?”

Kyle shrugged, watching both sides of the mess clear out. Set up in the middle of the road, the emptiness was making him uneasy, especially after the morning’s trouble. “It could have been a part of their group, the tail we’ve had, maybe. It felt like a two minute plan, and they had no support.”

Adrian wasn’t relieved. Two spies had recognized an opportunity (rookie mistake made by his Eagles when they’d sent her and the kids on alone) and had tried to take advantage of it. Just because one of them died in the attempt didn’t mean it was over, however. In fact, it had likely added more fuel to the fire. Now the enemy knew it would be no easy task, and they would come in force. There was a battle for survival waiting and he had to get everyone ready.

Kyle took out his notebook expectantly. Under pressure, their leader was at his best.

“All training and testing will be done indoors for a while. Start rescue lessons for every Level. Double the sentries at night and use the disks at one hundred feet instead of fifty. Seamstresses will be in my tent an hour after evening chow, and gather all the steel plates and green material you can find. Put it in the rear of my rig and have Miller and his two boys brought into it.” Adrian paused to light a smoke, sure Kyle already knew to cover the family’s absence. Adrian couldn’t let his sheep know he was worried enough to have steel-plated canopies created, but it still had to be done.

“Mention that we have openings in the defensive driving and hand-to-hand classes, and offer vests. Use the reserves if you need to. Go out of your way to keep them calm and stress that it was random, and not related to the group moving up 25.”

Kyle had no problem with omitting that part of the story. He’d viewed panic in New York before the war, and it was as deadly as the crisis itself.

Adrian glanced at the empty tables being packed up. The big ants crawling along their perimeter was something he stored for later. It would go into the notebook. The mutations didn't usually get this close. "I'd like one of you to stay with her at all times, out of sight."

"We already sorted out a rough schedule for the next two days, boss. There are four of us. Marc we naturally included after today, but Seth wouldn't back off."

Adrian was glad his people were loading up without any obvious signs of being scared, but he didn't care for the way a few of the Eagles were staring at Angela. None of this would be easy. "He's like her in some ways, I think, running on a level closer. Maybe he'll catch something we miss. Make the lower Levels believe it was a random attack. Some men saw her alone with the kids and thought they were helpless."

"I'm sorry for it."

Adrian answered with none of the coldness Kyle felt he had earned.

"I don't hold it against you. We will make mistakes. Hopefully, no more like this one. High-level security meeting an hour after we're settled for the night. I want all team leaders present, and bring Marc along. We're starting on some defenses."

Kyle kept his voice low. "She'd search for you, boss."

Adrian didn't pretend not to understand. When he'd told Kyle he trusted him completely, Adrian hadn't lied. "These people can't find out too fast, or we'll lose them all, including her. It's code Raven. You have a better idea what that means now?"

"She's gonna be one of us." Kyle was unable to stifle the note of awe in his tone. "She was great. Fell right into it like you thought she would, boss. You'll get the full in my report tonight." Meaning all the details the college kids wouldn't have noticed.

Relieved to hear it had gone well, Adrian met Kyle's eye, thinking of the Arkansas dreams that had haunted him last night. "She'll recognize your loyalty, too. She'll need it."

Kyle didn't really doubt Adrian's words or Angela's honor, but questioning both was required now, especially after discovering Kenn's lies and abusive nature. "We can trust her like we do you? She won't use it to her advantage?"

"Of course she will, but survival is all she cares about," Adrian explained. "She's almost accepted this as her home, her new family. For the first time in her life, she is valued. She'll protect that security, this camp, by any means we allow, and I intend to give her few limits. She'll do what she was meant to—help us keep our country alive."

Adrian's voice lowered. "And Kyle, she's on the edge right now with all these new tensions and people. She's a little unsure, and that may make her slightly dangerous. Don't be the one to insist on the changes if you can help it. Marc is the only one who can stand her heat."

4

"You keep up that fake smile, your mouth might crack."

Kenn turned from glaring at the little mess to discover Tonya leaning in Adrian's open door, big tits almost spilling from her low-cut red dress. *Doesn't she have any other clothes?*

"What do you want?"

His curt tone sent a mean sneer across her pretty lips. "I thought you could use some company now that your woman's gone and joined Adrian's super-troopers."

Kenn's unshaven countenance set into hard lines. "She got lucky and found some people. So what? She's not an Eagle."

"Then why was she at the center table? Well, maybe we were low on seats. I do wonder why she was the one to check in for the recon team, though. Bet they were all too busy. But why is she wearing a vest? Hmm... I can't answer that one."

Kenn made his voice sound normal despite the dread in his gut. He'd heard rumors, but he hadn't talked to anyone yet. Obviously, Tonya had. "Adrian covers that."

Tonya laughed cruelly, hawk-like profile turned toward Adrian's rig. "Yes, he does, and you're on the outside now. She's already done more for his dreams than you have."

"What are you running your mouth about?" Kenn snapped.

Very aware of his abusive notions, Tonya took the smirk out of her tone but her words couldn't be buffered. "I'm talking about lots of things. You didn't tell Adrian that she's...different, or that Brady was your boss before the war. You didn't tell him about your heavy hands either, but it's more than all that now. She's left you for Adrian."

Kenn was getting hotter as Tonya talked, slamming awful truths into place.

Tonya didn't stop. She needed him pissed for her plans to succeed. It would take guts to eliminate Adrian. "She'll be the first female Eagle, the one that draws the others in, and he'll give Marc your place to keep her happy."

"And where does she rank?" Kenn asked, not quite successful in blocking the tremor from his voice this time. "If she's so important, what's her place?"

"She doesn't have one." Tonya softened her tone, taking pity. Kenn may have broad shoulders and a strong back, but this would be a hard blow. "Your woman's what the voters used to call an Independent. She'll be above the chain of command, an advisor of sorts...though in time, she might not even answer to him."

"How do you know all this?" Kenn snarled, and Tonya showed an edge of shrewdness that the rest of the people, including Adrian, would have been shocked to witness.

"I don't. I'm the dumb-ass, remember?" She turned away. "The dumb-ass who doesn't play his 'nice people' games, and yet still gets to stay and be safe."

"You're wrong!" he shouted, drawing attention, and Tonya turned to deliver a scornful tone that said they had all underestimated her.

“How many times have you heard him say he could use a little magic, Kenny? Now, he has it. You and the Eagles are nothing compared to that.”

Tonya left him with those unsettling thoughts.

When Adrian climbed into his seat a few minutes later, the tension was thick and unavoidable. Adrian didn't try.

“I'm offering them both a place in my Army. They'll be below you in the chain of command, above everyone else.”

“You're only giving it to him because of her.” Kenn's protest was low, rare.

“He's one of us. If you didn't know them from before, you'd be impressed. He threw himself between strangers and death,” Adrian pointed out, trying to avoid the rest, but Kenn knew without being told.

“Would he have done it if she hadn't been in danger?”

“Does it matter?” Adrian shot back. “He saved lives, not just hers. He helped complete a mission and eliminated a possible future threat, something you, yourself, are adamant about. If you didn't know them, you'd agree,” Adrian repeated.

Kenn let the truth slide out. “But...I do know them, and I can understand why you want her, but he's only here to— It's an insult to me and should be to you too. He's using your dream to stay close to her.”

“Like you did, when you first got here?”

Kenn didn't deny it, flushing, and Adrian laid it out. “You can't keep them from getting close. Any fool can see it's much too late for that. As to the dream, how or why we join up doesn't matter.”

Kenn said nothing.

Adrian sighed at the silence. “Hardly anyone here has a good past, but we all came to believe. Unless you still don't?”

Kenn snorted. “No, I like living on the edge all the time. Of course, I believe. It's our future, our duty to try.”

“Angela and Marc are a part of that future, and I need you to cooperate with them, with *me*.”

Kenn wanted it badly at that moment, wanted his true place back more than anything. The desire to be everything that Adrian needed hadn’t vanished with Angela’s appearance.

“Always, you know that,” Kenn vowed. “I’ll handle it. The sheep come first, right?”

Haunted pain flashed across Adrian’s face. “Yes. Above all else, and I do mean all. You’re not the only one making sacrifices.”

Despite his warning, Adrian couldn’t have been happier. His help was here. The magic and the strength had come to him. They didn’t know their destinies yet, but he would teach them. The next part was getting Angela into his army.

Adrian picked up the mike, held it out. “Start the count-off. I want the Borderlands before our next three-day break.”

5

The light had begun to fade as the caravan made camp in the middle of 34, out of sight of Sturgis, SD. With a darkened skyline to cast distant shadows, it was another of those rare places that Adrian had found for them. The only signs of the war were the ones he couldn’t hide, like the black mold growing up weakening trunks and the bodies of mauled pigs. The Eagles would get those out of sight shortly and people would avoid the trees. Adapting had become a normal part of everyday life for the refugees of 2012.

The center fire and cans pushed back the falling blackness as the perimeter was taped and secured. A full team of rested men took up posts over their new surroundings, along with a dozen members, and the entire area became a flurry of activity in the sharp wind. Men moved things from trucks, women and kids ran for bathrooms, and dogs yapped excitedly, knowing it was almost time to be fed. Safe Haven was full of noise and

movement, but it was organized, like a well-rehearsed play. They'd done it many times.

Angela exited the Blazer that Neil and Kyle had already flown from almost before it was stopped and found Seth waiting nearby.

“Guess you're the first wave?” she asked.

Seth threw a charming smile, freckles standing out in the dusky emerald light. “Yes, ma'am.”

Angie snorted and slung her duffle bag over one shoulder. “All right, Sir Eagle, here's my plan. First, I need a shower. After that, I'd like to be fed, smoked, and then sleep for a week. That okay?”

Seth gave her half a graceful wave. “After you.”

Kenn had point during setup, which meant continuous helping and supervising until the camp was in place and settled down. He did it with his usual thoroughness, but Tonya's words echoed in his mind as he labored.

Joined Adrian's super-troopers.

In time, she may not even answer to him.

Kenn had wanted to go to the Quarantine zone, but by the time camp was up, mess was being enjoyed at the boss's center table, something Kenn tried not to miss. Then, Adrian had asked detailed questions of the dirty steelworkers he'd invited to eat with them and Kenn had stored the knowledge that the Miller family was doing something for the boss. Normally, Kenn would have dug into that a bit, but right then, all he wanted was to be free to discover what was going on with Angela. Had she really used her power in front of the Eagles?

What does it mean to me if she has? Will I defend her? Help them drive her out? If I do that, I lose Adrian's right.

Unsure, Kenn suffered through the meal, smile plastered on as the tales spread. If she and Brady were both in Adrian's army, he was beaten. Kenn knew the bond men formed from training

and fighting together. Add that to the spark already between the couple and there wouldn't be any keeping them apart.

Kenn now suspected his boss had known she was an Eagle as soon as he saw her. Adrian recognized power and talent in many forms, and there was no way he would let it go to waste. Angela would be a part of Safe Haven, the real one that the sheep avoided.

What does that leave? he asked himself. *If I can't get to her... I have to handle it from the other side. I have to tank Brady with the camp or they'll see how good he is.*

And risk my place anyway to accomplish it.

Subdued, Kenn continued stewing and those around him continued to notice.

6

“The movie party is a distraction, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” Kyle was surprised to be around a woman who was so quick on the pick-up. He was also unhappy to be the one telling her the changes she had to make. He had waited until she ate, hoping she would be more receptive to their plans.

“It makes them feel safe and gives us time to accomplish things without having to answer their questions,” he explained further.

Not responding, Angela inhaled and then put the blunt back into circulation. It was one of many traveling the companionably crowded little mess.

“There are some things we need you to do, like change your clothes.”

“Excuse me?”

“Until we put more miles between us and them, we're requesting that you dress like an Eagle. You'll be harder to pick out. Get changed ASAP.”

He revealed a black duffle bag and set it on the table, thinking they would all miss the sight of her bare skin under those thin tank tops.

Angela studied the tanned man intently, not taking pity on him. “You would, huh? ASAP?”

“Yes. With your hair up, from a distance, you’ll look like one of us.”

Angela opened her mouth to protest, but Marc slid onto the bench next to Kyle.

“That's nothing,” Marc teased. “Wait for it.”

Dog lay down at his feet protectively.

When her lids narrowed, Kyle heard Adrian's words again. *Marc is the only one who can stand her heat.*

“What else?”

“We want you to stay out of sight until John clears you. We're putting up one big tent. You'll be in it with us.”

Thunder filled her expression. “You mean during the day, right? At night, I'll be in my own tent.”

Mindful of the warning he'd received, Kyle gave control to Marc with a subtle gesture.

“No, Angie,” Marc informed her evenly. “You can't even have an area partitioned off because any sniper worth his salt will know you're there. We'll all be in bedrolls and keep our vests on.”

Marc cut her off before she could protest. “It's for a couple days and then you can go on like before. We need time to put some things into place.”

“What things?”

Kyle jumped back in, not wanting Marc to be burned too badly. “Bulletproof canopies over the areas you use and later, a 3-plate-thick steel roof for the entire camp.”

Angela raised a brow, feeling guilty. “That's a lot of work. You sure I'm worth it?”

“Yes.”

“Aye.”

“Absolutely.”

It was an echo from the men at her table and from the other Eagles listening to the conversation. She blushed, heart warmed, but the anger was still there.

“Then I agree, but someone else will have to drive for me tomorrow. There's no way I'll be able to fall sleep in a tent full of men, no way.”

Kyle glanced at Marc. “We've got it covered.”

“If you say so.” Angela lit a smoke. “What else is on the list about me?”

Kyle flinched, not expecting the question. “Camp stuff.”

Marc wasn't the only one who noticed she didn't protest when Seth slid onto the seat next to her, gently bumping shoulders.

“You're putting us in a rough spot,” Seth said. “We don't know how much Adrian wants revealed to you.”

Her puckered brow remained, but she didn't give the impression that she minded the scold or the playful greeting, and envy went around the table at their fast friendship, hitting Marc harder this time. He knew he had nothing to worry about, but the openness with which their friendship could be had, hurt. His own moments with her would be stolen, brief. Neil said this was the perfect foundation, but Marc wasn't convinced. Neil wasn't the one with this *need* burning in his guts.

“So, let me get this straight. You think I'm gonna accept these new chains, knowing they'll last more than a couple days, and I'm not even allowed to ask questions and get honest answers?”

Angela snorted at the silence. That was exactly what they expected. *You guys don't know me yet, she thought, but you will.*

“How do you plan to explain those changes? If the camp finds out about me, I'll have to run.”

“We lie.”

Doug's calm words drew her surprised attention to the table behind them.

“What?”

Doug was still purple and yellow from Marc’s single hit. “We lie. We’ll tell them it’s for the camp’s protection.”

Not certain she believed that would succeed, Angela shrugged. “Anything else I should know?”

“He wants you checked out on the gun class,” Kyle said. “But we’ll do that in the morning after you’ve calmed down and gotten some sleep.”

“Oh, hell,” Marc groaned, dropping his head.

“Are you kidding me? Calm down and get some sleep?” Angela blew out a frustrated snort, hand sliding to the Python on her hip. “Pick a target. Better yet, let *me* pick one.”

“What did I say?” Kyle glanced around in confusion.

Angela’s fingers flew over the .357, checking it with a familiarity the men knew came from being comfortable with the weapon.

“Let’s go.”

“Now?” Kyle hadn’t realized his mistake. “Won’t it bother you?”

Her eyes were cool blue flames in the dimness as she sharply flicked the cylinder shut. “I either can or I can’t, right?”

“But, now?”

“Yes.” Angela spoke slowly, tone biting. “Putting holes in something sounds good.”

There were chuckles and snickers from the Eagles.

Kyle raised a bushy brow at Marc. “What level?”

Marc was always awed by her strength. He had expected this to intimidate her, but here she was, mad instead.

“At least a 3, but she’s hot. Right now, she’ll hit whatever she aims at. Make it a challenge for her nerves too.”

Angela was suddenly flooded with memories of him doing that on the way here, bitter pain brewing in her heart. She already missed those nights alone with him.

“What kind of challenge?” Kyle asked.

“She’s just a girl,” Marc goaded. “Any level man should be able to beat her.”

Angela's fury rose to the surface and Kyle pushed the button on his mike before she could unleash the four letter words he felt coming. “Four to Eagle. We're doing the test. Now.”

“Level Two,” Adrian directed. “But first explain the consequences for failure and let her withdraw if she wants to.”

“Son of a bitch!”

Angela’s voice was clear over the radio, causing a myriad of chuckles and frowns.

“Copy.”

“Pick a damn target!” She holstered with cool, icy movements.

“I’ll get the rollouts.” Seth stood, eager to witness the action. She didn’t feel like she was bluffing.

Seth didn't make eye contact with Neil, who now had Point, or with Kenn when he spotted him lurking in the shadows outside the QZ. That black-clad Marine could probably hear at least half of what was being said, but Adrian’s right-hand would have to suck it up.

“Who’s the best shooter among the Level Two’s?”

Alex, Safe Haven’s math teacher, raised his hand. “Me.”

Kyle waved him over. “This is a test, Eagle. You will win.”

The bald man from Montana acknowledged the order and didn't glance at Angela as they waited for the opposite side of the small mess to be cleared.

Kyle nudged the duffle bag toward her. “As far as the camp knows, you're sleeping in the medical tent with the new girls.”

He was relieved when she took the bag with an annoyed movement.

Angela went to the stairs leading into the cooking area of the mess truck, instead of leaving the canopy to go to the Quarantine zone bathroom. The big cook came out a few seconds later, moving fast.

Maria cast a worried glance behind her and the Eagles shook their heads in admiration and amusement. Angela definitely wasn't a coward and that was something they respected. Her animosity toward Maria wasn't questioned. Men might enjoy the shows, but they wanted no part of the catfights themselves.

7

There was a small group of members at the caution tape, waiting and watching. There were those who had heard *her*, and understood the first female was taking a level test—Tonya, Hilda, Cynthia and Becky. The group was also made up of level men who had heard the stories, but hadn't gotten to go along for the rescue.

Kenn casually joined them. Unwilling to miss her first test, he stood stiffly with the others and tried to hide his worry. If she failed, he was safe. If she did well, everything he had built here would fall.

Angela's emotions were boiling. The horror-filled day and the new restrictions had her feeling as if she was on fire. She stood where they told her, nodded when they said something, and waited impatiently for the release she needed. She cared little for their words of having to give up her gun if she failed. After all the time alone, with no rules, it was suddenly too much and she couldn't wait to fight back in the only way she would be allowed to.

Calm down and get some sleep, my ass!

Marc noted the cool glaze of control and the furious heat lurking beneath, and knew she was about to do some of the best shooting he'd witnessed from her. When she got into the groove, things rolled.

"All right, let's do this." Kyle set a box of ammo on the table. "We'll give the lady a few warm-up shots. As a Level Two, Alex doesn't need it."

“Neither do I!”

Angela’s hand felt like it belonged to someone else as she drew and shot from the hip. Not waiting for them to give her a clear line of fire, the men froze in training positions, apprehensive as she aimed and fired, slid to the right, fired, fired.

Counting off six shots, Angela deftly reloaded on the move, using the speed loader positioned on the left side of her belt where it could be quickly grabbed by her free hand. With a practiced precision that all the men approved of, she snapped the cylinder of her Python shut with a flick of her wrist and fired off the last two shots.

“Bulls-eyes in all 8 targets!”

“Damn.”

“Wow!”

The furious rage melted into cool, calm anger as her fingers reloaded the two expended rounds, and topped her speed loader off, something else all of the males noticed. It was what they did.

“She shoots like Adrian. You see that hip action?”

“And with a gun too big for her hand!”

The level men cheered and Kenn tried to appear proud as friends slapped him on the arm, but his stomach twisted. It came as no surprise to him that she was so good, though Brady had only had weeks to teach her. Hadn’t he known it would be this way all along? It was part of why Kenn hated her being here. Now everyone would know it all came down to male insecurities and pride.

To hell with Brady! Angela is the real threat.

Kyle was shaking his head, smiling. “Shoulda known. That’s a pass and then some.”

Angela didn’t return his grin. “Move ‘em.”

She caught his tightening jaw at her tone and added, “Providing Alex can match me?”

Kyle looked at Marc, who snickered at the helplessness he read there.

“I didn’t challenge her. I know better. A higher level shooter maybe?”

Alex cleared his throat. “I’m a Level Two Eagle, but I’m a Level Six shooter.”

The teacher turned and fired smoothly, matching her quickness with grace.

“Bulls-eyes in all 8 targets! Matched!”

The men cheered again and Angela refused Alex’s apology.

“Don’t be. It’s all or nothing with me, too, and I’m not a sore loser.” She beamed widely. “I am a sore winner though, and I plan to rub it in.”

It was a loud, tension-relieving hour for most of them, Angela and Alex matching each other shot for shot until she finally missed at 100 feet. It also had a good effect on the camp, the normal noises giving credence to their tales of it being a random attack on what was thought to be an easy target.

Most people on both sides of the caution tape enjoyed the show, but others worried restlessly. Their fears ranged from isolation and betrayal to the future and how to prepare. They were wise to be concerned. It was almost Fate’s turn to play another card.

8

“Don’t like the movie?”

Angela hadn’t heard him and she tensed, hand dropping despite the two guards hanging back to give her a little space, and the wolf now pacing a perimeter.

She was sitting in the middle of a moldy picnic table, smoking a joint and she stared at Adrian for a long moment. Was he here to scold her for leaving the QZ? She really wasn’t in the mood.

When he only stared back, she finally answered, “Not really. That one bothers me.”

She offered him the smoking weed and Adrian hit hard as he sat down next to her, closer than either of her men would like, she was certain.

The sky above them was black, no stars or moon visible, and that was depressing. The dying leaves rustled sadly with the breeze in an eerie howl of mourning and she shivered. Their enemies were closer now and their hatred was so clear!

“Is it because they burn the witch at the end?”

She didn’t pretend ignorance. “Yes.”

“That’s why I picked it. That scene will also bother the hell outta my men and make them determined to keep it from happening here.”

She raised a brow, too tired to be upset. “Is there anything you leave to chance?”

Adrian blew out a steady stream of smoke. “Not if I can help it and you shouldn’t either. There’s too much at stake.” He scanned her, noting Kenn’s ring hanging from the thin gold chain around her neck. The Marine was currently using it as proof that she was his wife. “You gonna watch the next movie?”

“What is it? Witches of Eastwick? Harry Potter?”

Adrian’s tone deepened. “Excalibur.”

Angela broke the connection, feeling the hunger, the demon inside, stir. “What’s the camp viewing?”

“Bruce Almighty, and then Independence Day.”

She chuckled, able to recognize the usefulness of both films, but also the irony.

The wind dropped suddenly and they could almost make out the words of those in the big tent before it gusted and they were alone again. It came to her then, what he needed, but couldn’t openly ask her for yet, and she felt no reason to delay him discovering her other gifts. She had basically brought a man (her man) back from the brink of death. If that didn’t freak him out, nothing would.

Adrian felt the change in the slender woman next to him and stayed still as the soft hum of electricity filled the air. Her

breathing was shallow, a bit faster than normal, and Adrian stored the feeling as the cool wind brushed her hair against his arm and filled his nose with vanilla.

“They will come in the darkest hour of the wake. They hate you, plan to behead your men and rape your women while you watch.”

“What should I do?” He was prepared to grab his notebook.

“You’ll know when the time comes.”

Her lids flashed open in the darkness and his pulse sped up as the witch studied him intently.

“You have great secrets, but there is more support for honesty than you’ve given them credit for. Tell the truth now, before it all comes out,” the witch spoke to him directly, dripping need. *“I’d protect you,”* she seduced, and though Angela tried to pull her in, the demon continued to remain in front. *“Or find you a new herd to care for...”*

The lust rolled off her in waves. A hundred times stronger than in the training tent with Seth, Angela was helpless to control the actions of the hunger inside when the witch surged forward.

Adrian froze, too aware of her as a woman to turn away. He had time to notice she wasn’t wearing a bra under her tank top, unable to keep from dipping, and then those red orbs were locked onto his. A current of need ran the length of him as her nostrils flared, the woman inside scenting, sampling.

Sweat, fresh cut straw, and underneath, man. Hers, if she wanted him. The witch ignored Angela’s protests as she inched forward.

Adrian stared, drowning in her glowing depths. He knew he had to stop this. A single word would help her regain control, but he couldn’t wait to taste her, claim her.

The witch slipped into his mind. *I’m hungry.*

It was something Angela would never have said and Adrian felt the spell break as he became immune to the waves of lust the demon was hitting him with.

He retreated. *I feel her fighting. She’s not willing.*

The witch sent erotic images through his mind. *She wants this as much as you do. She fears a bond with yet another man she can never have.*

Adrian opened his mouth and heard Angela clearly.

Think!

The witch flinched and Adrian froze as flames shot up around them.

“I will have this!” the demon hissed violently and it cleared the final layer of haze.

“No.”

It was the first word spoken aloud, and instantly the witch and her fire were gone.

Angela slid onto her knees, winded, and mortified at her lack of control. She had never been around her own kind before, and Adrian was definitely that.

When he would have helped her up, she flinched. “I’m fine!”

Adrian gently guided her to her feet anyway, making her look at him in the process. “Is this you?”

Angela snorted at the very serious question. “No, it’s the Sandman.”

Adrian kept full eye contact and hands on her skin. “Take what you need. I give it willingly.”

His words had an instant effect, as he’d known they would.

Thunder crashed as she drew energy from him, followed by the angry waves of a salty ocean, and then it was just them, the dead night, and two very curious Eagles.

Angela’s voice trembled with renewed energy. “I’ll show you something beautiful as a reward for your strength.”

Adrian felt her cool, soft presence in his mind, so unlike the feverish heat of the witch, and he struggled to control his thoughts, to keep her out of his desires.

“This is what I see,” she whispered, blowing into her cupped hand.

As her sweet breath rushed into his lungs, a black as death map, of their country, appeared.

Gone! was his first thought. There was only charred outlines of apocalyptic landscapes...but as the huge sun sank, thousands of tiny lights emerged, scattered across the states.

“Campfires.” Adrian blinked as the vision panned out and even more flickers appeared in the darkness.

“My people!” he moaned, struggling to memorize their locations. “I’ll never get them all.”

“We’re not meant to.”

The map vanished at her words.

Adrian kept his lids shut, still able to view it in his mind and Angela moved to the table, letting him work. In the distance, lightning flashed violently.

Adrian was in heaven and hell at the same time. So many!

How do I know the ones I remember are the right ones?

“Fate controls that, not you.”

Finished with his mental imaging, Adrian joined her on the table, frowning. “You use a lot of energy to do these things.”

“Yes, and to keep the witch in line.”

“It’s the energy she wants.”

“It creates a bond and I think you already knew that.”

“But having it confirmed makes the choice easier. It can be done in dreams?”

“Yes. Don’t you worry about keeping things under control?” she asked suddenly, sensing where he was going.

“Good leadership is control. Let her have their dreams. You’ll be in some of them anyway. Pretend you don’t know. With her satisfied, you’ll be in charge and your gifts will grow.”

She regarded him coolly. “If I let her loose, your men won’t be good enough. She’ll go straight to the top.”

Adrian felt need rise up and begin lashing him with stinging flares. He stood. “I won’t turn her away twice.”

Angela shrugged, but he understood how against it she was as lightning flashed again, illuminating her features.

“What about time with Brady? I can make some arrangements.”

She brightened at the offer before going dim again.

“No. I’m fine without it. I always have been.”

“You’re doing more now.” Adrian motioned toward camp, sure the electrical storm would make the herd uneasy, and was glad when she followed. “Let her out to play. It’s just a dream.”

Angela sighed, not certain she was strong enough to keep the witch in line tonight anyway. The demon inside already liked it here and Adrian had given her free reign.

End of Book 1

What would you like to do now?

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Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Life After war is a story that I've carried around in my mind for decades. It's an honor to finally be able to share it with you. Thank you for giving me a chance.

I'm on Facebook for any number of reasons these days, so if you'd like to check out my wall, you'll find the url on the very last page of this book. I often talk with readers there. I also communicate with Betas and conduct some work-related business, meaning you'll get to watch parts of the process and maybe even help me choose things--like new covers! I always listen to advice.

Have you explored my website yet? Here are just some of the fun features:

- Readers can now vote in the Safe Haven Mandatory Camp Votes
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You can also contact me and leave comments for everyone to view. Please stop by. You are all welcome.

Hey, have I said thank you yet? Thanks for reading my work! I hope it drew you in and refused to let go.

Waving,

Angela White

Deleted Scenes from Books 1-3

Deleted Scene #1

12/21/2012

Granite Mountains Complex

Stunned, Press Secretary Pat Michaels sat in the rear of the large, crowded room that was embedded under a dank maze of tunnels. Half a mile beneath a secret military base, the compound was now being overrun with terrified citizens demanding the protection they knew the Essex could (but would not) provide.

The limestone command center was thick with smoke and people, some of them in on the original testing of these weapons. Pat hoped his own punishment would not be as harsh as theirs would. After all, they had known firsthand what a horrible thing had been created. It was so powerful, so unstoppable, that the America above them was about to be destroyed, and a new, hostile land would take its place.

The slyest of presidential defenders since Nixon's well used man—Pat Michaels, former press secretary—was useless, forgotten in the chaos and not even sure he should be here. His family had been in New Jersey... Someone had been with him when he got the news, had brought him along when they had evacuated from the Las Vegas convention hall, although he wasn't sure who it had been. Amanda, the kids! How would he go on? How would anyone?

Panic was rampant. Voices barked orders, people scrambled to get information, papers floated through the humid air, and satellite phones rang continuously, annoyingly. Thanks to an

EMP and a lucky shot from a disgruntled citizen with a grenade launcher, the vice president was dead. The Speaker of the House was now the legal recipient of the highest seat in the land, but she wasn't here and neither was the new Secretary of State. No one had discovered where they'd been evacuated to, or even if they were still alive. Those jobs were no longer in demand, and the result was chaos, fear in control. Maybe that would change later, if they survived the missile headed for Montana.

Deep and sturdy, this complex had been built secretly during the 1990's and not only was untested, it was less than one hundred miles from what was about to be a direct hit. Pat shuddered. They would probably feel it.

Lurking near the back wall of air vents and panels, the press secretary broke into a light sweat as one of the remaining clocks on the cold, sterile walls around him neared and then passed the five minute mark.

Washington, New York, and most of the east coast had already been destroyed. Of the seven warheads that the long-denied Star Wars program hadn't been able to deflect, three were definitely going to find US targets, and maybe two others that they had lost radar on would as well. Their own warheads had decimated countries around the globe, and now, America would pay the price.

The huge, multi-picture screen in the front of the crowded room changed when the next clock hit four minutes, flashing to a satellite view of the incoming missile careening toward the Sunshine State.

Pat found he couldn't look away. Why, in God's name, had the former president done this? And who had given the technology-challenged man the disk that would allow him such unforgiving control? Surely, this was a bad dream? If not, millions more were going to die in only...

03:45

03:44

03:43

The computer switched to full alert, alarms all over the vast compound warning of the impending arrival. The press secretary's stomach churned as the ceiling lights flickered a hazy red.

America was in the same panicky state as this room, thanks to the convoys of soldiers taking all males, ages ten to sixty. The soldiers had been told to get a full truck of warm bodies any way they had to and be back within eight hours, and gunfire was filling town after town. They had reports of it in nearly every major city across the country: soldier and civilian wars over their sons and husbands and over remaining food and weapons. The end was close and everyone felt it.

02:50

02:49

02:48

Would mankind survive? Had they really blown themselves up? How much of this new hell was he personally responsible for? Millions of lives were already gone... So many cultures and their history!

01:20

01:19

01:18

Pat cringed at a fresh braying siren from the front of the loud, crowded, tactical room. They'd destroyed the world. Was that the red stain on his hands that refused to wash off?

00:40

00:39

00:38

When was my last orgasm? he wondered suddenly, too scared to recall what it had felt like or what the intern's name had been. Greg? Gary?

00:25

00:24

00:23

*When was my last confession? Pat struggled to remember.
Did I mean it? Is it too late?*

00:15

00:14

00:13

He shut his eyes and began the comforting, useless litany from his seat, still unable to make himself get on his knees even though the true hour of judgment had come.

“Please forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

00:02

00:01

00:00

“I did it for my country...”

Deleted Scene #2

1

“Everyone shooting must sign in. Only people that have passed the gun class can enter. Shooters will stay in front of the gate, everyone else behind. Sign in folks, and let’s get started.”

Jeremy was the MC tonight, Neil’s second Eagle, and as Adrian stepped by, he again caught a whiff of perfume that he now recognized as Cynthia’s, but he said nothing. Adrian wasn’t worried the Eagle would slip with anything he shouldn’t. Before the war, Jeremy had been a devout Catholic, quiet and observant. He knew the meaning of secrecy, and he’d found his place here, something the church had been unable to provide. The guard would be careful with it.

There was standing-room-only in the bleachers, and a large crowd lined the gate as the shooters signed in and checked their weapons. Adrian was glad to discover no real fear, no desperation in the faces of his people. The crowd talked loudly, betting on their favorites as they sat in chairs in the sand or on thick blankets. The men shooting waited behind the gate, eager to start.

“Okay. We have twenty-nine shooters tonight,” Jeremy announced.

Adrian picked up the clipboard on the bales of hay. “Make that thirty.”

The crowd cheered loudly, and the other shooters groaned as Adrian signed up.

“First, Kenn Harrison.”

The sun was gone, the night dark and gritty, but the moon's outline, while not clear, gave some light and made people feel better to be able to glance up and finally find it in the sky. It was something they hadn't seen much of for almost a hundred days.

The area was still dim, but spotlights on top of the trucks lit up the ball field and roller-bound targets. The ones set at thirty and fifty feet were hardly a challenge to the men watching Kenn get set, but the ones at one hundred and one hundred twenty-five were difficult, and all the contestants knew they would likely be gone before round seven. Adrian and Kenn had dueled it out last time, easily leaving everyone else behind. When they were shooting, no one else stood a chance.

"As many direct hits as you can, any target. On your mark."

Kenn held the gun steady against the gusty wind, accounting for it, and then fired smoothly.

The crowd cheered when the call came, and the guards on the perimeter stayed alert, knowing the noise would carry.

"Eight bulls-eyes! Next, Adrian Mitchel."

The leader checked his weapon and then put it into his holster, letting his hand hang loosely like an Old-West gunslinger.

The newer people, who hadn't yet observed him shoot, were nervous; sure he would miss and prove he was as fallible as the rest of those who had tried to lead.

Adrian's hand was a blur as he drew and fired, fired, fired. He twirled the black 9mm a single time and slid it neatly into the holster on his hip.

"Eight bulls-eyes!"

The crowd roared, and Jeremy had to shout to be heard as Adrian grinned and joined Kenn.

"Next, Kyle Reece."

No one missed a shot until the end of the round. Mary and Heather, two females Adrian had sent to the class for matchmaking purposes, didn't get bulls-eyes, but Adrian was pleased that they had hit anything at all. For the women here, that was definite progress.

The third woman, Lexa, was a gun shop owner from Los Angeles. Short, with a big chest and a long, brown ponytail, she hit half the targets, making Adrian wish he could add her to his list for the next Level One Eagles. Her draw was beautiful, almost a perfect copy of his, and with a little instruction, it would become as natural to her as breathing.

Adrian wondered if he would ever get his Eagles to accept women on the teams. He needed one of these shell-shocked females to be a warrior in disguise that could hold her own among his army and make the rest of the camp accept it too. For now, though, it looked like Lexa was eliminated.

“Last shooter. Rebecca Ann.”

The cute teenager strolled casually to the line, and Adrian frowned as the crowd cheered and catcalled. Had she made it through the gun class somehow without him knowing it? There was always a wait because he hand filled over half the seats. Adrian was almost certain she hadn't, but instead of immediately calling her on it, the leader let her have one try, thinking again of how much he needed one of these timid homemakers to secretly be Xena, the warrior princess.

Becky was innocent, sexy, playful, and many of his men were watching the slender girl, waiting for her sixteenth birthday in October, when it would be legal to ask her out. That included Kenn, but Adrian thought she had a thing for one of his other top guards. Either way, the girl would be something here. What, was up to her.

Rebecca's reddish blond hair was wild with frizzy curls, and she brushed them back impatiently as she took her place, knowing she would only have this one chance to get noticed, to

show these men she was useful. She'd almost swallowed her tongue when Adrian signed in, sure he would single her out.

"Any time you're ready, shooter," Jeremy encouraged, eager to get the next round going.

The nervous girl nodded. She was ready now, and she wanted them to know, needed Adrian to know.

Feeling the magic, the confidence of holding a gun she knew she could use, Becky pulled the trigger gently. The light recoil was well controlled, and she was smiling as she aimed and pulled, lined it up and pulled again.

The bullets dug into the targets, and she turned her attention to the frowning blond man moving her way while the crowd waited for the call.

"Eight hits, five bulls-eyes!"

They were as loud for her as they had been for Kenn, and Becky grinned in satisfaction as Adrian stopped next to her, impressed and displeased at the same time.

"That's some impressive shooting."

Her countenance lit up at his words, and then she dropped her head, remorseful. She hadn't broken his rules lightly. Now, she would pay the price.

"I'm sorry." She moved toward Jeremy without being told. "I have to withdraw."

The Level Two Eagle frowned as the crowd muttered, and those who knew she hadn't taken the class waited to discover if Adrian would let her ruin her own chances here by owning up to it. If she admitted she cheated, it would be a label that she'd carry forever.

"Why?" Jeremy questioned.

"Because I—"

"She forgot she has a shift with the vet. Right now, we'll go on to the next round since we're losing a shooter."

Adrian's calm words weren't doubted, and his men were pleased. If Becky had ruined herself tonight, they couldn't have shown any interest in her, not without losing their place by

Adrian, and that was now something most of these men would never jeopardize.

“Rebecca is eliminated. Kenn will start round two.”

Becky smiled gratefully at Adrian as she left, thankful he’d chosen to stop her admission. His men weren’t the only ones who were aware of all she had just risked to be noticed.

“Three shots this time, and only those beyond twenty-five feet count. Bottom two will be eliminated.” Jeremy looked at Kenn. “You ready?”

The Marine opened fire in answer.

Deleted Scene #3

1

Adrian and Kenn reached the dust-covered farmhouse at the same time, both easily avoiding the Level Ones who were clustered behind the big barn. Daryl was nowhere in sight as the small group of men talked for a minute—Neil clearly refusing leadership, as instructed. When the rookies advanced, Adrian saw it was Seth who led them.

The small team slowly swept the barn and shed but avoided the house, as Adrian had known they would. When they disappeared inside the barn, he and Kenn moved to the long porch of the farmhouse to enjoy the show.

This was a draft area, with wrecked army trucks, uniformed dead already stripped of their weapons, and doors kicked in, but there were no longer dried bloodstains, only charred frames in the distance, now mostly covered in sand. Thanks to the slight sloping hill, the camp's view was blocked, but Adrian hated it even as he used it. To be out of sight, was to feel out of control.

As he and Kenn watched, a black-clad shadow with hardware on his back slid down a tree near the barn's blind side. Daryl edged silently around the corner to the front doors and picked up a two-by-four from a tall stack that lay alongside the faded red cowshed. He slid it in the front door handles, quietly blocking an easy escape route without drawing any attention.

Those inside were peering out of the single window of the second floor loft, unable to view anything directly below the overhang, and without sentries posted, Daryl had full access.

Daryl unslung and hefted the grenade launcher to his shoulder in one smooth movement, entering their line of sight as he aimed at the window.

Faces ducked, and men yelled a late warning as he fired.

“Incoming!”

“Get down!”

Glass shattered, and a loud hiss of smoke echoed as the canister exploded in a huge cloud of tear gas. Everyone bolted for the blocked doors, shoving and throwing themselves against wood that wasn't quite rotten enough to break.

Hearing panic and leadership, Adrian and Kenn joined Daryl in front of the barn as thick, gray smoke roll out of the broken window and from under the molding boards.

“Door's blocked!”

“Shoot us out!”

“Can't see!”

“Someone light a flare, and do it now! Everyone else, shut up!”

There was immediate silence and then that same last, assertive voice, “There. Up and out the window. Move! Alex, Jack, you two go first and provide cover.”

The men were climbing out seconds later, dropping from the loft's overhang into the thick sand, and everyone had a laugh at the sight of Adrian holding up his watch.

“That beats the last time. New record! Gather around,” Adrian lit a cigarette, noting that Seth was already the center of his team. *Good.*

“Eagle Four is due through here in about thirty minutes. Your mission is to keep all of them away from me. I'll be somewhere in the house. Daryl is your hostage. He goes in a chair in the middle of the road. Set the rest of it up as you will. When the vest goes off, you're out. Questions?”

There was none.

That's a mistake they won't make next time, he thought, turning to Neil. “Who took charge after the smoker?”

“Seth.”

Adrian nodded, eyeing Neil’s hat. It was clear now that he’d never get the trooper to wear any cover but that Arizona Gray. Adrian had decided that was all right. It showed the men that they could be his and their own, at the same time.

“You’re the leader here. Seth is your second. Weapons go under the wheelbarrow. Move ‘em out.”

Neil gave Adrian a glance that said he had questions, but he knew this was to teach the men and didn’t ask them. Neil liked the unexpected thought of himself as a drill instructor in Adrian’s army. That was usually Kyle or Doug’s honor.

“Let’s go, in the barn,” Neil instructed the rookies. “Seth, make us a plan. Alex and Jack on guard. One from the roof, one in that tree. Move out.”

Adrian and Kenn watched them from the dust-covered porch of the farmhouse as the battle plan emerged. One Eagle used the huge concrete planters to the side of the loosely bound “hostage” in the road as cover, two men staying inside the wide-open barn doors. Two more ducked under the dusty bushes to the left of the big shelter, and a final man lurked behind the wide, paint-chipped shed at the side of the barn.

They spread themselves out, a wall of strength between the road and the gritty porch where Adrian and Kenn were talking quietly.

“Who’ll make it through?”

“Kyle, for sure.”

“You want an extra body guard?”

“Of course. The last set of gear is for you,” Adrian handed it to him. “You’ll be in the house somewhere too, as a surprise.”

They grinned and smoked, watching the men fidget. When the faint sounds of engines came, definitely the quiet Safe Haven setups, Adrian pointed.

“I’ll be in the room directly above us. Have fun with Kyle and keep track of Seth. I want to know how he handles himself.”

From his second floor vantage point, Adrian observed it all. As soon as he detected the shadow sneaking toward the house, he knew who would win and was impressed.

Kyle's invading men slid through the un-harvested hayfield behind the dusty yard within a few minutes, the engine left running a very good distraction technique. Adrian wondered if Kenn had distinguished the shadow coming in the rear door. Probably. Kenn missed little.

Kyle's team slowly eased closer. When they were in range, Kyle gave a short whistle that had Daryl rolling his chair onto its side in the sand, clearing a line of fire for the Level Threes, who immediately began to shoot. Vests flashed brightly as the attack started.

No one yelled or called out orders, and only two of the more experienced Eagles had been shot when it was done. Watching from the window as they rounded up the rookies, Adrian waited patiently. There were still two more surprises.

Kenn opened fire from inside the front door as Kyle's men approached carelessly, and he got them all. He darted to another window and hit one of the two men running by.

Kenn took up a defensive position a few feet from the stairs that led to Adrian, the annual paintball competition they'd won at Fort Defiance this year making his movements smooth.

Floorboards creaked to his right, and Kenn shoved his gun around the corner, firing in a sweeping motion that sent blue lights flashing off gritty windows and faded gifts still under a drooping tree.

It lit up the house and allowed Kenn to notice the shadow he'd missed. He had time to witness the deep satisfaction fill Kyle's pale eyes, and then his vest began flashing too.

Out, Kenn flipped him the finger.

Kyle smirked, easing up the stairs.

The door at the end of the long hall was open. There was only one blurred set of prints on the dusty floor, and Kyle relaxed at the sight of Adrian sitting on the edge of a cluttered, cobwebbed dresser.

“Congratulations on making it past Kenn.”

Kyle grinned, entering the small room. “We won?”

“Soon as we shake on it.” Adrian held out his hand, body language full of warning.

Missing the clues, Kyle’s arm moved, and he froze as the flashing blue lights of his vest began to bounce off the walls.

I’ve been shot!

Caught completely off guard, Kyle searched the shadows in disbelief for his assassin. The Genovese Captain had never been beaten with only surprise used, not even by Kenn.

“Who is that?”

Seth came out of the dusty darkness. Trying not to gloat, he holstered and removed the black cap that had hidden his red hair from the mobster’s sharp gaze. “The last man standing.”

“Excellent,” Adrian praised. “Come on. Let’s get to camp.”

Kyle turned to Adrian, angry. “Was this your plan? Was he here the whole time?”

“I came up about two minutes before you did,” Seth said. “Kenn was the only one who knew exactly where I’d be.”

“But I saw you...”

They followed Adrian while they talked about it, and when Kyle laughed at something Seth said, Adrian decided it had gone very well. Both teams had learned lessons, especially Kyle’s, and they’d bonded a little more. When the time came, they would now have these exercises to guide them.

Deleted Scene #4

It only took twenty minutes and one try to get the canopy up and staked down.

Adrian was pleased as they gathered around him again.

“What’s next, Jeremy?”

The lightly bearded man considered. “The bottom of our area?”

“Yes. We’ll be here for another day, so we can’t let it drain onto the ground. We’ll stake down the tarp, but leave the edges loose. Curl them so the mess runs into the watering tubs we have in the trucks. We’ll also cut two metal cans in half and keep fires burning to deter the insects.” Adrian looked at his watch, “You have twenty minutes, gentlemen. Go.”

It took them less than half that and they gathered around him again.

“See how Kenn keeps a slipknot in the end? That’s for the hooves. Always double your rope over the branch, but not on top of each other. Place them side by side on the limb and you’ll get more support because the weight distribution is better. Doug, how thick should the branch be for a cow?”

“At least ten times the size of your rope. You have to account for not only the animal’s weight, but also the lift and struggle, and then the hours it has to hang.”

“Alright, we’ll need four pullers on each rope and two steadiers with me. Strongest people go on the inside of the rope line, while the men on the end stake it down. Those with me should know there will be blood and I will not tolerate being puked on again,” Adrian said.

The reference to the previous month's lessons at a chicken farm in Northern Wyoming provoked laughter, but they also knew he was serious. The man who had done it was no longer a part of Adrian's Eagles.

Doug and Kenn were on the inside of each rope, the big Irishman's face swollen and black where it wasn't covered by the bandage. Every man there was glad he'd come anyway, especially when the vet came through the trees leading a huge black-on-white cow by a thick rope around its neck. Attached to the cow's wide back was a harness tied to a sled. On the sled was a large wooden crate that grunted and squealed to protest the bumpy ride.

Chris handed the 'leash' to Adrian and left, not looking at any of them.

Adrian knew his men felt the vet's displeasure. The man had been allowed to stay, despite his nasty mouth, because the camp needed to raise food. But the vet was angry and sullen. He believed slaughtering animals, even for food, was wrong. To Chris, not only humans had earned a new chance by surviving the war.

Adrian agreed they didn't want to raise animals by the thousands in warehouses again, but they would produce their own food. They had to.

"We have to eat," he said getting their attention back. "We're going through the stuff we find as quickly as it's brought in. Fresh meat will keep us out of the reserves, but anyone who feels like Chris is excused. I won't force you."

No one moved and Adrian was pleased. These were hardasses, this team handpicked for their strength, and he had high hopes for them. He turned to Jeremy and Kevin, his steadier's. "Your job is exactly what it sounds like. As I slice, one of you will slide the tub under and then help the other keep the flow going into it. When they pull, I'm gonna cut, but the legs will kick and they can knock you out, so be careful."

Adrian gave the pulling crew a look. “Slow until I make the cut, then fast and steady. Don’t jerk any more than you have to and watch the other rope. Don’t race. Stay even.” He looked around. “Everybody ready?”

DOC Article

USA Today

December 21

Betrayal, Lies are Foundation of American Politics!

The Gospel of Mary was discovered in southern France last month and has now been proven genuine by experts secreted in to test the parchments. In them is a tale of murder, extortion, kidnapping, and forced reproduction that scientists claim have kept secret the descendants of Jesus Christ. The list of powerful families around the globe being accused is staggering.

This story began more than a thousand years ago, with a secret that millions have now died to keep. If proven true, it is a deception so big that it might have changed the entire world.

The Knights Templar was officially sanctioned in 1190 by the Roman Catholic Church, but what if they existed long before that? What if they escorted Mary Magdalene out of Gaul and settled her somewhere safe? We've heard the speculation that her offspring became kings through the Merovingian line, but what if they were also the descendants of Christ? Reports do tell of a young girl named Sarah that traveled with Mary after the crucifixion. The daughter of Jesus?

The Gospel of Mary, found during an archeological dig at an unnamed location, implies that the wealthy intentionally repressed all such knowledge, creating a secret sect to hide the truth. Most of the men, according to the parchment, believed they were protecting these special females. They took them to the Cathars, a religious order in southern France that was also

under control of the Catholic Church, content to leave them there. The Church certainly didn't expect trouble from one woman, but within a few years, the Cathars had turned against the Church and created a new religion based on love of God without control or wealth. Terrified of the world finding out, of having to give up all their power and decadent ways of living, the Church began the Albigensian crusade and eradicated them.

So what happened to the descendants that the Cathars died to protect? According to the Gospel of Mary, many escaped and walk among us, even now, in the form of their offspring. Most of the Knights were for the truth coming out, were beginning to rebel against the Church, as well. They were wiped out the same way the Cathars were, but stories abound of a few brave souls being able to save the precious remaining descendants, ensuring the bloodline of Jesus Christ. With the Church hunting them down, these groups of saviors went into hiding with their wards. When they finally emerged, they called themselves the Freemasons...and they were powerful.

If this new Gospel is to be believed, none of them exposed the truth. There were various groups of Templar's in unnamed places around the world, but the secret held—because of power and greed. Mary Magdalene's offspring were Merovingian rulers now, and the temptation was too much. Instead of being the defenders, the Freemasons had become the captors. According to the Gospel of Mary, the descendants of Christ were forced to reproduce with the Knights. Only the special offspring were kept, and the parchment even suggests that inbreeding was one of the common experiments tried in hopes of making the kids more gifted.

Skeptics are coming out of the woodwork, but so far, no one has disproven the new allegations of a corrupt political system that traces its origins back further than just one nation's founding. If the Gospel is proven genuine, it could possibly mean that every president America has ever had was a descendant of

Christ and was bred—not raised, but bred—for that very purpose. The same would be true of other governments across the globe.

A very outspoken civil rights leader, who didn't want to be named due to safety concerns, explained why governments around the world might have taken these actions of secrecy and coercion:

“Imagine how different our lives would have been if the existence of Jesus Christ were fact, proven by science. Consider how much control the legitimate churches would have had over the masses. Laws, education, politics, careers, art, music, literature, lifestyles—it all would have been ruled by religion. Ask yourself if the governments—and yes, all of them; no one group of people can successfully hide a conspiracy this size—ask yourself if the leaders you've been listening to would still be in charge right now if it was a documented fact that our Lord and Savior walked this very earth. Wouldn't those governments have been the first ones Jesus fed to those hungry lions? Is there anything they wouldn't have done to stop it from happening?”

What if these children of Mary and Christ have been betrayed repeatedly, killed in every generation to hide the truth, when we could have been basking in their light? How different might our world have been.

Endnotes

1. Read the entire article in the Extras section.

2. DOC is an abbreviation for Descendants of Christ.

3. Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle.

4. Gat is Marine slang for a 9mm.

5. Hardback can mean a cargo truck or MRAP vehicle; slang.

6. Charbucks is any coffee that isn't Starbucks; slang.

7. The Essex is a fictional government bunker set in the Granite Mountains of Wyoming. This came from NORAD no longer being the preferred presidential and joint chief evacuation site as of 9/11. That new location has not been revealed.

8. A boot is a junior Marine fresh from basic training. Also, it is an unforgivable insult when used seriously.

9. FUBAR stands for f'""d up beyond all repair.

10. Calling a Marine "soldier" will cause frowns, mutters, and sometimes a fight. They go through very demanding training to earn the title of Marine and are quick to defend it.

11. During research, I was informed that a Hum-vee is what a badass grunt used to roll around in. A Hummer, on the other hand, is something received from a generous girlfriend...

12. "M9s are often issued to those who don't take care of them. They get used as hammers, and generally by the time they get to the pistol range, [they] jam, fail, and generally suck like a Hoover." – ZS Quote.

13. Pogue bait is slang for candy. In the derogatory sense, it can also mean a woman intent on grabbing a successful man.

14. Dog Tag. You'll notice this has been singular throughout the book. That's because the other tag is laced into a Marine's left boot for identification if they are killed. It is SOP and ingrained.

Character Bios

Adrian Mitchel is a lifelong Marine with a huge secret, one that might have prevented the war. Full of guilt he can never be free of, Adrian is driven, obsessed with gathering enough survivors to restart his broken country.

Samantha Moore is a storm tracker. Born with a gift that allows her to predict bad weather, Sam led a sheltered life before the bombs fell, and her road to Adrian's camp is full of pain and horror as she struggles to adjust.

Angela White is many things: doctor, battered woman, mother, and witch. She long ago locked up her powers to keep her man from using them for his own gain, but the war freed the demon inside, and now it is her best defense as she tries to cross the broken country in search of her missing son.

Kenn Harrison is a Marine adrift when he joins Safe Haven. An angry man with secrets, his months of trials at Adrian's patriotic side have begun to change him, but what will happen to all the progress he's made when Angela finally comes for her son?

Marc Brady has been in love with Angela since they were kids. Split up as teenagers, he had no idea they created a baby. He can't wait to get to know his son, but it's the thought of being with Angie again that sends him running to answer her call for help.

Kendle Roberts is a famous TV star, but the survival goddess wasn't prepared for the wave that rolled her cruise ship and left her adrift on the restless ocean with no land in sight. For two months.

John Harmon has been a doctor for over forty years. He is sure he has terminal cancer and his wife pretends not to know, so

they can set off to find safety so that one of them can die and one of them can live.

These are your heroes. Welcome to Life After War.

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