



Author Angela White

Dearly Departed

Life After
War

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TOC

Reason and Law

When we left that cursed mountain
We had become fully hard-hearted
We turned sinners away for any infraction
Still deeply mourning our dearly departed

The light of Safe Haven still beckoned
Our people were protected
But we lost all compassion
For any trace of evil that we detected

If they killed or stole
We removed that disruption
The only exceptions made
Were for souls without corruption

Our population began to recover
Our hearts began to thaw
But we refused to forget the lessons learned
There has to be reason and law
Without that
Societies always fall

Chapter One
Unnamed

1

“We will have the witch!”

Many of Mikel’s men cheered. The rest were dead or screaming for help.

Inside the mountain, screams began to fade into groans and tears...and then silence.

“Why is it so quiet now?” Tracy asked tearfully as she and Charlie stayed beneath the cushion of the clothes.

“The smoke,” he muttered, feet digging them downward. He was still trying to reach the bottom. This ledge had broken off and slid, but he didn’t know how far or if they had landed flat. For all he knew, they were now dangling sideways.

“We have to help them!” Tracy cried, but she didn’t resist when he pulled her lower.

Around them, the laundry moved.

Natoli stayed on Tracy’s right as the clever teenager took them through the maze of laundry and stone. His men surrounded the couple, as he’d instructed them to do before they’d rejoined Safe Haven under the ground. Marc had told Natoli of

his fears for the future, of the deaths and lives that had been promised. Natoli had vowed to protect Marc's heart so that the warrior could fight for all people. Now, Natoli was fulfilling his vow.

Charlie was glad they weren't alone. He was in the lead for the first time and it was terrifying.

Charlie stopped as his foot hit something hard, hands fumbling in the darkness for the light on his belt. He tried not to think about everything that might be on top of them or how hard it was to breathe down here. They had survived the quake. That had been his only goal when he'd brought them to the laundry area. Now, he had to keep them alive in the aftermath.

Around them, other people were coming to the same realizations. Through the broken stone and shifting darkness, battered survivors began to emerge.

2

Adrian groaned as weight finally shifted off his shoulder. The pain in that arm was bad enough to convince him that he was alive.

"I heard someone! Keep working!"

Adrian kept his eyes closed as more debris was cleared from his body. He hurt everywhere.

"It's Adrian! Grab that end. Lift on three. Ready?"

Adrian screamed as the weight increased and then it was gone. He screamed again as he was dragged free by his arms.

“Someone’s under him! Keep digging!”

Adrian was left alone as the men went back to the debris pile. He stayed still, listening to coughs and shouts, to tears and groans.

There’s a fire! Angela thundered in his mind. *Get up!*

Adrian struggled to a sitting position, arm useless except in the flaring, ugly pain that came each time he tried to move it.

Dislocated, Angela told him. *You can’t climb like that. Damn!*

Adrian forced his hurting body onto legs that shook, scanning their new, dangerous environment. *There!*

He stumbled over rocks and wood, lurching toward the entrance to the tunnel where he’d first been camped.

This is gonna hurt, he warned, teeth clenching. *Go away.*

He felt Angela withdraw as he propelled himself forward to knock the shoulder back into its socket with another harsh scream.

“What is he doing?” Theo demanded.

“Fixing himself,” Greg answered grimly. He tossed another large chunk of stone aside. “Keep digging. I see dark hair. I think this is Marc!”

The digging resumed with more energy as Adrian fumbled for the light on his belt. He shined it upward with his good arm, blinking at the waves of falling dust. The sight was so awful that Adrian needed the throbbing shoulder and every cut and

bruise to prove that this was really happening. Safe Haven had been destroyed.

They'll all be dead if you don't get that fire out! Angela shouted in his mind.

Startled, Adrian staggered backward and fell over, groaning.

Give me a minute!

We don't have it, she answered gravely. The smoke has already reached the top floor. Everyone up there is dying.

Adrian managed to get back on his feet, but his flashlight had rolled too close to a crevice for him reach without his balance. He staggered toward the ladder instead, blinking in dull comprehension. The ladder was there. Bodies were hanging from it, piled below it from their falls. He turned his head and puked.

Breathe. Breathe. Angela shoved deep into his mind, to where their connection was glowing brightly. *You can do this. I believe in you. I always have.*

Adrian wiped his mouth on his gritty sleeve and queasily began to climb the ladder. His painful movements quickly became a way to stay alert as he fought bodies for space on the ladder while trying not to inhale the smoke wafting downward.

As he reached the level above, Adrian yanked up his shirt, wishing he had time to stop and wet his bandana. Then he remembered that he had been getting ready for bed and didn't have either of those things. All he had was his jeans, boots,

jacket, and belts-tool and gun. Those last two he even slept with and good thing, he praised himself, taking out his spare flashlight. After this, he was down to the headlamp. He didn't want to try using it yet. The buttons were small and his hands were still shaking. He might drop it and that would be worse than the dim illumination from his small flashlight.

Far above, Adrian saw a shadow illuminated by an orange glow. The man hefted himself onto the level with the fire and vanished. *Good*, Adrian thought, realizing Angela was likely telling others of the fire and directing them too.

“Right behind you!” Greg called as if to prove the thought, coming up the ladder.

Theo and Debra were taking care of Marc, but so far, there were no other survivors from the bottom level. Angela was telling him about live people trapped by a mess fire and Greg was determined to save everyone that he could.

“Adrian!” Kyle shouted from his right. “Can you tie off this rope?”

Adrian missed the rope that Kyle threw, but it caught on wooden debris, allowing him to fumble for the end of it. As he tied it to the sturdiest thing he could find—a heavy-duty hitch that had been used to tie up their larger animals for milking and slaughter—fresh screams sounded from above them.

“Going up!” Adrian shouted, wincing violently at the pain in his head. His hand came away bloody,

but there wasn't time to worry over it. He went back to the climb as Kyle anchored the rope to the other end of the lab and began inching Jennifer across the gap. There was a very narrow ledge, but no room to even look down. They would have to feel their way across. The rope would keep them from falling.

"I found two!" Greg called to Adrian, holding up two dusty fire extinguishers after he pulled himself onto the level.

Adrian took one and put it inside the back of his tucked in shirt so he had both hands to use for climbing.

Greg did the same and followed. Both men were aware of heavy coughing, but the lack of words worried them more.

"Someone got a light on," Greg commented, sweating so much his back was soaked.

"It's not a light," Adrian answered grimly. The climb was clearing the fog from his head and sending terror into his heart. There were bodies on every floor he'd reached so far. How many had they lost?

Greg climbed faster, realizing it was light from the fire. It was illuminating the top levels clearly, meaning it was a big blaze. *Two extinguishers won't be enough*, he thought, pulling himself up onto what remained of the security and medical level. He shined his light right and left, spotting survivors on both sides. None of them looked like they needed immediate help and the two men

moved swiftly to the next ladder. Half of it was gone, but there was a rope hanging down from where someone else had already climbed up.

“That was Adrian and Greg!” Morgan announced happily as the two men went up the rope.

“Good.” Kenn carefully tied his rope to his waist and then to the top of the outcropping that had split open and started the huge crevice. “We can’t reach them that way. We have to go down and get back over to the ladder.”

Morgan knew he was right. The tiny ledge on either side of the crevice in the tunnel wasn’t going to hold their weight and there was no way they could jump the 20-foot gap.

Next to them, Neil was still staring at the hole where Jeremy had jumped. He was in shock. He refused to believe that Jeremy and Samantha were dead.

Kenn nudged Neil’s shoulder. “We’re going down there. You want on first?”

Neil took the unused rope.

Kenn quickly tied it to Neil and then to a different outcropping that he hoped would hold. He understood Neil’s dazed response. If not for seeing Tonya across the gap, Kenn might have been feeling the same emotions and he held great sympathy for Neil.

Neil followed Kenn back to the edge of the gap, but he didn’t go first. He squatted at a nearby pile of rubble and began digging through it, hoping he

had the right place. They'd kept medical supplies on every level, but this floor had also held the medical bay, so the majority of those supplies were here somewhere.

"Come on," Kenn called, lowering himself into the hole with hands that immediately protested the lack of gloves. *Got softer*, he thought, reaching down with his leg to find a place that might support his weight. He found something that felt sturdy and tested it.

Kenn pulled himself back up as the hard object rocked and vanished.

A shattering crash below brought Neil to hole.

"Be careful!" Neil snapped.

Kenn nodded to the rope. "I was able to see down five foot. It's clear. I'm dropping."

Neil shined his light as Kenn began to climb down his own rope. It would have been incredible to watch if not for the situation.

Now that he'd seen how it was done, Neil tried to copy it. He had found the shelf of packed medical bags and tossed two of them around his neck.

He lowered himself, arms straining... Sweat broke out on his neck from the heat as his lower body descended into the cool darkness below. He hadn't realized it was hot and bright up there. Down here, it was pitch black and cool. *And quiet*, he noticed, ears now working overtime as his headlamp flickered off bodies, rubble, equipment that was mangled, and shards of thick plastic that had been crushed. *Water tanks*, he thought, heart pounding.

Kenn had stopped a bit below, feet crunching.
“Careful man, it’s a maze.”

Neil’s foot hit crushed plastic and slipped.

Kenn grabbed his arm, guiding him down. He didn’t tell Neil what he’d already seen. The trooper would view it for himself any second now.

Neil’s light blurred as he caught his balance, but it was enough to show him that the entire rubble field was made up of those huge plastic shards. Across the glittery field of danger, Samantha sat with her knees to her chest. Neil thought he could hear her breathing but he wasn’t sure. She was covered in dust and dark shadows.

Kenn took Neil’s arm before he shined the light on her. “Easy man. If she gets up to run to us, it might all fall.”

Neil blanched, lowering his light.

“There’s something else,” Kenn stated worriedly.
“She won’t want to leave the body. You’ll have to make her.”

Neil shined his light on Samantha anyway now, mind blanking. *Body?*

Jeremy had landed on one of the plastic tanks. He was still hanging there. Neil hadn’t seen it at first because it was covered in blood and blended with the broken cave walls and shadows.

“Neil?”

Neil swallowed his horror. “Don’t move, Sam. Please don’t move!”

“He knew this mountain would kill him. And I made him come here!”

Samantha's sobs were a torment to the men, but all they could do was listen and curse fate. Without help and equipment, they couldn't reach her.

Kenn, aware of Morgan joining them, moved slowly toward the only exit he could view with his light. It was also lined in plastic shards, but most of these had been crushed and were covered in large pieces of debris that Kenn identified as stone from the radio room. It had been darker than the outer walls.

Contemplating ways to rescue Samantha, Neil was barely aware when they'd gone.

Across the debris field, Samantha continued to cry.

Kenn and Morgan gently removed two large stones so they could ease through the debris piles to reach the bottom level.

"There's another hole," Morgan pointed to where they'd just removed the stones.

Kenn shined his light down and tried hard to force a grin. "Can we give you a lift?"

Angela wanted to chuckle, to reward his effort at lighthearted calm, but the best she could manage was, "Get us out of here, jarhead."

She held Cody up so that Kenn could reach the scared boy's arms, but Angela wasn't in any shape to be pulled up that way. Some of her stitches inside were still healing the wounds and hadn't fully dissolved yet. She knew that by the way they pinched nastily as she held Cody up. Angela chose

to climb. She wouldn't have been able to do it with Cody on her back yet, but she thought she could handle herself.

Kenn watched nervously as she came up the debris pile and then the wall. As soon as she was in range, he was grabbing her.

As Angela neared the top, she chose the wrong the handhold. The small ledge crumbled under her fingers, sending her flailing...

Kenn snatched the front of her shirt and jerked her up out of the hole.

Angela cried out but didn't struggle as she was set on her feet. She clutched her stomach, trying not to puke.

Are you okay?! Adrian demanded in her head.

"Fine. Keep going," she wheezed out. Angela waved off Kenn's apologies. "Now, we're even."

Kenn grinned, but he'd never felt less amused. "Nice. Let's go."

Kenn moved them through the debris carefully as Morgan brought up the rear. He was carrying Cody, who was staring toward the ladder with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Morgan shielded the boy's eyes as they joined Debra and Theo at the bottom of the ladder.

"Damn, we're glad to-"

Debra flung herself into Kenn's arms, hugging him hard enough to make the Marine yelp. He patted her shoulder awkwardly and pried her off, handed her back to Theo.

“See you,” Theo finished, holding Debra as she cried. She was the gentlest person he’d ever met. She wanted all of them to survive, even Kenn and Adrian. When she said she’d never attacked anyone before Tara and Jayson, Theo believed her. “We’re going up to help with the fire,” Kenn stated. He glanced at Angela, expression hardening. “Stay down here with the boy. If the smoke gets worse, get into the tunnel with the Mexican bodies. It’ll be rough, but the drafts there might keep you guys alive.”

Angela turned from his advice, going to the bodies that Theo and Debra had dragged under the ledge. “Marc!”

Kenn rolled his eyes and started up the ladder.

“Help me!”

Kenn swung toward the scream, pinpointing it to right above the bathrooms on this bottom level. Morgan and Theo went that way.

Kenn returned to the climb.

Debra held onto Cody and refused to let him look at his mother’s body. Debra wanted to cover it, but there wasn’t anything close to use and she was scared to leave the light now. She no longer liked the darkness. Safe Haven had changed that for her but now, Safe Haven was gone.

Samantha screamed as the ground shifted below her. The tiny ledge she’d been on collapsed, dropping her down ten feet through the sharp darkness.

The debris field collapsed in a shower of plastic dust, revealing huge stone slabs that Neil ran across as fast as he could. The cave around him grumbled, releasing another cloud of dust and shakes that sent Neil sliding downward as he ran. He leapt as the floor fell out, reaching Samantha's location by bare inches. He scrambled away from the edge, bags slamming into the debris as he crawled.

"Sam?"

She didn't answer. Neil knelt at her side, wincing as his light showed him her bloody body. A sharp shard of plastic had gone through her leg just above the knee. Too loose to plug the hole it had created, the shard vibrated wildly as the cave continued to shake.

Neil covered her with his body as best he could, trying to remember his lessons. *Do I pull it out?*

The choice was taken from him when Samantha groaned, rolling over. The shard hit a slab of stone and broke off. Blood immediately gushed from the wound, pushing out the remaining shaft.

Neil reacted without thinking. He followed the training he'd received in Angela's class. He yanked the medical bags from his neck and dumped them out on her chest. He ripped open packages he thought needed, but when he got to the tourniquet, he quickly wrapped it around Samantha's thigh, as far up as he could get it over her pants. He knew it needed to under to be most

effective, but there wasn't time. Blood was gushing from her leg.

The flow slowed a bit as soon as he tightened the tourniquet and Neil grabbed his lighter. He had to cauterize the wound. There was no time to sew it—certainly not with his big stitches and clumsy hands. *What do I use?!* he demanded, starting to panic. Uh... Uh...

The flashlight bobbed as he looked around and Neil grabbed it off his belt, unscrewing the cap. Plunged into darkness, he managed to keep ahold of the cap and the lighter.

Neil forced himself to breathe as he heated the cap with his lighter, willing it to glow faster. He'd witnessed this at the rest stop with Angela and prayed he would never have to do it for anyone.

Neil ran his sleeve over the gaping wound that cleared for a brief instant and then began to refill with Samantha's life. He slammed the cap over the injury, trying to get it all with one shot.

Blood pushed up from the edges, but the sides and center of the cap held the flow back. Neil hoped he'd gotten it hot enough to hold when he removed it.

Samantha groaned, but didn't respond otherwise.

Neil pulled the cap back, horrified to see burnt skin and the gap still there. Blood ran over her leg.

Not hot enough!

Neil reheated the warm cap, praying again. He forced himself to wait until the cap was slightly glowing this time, then he centered it over the

wound that was still flowing heavily. He swiped and pressed.

Samantha screamed, rising, but Neil pushed her back down with his other hand, dropping the lighter. He groped for his headlamp, trying not to shout for help when he knew there was nothing anyone could do. They were all in desperate situations right now.

Neil very slowly lifted the cap... Blackened skin and flesh...no fresh blood.

Now do it again, Neil ordered. *Then check the other side.*

He did it with a twisting stomach, trying to get the entire wound again before he rolled her over. In his mind, her odds of survival went down with every second. He had to get blood back into her, but the medical bags didn't have that, as it needed to be packed on ice.

Neil considered where that refrigerator might be now as he reheated the cap to do the back of her leg. The plastic shard had only pierced a small hole through this side but he wasn't able to sew it up for the same reasons as the front. He needed to get the blood to stop right now. He held her down and cauterized the back of the thigh that he had lovingly kissed the night before.

?

Debra and Cody jumped as a man carrying a body came from the ledge above them. They recognized Neil and Samantha with relief and concern. Theo

and Morgan hadn't returned from helping the screaming woman, but Cody had told her the noise had stopped, so she assumed they would be back soon.

Debra helped Neil settle Samantha next to Marc, but she also kept track of Cody, tugging on his arm when he would have gone toward the ladder.

Neil, who had been trying to learn sign language, frowned. "She's right boy. You don't need to see her like that. Stay here and protect your dad."

Given a job, Cody nodded and stumbled over to Marc's body, where Angela was leaning over him, muttering.

Neil hoped it was to heal him. They need Marc and Angela right now. If he died, they would really lose them both, but more than that, once Angela was finished with Marc, she could help Samantha.

"I think he's just got a concussion," Angela stated, slowly guiding Cody onto Marc's chest. "Can you keep him warm while we go help people? Debra will be here with you and others will come with blankets."

Cody nodded, eyes sad. "You'll come back?"

Angela placed a soft kiss to the boy's forehead. "Yes. So will your dad. He just needs to sleep for a while."

Cody laid his head on Marc's chest, comforted by the even breathing.

Angela turned to Neil. "I can't heal right now. You have to find blood for her. Others will need it too."

She scanned hard as Neil pointed his headlamp toward the rubble to help her. “That’s the lab shelf we kept medications on. We need that too.”

“Antibiotics,” Neil realized.

“Yes.” Angela pointed toward a dark corner. “Over there, maybe. We kept it in the back of the room, so it might not have fallen at all.”

Neil went to the rubble pile and shook his head. “I can’t tell it came from bags or... You know, but there’s blood over here.”

Angela joined him, collecting things as she came. The gun she shoved into her belt. The flashlight, she turned on, but she couldn’t tell either. The blood was too close to the ladder to be able to determine the difference under these limited conditions.

Neil turned to her, expression desperate. “What if it’s gone?”

“We’ll get the doctor down here,” Angela stated, heading for the rope. “He might be able to tell, but he also might know her blood type.”

Given hope, Neil went up the ladder quickly. He understood time wasn’t on her side. As soon as he’d released the tourniquet, the cauterized wound had bulged, telling him there was an internal problem. She needed real help.

Angela came up more slowly, reaching out mentally to those she could find through the panic. Adrian and a few others were trying to get the fire under control, but they needed more hands. *Get to the mess, she sent. We need hands at the mess.*

Angela's call was a comfort to her terrified people. It helped them continue to fight. For a few of those who were in bad situations, it also said they would have to help themselves until she could get to them. A fire had to take top priority.

Angela used her shirt to cover her mouth as she reached the next level. The smoke was thicker up here.

She realized the light above them was going out and celebrated it even as she mourned the illumination. Their few flashlights weren't going to hold for long. They needed power-for several reasons. The air vents had to be opened to clear the smoke, but they also needed the refrigeration for their food and the power to clean their water. Everything else beyond that would have a trickledown effect. Power would allow them to survive.

Angela found Ozzie and Logan coming up the ladder behind her, both covered in dirt and blood stains. She pointed upward. "Kenn is headed to the top level now. We'll help him get some lights on and then draft rescue crews."

Both men followed without protest. They'd been in the wash area when it collapsed. The carnage from that moment was still ringing through their minds. There wasn't room for any other thoughts yet.

"There's Kyle!" Ozzie spotted the mobster. He hurried to help Jennifer over the last few feet.

Kyle handed her over gratefully, arms straining from the tight grip he'd kept on her while they walked the tightrope.

Kyle joined Angela at the ladder to the next level, aware of Jennifer now checking their quiet daughter for injuries.

"She's okay," Jennifer breathed. "Thank you. Thank you."

Angela understood the emotion. She started climbing while Kyle tried to convince the teenager to go to the bottom level and wait for them. Angela doubted Jenny would, but it really was the safest place for her and the baby right now. The smoke up here was thick enough to make her eyes water.

Angela felt impatient males take the ladder behind her and tried to hurry, but her body had gotten lazy during her time off. *Mistake*, she thought, hefting herself onto the next level. She rolled to the side to clear room for the men, who were in much better shape.

"You okay?" Ozzie asked, helping her stand.

She nodded dizzily. "Keep going."

The rest of the men hurried up the rope, listening for survivors but not hearing many. The third level residences tunnel was destroyed and they hurried into the mess, the only area where the majority of their people could be.

Ozzie stopped in shock, as did those behind him. The gaping hole in the center of the mess stunned them. Camp members were trapped behind the hole, except they weren't moving. Body after body

lay sprawled across the floor, including kids and pregnant women. In the rear of the mess, where the fire from the kitchen was burning hotly, a group of men was trying in vain to combat the fire with powdered goods and tablecloths.

Ozzie turned back toward the tunnel, grabbing Logan's arm. "Help me!"

"Do what? We have to get them out of there?"

"We are," Ozzie answered, limping into the adjacent tunnel. "There! That might be strong enough to hold us."

The two men uncovered the long sheet of metal and dragged it into the mess to put over the smallest corner of the gap. It would allow them to get some of their people out once it was in place.

Across the gap, Adrian saw movement and backed up to evaluate. He and the others had jumped the corner of the gap to combat the flames. They'd pushed the fire back into the kitchen, but it wasn't going to hold much longer. The cooking oil and gas from the stoves had flamed up and it was still spreading along the ceiling by the cords. Melting plastic and popping cans filled the air with ugly shrapnel.

Ozzie and Logan began dragging unconscious people out of the mess, but there wasn't room for more than ten in the tunnel. As the two men brought people out, more men and women came up the ladder.

Forced to use them like ants, Ozzie began loading bodies onto shoulders to be taken to the bottom level. Slow work, it kept them from removing everyone from the mess.

“We can’t get up there without digging,” Kenn called as he came down from the top level. “All the ladders are gone and it looks like most of the ceiling caved-in to block our exit. Lots of smoke.” Kenn grabbed a heavy camp member, aware that most of the men around him wouldn’t be able to carry that one. “Let’s get these people cleared. Look for fire extinguishers. We had ten to fifteen per level. They have to be here somewhere.”

“I’ve got one!” a weak voice called.

The men turned to find Shawn coming from the level below them. Adrian had been next him a few minutes ago while they tossed salt and flour-all they could find- onto the fire, but he hadn’t noticed when the man left.

“There’s five more right below us,” Shawn stated. “I need help carrying them up.”

The group of Eagles descended quickly, aware of the time running out for those who were still in the mess but even more, they were aware of their own limits. The constant climbing and smoke was taking its toll. So was the silence. Grief was sneaking in now, telling them they’d lost friends and family this time.

“I found the blood!” Neil shouted up eagerly. “Working on getting the doctor.”

Angela grunted in answer, pulling herself to the top level. She'd gone right by the wonderful men fighting to save those in the mess without being noticed. She had to get the vents open or the smoke would overwhelm her workers.

Angela breathed deeply from inside her shirt and began working on the pile of rubble blocking off the entrance to the tunnel that led to the top. The ladders were gone from the other entrance, and that hole was filled with large debris. She'd chosen to try digging out their backup tunnel, hoping its narrowness and odd shape would have kept it in tact. Angela used her witch to help her with the heaviest pieces, but she hadn't gotten very far when she felt Adrian join her.

Adrian began pulling rubble aside with her, not trying to speak. The men below were evacuating their camp members from the mess as fast as they could, but without the vents being opened or the fire being out, they were all going to die down here.

Angela heaved a heavy chunk of stone to the right by rocking it. Adrian saw a gap open up and helped her push.

"That's good!" She ducked into the darkness before he could stop her.

Adrian quickly followed, wincing at the heat blast as the warm air found the newest vent and rushed through it.

Angela stood up as soon as she saw the tunnel was clear, trying to keep from running. There were

rocks on the floor and dirt, along with big ants that she stepped over or on without a thought for their squeals or misery. She had her own colony to protect.

Adrian grabbed her arm when she would have stepped into the smoke-filled tunnel that led up a ramp to the top floor. He put her behind him and then advanced while shining his light. He immediately found bodies.

Angela hurried to check them, but she already knew she was too late to save those who had been trapped up here. The smoke from the level below them had found every nook and cranny it could and smothered them while they waited for rescue.

“Come on!” Adrian helped her up, leading them through the smoke and horror to the large control panel that Theo and Ozzie had welded to the entrance wall of the cave. He shined his light, seeing that something from the outside had almost pierced their steel door. *Not getting out that way*, he thought, ripping the panel open.

Angela shined her light while Adrian flipped switches and opened the vents. Once the buttons were set correctly, he had to hand-crank the wheel. Angela winced as metal clinched, grinding, and then it popped like normal and a huge rush of cool air came at them. Behind it was a thick cloud of smoke that was impossible to see through or keep from breathing.

Adrian staggered towards the washrooms, dragging Angela with him as the smoke disturbed

the debris and sent fresh dust clouds over them. Gritty and thick, Angela and Adrian cowered in a far corner of the washroom and waited for it to settle or for their lungs to shut down. There was no way to know which one would come first.

Adrian took her hand, blind from the smoke. He tugged her into his arms and brought up his shield, wishing he'd thought of it sooner. It would tire him out quickly but it would protect them from the worst of the thick clouds now racing from the top of their mountain.

Chapter Two

Burning

1

“They are burning!”

Mikel’s scream echoed over his devastated campsite. He keyed his mike in ecstasy. “You have to come out now! We will have your witch!”

Inside the mountain, the few radios that had been on blared with Mikel’s voice, causing ripples throughout the cave. Most of it was anger and Kenn was glad to be surrounded by it. With the smoke clearing, they were able to see how badly they’d just been hit. To know that Mikel had been spared brought rage forward and gave Kenn the strength to keep working on the fire, as it did with the others who had been spared death. If they survived this, Mikel was still out there waiting for them. Instead of the trapped feeling causing panic, the determination to end the final threat became hardened in their hearts. Mikel was on borrowed time now. He just didn’t recognize that yet.

Gunshots rang out, startling Cody, who had fallen asleep. He jerked upright to find Debra helping Theo and Morgan bring down a woman whose

name he didn't know. She was shaking and covered in blood.

"I can't believe he's gone," Nancy sobbed, hanging onto Morgan's arm. "I tried to help him..." She dissolved in sobs and Morgan scooped her up to carry her the last twenty feet. He put her next to Samantha, hoping the former sailor might be able to help with their wounded.

"Ants," Theo explained to Debra, signing quickly. "They killed Shane."

How? Debra signed. *They're little.*

"Strength," Theo stated. "He was knocked out. They took him right from her arms."

Debra started sobbing. She couldn't help it.

Cody came to her and wrapped his tiny arms around her hips. "Shh..."

Debra held onto the boy, taking comfort where she could find it.

Cody instinctively led her over to Nancy and the two women fell into each other's arms, crying.

Cody backed away, glancing at Theo.

"Good job," Theo whispered, patting the boy on the shoulder. "Can you watch them for us while we work?"

Cody nodded, returning to his place on Marc's chest, but he shifted so he could see the women.

Theo and Morgan felt the draft in the tunnel switch, both looking upward. The light from the fire was dimmer now, but waves of dirt and dust were falling over everything.

“Backdraft?” Morgan questioned as the wind increased, knocking more debris over and down. Theo shook his head. “We set it up so that couldn’t happen.”

The two men went to the ladder, where Theo resolutely began the climb with his casted leg. Morgan followed, ready to grab the man if he started to fall. There was a lot of work waiting for them all and behind that, there was grief and anger that would have to have an outlet. First, though, they had to get out of this cursed mountain.

End of Free Sample

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