

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #9

LAST CALL



Copyright
Last Call
by
Angela White

Title: Last Call

Life After War Book 9

Edition: 2025

Length: 824 pages

Author: Angela White

ISBN#: 978-1-945927-57-7

Copyright: Angela White. All rights reserved worldwide. No part of this publication may be replicated, redistributed, or given away in any form without the prior written consent of the author.

Thank you, Drew, Stacey, Holly, Jeanne M, Allison, Charles, Elizabeth, Angie H, Crystal, John M, Jeff, Wendy, Marleen, Kristi, Harry, Jim, Jacqueline, Diane, Clara, Carol, and Kim for all your hard work!

Table of Contents

[On the Road Again](#)
[Making Rounds](#)
[Hard Rules](#)
[Under Pressure](#)
[Sky High](#)
[A Pick Me Up](#)
[Bumps in the Night](#)
[Chokepoint](#)
[Getting Gone](#)
[Spa Day](#)
[Wake Up!](#)
[Don't Slip](#)
[Riding the Rails](#)
[Permission Revoked](#)
[The Last Thing We Needed](#)
[Straight Through](#)
[Nothing Gets in the Way](#)
[Not Good Enough](#)
[Considering the Mood](#)
[Bunker Babies](#)
[An Odd Parade](#)
[Through the Middle](#)
[The Big Guns](#)
[Swarming](#)
[Last Call](#)
[Ciemus](#)
[Sleazy, But Effective](#)
[Slaps, Hits, and Thuds](#)

[Swallowing the Same Curses](#)

[A Mix of Both](#)

[Teeth Out and Hungry](#)

[Sanctuary](#)

[Teamwork](#)

[Sweet Hot Chocolate in a Great Wrapper](#)

[Playdates](#)

[Close](#)

Last Call

We had nowhere to turn upon our escape.
The horrors followed as we fled.
We tried to stay ahead of them,
And keep our people fed.

Sickness came with the cold,
Turning survivors into beasts.
We stayed on the move.
The hounding never ceased.

No longer protected by the stone,
Surrounded by men and ice.
We battled down to our last stand,
And begged fate to cast the dice.

We watched the cubes tumble across the dead,
Praying for sanctuary to fall.
The dice came to a bloody stop,
On Safe Haven's last call.

Chapter One
On the Road Again

Near Rome, GA

11am

1

“It’s the first of November.” Kenn steered the muddy semi around a wreck, glad it didn’t require stopping the convoy to clear. He saw where both dented vehicles had been pushed aside by Ivan’s tank. UN blue was smeared on the fenders.

The area they were driving through was still and quiet, with frozen trees and empty homes that begged them to stop, to stay. Kenn suppressed a shudder. He could almost hear them. Until the war, he hadn’t ever considered that houses had souls, but the ones around him held ghosts pleading for new life to be breathed into them.

They had been out of the mountain for 27 hours now, driving straight through except for one bathroom and fuel stop. They had made it 220 miles and were now near the Talladega Forest. Kenn estimated they would reach the ocean in another 700 miles. This first stretch had gone so fast because the roads were clear from the UN troops and the Mexican army coming through, as well as from their own fight with the government. The area

around the mountain was still lingering in everyone's mind. The wrecks and battle sites had been ugly, but the barren, frozen wilderness beyond it had been just as haunting. Some of their people had secretly hoped to emerge and find the old world up and running. They hadn't, of course.

Kenn glanced over to determine if Angela had heard. "Yesterday was Halloween."

Angela lowered her stained, wrinkled map. "Time was different under the mountain. Most people didn't know when it was light or dark. How did you keep track of the date?"

"I have a great watch." Kenn shifted his body to accommodate the woman dozing against his arm. Tonya was tired.

"So does Marc." Angela held up her wrist. "I use his."

Kenn's lips thinned. "You knew we'd missed holidays and birthdays."

Angela let go of the map. It flapped loudly as it rolled up, waking Tonya. "What's your problem?" She wasn't going to be reprimanded over something so petty.

"It isn't petty to the kids who've missed a birthday."

Angela shoved the map into the kit at her feet. "Adrian found time for it?"

"Yes." Kenn braced for ugliness. He was learning to read her tones.

"I'm not Adrian."

Kenn kept trying. “People need those moments. It might not have been so bad in the mountain if we’d celebrated.”

“It also might have reminded them of the old world so much they rioted to get out.” Angela was cold and grouchy. “I did think it through. You should try that.”

Tonya glanced between them. “Everything okay?”

Kenn patted her wrist. “It’s fine.”

Tonya took in Angela’s pinched lips and sighed. “Stop it.”

Neither of them knew who she was talking to. Neither of them responded.

Tonya yawned. “Adrian’s parties always made me sad. We never knew when the next one was coming, and he didn’t celebrate all of the holidays—only the ones he approved of. Either give them all back or keep them. Middle ground sucks.”

Angela stored Tonya’s secret as Kenn stiffened. He’d believed Tonya would be on his side. He was distracted and hadn’t realized she’d just read both of their minds. “I’m going to reinstate them all and add a few new ones. We just can’t do it right now. We don’t have the supplies, manpower, or time.”

They had healing injuries and grieving citizens who were happy to be free and also terrified of it. Their faith in her to keep them alive was an honor and a nightmare she carried every moment.

“Which you would have told Kenn if he’d asked instead of accusing, right?”

“Yep.”

Kenn flushed as Tonya made her point. They’d argued over this a few days ago. Not the holidays, but the way he talked to people. Tonya insisted it wasn’t just her. She said he was unintentionally aggressive to everyone.

Tonya yawned again and put her cheek against his arm. “It takes time. Keep working on it like you do everything else.”

Angela stared at Tonya. Sometimes, it still hit hard that the redhead was smart.

Kenn couldn’t let it go. “I agree with Jeff a little. The misery since she took over has been awful. Adrian gave us rewards and good moments to offset this new life.”

Tonya grunted in resignation and pulled earbuds from her pocket. She slid them in, brow puckered, and switched on the truck radio. Kenn had rigged it up this morning while teaching her to drive the semi. Each vehicle had two wheelmen, two guards, and passengers—except for this one. It was just her, Kenn, and Angela. Tonya was tired of the mix.

Angela was too, but she also didn’t understand what Kenn’s... “Why didn’t you just tell me you saw something coming?”

Kenn was afraid to answer.

Unable to trust him or give him time to come to her when he was ready, Angela dug into his mind.

Kenn didn’t resist. He knew better.

Angela scanned him hard and fast. “Oh, good grief, Kenn! If I wanted to lock away your gifts, I already would have.”

He flushed darker. “I didn’t know what it was at first.”

Angela tried to be patient. “We evolve after tragedies. A new gift isn’t something to hide.”

“...Marc won’t like it.”

“Ah. Fear of the Ghost.” Angela smirked. “That’s healthy for you.”

Kenn sighed. “I’ve always been afraid of him, even before the war.”

“That pleases me.”

“Yeah.”

Angela was relieved Kenn’s secret wasn’t bad. Marc wouldn’t care that the Marine could levitate now. Marc hardly ever thought about Kenn anymore. Adrian was always his target now.

“How do you think the mission team is doing?”

Angela grunted. “Better than we are.”

“Why do you say that?”

The radio on Kenn’s belt crackled. “Boss, we have a winter storm coming from the northwest.”

Kenn pushed the mike. “How long?”

“Less than three hours.” Neil’s reply was curt. “It popped up fast and plans to hang around.” The trooper had obviously thought Angela would answer.

“Copy.” Kenn glanced at Angela for instructions.

Angela shifted in the seat, searching for a position that hurt less. “Same course I gave you this morning.”

“You knew.”

“Samantha told me she felt something brewing. Our lunch location can double as a night stop.”

“Excellent.” Kenn increased speed. He quickly caught up to the tank that was running point.

Ivan and the soldiers also increased speed, but Kenn stayed on their bumper. They were still an hour from the lunch site and it took longer to get camp set up and running now than it had before.

“Are we going to another state park?” Tonya was already tired of sleeping in the open. She was exhausted because she’d jumped at every noise around their flimsy tent overnight. Dealing with the kids during stops had added to it and exhausted her. Many people had the same problem. The convoy was full of snores and mutters from those who were dreaming of the mountain.

Angela shook her head. “We’ll be indoors.”

“Awesome.” Tonya increased the volume of the music. There hadn’t been much entertainment in the mountain. She’d missed it, but not like Kenn had.

“Okay!” Angela groaned. “I give! We’ll have a party. Just one for everything. You handle it.”

“We’ll go easy on rations.” Kenn was thrilled to get what he wanted.

Angela’s face darkened. “You’ll have to. We don’t have much unless the teams unearth more stashes.”

Kenn now understood her concern. “Do you want them contacted?”

“They know where we’ll be. They might even beat us there.”

Kenn hated to admit it, but despite all the deaths they’d had, Angela was more thorough than Adrian. She covered issues before they became problems. It was comforting. If she would ease up a little on fun, things could be great.

“I’ll try.”

Kenn didn’t push. He would do that later if it was needed. For today, he was satisfied he’d gotten something their people needed.

“Adrian will have a notebook for you on Eagle training.”

Kenn’s mood lifted. “Cool. Soon?”

“A few days, probably.”

Distracted, Kenn fell into mental plans.

Both women breathed a sigh of relief as the bad vibes faded. Not all of the negativity was coming because of Angela’s choices. Kenn’s gifts were coming in and he hadn’t learned to lock down on the mood swings yet. He would, but not before making everyone else suffer the emotional blasts. The descendant children were the same. They had to learn to control it. So did Kenn. Everyone else had to be patient.

Even distracted, Kenn was keeping track of her thoughts. “Thank you for understanding. I don’t mean to let it loose. It just happens.”

Angela stared out the window. “We’ve all gone through that, even Marc. After a while, you’ll know when it’s rising and be able to control it.”

“Like our personal shields?”

“Yes.” Angela was curious. “Can you do that yet?”

“Not fully. I can’t make it big enough.”

“It takes continuous energy and we’re all drained.”

“Yeah, that reminds me. Why did you say no about drawing from camp members when they offer?”

“They can’t afford the energy either. None of us are healthy. I’ll eventually reverse that decision, if you give me time.”

“You got it.” Kenn stopped scanning her and really sank into training plans.

Angela resumed her futile attempts to discover what the future held. Samantha hadn’t been certain how long the storm might last or even what type it was when she’d first mentioned it. Now that they knew it was snow, most of the preparations depended on how bad it would get. The location Angela had chosen would hold them for a few days if needed, but they had refugees following and those folks had been out in this weather all along. They wouldn’t sit around and wait for it to be over. While Safe Haven took shelter, numerous threats would start catching up to them.

Meanwhile, their three strongest fighters were out of camp. The next few days might be as hard as

the last few had been. Angela was too weak to see that far. All the descendants were and that was going to get worse until they reached the boat. Once on the ocean, there would be time for recharging. Until then, the same constant struggle for survival would continue to wear them down.

One more month, Angela told her aching body and weary heart. Do it for one more month and then we'll try to figure out how to be happy again. We've more than earned it.

2

“Why is he on my ass?” James kept one eye on Kenn in the mirror, and the other on the road in front of the tank.

“She wants us to hurry up.” Ivan wasn’t surprised. The clouds coming in were heavy. They were going to need shelter soon, but this area was uninviting. Even the animals didn’t like it here. Ivan understood it was cold, but people hadn’t been decimating animal populations for 10 months. There should have been deer herds, stray cats, possums, and dogs being flushed out in panic by the sound of their convoy. He hadn’t even seen a bird yet. It was unsettling how quiet the world was becoming. “Speed us up.”

“That’ll be noisy.”

“She knows.”

James shrugged. “Okay.” He drove into a rusted dumpster, knocking it out of the way instead of

slowing to push it aside as they'd been doing since leaving the mountain. The noise was awful. "This might attract problems."

Ivan nodded. "If she wants us somewhere sooner, we make it happen and she handles the consequences. That's why she's the boss and we're just the soldiers."

James laughed at the old joke and aimed for the next chunk of debris.

3

"Are we all clear?" Angela looked to Ivan for the confirmation. The stopped convoy was growing impatient, but they'd arrived 20 minutes early.

Ivan was at the truck's passenger window. "They say we are, but I'd like to do one fast sweep myself."

Ivan was the guard over her vehicle. She'd assigned him. "We'll wait."

Ivan marched off.

Kenn gave signals to the guards around the stopped cars and trucks. Everyone was ready to be out of the vehicles, but Kenn and Angela both liked it that Ivan was taking the job seriously.

"The teams are all here. No contact, but they also didn't find much." Kenn translated the hand code updates while Angela got her coat on. The tiny town had a dozen homes in a square, surrounded by thick woods, short barns, and empty fields. It didn't appear looted, but it had the abandoned feel of most

American societal centers now. Kenn didn't expect trouble upon sight, which was a nice change. Still, it paid to be careful.

“All clear!”

Everyone scrambled for bathrooms and assigned posts, relieved at the call from Ivan. The adrenaline crash from their escape was gone, leaving a deep weariness that kept them all yawning and rubbing their eyes. Everyone who had duty was looking forward to being finished so they could sleep for eight hours in a bed that wasn't moving.

Angela understood. She planned to order lights out an hour after mess. They needed the rest and so did she.

Angela zipped her parka and stepped out into the stiff wind. Shivering almost immediately, she longed to have the old world comforts back for the millionth time. Like everyone else, she loathed this post-apocalyptic life. She wanted to settle into one of these empty towns, but that wasn't possible. All the horrors they'd suffered were still waiting to hit them again if she made a mistake, but this time, there was no bunker or radiation cloud to save them.

“My legs hurt.”

“My hips are shouting at me.”

“I can't stop yawning.”

Angela silently echoed the complaints of camp members walking by. Traveling again after being in the mountain for months was hard on everyone. Eagles just preferred not to admit to their physical weaknesses. It was the same with adapting to night

sounds and weather. Angela had forgotten what it was like to be so cold she couldn't stop shivering, but she remembered now as the wind whipped and blew her braid over her shoulder. Winter was her least favorite season.

Refusing to wear the hood on the parka that would conceal her identity, Angela did don the thick hat Marc had insisted she take. She also pulled on the matching gloves, hoping she didn't need to reach her weapon quickly. The Eagles had flat-out refused the gloves for that reason.

Groups of workers were waiting as she emerged. Most were dressed in the same gear as Eagles. Angela felt lucky to have scavenged enough to outfit everyone. Some of their hard-found supplies would remain in that tomb forever. There hadn't been time to dig it all out. Angela doubted the refugees would unearth much of it. Their lives would be short and hard, always in search of a surviving town. The next two years would be the hardest fight for survival ever experienced in this country.

Angela took a stack of folded papers from her pocket and passed them out. With so many untrained rookies, she couldn't just tell them. Things would be missed, forgotten. "That's it."

The men and women hurried off. No one wanted to linger for a chat.

Angela waved the next group forward. This was the door-to-door crew she'd drafted. They needed oral reminders of what to do, unlike the senior men

watching them. “Be careful as you clear the buildings. Besides scavengers, there could also be animals. Go in teams of four. Clear every nook and cranny where a small person could fit. Also check for snake tracks and such. Go slow and verify it’s clear before you call it. I won’t be forgiving if you miss something.”

The rookies took a minute to form the teams, then marched toward the dozen homes. Camp members hurried out of the way.

Conner joined her, with Charlie at his side. “Do you want us to handle the vehicles again?” The boys were almost hidden under thick parkas and gloves.

“Yes. We’ll form a complete block around the buildings. Get them as tight as you can. Gas tanks should be facing in.”

The boys assumed that was to prevent theft and allow them easy access to the fuel if it was needed for something during the storm.

Charlie jogged to the lead rig to move it.

Conner went to the rear trucks holding their remaining livestock while he waited for the next vehicle to empty. He could hear Angela now worrying over the condition of their small herd. They were taking these animals to the island.

Angela watched him walk away. Conner might turn out to be everything that Adrian couldn’t. They were getting him young enough to ensure he didn’t follow a dark path. It was too late for his father.

Refusing to waste time dwelling on what couldn’t be changed, Angela strode to the vehicle

carrying her twins. Daryl and Greg followed. The two men were her personal protection until the camp was up. After that, she was putting them to work, no matter what Marc had told them to do. The camp needed them more than she did.

“We’ve got it.” Jennifer walked by with Candy, Mandy, and Tracy. All four women were carrying an infant. “Stop by later. We’ll save you a diaper.”

“Thanks.” Relieved and disappointed, Angela tried to scan her surroundings and got nothing with her gifts. She was forced to rely on sight and normal senses. What she could see was barren, deserted. There were no birds in the air and no ants out of their cone-shaped hills. An ominous wind was the only thing making noise. Angela listened to it intently. It said the coming storm wasn’t going to go away until it wanted to.

Angela joined the crew clearing houses. They were shorthanded, so she would help where she could. If she became too tired, she could still stand guard while the others worked. In Safe Haven, there was always a chore waiting.

Daryl and Greg stayed close to her, but neither man was surprised when she pointed to one of the homes that hadn’t been cleared yet. They didn’t argue despite Marc’s possible anger when he found out. Angela was the boss. If Marc took over, he would also have the authority to change scheduled guard positions.

Daryl and Greg cleared the farthest house from the camp people now forming lines around the bathrooms.

Angela went to the home next to it, noting dead flowers and an open, empty shed. It appeared the residents here had left peacefully. Angela clumsily drew her gun and flipped off the safety as she walked to the house.

Running boots crunched behind her.

Angela paused to let Ivan take the bodyguard position, aware of frowns coming from everyone witnessing it. The Eagles didn't trust him. Angela didn't either, but they hadn't spent much time together yet. With Marc and Adrian away, that would change. Ivan had appointed himself (or had been appointed. She wasn't sure which yet) her guardian. He hadn't let her out of his sight except to piss and sleep.

Ivan sighed, impatient for her to move so he could clear the house.

Angela braced mentally for action as she'd been taught, then braced for pain... She kicked in the door.

Not locked, the door gave easily and slammed into the wall.

Angela flew awkwardly into the dark house, crashing into furniture.

Senior Eagles rushed her way.

Ivan wanted to help her, but he was laughing too hard.

“Yeah, I deserved that.” Angela grunted, pushing an end table off her leg.

Ivan was shoved aside by Kyle’s team. He heard Angela pick herself up.

“That’s gonna sting later.”

Ivan laughed harder as she sent the Eagles back to their duties. He couldn’t help it.

Angela appeared, limping and rubbing at scrapes and sore spots. “You can stop now.”

“No.” Ivan shook his head, tears rolling as Eagles scowled deeper.

Angela limped back in to find her gun and clear the house. “Never gonna live that down.”

4

By sunset, Safe Haven was fed and settled, and patrols were on duty. Angela and Ivan were also outside, though only the snipers knew. Lurking between the homes, Angela once again tried to scan the future and only found darkness.

“Funniest shit since her boy ambushed Adrian with paintballs.”

“I haven’t laughed that hard in a long time. Was she embarrassed?”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

Angela listened to the first group of sentries who strolled by without spotting her or her guard. The rookies had a lot to learn and she had a lot of training to do—on them and on herself. She hadn’t been this out of shape since before the war.

Ivan stayed right next to her now that the shadows had lengthened, limiting sight. Wearing his army outfit, Ivan blended in better than the other men. He was also warmer, but no one complained. They were all enjoying the fresh air, no matter how cold it was. They were free. To celebrate, the guards were talking to each other more than they had in the mountain.

Ivan was fascinated by the new routines. Each shift had a descendant to sweep for trouble. The same was true of each house, though many of those were children. The organization was impressive. He had a few things to add to their security if Angela would let him, but overall, it was tight. After the chaos in the mountain, Ivan hadn't been certain if being outdoors would be the same.

“We'd never been in a mountain before. Out here, we know what we're doing.” Angela tried not to shiver. “Most of us, anyway. New arrivals always took a month to settle in.”

Ivan controlled his reaction to her reading his mind, not wanting to be eliminated from her guard. He liked learning from her, but he often forgot how powerful she was even when she wasn't trying or didn't appear to be.

Angela grunted, breath streaming out. “We used to forbid it. The invasion of privacy isn't something we like doing, but after you've almost been killed as much as we have, you adjust.”

“I can understand that.” Ivan saw the next patrol coming and felt Angela tense. “What are we doing?”

“Testing nerves.” Angela finished the explanation by stepping in front of the three unsuspecting guards.

“Ah!”

“Son of a...!”

Angela didn't snicker. Her earlier humiliation was fresh in her mind. She wasn't going to enjoy this small moment after doing something so dumb. “Good evening, gentlemen.”

“You scared the sh...” Nathan stopped himself. “I didn't see you there.”

“I didn't want you to. The same as an intruder won't want you to.” She swept the tired level two men. Their shift was almost up. “Get a hot meal before you crash. We'll wake you up for the meeting.” Angela left, spotting Samantha and Neil near the rear of the truck he had driven today. She connected to Samantha so she could see whatever had frozen the woman in place with no reaction to the rough wind trying to push everyone off their feet. If not for Neil's hip against hers, Angela was certain Samantha would have already fallen.

Ivan put his back to them and stayed alert.

Neil kept his eye on Ivan. Samantha's injury and Jeremy's death hadn't allowed time to size up the new guy who was making a fast name for himself. Whenever that happened, he and Kyle usually

grilled the person, but Neil wasn't sure if they would restart the tradition.

Neil glanced around at footsteps. Kyle was walking toward him, accompanied by Greg and Ben, who were Ivan's relief.

Neil flashed a fast hand code question.

Kyle grinned. "You know it. I'll entertain until you can join."

"Perfect." Neil swept the landscape, not minding the chill in the wind or darkness around them. They were outside. It was wonderful.

Angela shivered, withdrawing from Samantha's mind. "Well, we needed the break." She frowned at Kyle. "Reschedule it or make it quick. You're busy tonight."

Kyle nodded. "You got it. What's up?"

"We'll be here a couple days. I want you to supervise the set up. Neil and Shawn will handle the vehicles. We need batteries pulled and brought in like while we were in the mountain. Get the terracotta heaters set up too. We also have to cover the livestock trailer and put guards in there with heat. Pick two people who can sing. It calms them." Angela paused, considering. "I don't want people to come out unless it's a bathroom trip. Put an escort in each house with rope in case the storm reaches whiteout conditions. We're not sure yet."

Kyle and Neil were both writing down her instructions. Ben and Greg took Ivan's place, leaving the soldier free to observe the boss and catch anything she missed.

She won't miss anything. Kenn joined Ivan, admiring Angela's leadership. She's the alpha. She sees further than we do.

I don't know. I see pretty far.

Kenn shrugged. *Do you see an interrogation coming?* Kenn left Ivan frowning. He went to Angela for orders. "Boss."

Angela gestured. "We're still doing the meeting tonight, even if it's 4am. Be ready for it."

"I will. Where do you want Tonya?"

"Where does *she* want to be?"

Kenn's lips thinned at Angela's tone. It warned him to be careful about trying to control his mate. "With you."

"Then that's where she'll be—after I finish rounds. She can take notes during the meeting."

Kenn walked away. "I'm sending someone else to tell her."

Angela snickered. "Don't blame you at all."

The amusement calmed the men around them.

Samantha didn't notice. She was trying to determine how bad the storm would get and how long they would be trapped here. Like Angela, Samantha knew they were on borrowed time every second they weren't moving south. She exchanged a glance with Angela, then let Neil lead her to the house where their other injured people were resting, but she didn't expect to sleep. It would be a long night of searching.

Whitney joined her. "Where to first?"

Angela pointed at the house Daryl and Greg had cleared. “Weapons and food.”

Candles and lanterns had eliminated the gloom from the buildings and from the town itself, but the guards weren’t feeling safe. Light attracted attention and attention brought bloodshed. That pattern hadn’t changed since the beginning of time.

Angela tapped twice.

A child’s voice cleared those inside to open the door. “It’s the boss.”

Whitney remained outside. He and Ben would switch off at each house to stay warm and alert, while Greg provided a roaming patrol.

“Good evening.” Angela swept the crowded home as people returned her greeting. The shelters were almost barren. Only heavy furniture had been left. That included dressers, beds, and tables. It was enough to make Safe Haven’s stay almost pleasant after the limited comfort in the mountain.

Some of the homes also had Christmas decorations. Angela was certain most of it would be eliminated before morning. People couldn’t handle those reminders. It had already been handled here. The plastic tree had been covered with a checkered tablecloth.

Angela acknowledged Brittani, but she went to Gus. Both of them were still wearing parkas. Damp tracks on the wood floor told Angela they were making trips to the supply trucks. She had ordered their food and water brought in. The pair was handling it personally between meal shifts.

Brittani and Gus's family was also here, in addition to Cody, Mandy and her baby, the Market Town twins, and a dozen jumpy camp members who stared at her. That would get worse if she didn't make these rounds. People were twitchy. They needed to know she was looking out for them. "I'll be holding a meeting here in a few hours. I'd like food ready, but I want your woman to sleep while you cover it."

Gus agreed happily, missing Brittani's frown. She didn't like being treated as if she was just one of the camp.

Angela hid a smirk and went to kneel by Mandy. "Any trouble?"

The twins perked up, as did Mandy's child. The trio stared in blurry happiness, able to sense an alpha even though they could barely see.

"No. They're sweet."

"Any sign of power?"

Mandy shook her head. "No. I'm watching."

"Good." Angela didn't linger. She went outside, letting Ben shut the door behind her.

Next to the house, Kenn was now working in a small pup tent that held crates of weapons. She didn't disturb him, but she did verify his guard was nearby and ready to kill if needed.

Morgan nodded in recognition of that duty and resumed sweeping the landscape with both types of sight.

Wind whipped overtop the town, blowing frozen debris from a roof. It crashed to the ground nearby, scaring people.

Faces appeared in every window, forcing Angela to flash hand codes in repeated directions to settle them down as she went to the next house. She'd covered the food and weapons. Now it was time to check on the wounded. Without doctors here, other than herself, this was a priority. She tapped.

“It’s the boss.”

Another child cleared her, confirming that she'd drafted a descendant child to cover each house. *Smart.* Ben wasn't convinced the kids would be a defense, but he'd figured out they were a warning. The Eagles and camp members in each home would do the fighting.

Conversations stopped, letting them all hear the wind. It was growing stronger.

Samantha was in the far corner, bundled into her sleeping bag and covered with a thick quilt. Leeann was next to her, holding a bottle of water and a bottle of pills. “She won't take her meds.” Wearing a white jacket and a white beanie, Leeann was a mini angel of mercy from old films.

Angela was glad the smells in here were medicinal, but not overpowering. They might have to open the windows tomorrow, when those who hadn't been able to use the bathroom tents were finally forced to make use of the cracked bedpans

they'd dug out. "She wants to be awake in case she's needed."

Leeann frowned. "But she's in pain. I can feel it."

The other injured men and women in the room watched them. Hair pinned up and faces dirty, they still appeared happier than they had two days ago. A few were even smiling. They'd been bundled up and fed, then medicated and encouraged to sleep—all by a child who wasn't as tall as any of them. Angela had known there wouldn't be problems in this house, which is why she'd put the girl with them. It wasn't because Leeann was too weak to fight or too young. It was so she wouldn't have to.

Leeann was reckless—much like Angela had been at that age and still was when life became too hard. Angela didn't tell the adults in the room it was to keep the child occupied until she was tired enough to sleep. Many of them were or had been parents. They knew what she was doing.

"It doesn't matter to her." Angela finished her mental sweep. "She's willing to hurt so she can keep monitoring the storm."

Leeann's brows puckered. "Well, I don't like it."

Samantha and the others snickered.

Angela shrugged. "What can I say? Eagles are stubborn. It keeps them alive."

"Whatever." Leeann went to the window to give the adults time alone.

It made Angela wonder if Leeann might be able to sense the storm too. Hopeful, she stored the information for later and went to Samantha for the update.

“No change so far.” Samantha looked at her with bloodshot eyes. “We’re in the direct path. We’ll be here a while.”

Next to them, Michael frowned. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

Michael didn’t know about the refugees on their trail. He’d been unconscious for most of the escape and trip here. Angela shrugged, not wanting to explain it right now. “Send for me if anything changes.”

“You know it.” Samantha shut her eyes and resumed searching the darkness.

Angela paused by the front window.

Leeann peered up at her. “The mission team is almost at the UN base.”

“You’ll keep me informed?”

“Absolutely!”

Angela stepped outside; light snow began to fall.

Chapter Two

Making Rounds

1

“**G**ood evening.”

“Evening, Boss.”

Like in the other houses, conversations ended abruptly when she entered. A loud cough echoed in the silence. Angela left damp prints and small snow spots as she walked across the wood floor.

As the door shut and Angela came her way, Candy contemplated faking an illness to avoid the coming conversation. If not for their problems in the mountain, Candy was certain she would have already been subjected to this interrogation.

Angela sat on the fading couch next to Candy, lifting a brow. “Why does it have to be an interrogation? Just tell me what you want. We’ll skip the rest.”

Huddled under a blanket, Candy was pale and her eyes were layered in dark bags. Angela hoped she would sleep tonight. The mother-to-be needed it. All of her people did. Months in the ground had made them fragile.

Candy frowned, flushing. “I don’t know anymore.”

“That worries me.” Angela didn’t keep her voice down. As the leader of Safe Haven, it was her duty to remind people of dangers. “Have you seen the misery the older Mitchel caused?”

Candy nodded, though she wanted to defend Conner and his dad. Instead, she stayed quiet and hoped Angela’s scold wouldn’t be that bad.

“You haven’t done anything wrong. There’s no reason for me to scold you. I’m just reminding you that Mitchel men are dangerous, no matter their age. The women probably were too, but there’s none left alive to tell us tales.” Angela didn’t mention Adrian’s daughter, Alexa. People didn’t need to worry about that one for years yet.

Angela stood up before Candy could defend Conner. Witnesses were listening. It was a bad time for Candy to admit she had developed feelings for him against her will. No one was certain if the boy had put a charm on her, but considering what his father had done, it wasn’t a stretch to assume he might have employed the same tactics. Angela didn’t want him banished again. Safe Haven needed every descendant they had. “You’ve been given the chance to find out, twice. Both of those people offered to protect you. You’ve refused. That’s a huge switch from where things stood when you voted to banish them both.”

Candy scowled. “I didn’t do that alone. It was clear the camp wasn’t going to accept anything less.”

Angela refused to let the woman lie. “That’s not even close to the truth.”

Anger flashed across Candy’s face. “I don’t know why I don’t hate the kid anymore. Maybe it’s because I watched too many of my friends die. Some kid playing with himself because he likes my butt is small in comparison. Let it go. It’s over.”

Satisfied she’d gotten what she wanted from this slowly warming house, Angela swept the other people in the room that included three Indians from Natoli’s tribe, Eagles, camp members, and Missy, who was the descendant guardian for this shelter. “Send someone if you need me.”

“I will.” Missy didn’t glance up from the book in her hand.

Angela smiled as she left. Missy sounded like an Eagle.

Whitney shut the door, then rubbed his hands together for warmth as the wind gusted. There was a light layer of snow covering the ground now.

Angela marched to the fourth house, noting the bathroom tents were finally empty, and Kenn was finished in the weapon tent. She expected him to join her at some point. She tapped on the door.

“Grab the cat!”

“I’ve got it!”

Angela waited until the loose cat was rounded up before opening the door. As she entered, a thin blast of snow and icy wind followed her, waking the sleeping soldiers. Peter, James, Boothe, and two of their buddies had overnight duty. They were resting

until then. Also in this house were the three descendant kids Kenn had insisted they keep, a dozen male camp members, and a team of rookies. If they were attacked, this house was a fighting base. Before Kenn went to sleep, the weapons would be moved in here.

Angela acknowledged the other people in the room who were trying to sleep, then went to Tonya. The howling wind sounded a lot different here than it had in the mountain.

Angela knelt to help Tonya get the cat into the carrier. “Kenn wants to propose.”

Tonya tensed for an instant, then shrugged. “It’s okay.”

Angela didn’t pick up a mental celebration or fear. “Doesn’t that make you happy? You’ve been hinting to him about it for weeks.”

Tonya fastened the carrier. She was aware of their audience, but she refused to lie to, or for, anyone anymore. She didn’t have to. “I hate it that he had to get permission. It’s embarrassing. It’s a reminder of who he used to be. That makes me...uneasy.” Tonya pulled her jacket together and zipped it against the draft that had come in with Angela. She’d refused a parka. It didn’t allow her enough movement while working.

“Because you’re afraid he’ll do it to you or because you’re afraid you’ll use it against him at some point to get what you want?”

Tonya winced. Apparently, Angela knew about her fears about reverting to her old self. “A little of

both, I guess, but more the latter. I get tempted sometimes.”

Angela was relieved it wasn't going to be a new problem. “I'm going to give my approval, but not until daylight. You have a few more hours to be sure it's what you want. I imagine he'll ask you in front of everyone and make it hard for you to refuse right then. I'm giving you a safety net. If you want it, use it—no strings attached. I've lived that life. I don't wish it on anyone.”

Tonya and everyone else in the room stared as Angela and her escort left, but there wasn't a conversation about it once she was gone. It was Tonya's decision.

The soldiers exchanged dismayed glances that said they hadn't known Kenn was a problem. They didn't know exactly what the infraction had been, but it wasn't hard to infer. Kenn instantly went to the top of their shit list. Tonya had earned their respect and loyalty. Kenn had just lost it.

2

The fifth house was full of light and laughter. Jennifer and the older kids, plus Shawn and a few Eagles, were telling jokes.

The laughter stopped when Angela joined them. Everyone regarded her warily.

All signs of Christmas had been cleansed from this home. Angela assumed the adults hadn't wanted to spend hours discussing the coming

holidays. Other than that, this house had it all, from heaters and snacks, to noises and odd smells. Angela didn't try to identify the odors of youth. She just enjoyed them. "I came to help with bathroom breaks. Anyone need to go?"

Kids jumped up, all eager to play in the snow. Pale, thin faces flushed in eager anticipation, making Angela's heart warm. She didn't believe it was a good idea, but it was impossible to resist their need. "Just while we wait in line."

Angela helped Jennifer and the others bundle the cheering children into coats and hats. She hadn't forgotten she'd promised playtime as soon as they were free of the mountain. It would have to be taken in short shifts, but one of those could happen now.

The small coats had a lot of buttons and the kids found it hard to hold still. Little fingers couldn't hit glove holes. Scarfs fell to the floor before they could be wrapped. The adults stayed as patient as they could, understanding the children were excited, but it took longer to get the kids ready than it should have. Angela wasn't sure why she was in a hurry. She had already finished rounds of half the houses. Instinct said trouble was coming.

Angela led them out, gesturing to several faces in the windows around them to come stand watch. She didn't have them relieve the current guards, however. She wanted a doubled shift. The snow was coming down heavier now. The Eagles had shrunk the perimeter for better visibility, but she wanted more security.

While at the four bathroom tents, the children scooped up handfuls of the fluff that had accumulated and chased each other around the adults. It should have been a wonderful moment for all of them, but the oppressive darkness surrounding their camp made it impossible for the adults to enjoy.

Guards actually winced at the noises. Angela had instructed them to rebuild the wall panels as they traveled, and they would soon gather items to muffle or suppress the sounds, but nothing was blocking their lights or noises right now. They couldn't do much about it yet. Safe Haven didn't have enough men to stand guard for three shifts a day, let alone enough hands to scavenge too. When crews went out, security would be light, leaving them all vulnerable.

Angela stilled, listening. *Trouble...*

Around her, the last group of children entered the bathrooms. The adults began to herd the ones who were finished toward their shelter.

The wind dropped into an eerie silence that brought goosebumps to Angela's cold arms.

The descendant children who were still outside ran to her.

The witnesses assumed the children were scared and wanted protection. Guards drew weapons and got ready to fight.

Angela let the kids surround her, tiny bodies rigid as they waited for the danger.

Cody took a place right in front of Angela. “Stay behind us.”

Molly, a rookie, kept her distance. She was creeped out by how the kids were so willing to give their lives for an alpha.

Shawn came forward to add his body to the circle of protection. After months of caring for Missy, magic no longer rattled him. It was a tool.

Jennifer stayed where she was, waiting for the last kids to come out of the bathrooms. She had left Autumn sleeping next to Pam. Jennifer glanced toward the house, unable to pinpoint the danger either. Like Angela, she’d been using her energy continuously since they left the mountain and the small amount of sleep she’d gotten overnight without Kyle next to her hadn’t allowed her a recharge.

Standing in front of Angela, Robbie rotated toward her in concern as snowflakes landed on his cold face. “She knows you’re here.”

Angela couldn’t help the shudder. “Who?”

“Nature.” Robbie’s eyes were dazed. “She knows she can reach you now.”

As if released from the spell, all of the kids relaxed.

“She’s hitting someone else.” Robbie stared at Angela as the wind started blowing against them again. “Don’t leave camp. We can’t protect you out there.”

Angela didn’t tell the boy she wasn’t safe anywhere. She didn’t want him to keep worrying.

“I suggest we get inside.” Shawn had the sudden urge to check on Missy. He was upset he’d been assigned to a different house. His consolation was that almost all parents and guardians in Safe Haven had been split from their loved ones so no one would ignore their duty.

Angela helped the kids into the house, aware of Jennifer lingering on the porch for a private moment.

Angela got the kids in and then stopped near the teenager who was coated in a light layer of melting snow.

Whitney shut the door, then left the porch.

Jennifer focused on Angela, hand going to her hip. “When will you give Kyle the same permission you’re giving to Kenn in the morning?”

“What?”

“Kyle needs your permission to marry me.”

“Oh, Jenny.” Angela gave the girl a weary smile. “He’s had it for months.” Angela left the surprised girl standing on the snowy porch. That explanation had to come from Kyle.

Angela skipped the next house. There were only two people in there—Ivan, who was resting for a shift later, and Neil, who was glaring at her from the tiny front window. She’d asked the trooper to keep it covered from the inside until the meeting. That very small house only had room for half a dozen people crammed in. Angela had chosen that as her base.

Another face glared at her from the window of the adjacent house as she neared that porch. Neil

and Charlie were both angry they hadn't been assigned to a shelter with their mates. Angela wasn't taking any chances. The wind was howling, even making senior men jump. They couldn't be lax.

Angela didn't tap on the door. Instead, she snatched it open and entered, making a dozen camp members cry out in alarm. Clumps of fluffy flakes fell to the floor, revealing the outside conditions.

Angela swept the people and then she swept the house. The Christmas items in this shelter were bagged in a corner to be burned.

Angela took out her notebook while everyone waited. *On the island, we'll burn garbage in community sessions and use it as fuel for making tallow and resin.*

All the men and women in here with Daryl, Charlie, and a team of rookies were going to be in her army soon. She was going to use every opportunity to train them, as Adrian had done with her. "There's a team meeting in the mess house tonight. Someone will tell you when. I want *all* of you there."

Charlie's attitude improved, assuming Tracy would attend.

Everyone had questions, but Angela went to Daryl. Most of what they wanted to know would be answered during the meeting. She would handle the rest of it privately. Right now, she needed something from Daryl, but she couldn't ask.

“Evening, Boss.” Wearing his old uniform, Daryl felt better than he had in a long time about the future. The past still bothered him.

Angela nodded, but didn’t speak. She stood next to the Eagle, wondering what he had been thinking about before she entered. He was wearing a pensive expression.

When Angela didn’t speak, Daryl was drawn from his reflections on Cynthia’s petition. He focused on her, frowning. “Is there a problem?”

Angela yawned. “No. I just needed to warm up for a minute.”

Daryl recognized the evasion, but he wasn’t certain how to handle it with so many witnesses. Despite the fact that she had declared everyone in this room an Eagle in one form or another, Daryl didn’t know half the men here and therefore they couldn’t trust them yet. “Is it as cold as it looks out there?”

“Would you like to give one of my guards a break for a minute and find out?”

Daryl nodded. “I’m a little stir crazy from the walls. Isn’t that nuts?”

Angela was glad she had chosen Daryl. After his time with Cynthia and his descendant research, he was as close to being one of them as a person could get without actually having gifts. Tommy was next in line after that. Angela didn’t know if they were Invisibles, but it didn’t matter. They were strong additions, no matter their ancestry.

The pair went out, where her guards once again stepped aside to give her privacy. Both of them knew what she was doing and were relieved. Marc wouldn't like it if he came back and she was sick.

Daryl waited until they were clear of the window, then put his hand on her shoulder. "Take what you need. I give it willingly."

About to sleep until his next shift, Ivan peered out the window in time to witness Angela sliding her arms around Daryl's neck.

Behind Ivan, Neil was doing a sweep of the attic and missed it. The narrow space had a tiny window with a flimsy lock, requiring an hourly check.

Enraged, Ivan stormed to the door and jerked it open.

"Close your mouth!" The guard in front of his building hurried up the stairs and got in Ivan's face. "Do it right now!"

Neil came jogging down the stairs at hearing the door open, but he didn't grab Ivan yet. He was judging the man's reaction. The boss had told the other descendants not to draw from the herd. She hadn't said anything about the Eagles lending *her* strength.

Ivan struggled to understand why he was getting the order to allow Angela to either drain one of their men or betray her mate. As he observed over Donald's tense shoulder, he got to witness what very few of them ever had.

Behind him, Neil stayed ready to help Donald if it was needed.

Beautiful orbs of multicolored light shot out of Daryl's chest and into Angela's, bathing them both in the stunning glow of an energy exchange.

After a moment, Angela stepped back from Daryl even though he had more to give. She might need it later. As the healing energy ran through her body, Angela slid to her knees, unable to remain standing. She was so empty it hurt.

Daryl didn't care about their witnesses. He also didn't want to hear Angela's gratitude. He slid back into the house and resumed his position in the corner but now, he dwelled on the sensation and the bond it created to do such a thing for any of the descendants. Thoughts of Cynthia's vendetta and death had been pushed aside.

Angela got to her feet and felt the strength of a quick meal flow through her limbs and heart. Daryl tasted good. His energy was pure, making it sweet. Marveling over the different flavors of power, she proceeded to the largest house sheltering their most likely troublemakers, and Kyle. She didn't look at Ivan. The guards would handle him if it was needed.

“What was that?!”

Donald stepped back out into the snow when Ivan didn't try to leave the house. “You know what it was. Use your brain, not your mouth.” Donald was jealous of how much time Ivan was getting around the boss. He didn't want to be Ivan's mentor

too, though one of the Eagles would be gifted with that job.

Ivan sat on the edge of the moldy mattress he'd covered in his army jacket, running it through his mind. When it finally connected, he lay down, grunting in resignation. "I gotta stop expecting her to be like the other females I've known. She clearly isn't."

3

Angela didn't need to knock on the door to the eighth house as Kyle moved from the window to greet her. Angela entered, cold bones aching. When she came out next time, she would have to lift the hood.

Conner, Zack and his boys, and other known troublemakers watched in apprehension.

Angela understood their fear. Her last dream had been from the point of view of a member who had been terrified to think anything critical of leadership for fear of having their minds read. After waking, Angela had realized she'd connected to the dream of a camp woman. Angela glanced at that female now and saw her pale.

Positive she should, but ashamed of the ability like she had been as a child, Angela didn't scan the woman. She had a great compassion for non-magic people, but she also had a great loathing. If she saw something bad enough, she would kill them all openly and panic the rest of the camp. It was better

to let it play out the way Jennifer had told her it would. “Are we set?”

Kyle gave a grunt. “As much as we can be. Are you sure we should leave the vehicles unattended during the meeting?”

That was Kyle’s way of asking if she had changed her mind. Angela was appreciative of his consideration, but she shook her head. “No, but we don’t have the manpower. I need everyone there.”

Kyle hid his relief at her choice as he turned around to point at Conner. “I want you next to me.”

Done in front of everyone, it was actually a protection. If there was trouble, everyone would know Conner was innocent because he had been with Kyle.

Conner agreed instead of arguing the way Charlie would have.

Zack didn’t care what game they had going this time. He was just glad his sons were allowed to come to the meeting. He didn’t want to leave them alone with any of the people in this house. The 10 men and women in here had been on the verge of joining Jimmy’s people from almost the minute the camp had split. Angela had vetted them, but no one had forgotten who was with who when shit had hit the fan.

Angela left before anyone could say anything to give her away. This house would be under the heaviest protection during the meeting, but the people inside wouldn’t know. They now assumed they would be able to do whatever they wanted

while her army was at the meeting. It was a horrible test of their loyalty. If they failed, the consequences would be harsh. No one could be allowed to carry tales of weaknesses and locations.

Emily exchanged a terrified look with Craig as Angela left.

Craig shook his head. He didn't care if Angela knew their plans. He wasn't changing them.

Scared and relieved, Emily rolled over as if she were going to sleep. She needed to get out of here before the clock stopped ticking. Emily had been listening to it since agreeing to Craig's plan. Emily loved the old Safe Haven. This new camp was so strict it was impossible to relax. It felt as if death was always tracking them.

Angela pulled up the hood on her parka and fastened it. The wind was frigid, and her boots were not waterproof. She was looking forward to being finished so she could take them off and warm up her frozen feet. Without Marc's heat next to her, she expected it to take a while.

Angela spent a minute scanning the town. The same dim lights were coming from all of the houses she had visited, but there was also a different glow in some of them now that she recognized as calm. The houses she hadn't been to yet were still tense.

The sentries watched, not sure if there was a problem. Kenn had shrunk the perimeter again. Right now, he was the only one who had the authority to make that choice, other than Kyle. Kenn had done it many times for Adrian.

As if her thoughts conjured him, Kenn came around the corner of the house to join her. Now dressed in all black overtop his parka, only his bright blue eyes and red cheeks stood out in the darkness. It was impressive.

“I’ll put something together for you like this, if you want to sneak out and play without your masters knowing about it.”

Angela’s frown was ugly.

Kenn wasn’t intimidated. “I learned from Tonya. She needs that sometimes or she’ll go crazy.”

Angela was sure that wasn’t the extent of the story, but there was no time to explore it right now. “Update me.”

Kenn pouted at her curt tone, but didn’t remark on it. “Everything is set and ready for us to get lost.”

Angela didn’t ask for more details this time, unlike when they’d been doing the mountain bugout. He had done such a good job that it had earned her respect. The only person they had left behind had been Cynthia, who Kenn hadn’t included in his plans because he had been certain the woman was already under removal orders.

“How about wildlife?”

“A few ants and coons.”

“What was the score?”

Kenn chuckled. “Coons and ants 2, Eagles 1. We’re regrouping.” The ants were avoiding the perimeter of camp. Kenn suspected they were plotting revenge.

So did Angela. “Come along?”

“You know it.” Kenn stayed on her heels as Angela went to the ninth house. Full of conversation and squeals of laughter, the noise didn’t stop when she entered.

Stanley, their clumsy radioman and medic was entertaining the five children. Using sock puppets and lantern light on the wall to create a show, he had the children so entertained all but one of the people in here missed Angela’s arrival.

Brandon, the top Eagle in the home, met her at the door. “Thank you.”

Angela nodded, sure what she was receiving the gratitude for. There was no tension in this house and no threats. After all the work they’d done and all of the men they’d killed, Angela was trying to give her people a chance to rest—not because they’d asked for it, but because that was a standard rule on how to handle Adrian’s army. Angela hadn’t wanted to tell Kenn that. She was hoping he figured it out on his own. She would deem it more proof of his progress.

Angela wanted to enjoy the great vibes, aware that the Christmas tree here was decorated. From a wallet to a comb, it appeared the adults had found presents for the children in the house with them. “I’m running short on time and people. I need you for sentry duty. You can listen to the meeting, but don’t get distracted.”

Brandon didn’t mind. He was still high on being out of the mountain. “I got great sleep today during

the ride. I can pull a double if you need it, or cover somewhere else after the shift is over.”

Angela pointed toward the house she’d just left, where Kyle was giving the signal to the other guards to let them know the trap was set. “They may need assistance in a bit. We move dark, we move silent.”

Brandon chuckled, copying the code. It meant not to make any noise and blend in with the colors of their surroundings. It was also a copy of a joke from the military movies they’d enjoyed before the war.

“It’s warm in here. That’s good, but let’s step out.” Angela led him, not caring that the man didn’t have his coat on. As he shut the door, the real boss came through in Angela’s hard tone. “Why did he make you hide?”

Brandon smiled uneasily, hand going into his pocket. He assumed she’d brought him out here so the Eagles could handle him away from the kids. “I’m glad you asked.” He handed her a note.

Frowning, Angela read it.

He’s a Mitchel.

If not for Adrian’s handwriting, she wouldn’t have believed it possible. She groaned in shock and dismay.

“Yeah, he said you’d react that way.” Brandon shoved both hands into his jean pockets as the wind whipped small drifts around their feet. “I’m sorry.”

“How did you hide it?” Angela shoved the note into her pocket to burn later. Brandon looked nothing like his... Angela concentrated. *His cousin.*

The brown eyes and hair had allowed him to blend in devoid of suspicion, but he had to have a strong gift to be able to keep a secret like this. “Did you lie?”

“No. We don’t use last names in Safe Haven. We’re Jim, the level four, or Jim, the level two. You know?”

It was such an obvious loophole that Angela immediately began drafting plans to close it. “And?”

“I’m a shield. It’s about all I can do so far.”

“Must be a strong shield.”

“It is, because of you.”

She frowned. “Me? How?”

“When you and Zack were fighting, my shield seemed like the coldness you were getting from all of his team, but when you two bonded, it became harder. I had to keep it up all the time. It made it strong.”

Angela could see how that would succeed, but it was disconcerting to learn she’d missed it for so long. She wouldn’t even know now unless Adrian wanted her to. “Why did he free you at all?”

“He gave me two reasons. He said I deserved to enjoy bonding with my own kind. I’d earned it. He also said you need me.”

“Does Marc know yet?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t have bruises and I’m still allowed around you.”

His hopeful tone told Angela he feared being held responsible for Adrian’s actions. Conner had

the same problem. “You’ve lied to us the entire time I’ve known you. Why should I hide your secret?”

“You shouldn’t. I’m just asking for a fair trial.”

Angela grunted. “This won’t get a trial. If the Eagles find out, they’ll dump your body somewhere and say you ran off, like Mitchel men always do.”

Brandon flushed. “Yeah.”

“Damn him. He’s always throwing a wrench in my works!”

Brandon sighed. “And it’s not over.” He gestured toward the house she hadn’t been to yet, where Nancy was slipping out to use the bathroom. “She wants a baby.”

Angela’s fury was thick enough to cause the woman to glance at her in wary concern.

Angela dropped her head, controlling herself. “We need babies.”

“What about the camp? They don’t like one Mitchel here, let alone four.”

“For Nancy, it won’t matter because she’s been open about their relationship. As for you, they’ll feel betrayed.” Angela sighed. “And frankly, I don’t have time for it. As of this moment, your last name is anything but Mitchel. Got it?”

Relieved, Brandon nodded. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah. When Marc is told, and he will be, a final choice will be made. If you’re lucky, we’ll be on the boat by then and you’ll have done something to prove you’re nothing like your cousin.”

“I’ve been doing that all along.”

Angela stepped around him. “If that were true, I wouldn’t be having this conversation and a new cloud of crap wouldn’t be hanging over my head.”

Brandon went back inside, determined to earn her respect. It meant more to him than Adrian’s ever had.

The ninth house was colder than the others were, but it had good ambiance. The boarding school kids were at a long kitchen counter with Theo’s team, putting together models that the engineers had scavenged from the entertainment section of the cave. As Angela entered, her annoyance sent a wave of unhappiness through the room. Ten profiles swung her way.

Angela flushed. “I’m sorry. Everything okay here?”

Theo and Ozzie came over to talk to her while his team and the boarding school kids continued to work. The few camp members in here put their heads back down and tried to return to sleep. There weren’t enough heaters for all of the houses. They had been given extra blankets, socks, and gloves. Despite the chill in the air, Angela estimated it to be at least 40° in here with all the bodies.

Hating it that she didn’t have enough supplies to cover all of her people, Angela sent a tiny burst of flame into the fireplace and lit the garbage that had been placed there.

Everyone in the room was grateful as small waves of heat began to radiate outward.

“If you can find things in here to burn, it’s okay to keep that going for a little while. Sorry about the cold.”

Everyone was quick to assure her they didn’t mind toughing it out so their injured people and the younger children could have the heat. Angela let them console her, joining the kids at the counter to see what they were building.

Already indoor types, Theo’s team appeared pale and sickly in the dim lantern light. They hadn’t changed much, other than to grow beards. Angela smiled at Ozzie as he stroked his, unconsciously responding to her observation. “It’s good on you.”

Ozzie chuckled, hand dropping. He didn’t comment on her greying hair. Like before, the stress and lack of fresh energy was turning it white.

Now Angela’s hand came up to smooth the strands back under the darker locks.

Outside, her guards waited impatiently for this part of her rounds to be done. It was cold.

Kenn leaned against the inside of the door, enjoying the break from the weather. It was the first time he’d been in a shelter since Angela started her rounds of the houses.

Angela kept her voice low, but she included everyone at the counter. “There could be trouble in one of the houses during the meeting. It’s okay for you to scan them and contact me through a guard. There are men listening for that call right now, so do not leave this house even if one of the other kids

are in danger. The adults will handle it. You do your job and they'll do theirs, okay?"

The boarding school kids, older and bored, were thrilled to be given a job. All of them agreed to follow the rules.

The camp members in the house were unaware of what was going on. Theo and his team made noise while Angela instructed the children, hoping to cover the small bits of conversation that might give it away. The people in this house had all been vetted. Theo didn't expect trouble from them, but that could be said of half of the assassins they'd had. The handicapped engineer didn't want to take any more chances. Next time, it might be his life stolen instead of his mobility. Or worse, maybe it would be Debra's, who was assigned to the house with Tonya and her soldier friends.

Theo knew how determined the soldiers were to earn a place in Safe Haven. He considered Debra safe with them. He hated to be away from her, but he wasn't as annoyed as some of the males in camp were over being split up for the night.

When Angela was finished, she went to the door, signaling for Theo to follow. As soon as they were out of hearing range of the others, she pierced him with an intent glare. "It's time you pulled your team together."

Theo frowned. "Who am I missing?"

Angela focused on one of the houses, where Candy was coming out for another bathroom trip.

Theo's thick eyebrows came together. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Did she do anything wrong?"

"Of course not. It's just...awkward."

"You mean like half the relationships in this camp between people who used to be a couple or wanted to be a couple?"

Theo got her point, stomach starting to boil. "You believe I was unfair to remove her from the team."

"I know Candy resigned, but yes. She didn't do anything wrong. She was a good addition, and you eliminated her because you don't want to date her anymore. How is that fair?"

"I didn't look at it like that. I saw the drama. The stress wouldn't be good for any of us—including her."

"I understand your reasons and I'm telling you now—you're wrong. I want you to get your team together or give leadership to someone who can be unbiased." Angela left before Theo could respond, glad the night's business was almost over. She didn't like scolding her men, but sometimes it was necessary and there was no one else who could do it as well as she could.

If she had the time and energy to scan every person in her camp, maybe she could solve all of their problems and they would have peace. That was another goal during their time on the boat. Things would be better for all of them then. "Just wish I

knew who's going and who's staying. Not being able to look ahead sucks.”

Chapter Three
Hard Rules

1

Kendle's former team met Angela in the doorway of the next house.

Angela motioned them out onto the porch to talk, despite wanting the tepid warmth of a shelter. The wind whipping her coat against her skin and jeans was freezing.

“Nice of you to stop by!”

“Yeah. We were getting lonely.”

Angela laughed with the team as they joked and shoved each other into snowdrifts on the porch. Tommy and his team were happy. It was in their easy smiles and guiltless greetings. She knew there was an issue to solve, but they weren't thinking about it. All she'd caught while coming up the stairs had been hopes that Kendle was enjoying her time with Marc, but not causing new problems. Angela was rooting for the same. “Is everything okay here?”

“Other than needing something to do, we're good.” Tommy was speaking for the team in Kendle's absence.

Angela gestured toward the first house, where they would have the meeting. “I want you guys to provide security.”

The team brightened as Tommy let out a sigh of relief. “Yes, please.”

Angela wasn’t in a good mood at this point, but she did admire their eagerness. She waved them on. “Take over now if you like.”

The team hurried back into the house to get their gear.

Kenn joined Angela on the porch. That would leave Tracy and the camp members here without protection, though Tracy would probably go to the meeting. This was where being shorthanded was going to hurt them.

Angela stepped in the house as the team came back out, gesturing for Tracy to follow them. “You can help until the meeting and then I want you indoors.”

“Awesome!” Tracy hopped up. With her Eagle jacket and bobbed black hair, Tracy appeared content, but Angela could sense the restlessness. She was certain the men in here could too, but they wouldn’t encourage bad behavior. She and Charlie were an official couple. Safe Haven had been living by Adrian’s rules on that since the camp was formed, though Adrian himself hadn’t followed it.

Angela studied the people in this house. All of able mind and body, she was certain they would be fine on their own, but she wouldn’t take the chance.

“I can use witnesses for the meeting. You guys up for it?”

As the house emptied out, Kenn made notes of who was going to be at the meeting. These members may have to be handled afterward. He’d been doing the same work for Adrian, but it made more sense to do it for Angela.

“This will be a quarantine area. Put the mission team here when they return, if there’s time for that.”

Kenn took a strip of tape from his pocket. Bright yellow, *Quarantined!* was written across it in ominous red.

“You counted, I guess?”

Kenn slapped the tape across the glass and joined her at the bottom of the stairs. “Actually, I used to carry them in my pocket any time the Eagles went into a new area. I found my old kit while we were scavenging debris piles.”

Angela shivered, but not from cold. It felt like a goose had just gone over her grave.

The last house was empty. They were using it to store their fuel and a few other valuables. Kenn had set alarms on it. Angela didn’t go in there. She had a meeting to host and another set of rounds after that to verify everyone was in for the night. Then she could go to her cot to toss and turn while wondering how Marc was. Adrian, she refused to think about at all.

“Effective immediately, these are the new rules for everyone in my army.” Standing in the lit doorway of the mess house, Angela would have been a prime target for snipers if not for being surrounded by 50 Eagles. There wasn’t room for everyone, so she was standing in the doorway. The house was packed with weaker fighters and females. The stronger men had insisted on standing out in the cold. A few of the women had protested, but they’d been outvoted. Angela didn’t think the women were going to care for her new rules any more than they had cared for that, but all of it was necessary. She was hoping the explanations she gave would make it tolerable.

“Magic use is still forbidden. The more people see our gifts, the longer it will take them to figure out that death comes from challenging us. I’m tired of killing my fellow Americans over jealousy of my abilities. None of us will use magic, even in front of our own camp, unless we have to. But public awareness is not the only reason I made this rule. We’re weak and we’re tired. We haven’t had a chance to recharge. I’m not sure we’re going to get one until we reach the boat.” Angela drew in a cold breath, lungs aching. “The last scan I did wasn’t good. We’re going to have to keep moving until we reach the coast and then we’ll have to fight to leave. I need all descendants to save every bit of energy they can for that battle.”

The crowd didn’t like hearing there was going to be another fight, but everyone was happy Angela

had chosen to share the information this time. They waited with low mutters and restless movements for her to continue.

“All Eagles need to pick a camp member to take under their wing and convince to become one of us. Everyone misses the people we left in the mountain, and the people we lost before that, but it wasn’t the only damage. All the teams have lost members, which means security is low. We’re vulnerable. That terrifies me.” Angela scanned the crowd. “I don’t scare easily, but I can’t sleep knowing we don’t have enough Eagles to cover us. Pick a student and teach them everything you know. That includes rookies. Senior men will guide you and I’ll guide the senior men. Marc and Adrian, plus Kenn and others, will guide me.” Angela consulted her notebook while judging reactions to Adrian’s name.

There were a few mutters, but it was common knowledge that he was going to help train Eagles. Angela waved. “You guys should be writing this stuff down.”

The senior men had already been doing so. There was a flurry of activity now as other Eagles found notepads, pens, and scraps of paper.

“I understand we’re low on supplies. Share your pens and pencils, and I’ll do the best I can to get everyone a new notebook during our supply runs.” Angela gave them another minute to get ready, then rattled off the first of three rules that were certain to draw annoyance from a portion of this crowd.

“Rule one: No female will leave camp unless it’s an emergency.”

“What the hell?”

“You can’t do that!”

“Oh, thank God!”

“That’s why she’s my hero!”

Angela didn’t respond to the dozens of comments that were tossed across the groups. Thanks to the women being placed inside the home, the dozen men squished in with them were subjected to the worst of the verbal abuse.

When it quieted, Angela revealed her second rule. “All shifts have been increased from four hours to six. The number of shifts is also being increased to four days a week.”

Now there was anger from both sides. Angela withstood it without a change in expression. She had been expecting this type of response. She would feel the same if she was in their place.

It took longer for the crowd to quiet this time. Their unhappiness drew attention from the houses around them. Windows opened as camp members tried to listen.

Tommy motioned a few of his team to take care of it.

Angela paused for the windows to be closed, but it was really time for the cold wind to take effect. She hadn’t chosen to do it this way just because they lacked space. It was hard to stay enraged when your toes were frozen and snot was forming an icy mustache along your upper lip. “The last change is

going to be the hardest. After I tell you, and you scream at me, I'm going to explain why I've implemented these rules. After that, I'm going to list the new teams and levels, and then send you off to get warm and vent in private. Everyone ready?"

The men and women nodded or delivered rude gestures that made senior men frown at them, though they felt the same way. Even when in disagreement, only a certain level of disrespect was tolerated.

"There will be no dating between Eagles." Angela leaned against the house, crossing her arms over her chest to keep from flinching as angry men and women shouted and shoved toward her for an explanation. Some of the more obvious couples, like Kyle and Jennifer, waited, frowning.

"Are you trying to get women to quit?!"

"What gives you the right to change Adrian's army?!"

Angela let her red orbs glow. It was answer enough, but it enraged the people who saw it. Those inside who didn't view it imagined she had shrugged or even extended her finger in response. It caused another nasty wave to fly through the small town. *Perfect*, Angela thought.

Ivan shoved his way through the angry people, coming to stand in front of Angela. He glowered at those closest. "Where's all your loyalty to the boss now?"

Angela placed a hand on Ivan's shoulder and felt him tense through the thick army jacket. She

would have to find him a woman soon or he might get as out of hand as the vet had during her manipulations, but now wasn't the time for that. "I made them angry on purpose. At ease."

Frowning, Ivan slid to one side, but refused to go further.

Angela moved back into the doorway so those inside were able to see her again. "I need you to think about that makeshift memorial we left in the bottom of the mountain."

Several people immediately guessed what her strategy was going to be, but it was impossible to argue that she was right.

Charlie stormed off into the darkness.

"We've lost husbands, wives, children, and beloved friends who meant the world to us. Our population has been cut in half. We had a limited number who were capable of childbearing before we went into the mountain. It's even less now. We spent a lot of time in radiated areas and the ladies have not been taken care of the way they need to be. I can't guarantee the health of any baby right now, born or otherwise. That includes the new twins in camp, who are descendants. I know some of you have been curious about them. They have a rare gift the UN wanted to destroy. If I find out it is evil, I will handle that." Angela was taking the opportunity to settle several rumors going around. She figured if she had to deliver bad news, it was best to get it all over at the same time rather than to keep hitting them with blows when they weren't expecting it.

“Everything that takes a female out of camp puts her in harm’s way. Every recoil jars the body, the baby. Under normal circumstances, I would stand up for the females and say it’s their body and their right, but in this case, we need those babies. We need those people. Our country is dying around us, and all women have a duty to reproduce. Whether you know it or not, that has always been a Safe Haven standard. That’s why women get first choice of the food. That’s why women are allowed to raid supply trucks at any hour. That’s why female areas have more security than others. That’s why Adrian went out of his way to rescue more women and children than he did men. This is not a vendetta against males. This is survival. We need women and children. I will not endanger the future of humanity for our pride. The rule stands.”

“If we need kids, why can’t we date?” one of the rookies called out, just curious. He didn’t have a woman in Safe Haven yet.

“For the same reason none of you were assigned with your mates or family tonight. Because there are so few of us, I need you to pay more attention than you ever have. Being away from your loved one will make you twitchy and jumpy, which will keep you alert and keep us alive. I am sorry to have to use that, but all of us will be going through it.”

Other than the females, the guards were calming at her answers. Angela knew that demographic would have a lot more to say about it over the next weeks. To help stem some of the restless anger,

Angela gave them hope. “I will hold a camp meeting to revisit these rules once we get on the boat.”

“How long will that be?” the same rookie asked.

“Roughly one month.”

Satisfied they wouldn’t have to endure the new rules for long, the Eagles once again became aware of the miserable conditions and their desire for the meeting to be done so they could get out of the weather.

“I have one new training rule to announce.”

The crowd tensed again, realizing she’d only covered personal relationships and runs so far.

“As soon as we leave here, I’ll be doing a new set of schedules. I’m going to put these new teams together for everything. I want you to become as close as any team has, but twice as fast. We need it. To do that, you’re going to spend every waking moment together. You shit together, shower together, shave together. The only time you’ll be apart is when some of your team is out on a run and even then, the members who remain in camp will spend that time together. If you hate each other, now is the time to sort it out.” Before anyone could ask, Angela lifted a hand. “Can you imagine what it would be like to be on a boat with hundreds of people you hate?” She didn’t explain further. The senior men would give details to the rookies if it was needed. “Here are the new teams. Special Forces One is Kyle, Daryl, Brandon, Morgan, Shawn, Kendle, Whitney, Donald.”

Small cheers came from the people who hadn't been Special Forces before. Claps came from those who were, to welcome the new members.

“Special Forces Two is Neil, Greg, Ben, Quinn, Wade, Tommy, and Tim.”

As Angela ran through each team, those men and women left, clearing room in the house for the others.

Only the women remained when Angela was finished. She paused for Ivan to close the door before facing the 10 glaring females. Angela slid onto a bench and regarded them expectantly. “Hurry up. I'm tired.”

“Will you consider changing your mind on any of the new rules?” Samantha had been elected unspoken leader for this mini rebellion. She still wasn't sure how that had happened.

“No.”

“Did you know this was coming?” Samantha looked at Jennifer.

The teenager was stunned. “No.”

“What about your man?”

Jennifer shrugged. “I don't think so.” She glanced at Tracy. “What about yours?”

Tracy shook her head, secretly relieved. She didn't feel like she belonged on a team anymore. She didn't want her accomplishments to stop, but she didn't feel like she was stable enough to be dependable for someone else's life until she had her own under control.

“Why did you put couples on teams if we can’t be Eagles anymore?” Jennifer was steps in front of the others when it came to questions.

“Because it was impossible for me to tell who would quit and who would end their relationship.”

“Is there another option?” Samantha wasn’t far behind Jennifer when it came to digging out information.

Angela leaned forward, elbows on her knees in an attempt to stop the cramping in her stomach. “You can volunteer for the new den mother force for one month and then resume spots on teams after the camp reverses the dating rule. They’ll do that because I’ll tell them we need babies more than we need security once we’re on the ship.”

It took a few minutes for the rookie females to figure things out, but Samantha and Jennifer immediately agreed. For Samantha, it would be that long before her leg allowed her to resume training anyway and Jennifer was busy with Autumn, her wedding, and her guilt over the kids in camp no longer having a protector. Angela had known exactly what to use to get their cooperation.

Outside, Ivan, Kyle, and Kenn listened in amusement as Angela handled the women better than Adrian ever had.

As Angela and the women came out a bit later, Kyle pointed at Ivan. “Let’s have a chat.”

Realizing Kenn had been right about the interrogation, Ivan went to one of the tables. *At least it's warm in here.*

“Why did Marc give you protection over the boss?”

“I can tell you, but you're not going to like the answer.” Ivan took a seat at the table furthest away from the cooks, hoping this conversation wouldn't take long. Even though he was off duty now, his ears were ringing and his eyes were blurry. He needed to go back to sleep so he could wake up and pull a double.

Neil and Kyle settled onto the bench across from him.

“He doesn't trust you guys to keep her alive.”

Tension flew through the small house, reaching to where Brittani was sorting supplies for the morning meal and eavesdropping. Kyle had asked her to, but he had made it clear that it was a favor to him and had nothing to do with the Eagles.

“You're lying!” Neil leaned across the table. “Why would he trust you over us? You came from the government!”

“So did Marc.” Ivan was too tired to find nice words. “You're just a state trooper and Kyle was a mobster. I was a member of the same military.”

“Marc knows he can trust us.” Kyle glanced toward the cook and was dismayed to find he could read her expression without her voice in his mind.

He's not lying.

Kyle and Neil were disappointed. They had been certain that Ivan was a threat in some way.

Brittani sent them a final message. *He is a threat—to both of you. If he has enough time, Ivan will take your places in this camp. That’s what he’s thinking about right now.*

Neil shoved up from the table. “If your story doesn’t check, you’ll be out of here!” Neil left, slamming the door.

Ivan waited for Kyle to make a similar threat so he could also go. His toes were still frozen from earlier and he couldn’t believe how sore he was. He had never spent so much time in a vehicle. His body was letting him know that.

Kyle tried hard to keep the rancor out of his tone so the soldier would answer. “Why did Marc trust you so fast?”

“When we met, the Ghost had just come from my CO’s tent after killing him. I was too scared to think about putting up a mental wall. He was able to read me from end to end. I guess he liked what he found.” Ivan stood up. “I’d love to continue this chat, but I have a dusty bunk calling for me.”

Kyle let the man go. Like a few other people in Safe Haven, Kyle was carrying a bias against the government soldiers who had been allowed to join them. He was grateful Angela had drawn the line and not allowed any of the UN men to become members.

As Ivan pulled the door closed, he saw Angela coming from the kids’ house, flanked by Whitney

and Ben. He strolled their way, deciding to ask if there was anything else she needed before he crashed, even though he was beat.

Angela was smiling as she stepped out of the house. She had allowed the women to escort her from the meeting and then decided to have a fast visit with the twins before things got crazy again. She felt guilty for spending so much time away from the infants, but Mandy had assured her all they were doing was eating, sleeping, and filling diapers. “Do you have another 10 minutes?”

Ivan hurried to her. “You know it.”

Angela motioned Whitney and Ben to go off on whatever chore she had assigned them. Ivan immediately began to look around for problems. Marc had made it clear before he left that Angela was never to be alone unless there was an emergency.

“Shit!” Ivan shoved Angela to the ground and fell over her as shadows came from the darkest edge of town. The fuel house door banged against the wall as more men joined them.

Tommy’s team had waited for the thieves to make their choice, relieved when they left camp instead of following their first plan. The number of Eagles guarding the descendant children was staggering. The thieves would have been killed on the spot, which might have endangered others in camp.

Tommy was glad the men and one woman had chosen wisely on that. Kidnapping a child was a

killing offense here. He waved his team back into positions around the homes, aware that his team was also relieved. No one wanted a shootout tonight. Angela's plan was silent. That made it better.

Ivan drew his gun, but Angela placed a hand around his wrist, absorbing his heat. "Just thieves."

"But we need that fuel!"

"It's covered. Save your bullets."

Ivan helped Angela to her feet as the shadows vanished into the storm near their vehicles. When the sound of engines came, Ivan figured out the troublemakers had chosen to leave. "Did you threaten them?"

"I gave them a test."

"That they failed?"

"In some ways. They didn't try to kidnap a descendant child to use out in the wilderness, so it was a success as far as I'm concerned."

"Won't they come back to haunt us later?"

"No."

He didn't holster his gun. "Because of the storm?"

"Because of the poisoned water I stored in there with the fuel. It was only two gallons, but they'll all be thirsty after a quick snatch and run like that. Tommy's team will recover the fuel and vehicles come dawn."

Even though he'd been about to shoot them, Ivan was revolted. "You said they were just thieves!"

Angela shrugged, moving toward her warm cot. “So?”

She left him there to stew over her ruthless answer, letting him figure it out for himself. When he finally got it that loose lips sank ships, he still wasn't sure that he was okay with it.

Angela didn't care. Those threats wouldn't come back to kill them in their sleep or try to steal their children. Nor would they be allowed to terrorize anyone else they ran into. She had zero tolerance for evil now.

3

“You should try to sleep. You look like a zombie on crack.”

Neil and Kenn frowned at Ivan for the comment.

Understanding he wasn't going to get any support from the senior men even though the interrogation had cleared him, Ivan raised up on his elbow. “Can I at least help you, so you're done quicker?”

Angela shrugged, not looking at him. “There isn't much to do. I made the list. Now I'm checking it twice.”

Without a heater, there was frost on the window that Kenn was forced to wipe away each time he did a check of the sentries. He was on duty in here until dawn, when Neil would take over. Because she was the only female, the two senior men were staying

visible to the guards outside. Neither of them wanted trouble with their women in the morning, but more than that, they weren't sure why Angela had chosen them to be in here. It made them nervous.

Ivan didn't care if anyone got angry. He hated watching the boss shiver. She'd already refused their coats. "Isn't that easier if you have an unbiased eye?"

"Ideally, yes."

Ivan took her silence to mean he could help. Ignoring the surprise of the others, he grabbed his blanket and brought it over to drape around her shoulders. He plopped on the bed close to her and picked up a notebook. "What am I looking for?"

Angela leaned against him, enjoying the warmth. She wouldn't feel comfortable doing this if it was Neil and she would never even consider it with Kenn, but she couldn't warm up and Ivan was hers if she wanted him. "There are two hand drawn maps in the front pocket of that notebook."

Ivan ignored her intoxicating scent and dug up the sheets. He held them out.

"I know them by heart. You guys look at them."

Glad to be included, Neil and Kenn hurried over to take each paper as the soldier finished. Ivan was officially only a rookie, but Neil and Kenn knew he was more like a level three or four. During his time in the army, Ivan had covered multiple positions and learned as much as he could, eager to increase

his skill set so that he would survive in any situation. Only facing Marc had given him pause so far.

Ivan frowned. “They looked the same.”

“They do, don’t they?” Angela sighed. “Adrian and Marc drew those at different times. As you can see, the difference is that Marc forgot to add the windmills that give the town power and Adrian forgot to include the airstrip where the supply plane landed. We’ll use Marc’s. Store Adrian’s copy. Kenn will add what’s missing from that one. I made notes on where it should be.”

Kenn took the map to a clear counter and started making changes.

“The island has a small town with half a dozen main buildings. That’s where we’ll take the camp as soon as we get it cleared and security set up. Our main issues to cover are the same issues we’ve needed to handle all along, just in a more confined space. Compared to the mountain, I don’t believe it will be a problem. We have to cover food and water, communication, power, medications, tools, clothing, security, and gear. Somewhere in there, we also need to have a backup shelter for storm season and a method of travel to it that accounts for the conditions of the island and the ocean. I thought bikes and 4-wheelers, but we’ll see what we find. We’ll also try to figure out how to operate the weather tracking equipment we’ll be gathering, and of course, we’ll need descendants to monitor for issues.”

The three men had already covered many of those topics on their own whenever they thought about what life on the island would be like. They had all been hoping for time to pick Kendle's brain for information, but it was clear that leadership had already done that. Below each item or location on the map was a list of suggestions and details that covered nearly everything.

"If you do think of something, please mention it ASAP. I'm trying to finalize where all the supplies are coming from so we can pick them up on our way to the boat. I don't want to be sitting on the dock for a month while we build something we forgot and lose our window between storm seasons."

The men scanned harder, hunting for anything she missed.

Kenn pointed. "I see we're going to use tallow, but you said there isn't room on the island to cover enough food for everyone through animals or farming. How are we accounting for that?"

Angela motioned toward the notebook. "I didn't have room on the map for all the details. Tallow doesn't just come from animal fats. You can also use palms or whale oil. We're going to hunt it, grow it, and take as much material as we have room for so we can produce our own. Confined production is going to be the key on this island. Wait until you see the plans I have to make use of fireplaces that aren't needed in such a temperate climate."

Still scanning the map, Kenn didn't comment, but he could imagine what the ruthless genius would

figure out for a space that couldn't be harmed. Anything that could hold a fire was valuable in their situation.

“Safe Haven will also become fishermen, but it won't all be fish. Some of it, we will raise. There are three other islands near Pitcairn. Over the years, we'll use them too.”

It was a relief to know there were other landmasses near the island. The senior men were positive Angela had told them so they could mention it to the rest of the camp and ease their minds too.

“The shoe store is over here on the map.” Angela pointed. “It can be converted into a bunkhouse for 15 to 20 people. We're going to keep the smaller shops as what they are. We need the clinic, and of course, we'll keep the restaurant. Everything else will be turned into apartment homes, including the wealthy properties behind the town. They won't be used for leadership. For example, the mansion behind the restaurant will go to the cooks and their assistants, and Eagles sharing shifts over the main town. The useless flower gardens behind it will be fruit and vegetables in one half, with a small herd of whatever survives the trip in the other. We'll do that to every property. We'll also build a barn if they don't have one, but that's the extent of the space we're going to use for the first year. We'll stay close and tight, and share everything we have. By the time we've been there

one year, we'll have a small stock and be adding to it monthly."

"You said fuel for the ship is the biggest problem?"

Angela nodded at Ivan's question. "A cruise ship will require an enormous amount to bring us home when we're ready, let alone what we'll use to get there. Even if we were lucky enough to run across abandoned ships, or a refinery that has something usable, we will still have the same problem around that one-year date. So far, I don't have a solution. Some of this is common knowledge and some of this needs to stay between leadership." Angela ignored the frowns from Kenn and Neil when they realized she was including Ivan as a leader. "Do I need to explain which is which?"

Kenn and Neil shook their heads.

Ivan nodded. "I'll need to know that line, but I'm certain your boys here will be happy to set me straight on it while they give me another interrogation. Thanks for that, by the way. I didn't ask for this shit."

Angela swallowed a smile at his attitude. He reminded her of Marc. "Just think, a week ago you couldn't wait to be like us. Now, here you are, afraid of mere conversations."

Challenged and embarrassed, Ivan crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm afraid of you and your man, and not in that order."

All of them laughed except Ivan, who was serious. Angela was ruthless. Marc was a killer.

Without the muck of combat and the ugly hat he'd been forced to wear as a government soldier, Ivan's face was interesting. He had a lengthy scar down one cheek that likely came from a knife, and his neck was dotted in small scars that Angela assumed were related to that wound. They looked roughly the same age.

Ivan felt her first real examination of him as a man instead of a fighter in her army and froze, hoping she wasn't disappointed.

Angela knew anything she said or did would be misconstrued. She settled for closing the mental door.

Ivan was glad she hadn't shown an interest. That would cause problems because he definitely wanted her. The only things keeping him from trying were his loyalty to her mate and banishment. Ivan didn't want to leave Safe Haven. He loved it here.

"So do I." Angela enjoyed Ivan's heat and wished Marc's run was over. It wasn't the same without him.

Kenn caught the reflection and agreed. Marc was a comforting strength they needed. It was too bad he couldn't accept things. Kenn had overheard Eagles discussing it. Marc's attitude was almost certainly going to cost him a place in leadership and he was the only one who didn't know it.

Chapter Four
Under Pressure
Outside Greensboro, GA
November 3rd

1

“**S**he’s dreaming about you.”

Adrian grunted, unwilling to discuss it with Kendle and Kevin both awake and listening.

Marc didn’t care about sparing feelings. “Why can’t I get in when it’s a dream?”

Adrian sighed. “Let her have some privacy. She doesn’t invade your dreams and try to change them, does she?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never asked her.”

“She doesn’t.”

“How do you know?”

Adrian glanced over, hoping that because Marc was driving, there wouldn’t be retaliation. “She hardly ever dreams about you. Why should she? She has you.”

Marc knew a lot more than he was letting on. “So dreams are our brains crying for the things and people we don’t have in our lives?”

“Mostly. It’s also a place for random shit, so don’t go stalking her there. She won’t like it.”

“I don’t like it. Why can’t I reach her?”

“She figured out how to block herself off while she sleeps. She has secrets she doesn’t want other descendants to know.”

“It’s not to keep me out?”

Adrian snorted. “I can’t believe you’d consider that. It’s like you believe she’s out to screw you over with every move.”

“Isn’t she?”

Adrian sat up straighter at the bitter tone. “What’s your beef this time?”

“She used our hatred to trick us.”

“You.”

Marc scowled. “What?”

“She tricked you. I knew what she was doing as soon as you made our newest deal.”

“Excuse me, but is this all the ride is going to be?” Kendle was tired of the topic. “Cause I’ve got better things to do.”

“Same here!” Kevin added from a rear bunk. His stomach was still upset. The negative vibes weren’t helping.

“Mind your own business!”

“We’re trying.” Kendle wasn’t intimidated by Marc’s anger. “Spit it out and then shut up, will ya? Everyone’s tired of it.”

Marc gaped at Kendle in the mirror, aware of Adrian’s smirk. The urge to lash out was strong. “You need a lesson in manners.”

“Me?” Kendle was offended. “You’ve been tormenting Adrian every time he drifts off and pulling us into it against our will. Keep that shit to

yourself and do your job. You can return to fighting when the run is over.”

“No, I can’t.”

Kendle realized Marc was using the last opportunity of them being out of camp together. He assumed it wouldn’t happen again for a while, if at all. Kendle laughed as she reclined the seat. “Wow, do you keep underestimating her.”

Neither Marc nor Adrian wanted Kendle to keep going. Neither of them responded.

Kendle knew, but the last 22 hours of annoyance needed an outlet. “Your perfect Angela screwed you both and you’re so jealous you don’t care. She’s been playing you two against each other to get what she needs—probably since she first realized what Mr. Sleaze was doing. When will you guys figure it out? Everyone else has.”

Their resentful silence filled Kendle in. “Ah. You do know what she wants and you’ve refused to give it.” She shook her head, eyes closing. “Not smart, but I can’t say I blame you. If I had to live by my rival and watch her love my dream man, it would kill me... No, wait. That’s exactly what I’ll be doing every day, and yet, you don’t see me and Angela acting like this. What is it with you two?”

Kendle didn’t know about the lives they’d wasted in the past doing the same thing, but both men thought about that now.

Any chance we’ve caused our own doom in each life?

Adrian nodded. "I know I have. I'd assumed you were innocent until recently."

"What changed your view on that?"

"You demanded I swear on her life. A pure soul wouldn't have done that."

"No, but a jealous idiot would," Kendle muttered. "Good luck making that right."

"He agreed!" Marc's dread was growing.

"Yeah, but she knows Mr. Sleaze will agree to anything that gives him a possible shot, like I would. She thought you were better than that. Frankly, so did I."

Marc considered her words and accusations without denying or defending this time. *Is she right? How badly have I hurt my relationship?*

Kendle snorted. "Not at all. You did exactly what she needed you to. The fighting during this trip so far tells me you lied too. You don't intend to make peace. She won't like that, Marc. Be careful." Kendle rolled onto her hip, away from the men. "I'm going to sleep now because I drove for 15 hours straight while you two whined. Keep it down."

Kendle sounded so much like the boss that Marc clamped his lips together and tried to lock down on his thoughts so the castaway would go to sleep and leave him alone.

"Finally!" Kendle had wanted to say all that for hours.

Silence, thick and ugly, took the place of the fighting.

In the rear of the RV, Kevin shut the homemade curtain.

Supplies and gear were strewn around the RV. They had all picked a kit and packed it, then got dressed for the run while Kendle drove. Angela had them clothed like mercenaries, right down to the creative tool belts that allowed for reloading while fighting. She'd also insisted anyone attached to their weapon bring a spare for this mission.

The roads under them were rough, but the empty homes glaring in reproach as they passed were rougher. It didn't appear as though there were people left when they hit streets like this one. Then the radio would flare up to remind them that was an illusion. Marc had switched it off when his driving shift began, unwilling to listen to another 10 hours of fighting and begging.

The mood grew uglier as he continued to dwell on Kendle's words and the future.

Unable to take his displeasure, Kendle joined Kevin in the rear, taking the bunk across from him.

Marc ignored them. He was feeling tricked.

Adrian sighed. He moved into the passenger seat. "She did and she didn't. Once you build it, we all have to leave to keep from corrupting it."

Marc contemplated Natoli's prediction that all the ghosts would live with the Indians at some point in the future. "Another big fight where we all go down in a blaze of glory?"

Adrian was again dismayed at how fast Marc's mind went through clues to form entire pictures. "Good and evil always come to that in the end."

Unlike when Angela had spoken to Jennifer, Marc didn't need the details explained to him. He shifted in the seat. "Will I be there for it? Has my future changed?"

Forced to answer an alpha, Adrian shook his head. "No to both, though I'm no longer the problem."

"Who is?"

"Fate. You can't outrun fate, Marcus. Some things are carved in stone."

"She's been trying to change it."

"Yes, almost since you two came to Safe Haven, I imagine. Maybe even before that. I don't know everything you went through on your way to my camp, but she'll keep searching. If there's a way, she'll find it."

Hating Marc's sudden depression, Kendle poked her head around the edge of the bunk. "What makes you think she hasn't already?"

Both men stared at her—Marc through the mirror and Adrian with a neck crane that hurt to witness.

Kendle shrugged at their expressions. "Didn't you wonder what she was getting out of the deal?"

Marc scowled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Adrian gets the society we need so suffering can end. You get his death for building it. What does the boss get for making you both do that?" Before they could respond, she delivered

another truth as she saw it. “And stop asking Adrian about your future. He wants you dead. Of course he can’t see if that future has changed.”

Marc opened his mouth to get nasty and paused. He stared at her in the mirror. “Can you?” Because Kendle didn’t have a horse in the race, her vision might be unbiased. As soon as Marc thought about it, he shook his head. “Never mind.” She did have a horse—him.

“You need to ask one of us who doesn’t care if you live or die, or the answer will be colored by the seer’s desires.” She frowned deeply at the men. “Now let me sleep or I’m going to get unpleasant.” All of them were grouchy and uncomfortable. Teamed, they were forced to keep their thoughts locked or suffer the doubts and fears of their companions.

Kendle shifted to get off the sharp edge of the mattress, refusing to contemplate the many souls who had likely used it before her or the spiders probably calling it home. She’d survived worse.

In the front of the RV, Marc snickered. “She needs to get laid.”

Adrian reclined the seat. “Isn’t Tommy taking care of that?”

“Not well enough or she wouldn’t be growling at me.”

“She’s jealous. You don’t care what Kendle dreams about.”

The hard truth brought a wave of silence that lasted until they reached their destination seven hours later.

2

Marc shut off the engine and swiveled his seat around. They'd agreed to make plans upon arrival. He paused for Kendle and Kevin to come from their bunks.

Yawning, Adrian sat his chair up and retrieved his notebook in case it was needed.

"What's the plan?" Kevin plopped into the seat behind Marc, not sure why he was along but willing enough to be a part of it because of who was here and who wasn't. This was a leadership team and he was the only Eagle.

"You're not an Eagle anymore."

Kevin flushed at Marc's tone. *Here we go again.*

"That's your problem, and I suspect, the reason you're here." Kendle sat across from Kevin. "The boss wants us to get you into shape or get rid of you."

Kevin's face clouded over as he realized Kendle was right.

Satisfied Kendle had the sullen man under control, Marc looked at Adrian.

Adrian scowled. "I don't have it. I assumed she sent it in a folder."

"No folder this time. Just your mental map."

Adrian shook his head. “She wouldn’t have sent us out without a plan.”

“That’s why I thought you had it.”

Kendle cleared her throat, holding up a sheet of paper. “She wanted us to rest before we got here. She told me not to mention it until now.”

Adrian snatched the paper from Kendle and began to read.

Marc snatched the paper from Adrian and handed it back to Kendle. “She gave it to you. Read it.”

Smirking, Kendle did. “The boss says we can use one of her plans or make our own.”

“What are hers?” Marc knew better than to skip hearing them. “Those will be the extreme.”

“A is to use the refugees to overrun them and let those lost souls have the supplies. With B, we get to bring the supplies home.”

“B,” Marc and Adrian declared at the same time.

Kendle kept reading. “All it says is infiltration. There’s a kit, but I haven’t opened it. She says not to unless we choose plan B.”

“Open it now.” The mood in the RV lifted in bright pleasure as Marc caught Kendle’s thought when she opened the kit. He grinned at Adrian.

Adrian tensed. “What?”

Kendle held up the UN uniform, amusement growing.

Adrian groaned. “Really? Again?”

Marc drew his cuffs and lunged, slamming his weight onto Adrian before the man could resist. “I love that woman.”

Now face down against the seat while Marc cuffed him, Adrian grunted. “My affection is waning.”

Kevin laughed.

Kendle frowned. “Liar. Every time she gives you what you deserve, you want her more.”

“Yeah.” Adrian slid onto his butt, grunting. “Well, I am a man.”

Kendle snorted while Kevin snickered.

Marc refused to allow his mirth to show, though he had to agree with Adrian on this one. Angela delivered hits and they kept asking for more. That behavior implied a pathological need for discipline.

“Stay with the ride.” Marc pointed at Adrian and then Kevin. The driver would remain in the vehicle the entire time, and they didn’t need anyone spotting Adrian yet.

As the pair exited the RV, Adrian slid his fingers into his pocket and retrieved the cuff key he’d begun keeping there after the last time Angela had surrendered him to the enemy. He curled it into his palm and looked at Kevin, who had missed it for studying his maps. “Are you okay?”

Kevin tensed. “Surviving.” Hearing his ugly tone, Kevin forced himself to relax. “I’m sorry about the baby.”

“Me too. And Cynthia.”

Kevin stared, no longer seeing roads and bridges. “She told me she wasn’t going to make it out of the mountain. I blew her off.”

Adrian’s own guilt rushed out of his mouth. “She came to me, hoping I would claim her. I laughed.”

Kevin’s shoulders drooped. “We’re responsible.”

Adrian sighed unhappily. “I’d like to say no, but my guilt won’t let me.”

“Yeah.” Kevin stored the map. “I saw the key. If you go against Marc, I’ll tell him.”

“Of course you will. You need to earn back your place in the camp. Keeping secrets won’t help.”

“But I’m not mentioning it unless you cross him,” Kevin finished. “Because I want you cleared. I want things like they were before she died.”

“A lot of us want that, Eagle, but it isn’t possible. You know that.”

“Yeah.”

Both men fell silent.

3

“We’re going to have to pick a plan C.” Marc handed the binoculars to Kendle.

The airstrip had a dozen blue and white planes and twice as many military vehicles. A line of jeeps was being unloaded from a huge cargo plane at the far end of the airport. Marc focused there, spotting a secondary row of trucks with workers scurrying

around them with bags and boxes. It appeared that supplies were being loaded and sent out, probably back to their headquarters. Heavy fuel tankers were all over the base, with UN troops rotating among those vehicles. It was chaotic, devoid of a supervisor.

Kendle also examined the makeshift base. Housed in the main terminal, it was obvious that renovations had taken place over the duration of the apocalypse. The terminal was now surrounded by a narrow wall made of Hesco Barriers, and protected at every junction by a squad of five men. Another squad of armed sentries was positioned 50 feet from those on the wall, all the way around. The spiral formation kept the troops in sight of each other and prevented infiltration over or under, even if an attacker took out the first set of guards.

Marc studied the main terminal building, where lines of sentries were waiting to get in. They were having a drill or being instructed on something, but Marc still didn't see a boss. He also didn't spot radios. Hopefully these men didn't know the details of the descendant gifts they were about to face. Market Town and Safe Haven Mountain had been destroyed. It would be hard to know exactly what had happened unless the men were there and it was obvious that these chubby bellies hadn't left the safety of this base.

Kendle scanned the fortified walls and variety of guns and men providing an impressive show of

force. “You don’t think you can pass for one of them?”

Marc shook his head. “Not a chance. They’re on alert and they have at least one descendant. I can feel the edge of a shield, which means they can sense me prying on it. They may know we’re here. We shouldn’t assume the same myths that our enemies have in the past.”

Kendle frowned. He sounded more like Angela every day and less like the Ghost.

Marc proceeded to the RV without telling Kendle the Ghost was the anomaly. Most of the time, he preferred to be civilized. Death was ugly and so was the attitude it took to get through bloody sessions like the ones they’d shared.

Kendle and Marc settled in rear seats as Kevin took them to the small farm Marc had chosen on the way in. He pulled behind the barn and paused for Marc to finish his mental planning. They could all feel him working on it.

Marc finally glared at Adrian. “Why does she want us all teamed?”

“How would I know? She doesn’t tell me that stuff.”

Marc glanced at Kendle.

“Sorry.” She shrugged. “I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“Is it because I’m not a descendant?” Kevin hadn’t wanted to ask, but it was clear to him.

“That’s it.” Kendle’s mood brightened. “She doesn’t know if we’ll be split up, so we all have a connection to our ride. Nice.”

Adrian kept quiet and thought about Cynthia. Having Kevin here made it hard not to.

Kevin was happy he had an important job. He got the maps back out and began familiarizing himself with quick exits. “Do you think they patrol outside the wall?”

Marc shrugged. “I wouldn’t, if I were them. Unless there’s a serious problem out there, they don’t need to.”

Kendle concentrated. “If it were you, what would it take to get you to send a patrol out so we can slip someone in?”

“Interesting question. A rescue of an innocent. A team in danger.” Marc frowned. “Angela being out there.”

Kendle chuckled. “Well, I’ve met her and that could happen.”

“Yeah, she’s—”

“Anything that threatens your wall,” Adrian interrupted. “Like a stampede...”

“...or a fire.” Marc walked to the rear of the RV to examine their supplies.

Kendle followed, notebook in hand. “We can set a small fire, but it won’t burn long in this cold weather.”

“We can use a flaming car.”

“I have another suggestion.” Adrian braced, hating himself. “Instead of infiltration, make her

deal. Knock on the gate and offer me in exchange for supplies and fuel.”

Marc frowned again. “It won’t work. I think they already know who’s coming for them.”

Adrian sighed. “Angela would have accounted for that.”

Kevin was all for it. “They won’t know who you are if Kendle plays the boss and you don’t talk. That way, you don’t need them to send out a patrol to infiltrate. Angela overthought this one.”

The drawback was Angela’s unhappiness if Adrian didn’t return with them. *I’ll live with it*, Marc decided. *At least he might not.*

Adrian dropped his chin to his chest, grunting. “Why can’t I ever keep my mouth shut?”

4

“Sir, we have a mercenary at the gate demanding to speak to you.”

Lounging in his small sauna, Kobi pushed the button to stop the delightful bubble-making engine. He stood up to get a towel, letting the guards view his fit body. Kobi didn’t like the idea their bosses might get from witnessing him fat, like these men were. He also didn’t like how he looked on camera when he was overweight. He didn’t care about being healthy to fight. He had troops for that.

Some of the men glanced away, but most of them didn’t even notice the display. Kobi had picked the men for this suicide glory mission.

They'd all served with him before. His oddities weren't new to them and this time, they were pillaging America instead of some shithole that had nothing to steal but misery. The sentries liked it here and they liked their excitable boss.

"Buy it, if we need it. Send him on if we don't"

"*She* says she'll only show her wares to you."

Kobi glanced up. "A woman?"

"She has one man with her. A fighter, but nothing more." The messenger lowered his voice. "I think it's the Black Widow."

"Really?!" Kobi squealed in excitement. Raul wasn't the type to tell false tales. If he believed it was her, it was. "Bring her in! Put her in the viewing room so I'll have a copy for later."

Raul left to do as ordered.

Kobi rushed off to give orders and get into something more presentable. Obsessed with films, he wasn't going to waste this chance to catch the Black Widow in action one last time. "Get the camera! I want my camera!"

I have a bad feeling about this. Adrian didn't resist as Kendle shoved him through the main door of the airport. Even with a bag over his head and hands cuffed behind him, he didn't stumble or flail around. He'd been given a glimpse of the path beforehand.

Same. Kendle stayed alert. *Run for it or fight?*

Neither. Marc overruled it despite being surrounded by hundreds of UN troops who stared in

shock or anger. It smelled like a bakery in the terminal, implying these men weren't suffering from starvation like the surrounding countryside.

That's because they took it all and enslaved the farmers. Kendle hated the openness between their minds.

We'll pay that forward. Marc didn't like it either, but the communication was useful. "I don't like this."

Kendle gave Marc a sharp look, now playing her role. "Be quiet or I'll leave you here."

The UN men in the hall and terminal were glaring at Kendle in open hostility and her prisoner in drooling greed. If she didn't cut a fast deal for Adrian, they would take him from her and then things would get ugly. The faces in here didn't resemble the slavers from Market Town. These were killers, but not the Safe Haven kind. You sent this crew to raze villages ahead of the boss. Which meant the tall, lean man hurrying toward her with a wolfish smile was a commander, not a general.

Marc hesitantly placed the man as Hungarian from the blue robe and shawl decorated in awards and commendations.

"Welcome!" The light-skinned, bald man beamed at them with white teeth and long, gleaming fingernails. His splendor stood out among the uniforms, making it clear he was their leader. Adrian admired the technique as much as he resented it. When it was being used for good, it calmed a camp. He didn't like it being used here to

remind these men if they conquered enough of America, they too would have nice things.

“Miss Roberts!” Kobi bowed low, ignoring her instant flinch for a weapon at his recognition. “Please, if you would permit me...” Kobi motioned his cinematographer closer. “Get a tight shot of them together, then pull back on her—nice and slow.”

Kendle and Marc held still, frowning when Kobi began to narrate.

“As you can see, these American fighters are just that—fighters. They possess no extraordinary skills and yet, bold as brass, they walk into enemy hands without fear. Remarkable!” Kobi gestured toward the end of the hall. “Please walk like you would if we weren’t surrounding you, preventing your escape. Don’t be alarmed. They won’t shoot until I tell them to.”

“Comforting.” Kendle gave Adrian a nudge. The narrow path between the UN sentries was streaked in dirt and stains that Kendle didn’t try to identify. She also didn’t bring her demon forward to read minds. Marc had locked them all down when he’d teamed them. Other than sharing thoughts, they were as powerless as these men believed they were. That made Kendle angry, but it would take the 400 men here by surprise—something they needed. The signal to fight was when Marc let go of the control he’d taken over their power.

Covered by the hood and his parka, Adrian kept his hands under the edges of the sleeves, where he’d

stuffed the key. He didn't trust Marc or Kendle to get him out of here once the battle started.

Kobi stopped in front of them to push the double doors open. "Welcome to my humble abode, Miss Roberts. My name is Kobi. I have drinks waiting by a warm fire. You must be cold."

Kendle didn't ask how he knew who she was. After Market Town, it wasn't surprising that her face had become known. She'd just expected to be called by the fighting name, not her old world title.

Kobi led them to the center of a spacious room filled with couches, sofas, stools, and chairs. The dozen seats in the center were plush blue and white, declaring them for leadership by how they sat apart from the rest.

Kobi pointed toward the crystal table in the middle of the seats. "Have a drink and sit. We will relax and warm, and we will talk."

Kendle didn't want to offend the man and trigger the fight too soon by refusing. She motioned Marc forward.

Marc immediately got her a drink, taking a small sip first. As he did so, Marc was able to pinpoint the descendant in the room. Raul was short, muscular, and wore his black hair in a lengthy braid down his uniformed back. Sporting a matching braided mustache, it was clear that he was a fighter in every way. His body was covered in scars and bruises, and his green glowing orbs swept the room. *Mistake. I won't have to find you later in the crowd.*

Raul nodded at him. *I'll find you, don't worry.*

Kendle accepted the drink and sat in the best-looking chair, certain it belonged to Kobi.

Marc shoved Adrian down at her feet and stood behind her. It told everyone he was her bodyguard.

Kendle downed the shot of expensive vodka and leaned forward to place the glass on the table. She belched loudly. “Excellent.”

Kobi beamed. “I have the best here. When the Secretaries-General visits, he will be pleased.”

Kendle squirmed in the seat, trying to be offensive. “Nice chairs too. American made?”

Kobi’s brilliant smile faded for an instant. “Of course. You have many fine things here. We have shipped thousands of them home, but none are as loved as the movies I make of your people.” Kobi gestured.

Troops hurried forward to occupy the seats as the camera operator ran to the far end of the room to flip switches on the wall. A moment later, a huge projection screen deployed along the far wall.

As the lights dimmed and a projector hummed to life, Kendle felt Marc’s thumb on her gift, about to lift. He clearly wasn’t expecting this to be good.

Neither was Adrian. His hands were now free.

Kendle waited, feeling the burn of alcohol on an empty stomach and full nerves.

Kobi plopped into the seat on Kendle’s right, but he stared at her instead of the screen as the film began.

“Good day, Secretaries-General and honorable council members. I have sad news for you. Our

fledgling town on the American east coast has been destroyed by a battle we still don't understand. These are the clips we were able to salvage from the wreckage.”

Kendle's lip curled as her fight with Renda appeared in scratchy motion. “She just won't stay dead.”

Kobi chuckled at her lack of fear upon discovery. “Perhaps this next clip will be more to your liking.”

The screen switched to Kendle killing Yuri. Bathed in his blood, Marc had never found her sexier. “Nice.”

Adrian was glad he couldn't see it.

Kobi pointed excitedly as the clip switched again. “*This* is my favorite.”

Kendle and Marc both tensed as a familiar profile appeared on the screen. Angela was standing in Market Town square. Flames were spewing from her hands.

“Lights!” Kobi clapped twice.

Kendle and Marc waited for the demands as they realized this one was smarter than Dirce. Kobi had known they were coming and prepared accordingly.

We'll use plan D, Marc chose.

What's that? Kendle hadn't known they had another plan.

That's where we improvise and try not to get killed while we run naked through a minefield.

Kendle sighed. *I already hate plan D.*

Chapter Five
Sky High

1

“**T**his is the one we want.” Kobi stood up as the projector stopped. The image froze on Angela’s rage.

Marc stared at it, connecting future dots. Angela was now wanted more than Adrian was. Safe Haven would never have peace.

The movie room brightened to reveal 100 pissed troops around the team and their gleeful boss about to spring the final trap.

Adrian could feel the tension and knew what was coming, even though he couldn’t view Angela on the film. There was only one thing that could get Marc so mad this fast. The heat baking off the wolfman was enough to make Adrian glad it wasn’t directed at him.

Kobi smiled at Kendle. “In one minute after I stop speaking, we’re going to kill you. You’ll get some of us. But we’ll get *all* of you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kendle let out another belch. “You’ve done all the talking so far. May I have a turn?”

Kobi waved a hand. “Sixty seconds.”

Kendle switched to her own backup plan. “We’re better than any of your crew and we’re looking for jobs. Don’t be stupid. There’s always a deal to be made.”

Surprised, Kobi went still. “Do tell, my dear.”

Kendle scowled at him. “I’ll *dear* your ass to the wall before they get me, big man. Don’t be rude.”

Kobi blinked. Instead of the rant Kendle expected, he rotated toward the camera operator. “You get it?!”

“Yes, sir. I’m getting all of it.”

“You’d better be.” Kobi turned back to Kendle, flashing another charming smile. “We won’t count that interruption in your time. I’ll cut it out later. Fifty-two seconds.”

“I can give you Angela.”

Marc tensed at Kendle’s words.

Kobi’s smile grew. “That is what I wanted to hear. Forty-five.”

Kendle kicked the man at her feet. “I kidnapped her mate.”

“This is the Ghost?” Kobi knew it wasn’t.

“No.” Kendle snatched the hood from Adrian’s head. “This is her lover. She likes him more.”

Kobi stared at Adrian. He recognized the most wanted man in their books of people to capture. When he finally spoke, all the charm and cheer was gone. “I’ll take him from you and slit your throat. No deal. Thirty seconds.”

Kendle laughed. “You’re not a magic user, Commander. I can put up a shield that will last until Angela comes for her man.”

Kobi assumed she was bluffing, but he didn’t like it that he wasn’t positive. “Dirce told us you were a descendant.”

“How else could I have beaten Renda?” Kendle pushed harder. “Would you like a small demonstration to prove my words?”

Kobi clapped, waving for the camera operator to come closer.

The dread-locked American cinematographer didn’t look at the prisoners directly so he wouldn’t feel connected to them. Willie had already made his choice. When the UN finished taking over this country, he would have it all on film. This was the award-winning footage the world would never get to view.

“You don’t understand.” Kobi knew she was trying to trick him somehow. “None of you will matter soon. We have reinforcements on the way. Take them!”

Kendle felt Marc let go. She gathered energy to blast Kobi. Too late, she felt someone come up behind them. As she fired, so did they.

Marc slid to the ground from the blast, unprepared for the attack. He’d assumed Kobi’s men wouldn’t shoot them.

Adrian brought up his shield as chaos hit the room. Already touching Kendle, he reached out for Marc’s leg to include the groaning man. Able to

scan now, he could tell Marc had been hit by a powerful zap that had drained him of energy. Being new, Marc couldn't take many hits like that without his body shutting down.

Marc was hit again. It didn't get through the shield, but Adrian knew it was only a matter of time before he was too weak to block it.

Kendle stared in fear. *What now?*

Kobi appeared in her line of sight as he knelt near Adrian. "You can't fire unless he drops his shield and the instant he does, we'll kill the Ghost. You have no alpha to control the defense. You lose, *my dear*. Surrender and face your fate."

Adrian kept the shield as strong as he could, not sure how things had gone so wrong so fast.

"Surrender or I will tell my man to skin your boy."

Adrian stiffened as a thin teenager was dragged out to stand next to the happy commander now posing his men for up-close shots. "Brian?"

The cook from Erik's crew gave a sickly nod. It was obvious the boy had been tortured for information.

"Grandpa."

Kendle glared at Adrian. "Grandpa?"

"Shit!" Adrian didn't know what to do now.

Brian looked like a Mitchel from the blond hair to the blue eyes, and he had the same shifty stare, but he put off a vibe of being unable to care for himself because he refused to sink as low as his family had. It was awful to find someone like him

here, where he would be used, abused and disposed of. From the filthy clothes and bruises, it was clear to Marc that moment wasn't far off. Slowly recovering, he made the choice. *Surrender so we can grab the kid and then we'll arrange the slaughter of every man standing here laughing at us.*

Adrian dropped the shield. "I give up. You win."

Kobi clapped. "Cut!" He spun around, accepting shoulder slaps and stomps of respect from his men. "It was perfect! You were wonderful."

Adrian, Marc, and Kendle braced as Kobi faced them, expecting the worst.

"If there's trouble, shoot them all. They don't have to be alive now." Kobi waved a man forward. "We're going to prep you for travel. If you resist, Walter will add your names to his body."

Brian cringed, telling Marc that Walter was his abuser.

Walter came forward, flashing a sick leer at Kendle. "What's your name?"

Kendle had known a nastier man, but Walter's tattoos got under her skin as soon as she saw them. His freshest was still bleeding. Blood dripped from it. *He's marking himself with the names of his victims.* Brian was next for whatever fate those unfortunate souls had met.

Kobi felt her rage building. "Put your knife against the kid's throat until we get them secured."

Brian struggled, but he was no match for the giant who swept him up and did as Kobi ordered.

Kendle was forced to extend her arm as a man carrying a syringe came toward her. She studied Kobi to keep from showing her fear of what it was. “Killing us somewhere private for a sequel?”

Kobi laughed cruelly. “No, no, my dear. You and these two are celebrities. You’ll be disarmed, secured, and put on a plane for transport.”

Kendle almost gagged. “Plane?”

Kobi nodded, glowing with triumph. “You’re being sent to the world’s first detention center for descendants. When you wake up, America will be behind you.”

Kendle struggled to fight the drugs, but couldn’t. She slumped over onto Adrian’s leg.

Adrian regarded Marc. *Should we try anyway?* Thanks to being teamed, the adrenaline rush was doubled, as well as the nausea and the headache. It was miserable, but it was the only connection to Kevin, who might now end up being their savior.

Marc shook his head, sending his demon away like Angela had taught him. *Go to sleep for now. There’ll be time for killing when the dealing’s done.*

As Adrian chuckled and fell over, Marc sent out a wave of alpha command to the single descendant he’d picked up since entering the base.

Lurking in the far corner with a dart gun in case they tried to escape, Raul was unable to resist. He left the movie room and snuck toward the airstrip where a plane was being fueled for take-off.

Adrian flinched away as a needle was withdrawn from his skin. Swimming in the mental fog of drugs, he came up all at once, groaning and coughing.

Shut up! Raul walked over to jab the same needle into Kendle's arm, giving her half the remaining medicine. He then slid over to Marc to repeat the gesture, though he used a fresh needle for him.

Adrian realized Marc had taken an alpha hold over Kobi's protector. *We'll do our own bonds. Leave your knife.*

Adrian felt the open blade slide into his grip.

I have to go now. I have work.

Go on. Adrian didn't know what Marc had told the man to do, but he wasn't going to interfere.

Raul went toward the cockpit while Adrian cut Marc's ropes.

Forced to wait for the rest of his mental facilities to return, Adrian and Marc examined their surroundings. The plane looked like every other that they had been on during their military careers. It was American, but the two pilots weren't. They spoke a language Adrian identified as Greek. He could hear Raul keeping them occupied.

It was impossible to tell how long they'd been unconscious, but Marc doubted it had been long.

The plane wasn't in the air yet. There was still time to escape Kobi's plan.

Taking the knife, Marc scooted around so he could reach Kendle's bonds. She was awake, but not moving yet as she scanned her current situation.

Outside the plane, shouts and engines were a constant noise, but no one came up the open ramp yet. The airstrip around them was covered in men rushing more bags and crates onto other planes. Marc assumed their host had ordered it all shipped, which said Kobi was worried even though he had his prisoners tied up and drugged for transport.

Marc didn't see animals being loaded and wondered why, but not enough to spend time sorting it out. He assumed Kobi's boss wanted only luxury goods. None of the crates in this plane was labeled as to the contents, but ownership was stamped across each container in bright red letters.

UN Property! Danger!

Kendle sat up while Marc swept for weapons.

Adrian watched out for surprises, heart thumping in his chest. After the fight in Market Town, Adrian had assumed Brian would take off in the opposite direction. He'd never considered the boy would be captured by the UN and used against him.

Raul came from the cockpit, but didn't spare them a glance. Wearing a robot-like expression, he exited the plane and went to carry out the next step in the orders Marc had given him.

“Where is he going?” Kendle wasn’t sure if she should kill the enemy descendant.

“To secure our ride.”

Marc nodded in approval of Adrian’s answer. He glanced around, wondering where Kobi was storing the weapons. He didn’t care about the movies, but Safe Haven needed the guns, and he wanted to rescue any other prisoners they had here.

“Are we destroying it or are we getting the hell out of the way again?” Kendle didn’t like the odds.

Marc looked toward the cockpit, aware that the conversation up there had stopped. “Can you fly?”

Adrian shook his head in regret. “I never learned how. I’m more of a ground guy.”

Marc regarded Kendle.

Kendle had gone pale, remembering her trip from Pitcairn to America in the shitty little beater that had been traded to the all-female group led by Marsha. It was an ugly flashback. “Maybe.”

Marc got to his feet. “I’ll clear a path. Bring up the ramp.”

The sound of struggling came from the cockpit a few seconds later, but there was no shout or alarm to bring the sentries who were busy laughing about their easy victory over Adrian Mitchel, the Ghost, and the survival show woman. It angered Kendle that her stage name hadn’t been mentioned during Kobi’s production. “I want that in the film.”

Adrian snickered. “Tell it to the director.”

Marc dragged a body with a broken neck by them. He dumped it between a stack of large crates

wrapped in plastic and then went back for the other one.

Adrian hurried to the ramp as Kendle joined Marc in the front.

“They had everything ready to go.” Marc slid into the passenger seat, shifting away from the window so the troops wouldn’t recognize him.

Adrian joined them, holding out a hat for Marc to wear.

Kendle staggered, turning to vomit. Once she finished, she immediately felt better.

Marc and Adrian understood completely. They hadn’t consumed the shot of vodka, but the drugs were merciless. Both men had nasty headaches and boiling guts. Marc wasn’t enjoying being teamed with three people this way, but he assumed Angela wanted them to have the practice. It wouldn’t surprise him if it became a part of lessons in the future. Marc suspected Angela wanted an all-descendant team. He’d heard Adrian talking about it and when it came to plans, Angela and the former leader usually went in the same direction.

Kendle slid into the seat, hoping she could get them off the ground.

“This must be the detention center.” Marc held up a map. He had already memorized the location.

Adrian also noted it and then handed the map to Kendle. He wanted to have his hands free.

Kendle realized they would be going within 150 miles of that location on their way to Pitcairn, thanks to Angela’s decision to sail around South

America instead of re-crossing this broken country to leave from the west. “Where are we going?”

Marc pointed toward the main building. “Kobi likes us ballsy Americans. Let’s say goodbye.”

Adrian grinned as he realized what Marc was planning. He hunkered between the seats and tried to brace.

Kendle swallowed the lump in her throat and started pushing buttons.

“As we hit, use your shields and give them everything you’ve got. I want the numbers cut in half by the time we roll out of here.”

Kendle and Adrian prepared themselves. It was payback time.

3

In the main hangar, Kobi glanced upward as the sound of a plane grew loud. “Are they taking off?”

Alarms begin to ring across the makeshift base. Radios crackled to life, confirming Kobi’s fear.

“They are escaping!”

“We have a breach!”

“Stop them!” Kobi stared toward the window in shock. He thought of running for his basement room. It would withstand a blast, but his pride wouldn’t let him. “Come and get me, Americans!”

Nearby, the camera operator snatched up his equipment. The boss always wanted clips, no matter the outcome.

Kobi felt their descendant come to him and bring up the shield. Bathed in protection, the commander got closer to the window for a better view.

Outside, the engines reached maximum and propelled the airship into the sky.

In the cockpit, a pale, shaking woman pulled on the stick to take the plane higher. “Are you sure?” Kendle was thrilled to be in the air at all, but she wasn’t certain about doing what Marc wanted.

Marc nodded. “Most of the troops are in that center courtyard, near the fuel trucks. Do the best you can to hit them while Adrian shields us.”

Always willing to risk her life for Marc’s respect, Kendle didn’t argue further. She gently turned the plane and brought the nose around to line up with the terminal. Pushing on the stick, she took them back toward the ground.

“Get out of here!” Raul was no longer under Marc’s control. He was horrified to discover what he’d done. He shoved Kobi toward the exit. “I can’t protect you from that!”

“Amazing, isn’t she?!”

Raul pushed Kobi toward the basement bunker as the man cackled madly.

“This will be my best film ever!”

Raul didn’t respond. He shoved them through panicking sentries who were looking for calm, effective guidance. *That’s not what we do here,*

boys. Raul shoved the door to the bunker open and pushed Kobi in.

The man rolled roughly down the stairs.

Raul heard his boss hit the floor and jerked the door shut. Pulling up his strongest gifts, he waited for the enemy to arrive, determined to redeem himself.

Kobi got off the floor, hand sliding up the dusty wall in an effort to find the light switch. He hated the dark.

The bright glare came on to illuminate his tiny palace... The building above him shuddered. Dust fell onto Kobi's head and shoulders as he stared upward, waiting for Raul to come and tell him everything was okay.

A second explosion shook the building, knocking Kobi to his knees. The walls rained dust and debris, sending shrapnel against his fragile skin. He cringed against the wall, waiting for it to be over.

At the top of the stairs, the door was jerked open and footsteps came down.

Kobi tried to stand. "I knew you'd come for me, Raul! I will reward you for this!"

Kendle grabbed Kobi by the arm. "Good. Tell your men to stand down or I'll gut you like a pig while they watch." The musty room was already flipping Kendle's stomach. It reminded her of Ethan's cave.

Realizing who it was, Kobi screamed and ran up the stairs to escape.

Adrian let Kobi reach the top of the steps and then snaked his arm around the man's neck. Despite being in charge of 200 troops and having a variety of killing tools at his disposal, Kobi was unarmed. "Tell your men to surrender before she gets up here."

Kendle took off running up the steps.

"Stand down! Stand down!" Kobi continued to scream it at the men surrounding them with fingers on triggers.

The center of the terminal was a pile of smoking rubble. Pieces of the plane were sticking out; debris was scattered everywhere. Kobi's beautiful movie room had been erased.

Standing next to Adrian with two guns and a nasty snarl, Marc gestured at the troops waiting for orders. "Do it now!"

It was a tense moment. As the plane had crashed into the building, the three of them had bailed out the rear. Flying into the plush couches had absorbed most of the impact. The plane had cleared a path straight to where Raul's body was laying, head cut off from the plane wing. As soon as Marc viewed the body and then the door, it was obvious Kobi was there.

The sentries around them began to lay down their guns, some grumbling, some relieved.

Kobi started begging for his life.

Kendle stopped in front of the commander, hand coming up to stroke his cheek. "Tell your men to

take the loaded semis to the front gate. We'll go from there."

Marc was feeding her the plans, but Kendle almost didn't need it. She was getting good at this.

"Give them the trucks meant for the Secretaries-General! Give it to them at the gate!" Kobi was terrified she was going to slit his throat after she got what she wanted.

Kendle was considering it. Angela had told them to cut the head off the snake and this one was about as reptilian as it came. Instead, she followed orders and whispered into the man's ear.

When she finished, Kendle glanced around, hunting for the crazy camera operator who had continued to film even as the plane crashed into the terminal. She found him lying in a pool of blood in the corner, missing a leg and his life.

Kendle retrieved the camera. The light was still green as she set it on the edge of a broken window. Kendle stepped in front of the camera, giving a grin and a snappy salute. "Hi! It's the Black Widow coming to you from America. Please cease and desist all operations in this country or we will be forced to make a home visit. God bless you and God bless the United States."

Kendle stepped forward and shut the camera off. She scanned the troops, some of whom were close enough to grab her if they were feeling froggy. "How many of you want to be here?"

She hadn't expected anyone to answer her and no one did, but it was obvious they loved their jobs.

She pushed harder as Marc and Adrian took Kobi toward the exit. “Go terrorize your own lands and let the descendants there deal with you. If you’re not gone, soon, we *will* be back and this time we won’t leave anyone alive. That comes straight from Angela.”

Troops paled or grimaced at the name, understanding this was a successful infiltration and the mastermind was their number one target in this country.

Satisfied they understood the danger, Kendle joined Marc and Adrian in the triangle formation around the prisoner. They walked toward the gate, where the four trucks were already being pulled around.

“What’s in the trucks?” Marc wanted to know now, so he could decide if he wanted to clear the base. Time was the only thing making him hesitate to do that.

“Poppers and pigeons,” Kobi grumbled. “Special guns and munitions, some food stuffs. It was a gift before I asked to come home.”

“Liar.” Kendle glared. “It was a bribe to get them to let you stay here longer.”

When they’d cased this joint, they had assumed the semis were full of food and weapons, but it was gratifying to have that confirmed.

“Tell your men to put their radios and guns in the rear truck, plus all knives and vests.” Marc gave Walter a shove as he went by, remembering Brian’s

fear upon meeting him. “*You* get on your knees and stay there until we’re gone.”

With dirty hands and gnats around him in a thin cloud, the big man was intimidating even as he knelt. The bugs sucking his blood didn’t bother him at all. As far as Marc could tell, the man hadn’t noticed. *That drove me nuts in the Marines. The buzzing becomes intolerable after 15 hours.*

UN men formed orderly lines to deposit the guns and radios in the truck. Marc and Adrian studied them for signs of rebellion, but there wasn’t any. These men wanted them gone so they could return to their jobs of stripping America.

Because there were only a couple hundred men here, the disarming process took a short five minutes. The team waited to be attacked by the guards or by Walter, who hadn’t tried to protest his kneeling position on the frozen ground.

Why aren’t they shooting?

No orders. Marc tightened his grip on Kobi’s arm. “Let’s go.”

As they proceeded to the trucks, a shadow broke away from the rear of the group and ran toward Walter.

“I’ll kill you!” Knife in hand, Brian threw himself at the bigger man.

Walter slapped the boy, sending him flying into a group of soldiers who kicked Brian until he scrambled away.

The Eagles didn’t interfere, not liking it that the boy had been about to take justice into his own

hands, but agreeing with his decision. Anyone as cruel as Walter needed to die.

Marc waved Kendle toward the last truck in line. He and Adrian kept going, leaving Brian at the third rig. As they moved on, Kendle realized Marc was giving her the duty of making sure Brian didn't take off in a truck of supplies. Obviously, Marc hadn't forgotten the boy was a Mitchel.

Marc left Adrian at the second truck, waving toward the passenger side of the rig. He looked at Kobi. "You get in. I get in. The gates open. We go out. The gates close. I stop. I let you out. We both go our own way."

Kobi nodded, dangerous mind spinning. He walked toward the open passenger door, still limping from being tossed down the stairs.

Already sure of what was coming, Marc went around the front of the truck. As soon as he hefted himself into the driver seat, he heard Kobi exit the vehicle and run into the safety of the troops who were gathering on both sides of the semis. *We stick to the plan.*

Marc was aware of the disapproval of his team at the choice. It hit in thick waves and didn't ease. To his surprise, Adrian's bothered him the most.

"Fine." Marc opened the door.

His team prepared to do battle.

Before the troops could figure out what was coming, Marc jumped onto the side of the truck and slid face-first onto the roof.

Bullets hit the truck, but only a few. Most of the men had been disarmed or killed by the plane. Marc fired his gun.

“Yes!” Brian screamed, watching Walter fall.

Marc fired again.

Kobi jerked and fell into the men around him. Blood poured from his shoulder.

It wasn't a kill shot, but Marc slid backwards and dropped into the seat.

“Thank you.” Adrian wished he'd been the one to give Brian justice.

Marc got the truck moving without closing the door or holstering. There wasn't time as the sentries rushed forward, those with weapons now firing.

Marc steered toward the wall next to the closed gate. He couldn't help the grin and shout as he drove through the weak connector spot.

Behind him, the rest of the team did the same, taking out a large portion of the wall. Even Brian joined in, enjoying causing damage to the place that had held him hostage. It had only been for a short time, but it had been ugly, forcing him to betray his own kind. He would never forget this humiliation.

“No! No! Not the wall!” Behind them, Kobi's screams filled the air.

Marc led them toward the spot where he and Kendle had done their recon, needing to see how the troops were reacting.

Gesturing wildly while bleeding, Kobi was an angry puppet in the mirrors as they drove away.

Marc was pleased. Signs of their gifts were all over the base. When the refugees arrived, they would recognize it and know Safe Haven had been here. It would whip them into a frenzy. Marc was sure there were already trackers on the way. They'd recharged during the short fight. Being a descendant had serious advantages.

4

Kevin had been observing the base from a distance, ready to provide the life-saving rescue. He was disappointed to discover the fight was already over, that his help hadn't been needed. He fired up the RV and joined them on the ridge above the UN base.

Everyone met in front of Marc's semi, feeling vulnerable without their weapons. Some of those had been left behind in Kobi's lavish movie room. Some of them were in the pile in the rear of the semi, in addition to the radios from the few guards who'd had one. The UN hadn't been doing as well here as Kobi had been pretending to his superiors in the movies.

"Thank you." Brian was grateful to be out of there and nervous about what came next. He barely considered himself a Mitchel. He didn't expect any of the free passes that usually came with the name.

Marc picked up the thought. He'd been right to rescue the boy. A quick sweep had revealed innocence and anger over wayward family. Marc

had bonded to him right away. He looked at the boy. “We can find a place for you in Safe Haven, but the mistakes your...grandfather has made will always color the name. By the time we leave, you need to have made your choice.”

That was kinder than Brian or Adrian had hoped for.

Adrian moved a few feet away, certain that Brian would follow for a few minutes of family talk.

Marc let them go, reaching into the semi to pick up the mic. He had already changed the channel. “I just saw Safe Haven! They’re at Macon airport!”

Marc flipped the radio to the next channel Safe Haven had been known for using before they went quiet. “Safe Haven is in Macon, Georgia! I saw Angela!”

Marc repeated that process over 10 more channels, having to stop on the last two to wait for other people who were calling in to verify the report. It was obvious everyone was still on the lookout for their camp.

When he finished, Marc ignored the responses that declared they would arrive within a few hours. He joined Kendle and Kevin in front of his truck.

“That is harsh.”

Kendle nodded at Kevin’s comment. “He learned from the best.”

Kevin understood Angela had used the technique and Marc had copied it. It made him feel better, but only by a little. He wasn’t looking

forward to hanging around to verify that the refugees did indeed breach the UN base.

Picking up his concern, Kendle shook her head. “We weren’t sent here for that. There’s no need for us to stick around.”

Kevin was glad to hear it. He stayed quiet, hoping there would be action during their next stop so he could help. Dog was still waiting for them.

Marc studied the troops below. They were repairing the missing sections of the wall. In the hours it would take the refugee wave to arrive, the sentries might finish, but the barrier wouldn’t be as sturdy and there weren’t enough troops to defend the entire wall to keep people from climbing over. It would be an awful end for those inside. They were securing their own crypt and didn’t know it.

A few feet away, Adrian and Brian were having a repeat of the conversation he’d had with nearly every one of his younger relatives. “You already know I can’t do that.”

Brian scowled in frustration. “You should come and help. You owe that to both of us.”

Adrian handed Brian a small kit with some medical supplies in it. He hated it that the boy wasn’t going to stay. Brian was fragile. He needed care.

“I need to find my mother!”

“I’m not that person anymore. Please don’t ask it of me. I can’t.”

Brian shoved away from his grandfather, snorting angrily. “Useless!”

Adrian winced. Brian didn't understand why he wouldn't throw everything away to go on a suicide run to rescue Alexa. In his place, Adrian was certain he would feel the same way, but the wisdom that had come from his mistakes told him not to interfere with his daughter's fate. Alexa would reach Safe Haven at some point in the future. Adrian was certain of that. It wouldn't be an easy trip, but fate was demanding it as payment for their crimes against humanity. Even Brian, an innocent, would be held responsible for the sins of the past. Generational curses were unbreakable. Adrian knew better than to even try.

Brian joined Marc and Kendle. "I'm going off on my own. I can't be in the same camp as him."

Marc's bond with the boy grew stronger. He clapped him on the shoulder. "You can take the RV."

Adrian hurried to clean it out, glad Brian would have a dependable ride. Adrian wouldn't miss the vehicle. There were too many memories of the vet there. He would replace it with something that used less gas and could fit into a smaller space.

Marc avoided thinking about how bad Brian smelled as the wind shifted. He handed the boy his canteen of water and ration kit. Both had been filled.

Kevin brightened as he realized he would be driving one of the semis. He hurried to get into the seat so he would be ready to go.

Arms full, Adrian also headed for a semi, leaving Kendle and Marc to sort through the RV

bags and boxes. No one was worried about the troops now. The frantic actions below told the crew the UN was terrified of being overrun by American refugees. They had recognized the threat coming their way.

Marc led the small convoy to a valley a few miles away and parked them behind a large barn with a silo that had been burnt to the ground. Side-by-side, the semis were only visible from one direction. The hills around them were littered by nervous deer slowly moving north even though it was opposite where they should be going. The rest of the landscape was still and frozen, settled in to face the harsh return of winter.

Marc watched Brian disappear over the hill toward the southwest, wishing the boy luck. Unlike the other Mitchel men he'd met, Brian was a good soul. It was nice to know there was one member of that family who didn't make him want to use his guns.

We'll stay where we are for a while. When darkness finally came, he expected the base to be surrounded, which would make it easier for them to go northwest to pick up Dog. If they went right now, they would have to kill people who were on their way to help loot the base. It was easier to wait until dark and keep their heads down. They would look like any other scavenger and be able to see lights before they were spotted.

In the rear truck, Kendle tried to get comfortable. She was eager for the rest to settle her

stomach. Between the shot of vodka and the drugs Kobi had used, her stomach was still boiling. She reclined the seat and hoped to be snoring soon.

In the truck ahead of her, Kevin was still disappointed. He fidgeted restlessly as he waited, wishing Marc would let them go on now. He didn't understand why they weren't, but he knew better than to ask or to leave his truck.

In the second semi, Adrian was making lessons for training. He was also occasionally sweeping their surroundings for problems, but Marc's demon was circling the stopped convoy continuously. Adrian didn't feel the need to draw the creature's attention. Now that the mission had been accomplished, he was once again expendable.

In the front truck, Marc concentrated on seeing everything his demon did as it made rounds of the farm. If someone tried to sneak up on them, he would know. This was the most dangerous part of the plan—when the mission was almost finished. That's when people were most likely to be sloppy and get killed. Even if it was Adrian, that would make the mission a failure. When Adrian died, Marc wanted it to be his idea, not an accident.

Marc rooted through bags, examining the supplies he hadn't time to check out before now. It was all American. The semis were also American, leading Marc to believe the UN had been sent over with bare rations and told to collect their needs from the land. It meant those troops at that base had been it. Any more would mean the UN had come over in

a ship that could track them all the way to the island. It was a relief to know that wasn't the case. Kobi and Dirce had arrived by plane.

Satisfied that they were okay for the moment, Marc leaned back and closed his eyes. Angela immediately filled his thoughts, guiding him to sleep.

Outside, snow began to fall on the warm windshields and melt.

Chapter Six
A Pick Me Up

1

“**O**h, God.”

The team echoed Kendle’s exclamation as they stared at what remained of Athens, Georgia. The city was covered in bodies of locals and UN soldiers. There were also men wearing other uniforms, but it was hard to distinguish how many or who they had been in the snowy darkness. With 80 miles down and 80 to go, it felt like it had been much longer than three days since they’d split off from Safe Haven.

Marc took his time leading them through the maze of charred homes and roads as it got darker. The other cars and trucks had lights on, making it easier to avoid them, but some didn’t use lights as they stalked their fellow man. Gunshots and screams echoed in random blasts. Marc stayed alert and angry. In times of crisis, humanity was its own worst enemy. He’d accepted that long ago, thus his decision to become a sniper, but it was still horribly frustrating to feel souls in pain the way these were.

He didn’t feel remorse for using them against the UN troops. He also didn’t feel bad for the deaths he’d caused. What bothered him was the lack of

humanity in humans. He didn't know how to fix that issue. Safe Haven's people were mostly good, but during their time in the mountain, Marc had seen good people go bad and bad people go good. He didn't have the energy to figure out such a confusing mess right now. Marc was just looking forward to being back with Safe Haven so he could sleep for more than four hours.

In the trucks behind, Adrian, Kendle, and Kevin were thinking the same. It was impossible to guess how many people were out here with them. The calls on the radio for help to breach the UN wall had been so continuous that all their radios were off. Despite causing the mayhem, Eagles didn't want to hear it or see it. If not for the UN being such a threat, none of them would have been okay using these methods.

Adrian was the most hurt by it. Like Angela, he had respect for every life. Even the removal of evil bothered him. His mind insisted that most people could be brought around to the Safe Haven way of life.

Adrian didn't mention that to Marc. He also didn't try to search out lost souls who might be accepted. That wasn't his job anymore. Anyone he recommended to Marc would be viewed with suspicion. He didn't want to put all of them through that just to have Marc slip a bullet into someone's brain because he drew attention to them. As angry as Marc was at yet more evidence of humanity's inhumanity, Adrian believed the few good survivors

were better off on their own. It was heartbreaking. *I hate being out here with Marc. Angela would have at least scanned them.*

As the night wore on, Kevin began to realize Marc wasn't going to pull over for a break, even though the roads were coated in a layer of white powder. Despite getting tired of the bouncing seat and a drafty truck that stuttered and shuddered under his heavy-handed touch, Kevin stayed on the bumper of the semi ahead of him and didn't complain. This was part of being accepted again. Kevin knew if he angered Marc, he was likely to lose this one chance. The waves of menace coming from their team leader were palpable enough to keep him awake and quiet. He assumed it was the same in all the trucks.

Covering the rear, Kendle pushed her truck over the rough, debris-laden roads and tried not to think about returning to Safe Haven. Unlike the others on this mission, she didn't want to go home yet. In that confined camp, Angela was boss. Out here, she only had to answer to Marc.

2

Three hours before dawn, Marc finally pulled over. He needed to pee and check maps. Marc donned his parka, pulling the hood up against the stiff wind. Light snow whipped around the small

convoy as the other drivers met him in front of his truck.

Deprived of flashlights and headlights, the four people stayed close.

“I’ll hold that for you.” Kevin hurried forward to take the map for Marc so he could examine it unhampered.

Marc allowed the sucking up, mostly because he was too tired to put Kevin in his place again. Everyone else on this team had had a tough day of dealing with Kobi and his ambush. Kevin was bright-eyed, bushytailed, and irritating.

While they waited, the cold darkness around them was broken by sounds of nature expressing displeasure at humans being here. Owls hooted in anger, while small animals scurried through the underbrush to warn the others. Kendle took it in without reacting, but it creeped her out that nature was so aware of them. Even the cicadas had gone quiet, reacting to human presence. Kendle shined her neck light around and found dozens of the fat bugs on every tree and bush she checked.

Adrian gently forced her hand down. “Let’s not disturb the blood-suckers, okay? Shut it off.”

Kendle did, paling as she got the images of a rest stop from his chaotic thoughts. He was trying to skip over the reason for them being there, but Kendle felt Marc tense and realized it was a scene from when Angela had almost died. Kendle hadn’t been in America then. She’d been surviving her own hell, but she’d heard the stories from Eagles

who had viewed the wreckage. The men who'd been there still wouldn't talk about it.

"This is where he is." Marc pointed. "Once we have Dog, we'll find a place to sleep." Marc motioned Adrian to the map. "Dope it out and pick the spots." Marc returned to scanning for trouble.

Adrian didn't allow himself to have any hope over the reasonable tone. As soon as they were both rested, the old fighting would restart.

Marc didn't correct him.

Adrian sighed. "I believe we can camp one night here." He squinted at the map. "If we can get far enough into the warehouse, I don't think we'll even need guards."

Kendle pointed at a place on the map. "What is this?"

Marc let Kendle and Adrian beat out the location, confident they could handle it. Marc was trying to pick up word from Angela on what she wanted him to do about the refugees. It had taken the first wave a couple of hours to reach the UN base. Under attack now, by dawn, it would no longer exist. When the refugees realized they had been tricked, they would spread out again in search of Safe Haven. Marc and his team were going almost all the way back to the mountain. From the spot on the map, it appeared as though Dog had made it close to home before home had bugged out on him. He was now hunkered down, waiting for the ride. If there were still refugees in the mountain, it

was possible these trucks would be spotted and followed. Marc was hoping for advice on that.

There was silence.

Angela had said not to use magic or radios while on this mission. He knew that meant him too. He also didn't want to give any trackers a clue to her location, but it was frustrating to not make contact. He couldn't wait for this run to be done. Tiring of the silence, Marc motioned toward the trucks. "We leave in three minutes. Adrian has point."

Adrian stared in shock as Marc went to the cab of his truck. He hadn't expected Marc to put him in a leadership position again, even one as minor as this. *He must be tired.*

Adrian drove his truck into place, not surprised when Marc took Kendle's rear spot in the convoy.

Kendle would have protested, but the switch put Marc directly in her mirror where she could stare at him. She kept her mouth shut.

Kevin, now moved to second vehicle in the convoy, sat up straighter and waited for everyone to be ready. He was going to be able to take credit for helping wipe out the remaining UN troops and for helping to rescue the wolf, and all he'd had to do was drive. *This is the perfect run.*

As Kevin drove by him to get in place, Marc picked up the thought and grimaced. He would much rather put Adrian in his place, but Kevin was going to be the big loser on this run. Angela had been right to send the man with them. Out here, he

would be easier to eliminate if Marc chose to go that way.

3

I want to secure our site before we get Dog. Map check. Marc sent the mental message to the other drivers, tired of watching Kendle watch him. With the snow blowing around, there was little else to look at. Marc hadn't missed the hours of driving while they were trapped in the mountain.

As the trucks pulled over, Marc sensed the relief of the drivers. Everyone wanted to use the bathroom, eat, and then sleep for a day.

"Ten minutes." Marc didn't stick around to listen to the grumbling, though most of that was silent. Kevin was the only one stupid enough to complain aloud and even he held it in until Marc walked away.

Marc climbed onto the front of his truck, fighting stiff winds and a slick hood. He wanted to see if there were vehicles moving around them. As far as he knew, they hadn't been spotted or followed. More radio calls had come as an ugly dawn broke, informing everyone that Safe Haven had fled. It had turned out even better than Marc had hoped. The refugees who attacked the UN believed Safe Haven had been there, which meant the real camp was gaining ground on that problem with every second. Their radios were off again now, but

they would continue to do checks on the situation during the rest of the run.

Marc changed directions, scanning and finding very little. The only people in this area was a small family dealing with their own crisis. Because it wasn't severe and he was tired, Marc ignored them instead of determining if they belonged in Safe Haven. He just wanted to collect Dog and go home.

His conscience immediately spoke up, denying him that callousness.

Sighing in annoyance, Marc sent his demon out to examine the family. If they were worthy, he would contact them.

A few seconds later, his demon returned. *Leave them be. They have a protector.*

Marc didn't ask questions. Unlike when he'd first started handling the demon inside, Marc now trusted that being. He understood the relationship that existed between them. One couldn't live without the other.

Marc got the convoy moving as soon as he saw everyone was in their vehicle, not waiting for them to get settled. The snow was picking up, making the roads more dangerous. It would conceal them from refugees, but it would also conceal the refugees from them. It was completely possible that they would run into a group on this very road. It was one of the main three that circled the mountain where Safe Haven had almost died.

Marc led them northwest at the fork, aiming for the small town Adrian had chosen. They hoped to

hide the trucks in the warehouse while they slept, but Marc wanted to pick Dog up first. He didn't feel good about remaining in this area. Sleep wouldn't be restful this close to danger. If there was trouble at the warehouse or it was already occupied, they would grab Dog and just keep driving.

As Marc entered the town of Ellijay, he was thrilled to detect snowdrifts in pristine condition. No one was moving here. It was easy for him to navigate to the warehouse without consulting the map. As his truck crunched over snow and debris in the road, Marc hoped the noise didn't draw threats. All the roads until now had been slushy, indicating they'd been used recently. That wasn't the case here.

Marc spotted a tall sign for the warehouse and sent his demon in for a sweep.

Empty.

Marc pulled into the parking lot and led the trucks behind the building where they would be out of sight between it and the hill.

Adrian hurried to Marc's door before Marc called the okay, wanting a minute.

When Marc rolled down the window, frowning, Adrian hurried to explain. "You can leave me here to clear this. I'll get camp set up."

Marc deliberated. "This is how you handled things before, splitting up the team?"

"Yes. I never took chances in storms like this. Whiteout conditions are impossible to predict. You need to get done and get back."

Satisfied the man wasn't trying anything stupid, Marc sent Kendle a message to come up. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "See what you can do with him."

Adrian nodded. Kevin's selfish thoughts had been blasting all of them the entire trip. The man had forgotten they were teamed, and that he was traveling with three descendants who were constantly scanning for problems. It would have been impossible to miss his attitude. "I'll do what I can."

Kendle got into Marc's passenger seat.

"We'll be one hour." Marc didn't look at her.

Adrian checked his watch. "If you're not, we'll come get you."

Marc drove the semi away before he could make Adrian swear it. He had to learn to trust the man again. Now that there were no secrets between them, it should be easier in moments like this.

"That's our support?" Kendle sneered. "I'm not impressed."

Marc grinned, but inside, he questioned her attitude. "We won't need it."

"Still."

"Yeah. Hey, listen, what's up with the flip?"

"Nothing." Kendle pouted as Marc took them down the street they'd just left. "I don't get you."

"Yeah, you do."

Kendle slumped in the seat, arms crossing defensively over her chest. "It's not fair. I was ostracized for interfering. He put a spell on her, stole

half her love, and you're rewarding him. I guess I'm jealous."

"It's not the same."

"How?"

"I was never willing to give you what you want."

"And Angela wants Adrian as much as she wants you." Kendle frowned deeper. "So if I seduce you, it's okay then?"

You can try.

Kendle flushed. "It's still wrong. I don't like it that she gets to play with your heart."

"What about you?"

"What about me what?"

"If I told you right now that I want you, while we're both committed to someone, would you tell me no?" Marc sent a wave of lust that was real. He'd been away from his mate's comforting arms for days.

Kendle's pulse quickened even though she knew it was a trap. "That's different!"

"Because it's you and me?"

"It's not right."

"Because you don't want to share."

She nodded.

"What applies to one, applies to all."

"It's wrong."

"Because of your jealousy. Let's look at another example."

"You mean Samantha and her men."

"Yes."

“But they were willing.”

Marc chuckled, remembering the fights and tense moments Samantha’s choices had brought into camp. “She was. Neither of the men wanted to.”

“I didn’t know that.” Kendle absorbed the images. “She seduced them!”

“She stated her desires and let them come around to it.”

“Which is what Angela is doing to you...”

Marc shrugged. “In some ways. She doesn’t want what Samantha had. She’s perfectly happy with my love and Adrian’s attention. He’s the one who wants more.”

“What a fucked-up mess.”

“Because of my jealousy.” Marc sighed. “We would have had peace months ago if I’d stopped fighting it. Back then, I believed she did want what Samantha had and there was no way I could handle it. Once I figured out what she really wanted, I mulled it over.”

“It’s wrong,” Kendle repeated stubbornly.

“No, it isn’t. She has the right to spend time with anyone she wants.” Marc felt his heart finally accept the situation. He grinned at the relief as some of the hatred left. “She’ll still pick me over him in almost every situation. I have nothing to be jealous of.”

Kendle wasn’t happy about his epiphany, but she was pleased to feel peace entering his heart. She didn’t like it when he was upset.

“I appreciate that.” Marc glanced over, seeing that her misery and her conscience were at war. “I

heard a rumor about you. Want to know what it was?”

Kendle grunted, not expecting anything good.

“The camp women are going to bring you in now that Tommy has an interest in you.”

She peered over in surprise. “I thought I was already in.”

Marc laughed.

“I’ll never get used to how things work in this place. I miss my island.”

“Did you feel that way while you were there?”

“No.” Kendle shuddered at the memories. “Ethan Kraft was alive then.”

Marc had heard stories of her tormentor, but he hadn’t gotten the full tale. “Maybe you could fill me in on the way home.”

Kendle hesitated, not wanting to relive it. “I have to drive one of the trucks.”

Marc pointed toward a small supermarket, where animals and human tracks coated the ground. “Dog isn’t alone.” Kendle went into alert mode, like Marc wanted. They would have time for emotions later. Right now, he had a friend to collect.

She pointed. “I see Dog! In the window!”

Marc and Kendle left the truck running as they hurried up the short steps of the market. Before they could open the door, it swung wide, revealing an excited wolf and a hunched man covered in a tarp that had been wrapped around him with tape.

Marc and Kendle scanned him, both gaping.

“Ray?”

Ray slowly lowered the hood. His sunken eyes and thin skin were haunting. He didn't speak.

Kendle wasn't sure what to say. It was obvious the Eagle hadn't found Dale, or if he had, it hadn't gone well.

"You need a lift to camp?"

Ray slowly nodded at Marc's shocked voice. There was nothing left for him here.

Both of their pickups were thin, with tired eyes that said they hadn't been certain how much longer they would have survived. Marc was certain the wolf would have made it out, but he didn't believe that was true of Ray. The store was small and moldy, telling Marc the pair hadn't found sustenance here. These cans and jars were spoiled. Marc could smell it in the air. From the water lines and dried mud on the walls, Marc also assumed it had been flooded at some point. On the walls behind the checkout counter, a wreath in almost pristine condition mocked him. *That's two months away. Will we celebrate Christmas as a holiday or the anniversary of when the world died?*

The view out the windows wasn't better. The town was rotting away from the ground up, adding to his theory of a flood. It explained the lack of people and the condition of the buildings. Even rioting didn't account for a speedboat in a park.

Kendle stayed alert as Marc took Ray's arm and led him to the truck. The wolf danced around their feet, but he didn't yap or make other noises. As soon as they got to the warehouse, the pair would be fed

and watered, and then rested. Ray wasn't capable of driving one of the trucks.

"He just needs some care." Marc patted the man's bony shoulder. "By the time we leave, he'll want to drive."

"What's that?" Kendle spun around at a crunch.

"A badger." Marc had already spotted it.

Angry animals were roaming this part of town, giving Marc and Kendle moments of heart-in-throat until they identified the shadows as non-human. They knew the wildlife could be a problem however, and kept an eye on the foraging bobcat and herd of deer that seemed to be aware of each other but not scared by it.

Ray climbed into the small bunk of the truck, followed by the wolf, who dropped onto his legs. Smothered in warmth, Ray laid his head down and closed his eyes, trying not to see Dale's bloody body again in his mind. It made sleeping hard.

Marc and Kendle got in, but they didn't brutalize him with questions. They had their own horrors to suffer through when darkness fell. They didn't want to add his to the list.

Ray was grateful. As they pulled away from the spot where he'd been sure he was going to die, Ray began to cry—not for himself, but for the future that could have been if he'd spent more time with Dale and less time trying to be one of Adrian's Eagles.

As they traveled back to the warehouse, it was obvious the storm wasn't going to let up anytime soon. Between the heavy winds and the thick sheets

of snow, it took them twice as long to make it, telling Marc they would have to stay here to let the weather pass. The other option was to try driving through it. He would have been willing if everyone drove the way he did. Adrian would make it and maybe Kendle, but there was no way Ray or Kevin would be able to keep up in these conditions. They could all pile into one or two trucks and try to hide the others, but they would have to come back to get them, and Marc didn't want to see this part of the United States again as long as he lived.

Kevin met them as they came into the warehouse, shocked at the sight of Ray. "Are you okay?! Where's Dale?"

Ray's face crumbled.

Kevin snapped his mouth shut with an audible click.

Before he could make it worse, Kendle shoved Kevin toward where Adrian was preparing a small fire, then followed him.

"That was fast."

Kendle nodded at Adrian's comment, signaling Kevin to take over the chore. "It was like they knew we were coming."

"Angela wouldn't have sent a message this far over open waves. That was all Marc and Dog."

Kendle glanced over to where Marc was securing the door. The warehouse was dusty and dirty, with a nasty draft from a ceiling that no longer sat even. They couldn't stay here long. It wasn't defensible. The wolf was out of sight.

“Dog’s doing rounds.” Adrian sparked the tinder. “Those two were the best security team in Safe Haven before things went crazy.”

“You mean before you betrayed everyone.”

Adrian peered up at her. “You’re being nastier than usual. What’s the problem?”

Kendle blinked at the tone. Adrian was hardly ever rude to her.

“You were rude to me. I just returned the favor.” Adrian stood. “Well?”

Kendle was forced to admit the truth. “I know what you did. It pisses me off.”

Adrian sighed. “Okay.” He left her standing there without defending himself.

Adrian wasn’t trying to gain sympathy to worm his way back into her good graces. He’d done wrong and he was being punished for it. That was the way of Safe Haven, the way he himself had put into place and brutally enforced on men and women alike. It was justice.

Glad Adrian wasn’t going to be a problem now that they were camped, Marc joined Dog on a round of the building. He could see where Adrian had secured the entrances and was pleased. The warehouse was mostly empty. Other than a few molded boxes and broken jars, the structure clearly hadn’t been used before the war. Ellijay didn’t have a manufacturing economy. That was obvious from the shacks and crumbling homes. After the war, this town had probably emptied quicker than most due to a lack of deliveries. It should be okay to sleep

here, but he would have Adrian put the bedrolls in the trucks instead of sleeping by the fire.

“Sorry, man.” Kevin nodded at Ray as he walked by.

Reminded yet again, Ray turned away from the rookie without replying.

Marc sighed. He had hoped Adrian might be able to talk some sense into Kevin. When they returned and told Angela about his behavior, it was possible she would eliminate him from her army. Kevin was about to be a camp member again. Marc didn’t imagine that would last long, but it was clear Kevin needed to remember how it worked in their camp. Selfish behavior would get people hurt or killed.

Dog sat at Marc’s feet, round of the building finished.

Marc knelt in front of his old friend, moving slowly. He wanted to give the wolf time to come to him. They’d been apart for so long that Dog had probably gone—

Marc was knocked over as the wolf barreled into him and began licking his face.

Laughter echoed through the warehouse.

Marc and Dog looked at each other with memories of past adventures and regret for things that hadn’t been said.

Marc waved it off. “Some other time.” He wanted to scratch the animal’s ears, but he wasn’t sure if their new relationship allowed that.

Dog peered up at him. *It's one of the best parts of having a human friend.*

Marc chuckled and let his hands go where they wanted.

That is nice! Dog moaned. *No one does me like you.*

Marc gave him a good scratch, trying to show the wolf how much he had missed him. By the time it was over, Dog was laying on his back at Marc's feet, paws in the air and tongue hanging out of his mouth.

"That's what I'm talking about." Kendle was watching them.

Not wanting to intrude, Adrian joined Kevin by the front window, where the rookie had appointed himself sentry instead of doing what Kendle told him.

Cheeks still flushed, Kevin tensed for more abuse.

"You can ride with me for scavenging runs when we get back. I always need a spotter."

Kevin's shoulders slumped. "I'm not one of them anymore. I'm trying, but it isn't working."

"I'll always be one of them and at the same time, I never have been. I understand." Adrian patted him on the shoulder as he turned to go see what Marc wanted now. "When you need a break, just tag-a-long. You don't need an invite."

Kendle also joined Marc, able to sense his impatience and concern growing now that he'd finished both parts of the mission.

Even Ray limped over to Marc, eager when the man silently asked if he was up for this. “You know it.”

Behind them, Kevin winced. He didn’t feel that way anymore. He would likely take Adrian up on his offer.

Marc did a last sweep of the property and then started the next step of getting them home. “I need a 10-minute inventory of the trucks. Kevin has guard duty. Ray will get a meal going. Dog will provide rounds of the doors and windows. Ten minutes. Let’s go.” Marc walked off without giving them time to question or argue. He wanted to be done.

The others hurried to do as he’d instructed, except for Ray, who wasn’t sure what to use for the meal. He’d been out of training so long that it took him a full moment of recollection before he limped to Marc’s semi, where he got their leader’s kit. It would have the extra rations and cook stove. He would collect water from each member of the team next. Ray’s stomach rumbled for the first time in days, reminding him that despite the agony of life, he wasn’t ready to die yet.

4

“How did it go?”

Dog huffed in annoyance as he sat on the cold concrete next to Adrian’s feet while the man repacked a bedroll on the front seat of his truck.

That woman was more trouble than any of us expected. She's lucky Jeff didn't leave her on the side of the road.

Adrian wasn't surprised by the revelation. His few minutes talking to Sally had convinced him of several things. One was that she was mean and sly enough to survive on her own once Jeff and Kevin got her to a better location. *Is she safe now?*

As much as any human can be. Nature's armies are gathering in the north. Come spring, everyone will be in danger.

Adrian wanted to get more updates from the wolf, but he knew Marc was serious about the amount of time they would spend here. Yawning, he motioned toward his truck. "You're welcome to bunk with me."

The wolf gazed up at him. *Not on your life.* Dog padded off in search of his master.

Adrian swallowed the sting and went to his truck. The wolf would always be Marc's. No charm could break that bond. It was a waste of time to even try.

Chapter Seven

Bumps in the Night

1

“**T**his is good.” Marc shoveled in another mouthful of rehydrated spaghetti. He wasn’t blowing smoke. After three days on dry rations and water, the spaghetti was delicious.

Ray beamed. They had given him spare clothes and he finally felt clean again for the first time in weeks. He’d used a few handfuls of hated, cherished snow to wash up before cooking. He and Dog had survived on it for days—giving Ray a love/hate complex for the fluffy precipitation.

The others paused to echo agreement and then returned to enjoying the hot meal. Even Dog was having a share, slurping the slippery noodles from a plastic jug Marc had cut in half and cleaned.

“What were you doing in the store?” Marc hadn’t been able to figure that out yet.

Ray swallowed a mouthful. “It’s in the center of town. Training taught me to clear in a circle.”

Marc had forgotten.

Ray belched, slapping his hand over his mouth when it echoed louder than he’d expected.

The others grinned, unable to help it. Ray didn’t normally make those noises.

Eating while on duty, Kevin stared resentfully at the group between sweeps of the windows, where the snow was piling up.

Marc ignored Kevin, playing the role of bad cop. Adrian was good cop for this one because Marc didn't have the patience to deal with Kevin's immaturities. He understood the grief, but he didn't have time for that either. "We're going to sleep for eight hours after we eat. Everyone will be in the cab of the truck they're driving. Every three hours, you can have heat for five minutes—after the guard on duty clears it. We'll stay dark and quiet, and hope we don't draw attention."

The group agreed without needing to discuss it. They were monitoring radio calls about the base and from the mountain, where some of the refugees were now living. They'd heard awful, familiar screams in the background of those calls. Not all of Jimmy's people were dead yet.

Some of the mission team had expected Marc to make plans for it, but he'd switched off the radio instead. They didn't have the manpower to force their way in to rescue Jimmy or his ducks. They also didn't have that much luck left. They would sleep and then get out of here before anything went wrong. This mission had gone too well, and this warehouse was still 300 miles from where Marc estimated Safe Haven to be. It was going to be a long trip home.

"Where do you want me and Dog?" Ray was getting sleepy now.

Marc gestured toward Kevin, who hadn't finished even half of his meal. "Kevin can use the company. Dog will ride where he wants to."

Everyone assumed that would be with Marc.

Ray began cleaning up the meal as soon as Marc was done, able to feel his need to be on the move. Once Ray finished, he would get the truck ready for Kevin. After standing in the cold for six hours, the man would be ready to rest. Ray planned to offer to relieve him then. He would do his share.

Marc gestured toward Kendle as she finished eating. "Go start all the trucks and put the heat on high."

Marc and Adrian were left alone as Kendle went to do as instructed. Adrian braced. He was never certain what to expect with Marc now.

"We need to drive straight through. That's 20 hours. How do we do it?"

Adrian was thrilled Marc was asking, but he didn't have an answer. "We can try to tow vehicles or just do it without stopping and probably have an accident. Twelve hours on the road used to be the max that even taxi drivers were allowed to do by law because reflexes slow so much."

"I need a solution to that by the time we roll out." Marc left Adrian standing there.

"You're not asking for much." Adrian stewed on it as he found a dark corner to use the bathroom. No one was allowed out right now, per Marc's orders. Adrian approved, but it didn't make peeing in a corner any more tolerable.

In various shadows of the warehouse, all of the mission team was doing the same. It was an ugly surprise to leave for anyone who might have to use this building for shelter after them, but there wasn't another choice if they didn't want to draw attention. They were already making too many smells and too much noise. Going outside would exacerbate that.

A wave of grief floated through the drafty building, pulling at Marc as he finished his business. He went to Ray. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Ray was glad Marc had come and not Kendle. "No, but they're all going to ask when we get back. It's better if I tell you and they get it that way."

"You don't have to answer."

Ray ignored the free pass. "They thought I was one of them. I dirtied up before I went in. They were playing with the ducks. Jimmy was hanging from the bottom ladder."

"And Dale?" Marc knew Ray needed to get it over with. The horror had to be shared or a soul would smother under the load.

"His throat was slit." Ray sobbed. "They found a way to make him stop screaming."

Marc hugged the man and tried to take half of the unbelievably heavy weight.

2

Half an hour later, the trucks were off, and the mission team was in warm cabins, trying to find comfortable positions. Some of them fell asleep

quickly, but not Marc and not Adrian. They both stewed, though on different topics.

Around the trucks, the drafty warehouse disappeared in the blizzard. Aware that it had come from the west, both men were worried about Safe Haven. Marc refused to dwell on it. He was concentrating on the trip home. He didn't expect Adrian to come up with an answer because there wasn't one. It was just busy work to keep the former leader out of trouble. Marc didn't want to shoot them up with chemicals to increase their alertness and they didn't have any of the caffeine pills left that Adrian used to keep on hand to help tired Eagles through the end of a shift. They would have to do it with stamina alone and that wasn't going to be enough.

The human brain refused to run when deprived of sleep. They had already been light on it for this trip, which meant when they woke up eight hours from now, they would feel as if they were suffering a hangover. In a way, they would be. That meant 10 more hours of driving was about the most they would be able to tolerate before it became too dangerous. The weather and their surroundings would make it worse. Marc wasn't sure what to do.

In the truck next to him, Adrian was aware of Marc's discontent, but he wasn't working on a travel solution like the man thought. He had decided it was a lost cause and moved on to a way to provide alertness for everyone. The strongest motivator he knew was fear. Being surrounded by refugees and

surviving UN troops would hold them for a few hours past what Marc estimated they were good for, but at hour 14, they would have to stop and then they would be vulnerable. Adrian was laboring on a plan to keep them from being followed, but he had no faith in it.

On the other side of Marc, Kendle was sleeping, but not peacefully. The closer they got to leaving on the boat, the harder it was for her to rest. Beyond the constant flashes she expected to have of her sister, and everyone else on the doomed cruise ship that had stranded her on Pitcairn Island, she also expected nightmares of the plane ride and of course, Ethan. He was never far from her mind, even when she was with Marc. Ethan was a torment she doubted would ever leave her.

In the last truck, Ray *was* sleeping peacefully. It was the first time he had felt safe since leaving to rescue Dale. Unlike the last four days, where his every dozing hour had been spent reliving Dale's death, this time he rested devoid of dreams.

Moving between the doors of the warehouse, Kevin made a complete circuit every half an hour, praying for daylight. He still hated the dark and the weight of their safety was firmly on his shoulders right now. Kevin suddenly missed the other Eagles. In the darkness, the building around them was too much like a tomb.

We have trouble!

Kevin's mental warning blared through the minds of the sleeping team.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Marc jerked awake, adrenaline immediately popping through his system like a firecracker. *Danger! This is why we're teamed. Not so we can reach him, but so he can reach us!*

Marc jumped out of the truck, ignoring Kevin's words as he listened to the sounds. They were either under attack or about to be.

Marc put his fingers to his lips to ensure Kevin understood to be quiet, then gestured for the drivers to get ready. He waved Kevin into the truck with Ray, who was already behind the wheel and eager to go. Marc pointed toward the weakest wall of the warehouse, wishing they didn't have to crash through and make so much noise, but the door wide enough to accommodate the semis was currently being pried open by an unknown number of intruders. From the shouts, Marc assumed it was refugees from the mountain. There wouldn't be any negotiations once they realized members of Safe Haven were in this warehouse. They would call in help to surround the place. Marc wasn't going to let that happen. He hurried back into the driver seat of his rig and started the engine.

"Someone *is* in there!"

"Get that door open!"

"Someone go around the front!"

The refugees split up to prevent an escape.

Marc's semi crashed through the wall, hitting several intruders and shoving their vehicles over the hill.

"Take this!" Kevin smashed into the bumper of a small truck and shoved it aside.

The other drivers didn't celebrate as they rolled from the warehouse. The action wasn't over yet.

Marc was instantly on edge because of the road under his tires. Covered in half a foot of snow, the morning sun had begun to melt it in places and the wind was refreezing it. This was like driving on ice.

Kendle and the others stayed as close to Marc as they could, driving through his tracks. None of them liked the feel of the road either, but even less appealing was the sight of half a dozen vehicles giving chase in their mirrors.

Marc recognized two of the intruders, anger boiling. The men had been denied entry to Safe Haven and placed in Zone C. Everyone had hoped those people were killed during the avalanche. Marc spotted Eagle gear on thin backs and swallowed a growl of rage. The only comfort was that none of the men and women looked sick. That was also a frustration, however, because they deserved to be ill or worse after everything they'd done to innocent people.

Dog yapped from the passenger seat of Marc's truck as a dirt bike came along side.

The driver of the bike leapt and missed, falling under the truck tires. The bike crashed into the semi and disintegrated with its driver.

Marc wasn't happy to see two more bikes trying the same suicide plunge on the other semis, but only one of them was successful.

Kendle braced for noise as she pulled the trigger, shooting the man outside her passenger window in the chest.

He fell into the snow as she hit the gas, ears ringing.

He was run over by a car chasing her.

Kendle kept her gun in hand in case someone else tried that, almost enjoying the cold air coming through the bullet hole in the window. There were still three vehicles behind them—a small white truck and two dented wagons, but those drivers didn't try to come alongside the semis where they could be knocked into the tree line or sandwiched. They just watched and followed. It made them more dangerous.

“We're following Safe Haven! I see the Ghost! I see Adrian!”

Radios came alive as their stalkers reported the location.

“We're traveling southwest on 20, outside Atlanta! We need help to box them in!”

Marc flipped to another channel and was dismayed to hear the same message going across the waves. It appeared the refugees had gotten more organized.

Marc saw Adrian roll his semi into a nearby parking lot and scowled, foot easing off the gas. *What the hell are you doing?!*

Go on. I'll catch up.

Marc wanted to leave him. He was furious with Adrian for disobeying, but he also agreed with the decision, which made it hard for him to leave the man on his own. If they took out the three vehicles following, the other refugees wouldn't know where they'd gone. They could escape.

Keep going! Marc turned the semi around in the front yard of a barbershop. It crushed the birdbath and decorative wheelbarrow that was full of frozen flowers.

He passed Kendle and Kevin, aware that one was frowning as the other hit the gas. Marc didn't know which way Adrian intended to play this, but it wasn't hard to figure out. They were basically driving tanks and the other guys weren't.

Adrian laughed as Marc's rig flew by him. He shifted his vehicle into gear to catch up, forming a ramming rod that took up both lanes of the icy road.

"Look out! Look out!"

The radio went dead as Marc's rig connected.

Adrian's semi crashed into one of the cars, knocking it into the truck.

With nowhere to go, the third car crashed into the pile. The driver flew through the window. He smacked into the front of Marc's rig.

As the body slid to the slushy, bloody ground, Marc hit the gas again to take his truck overtop the wreckage. He didn't want survivors.

Adrian followed Marc, hoping this scene would make it clear that Safe Haven should be left alone.

They would leave it here, like he had at the rest stop, as a warning.

Marc quickly caught up to the convoy, trying not to consider what the front of his truck looked like. If it was damaged, they would move the supplies into the other semis as fast as they could and leave it. There wasn't time for repair. The smoke from this wreck would tell refugees exactly where to go and there wasn't enough snow on the ground to hide their tracks. Marc scanned the area, hoping for somewhere they could lay low and let the refugees go by, but it was all businesses or hills.

Marc passed Kendle on the right as Adrian passed her on the left, both of them creating new grooves they hoped might confuse the coming people. It looked as though they had all turned around here. It would buy them a little time.

As Marc took lead of the convoy again and Adrian fell into the rear, he decided not to reprimand the former leader. He checked his internal clock as the wreckage fell behind and was surprised to discover it had been almost five hours since he went to sleep. Because of the hangover feeling, it seemed like a lot less. Determined to make it through, Marc dug in his kit for a drink and tried not to get bogged down in reflections of home. He could think about it after he was there.

In Safe Haven, Angela and the Eagles had been glued to radios for days. All their past channels had stayed active with refugees asking if anyone knew where Marc and Adrian had gone after the base. That had allowed Angela to breathe, knowing the team had slipped away. When the calls had come about the new wreckage, she had been concerned, but if anyone had found a Safe Haven survivor there, it was certain they would have bragged about it.

That's what she told the Eagles, but in her heart, it was impossible not to worry. A smart hunter didn't tell everyone when he caught his prey. He sold it to the highest buyer. In that case, it would be to the surviving UN troops, who would want revenge. Angela was positive Marc had accomplished that mission. From the calls, the mission team was in the north right now, but they'd had orders to handle the UN base first. That meant they were finished. Angela was looking forward to them getting here. She was shorthanded and the storm still had them trapped. There was no driving in this for most of her people. She just hoped Marc found a place for his team to hide until the storm was over. Anyone traveling through this was risking life and limb.

5

Fifteen hours later, Marc pulled into a deserted donut shop parking lot. The late afternoon rays were

glimmering on the melting snow, making his blurry vision worse as he exited the truck and met the others in front of the wide building. “We’re going to sleep now. Four hours, then we’ll go on. Eight hours after that, we’ll be home. Hit the bathroom while I pick a campsite.”

No one argued. All of them were glad to be out from behind the wheel for a few minutes. They were also a little impressed for going so long without stopping.

Marc waved them all off to use the bathroom and then did the same himself, missing the port-potties. When you were this tired, it hurt to squat.

As the drivers got back into their trucks, groaning and popping, radios flared up again, making them jump. It had been quiet for the last hour.

“Keep your eyes out for smoke, campfires, or lights. If you find them, call it and we’ll come help you block.”

They had been hearing that commanding voice all day. Always the same, it was obviously a leader of one of the groups. Marc and Adrian both assumed the man was from the mountain.

The land around them was darkening, hiding farms that had once helped to feed over 300 million people. It was awful to be here and not hear one horse or cow, to not see a single tractor on the two-lane road annoying other motorists. Marc wondered how many of the homes had root cellars with food and water, but there wasn’t time to explore them.

Someone who did have the time might get lucky. He didn't see signs of looting here.

Half a mile from the donut shop, Marc pulled them into a dairy barn with the charred remains of a farmhouse sitting on a one-lane easement. The dairy was dotted in bodies, but not of people. Cow carcasses littered the fields, and even in November, the flies were thick. The sound of their wings was disquieting.

Marc directed his group to the far edge of the property and placed the trucks into a tight square, going nose to bumper. Thanks to the quick inventory he'd had the team do, he had a little to work with. The white tarps would be placed over the trucks. They were visible from two directions right now, but not from the road in front of the dairy. It was the best he could do.

It took them almost an hour to get the tarps up, fighting the wind and snow the entire time, but it didn't take long for the weight to hold the tarps in place so they were no longer flapping and making noise. By the time they got all the covers in place, the snow was giving them a camouflage effect. They would be almost invisible if they stayed silent and didn't use lights.

Marc got everyone in the cabs of their trucks as soon as they finished, but this time they couldn't run engines for heat. It was miserable.

As full darkness slid over the site, heavy snow began to fall in thicker sheets that whipped through

the gaps in their small den. Adrian was flashed to his ride in the rear truck during the dust storm. He wondered suddenly how Seth was doing before letting sleep claim him.

Kendle was reminded of her flight with Luke when the hurricane had threatened to send water up to his cabin. That had been the night she'd become aware of the growing attraction between her and the older pilot. As she slowly sank into sleep's comfort, Kendle saw Luke beckoning to her and smiled. *No nightmares. Awesome.*

Kevin and Ray spent a few minutes chatting lightly about topics that wouldn't disrupt the peace before both of them curled up against windows and drifted into restless slumbers.

6

Gunfire woke Marc two hours later, bringing his weapon to hand and his head up to the frosted window.

"That's the Ghost!"

"Get him!"

Marc ducked as bullets slammed into the truck. He shoved over top the bags and boxes of supplies on the seat and in the floorboard, pinning Dog underneath him to keep the animal from being hit. As soon as there was a pause, Marc popped the passenger door on the truck and sprang out into the cold darkness with the wolf.

More gunshots echoed.

Using the mirror, Marc spotted Kevin and Ray firing from the open windows of their truck. They were both aiming toward Kendle's vehicle. He glanced in the other direction and found Adrian running to him.

"They flushed me out as soon as I drifted off. They've got my truck." Adrian shoved Marc aside as two tall, white-coated scavengers rounded the truck behind him. Adrian shot them both, then reloaded without a pause. "I'm out after this."

Marc provided a mag for Adrian's Colt, not commenting on the change of weapon.

Adrian slammed the mag in, reminding himself to make each shot count as if he were a rookie.

Marc rushed around the truck, heading for Kendle.

On the other edge of their small camp, Ray and Kevin ran toward Adrian's rig.

Gunfire split the air again, but it came from a familiar weapon, causing all of the men to pause to make certain that they didn't enter her line of fire.

"One more, south of me!" Kendle shouted as she reloaded.

Her team ran that way.

Kendle listened for the shots to confirm they had gotten the last scavenger, then joined them while scanning for more problems. When she didn't detect any, she lifted a brow toward Marc.

Unlike their previous pursuers, these men hadn't rushed in wildly or called for help. Adrian was sure they were UN sentries who had followed

them from the base. Assuming Kobi would keep his remaining men close had been a mistake, but they hadn't had enough manpower to kill them all.

"He should be dead now."

Marc nodded at Kendle's comment. She'd hit Kobi with a slow death spell, one that she'd gotten after her Market Town evolution. Kendle had learned how to kill with her mind, like Becky and Conner. She'd told Kobi to hang himself the first time he was left alone, but to get it on camera if he could. His obsession would help that along if the spell began to weaken. "I think they followed us from the base."

Satisfied with that answer, Kendle went to examine the damage to her vehicle. Her truck had taken several shots.

Marc did a fast sweep to verify no one was injured, including Dog, then waved them toward their trucks. "We have to go."

This time they would keep rolling until they reached Safe Haven. *I can't take anymore sudden wake ups.* Marc led the small convoy out of the bloody kill zone, glad the vehicles hadn't been damaged other than windows and mirrors. It was hard to be certain about the tires, but that was a concern for later.

He pulled them back onto the main road in the middle of a weakening blizzard. Rough weather was the safer challenge. It wasn't shooting bullets at them.

In the howling wind, refugees, scavengers, Safe Haven hopefuls, and revenge-seekers around them in the darkness missed the sound of their engines. The team slipped through unnoticed.

7

“How far out are we?” Ray had to break the silent tension.

Kevin knew where Safe Haven was camped, thanks to the maps Angela had given before they left the mountain. “About two hours.”

It had been eight hours since they were attacked at the tarp campsite. Some of that material was still hanging from the trucks. Marc hadn’t stopped yet to remove any of it.

Ray was happy to hear they would be arriving soon. He had spent the days praying for a lift. At that point, he had been willing to ride on a sleigh if it would eventually take him some place warm. Now, if he never saw another truck again, it would be too soon. He wanted to be still and sleeping.

All the drivers felt that way. With upset stomachs and headaches, it was hard to concentrate on the narrow strip of road in front of them while traveling without lights. Even though it was almost dawn, the blowing wind and snow made it impossible to tell the time without a watch. Marc could sense danger creeping up on them; if they used lights or stopped for even an hour, he was positive those on their trail would catch up. This

time, no one was alert enough to battle. They had to keep going.

A dark shape darted across the road in front of Marc.

He only jerked the wheel a little, not allowing the truck to fishtail. He didn't know what had run across the road.

Another dark shape ran into the road in front of him, this time staying put.

Marc hit the bear with the front left tire and felt it pop right before he heard it. Doing 40 mph on icy roads, the force of the impact jerked the wheel out of his hands and sent the truck careening to the right. Losing traction, the cab began to slide in toward the rig, jackknifing.

Something heavy slammed into the truck and cried out. Marc tried to steer as another dark shape ran by the skidding vehicle, but the ice had control.

Rubber lifted as the truck hit debris and tilted, spilling Marc from the seat. The metal shuddered, wanting to keep rolling... Held down by a foot of heavy, frozen snow it had to crunch through, the semi skidded forty feet before finally grinding to a halt.

“Damn...” In the floorboard, Marc lifted his head, groaning at new pains in his body. “This has been a long-ass trip.”

Dog licked his face in agreement. He was under Marc again.

Footsteps sounded and then paws thumped on the hood. A minute later, the cold draft hit him as the door was pried open.

“That’s a bear!”

“Don’t use your gun!”

“Stand watch while we get Marc.”

Marc took a minute to steady himself, examining his body for injuries. He had a nasty twinge in one leg and his ribs felt like a couple might be broken, but other than that, he seemed okay.

Adrian paused for Marc to take control of the situation and then realized they didn’t have time for that. “Do you want us to move the cargo or leave it?” Adrian saw a place in the tree-dotted countryside where they could squeeze around the wreck.

Marc tried to clear his head. “I think we need the supplies. Do we have time?”

“Not really, but we’ll make it if Safe Haven needs it.”

Marc regretted not sharing those sheets with Adrian because he was too dazed to remember what was on them. “In my pocket. Top jacket.” He was having trouble forming sentences. “I hit my head.”

Adrian retrieved the papers and found the one for Marc’s truck. “Blankets, medical supplies, water…” Adrian stuffed the papers into his pocket. “We need that cargo. Someone get him into one of the other trucks and then come help carry.”

Everyone hurried.

Smoke came from the engine of Marc's truck as Kevin shut it off. He didn't smell leaking fuel, so he didn't think there would be a fire. Kevin wondered if they had a siphoning kit and then remembered he did. He went to take care of it, assuming the fuel was important. It always had been to Jeff.

While Kevin siphoned the fuel into the 10-gallon canisters he'd pulled from each rig, the other three helped transfer the bags, boxes, and crates that were light enough for them. It was impossible to move everything. They were forced to pry open larger containers to remove the contents. It was slow, cold, tense labor where they twitched at noises and movements while trying to avoid the damp snowflakes that wanted to smother and drown them at the same time.

"Do you hear that?"

Everyone stilled at Adrian's question. It allowed them to hear Marc's boots crunching toward them.

"Get in the trucks!"

Adrian looked at Kendle. "Your job is to get the rookies in trucks and keep up."

Kendle grabbed Ray, spinning him around. "Time to go!"

"Too late!" Kevin dropped the bag. "Headlights!"

Everyone took off running.

Above them, the storm finally abated. It had done its worst. Now it was time for nature to sit back and observe the effects.

Chapter Eight
Checkpoint

1

“**W**e need to hide the wreck!”

“We’re out of time!” Marc shoved Kevin toward the trucks, wincing at his ribs and ankle. “Get out of here now! Cut through that field!”

Marc made sure the other drivers were rolling before climbing into Adrian’s rig. Dog was in Kevin’s semi, where Marc had spent half an hour trying to recover his faculties. *Let’s go!*

Adrian got moving, aware of lights and engines getting closer. Coming from multiple directions, he didn’t think they’d gotten out in time. Staying had been a mistake. “I’m sorry.”

“We need those supplies.” Marc held on as Adrian bounced overtop debris to get them out of sight. The road they were on was cut through the center of a narrow valley with steep sides that prevented driving up them to escape. Only a few scattered homes offered hope. Marc tried to choose the correct one. Seeing a rusting horse farm sign, he pointed that way. The big animal haulers needed time and room to travel. As a result, most large farms had their own access road.

“We found another wreck!” The radio lit up, making Marc and Adrian flinch. They weren’t out of sight yet.

“I see someone moving!”

“It’s them! That’s the same truck!”

Marc groaned at the pain in his ribs as Adrian pushed the truck to dangerous speeds in hopes the men behind them would be discouraged from following.

“I’m going to take care of it and then I’m going to pass out.” Marc tightened his grip on the dashboard. “Don’t stop until you get to camp.”

“I won’t, and you’ll be with us.”

Marc didn’t let their connection close yet. He needed energy.

“Take what you need.” Adrian had never thought to say those words to Marc.

Marc drew what he needed, but it was almost too much. Adrian tasted like old death.

The powerful energy sank into Marc’s body, partially healing his ribs and fueling his anger. He opened the mental door he hadn’t had time to explore during the fight in Market Town.

Lightning flashed across the sky and arced in a vicious blast that forked down and hit two of the vehicles chasing them. One of the jeeps flew into the air and landed on top of the other. The last one burst into flames from the lightning strike.

The small wreck filled in the trench left in the snow from Adrian’s truck, blocking access.

Wanting to be sure they had enough time to get to camp, Marc used the last of his energy to send one more blast. It hit a tree and knocked it over, blocking the remaining part of the yard that a smaller vehicle could have driven through. He hadn't seen any big rigs or tanks with the refugees yet. He hoped they would have to move the tree or the truck by hand to be able to follow. In that time, the mission team would disappear.

“They blocked us with magic! It is Safe Haven!”

“Where?!”

“We're in Atlanta! They're going north!”

Adrian was glad north was the last direction people were going to get. As soon as he was able, the convoy would turn south. Adrian caught up to the other trucks and took the lead.

In the seat next to him, Marc slumped over.

Even though they were close to camp, Adrian couldn't leave him like that. He shifted in the seat to lay a hand on Marc's shoulder. Other hand on the wheel and concentration split into different directions, Adrian pulled energy from the storm around them and directed it into Marc's body. It was a minor gift most descendants had but didn't know about. Their kind often refused to use it once they recognized the ability. Nature fought hard when her energy was stolen.

Marc didn't react as the healing orbs swarmed through his body, mending another layer of his injuries.

Adrian was afraid to steal more. Trying to withstand nature's wrath was a bad idea right now. Safe Haven didn't need the extra trouble.

Danger!

Adrian didn't slow as mental alarms blared, showing him a threat that was terrifying.

2

Bugout! Get out of there!

Angela tensed as Adrian's message slammed into her. It was obvious from the tone of utter weariness that the mission team had had a rough trip. She assumed they'd been dodging refugees all along and hadn't been able to lose them. Relieved to know, it was still dismaying when the mental call immediately caused what she had feared.

Radios around Safe Haven lit up.

"I'm a descendant tracker. I just picked up a call from Adrian to Angela. Safe Haven is close. I'm near Talladega and the call was clear as a bell."

Radios went crazy with responses.

It's us! The danger is here! Angela rotated toward Kenn. She hadn't known trackers were sneaking up on her. "You have point. Get them in the trucks!"

Kenn ran.

The tiny town flooded with activity as word spread.

Angela went to help with the kids. She wasn't happy to have the confirmation of a descendant

tracker, but she was glad Adrian had warned her. She was also worried that Marc hadn't. It meant something had gone wrong. She wanted to demand to know what it was, but forcing the mission team to respond would give the tracker a positive location on both groups. One shot got attention. Two narrowed it down and brought danger directly to the door. That was the law of the land.

It took Safe Haven almost 20 minutes to get loaded.

The Eagles were on the verge of panic. The tracker had been near enough to reach them in 30 minutes. They were cutting it close. Many of them had wanted Angela to leave as soon as the camp rose this morning, but she'd been adamant about not making them travel through the storm. Having accidents would hold them up longer than lingering for the mission team, but Angela didn't have a choice now.

"We're all in." Kenn stuffed the paper into his pocket. "Every name."

Angela got into the truck upon hearing that, eager for the warmth. The storm wasn't completely over, but it had slacked off enough to allow them to see where they were going. The wind was still a harsh mistress that had tried to blow them off their feet as they'd helped camp members to their assigned vehicles. Thanks to Conner and Charlie working a double shift, all the cars had been fueled and checked for problems this morning.

Behind the lead rig, drivers started engines and shifted into drive with their feet on the brakes so they could get going the instant the car in front of them moved.

Kenn got the convoy rolling through the dusky twilight as Angela took her map out and Tonya huddled silently in the center with her cat.

“We’re going to have to split them up.” Angela was thinking aloud. “Right now, we can be tracked from every direction. We need to make certain we only have one direction to defend—our ass. We need...a chokepoint.”

Kenn concentrated, trying to bring up what he knew about the area.

“I always wanted to take a vacation here.” Tonya let out a deep sigh of longing for the old world. “What if we drove through a cave or a tunnel?”

Angela shoved the map at her and took the cat. “Show me.”

Waiting for Tonya to find what she was hunting for, Angela swept the landscape, but she couldn’t view much through the frosty windows between her and the apocalyptic darkness. She also couldn’t sense much, but she wasn’t sure if that was because she was weak or because this area was deserted. That wouldn’t last. The tracker had almost reached the tiny town by now. They would know on sight that Safe Haven had left in a hurry. They would realize they were within an hour of their target and the refugees would be called in, but they wouldn’t

camp and fight over tidbits this time. The tracker would keep goading them while Safe Haven's trail was hot.

Tonya used the flashlight around her neck to narrow the right location. "The Cathedral Caverns had a driving tour that lasted hours and took people into the caves. I have no idea what conditions we might find. There could already be people there or it might be blocked."

Angela traded back and scanned the map again. "The turnoff for that is three hours. I'll let you know by the time we get there."

Kenn didn't comment, still racking his brain. No one wanted to drive underground after an apocalypse, and certainly not while they were being chased by refugees. If Safe Haven got trapped there, they would all die in the dark.

"How do you feel about being a decoy?"

It was Angela's way of asking if Kenn was going to let his relationship with Tonya get in the way of their survival.

Kenn grunted. "Just tell me what you want."

"I want a small group of us to block the road and pull attention so the rest of the camp can keep going. When the mission team arrives, hopefully they'll be able to help us trap anyone we haven't picked off yet. You can choose where we set it up, so we have the advantage."

"Do you want them dead or stopped?"

"Whatever we have time for, but preferably dead—especially the tracker. He's one of us."

Kenn began to dope it out.

Angela tried to gather energy she didn't have, not sure what type of trap Kenn would devise. If it required magic, she needed to be ready.

"I can do it without that, but I'll need 20 men with all the grenade launchers we can scrape together, and you'll want everyone in the double vest setups. We have just enough to cover 20 people." Kenn glanced at Tonya. "She and the cat can protect our getaway truck."

Angela snickered, welcoming the amusement in place of the tension. "Sounds like a plan. Flash lights to notify Ivan and then pick your spot. I'll handle passing information to everyone else."

Kenn did as instructed, getting excited. He hadn't made an on-the-spot plan like this for a while, but he'd always had great luck with them in the past. Like Marc, he was quick on his feet.

Tonya held onto her cat and hoped it went well. She didn't mind being along for the action. She would mind if she got hurt.

So would I. Kenn patted her wrist. *So would I.*

3

"Are we ready?" Angela asked 15 minutes later.

"Can't you tell?" Kenn was full of eager excitement as point man over the quick, hard attack.

"If I could, we probably wouldn't be here."

Kenn missed her mutter. He was directing the last man into place. "We've got it. Ten minutes from

now, we'll be ghosts and they'll all be stuck right here."

"Clearing the wreck and consuming the supplies we're leaving?"

"Yes."

"And it's the slower version, so all of them will eat or drink before anyone notices a problem?"

"Yes. I mixed it using your instructions."

Angela refused to tell him good. She'd been able to do that with the vet because he hadn't had a soul left to finish corrupting.

"Put these on." Kenn shoved a set of earplugs at her.

She flinched at the fast movement, hating that reaction, but she'd lost her edge while cowering in the mountain. It would take time to recover it.

Kenn waved at the chokepoint, where darkness and snow hid their trap. "Headlights are coming."

"On your call."

Kenn waited patiently as the engines grew louder, not caring about the damp flakes falling or the camp getting further away with each second. For him, there was only this moment. "Now!"

Cars began to roll through the chokepoint, forced into two racing, bumping lines because of the narrow road.

Grenades flew under the tires and into the rear of a truck. More small bombs flew through the darkness, flashing Angela back to the rest stop. She was copying Adrian's plan. Like with the Mexicans,

these refugees didn't see the grenades coming either.

Explosions filled the sky, then the screams and grinding metal noises.

I get shot after this... Angela was unable to pull out of the memory.

“Get her down!”

Morgan shoved Angela to her knees as gunfire came.

Pain brought Angela back. She stayed down so she didn't make things worse, cursing herself.

“Behind us!”

Gunfire came again, pinging off the rocks and the ground around them.

“It's the tracker!” Shawn fired.

So did the tracker.

Kenn threw himself overtop Angela, but there were too many bullets and blasts to defend against. He felt her flinch from his weight and then again as she was hit. Her silence chilled them all.

4

“Angie!” Marc snapped awake. “She needs me. She's hurt!”

Adrian's lips were thin lines across his face. “I know.”

“Hurry up!”

“Wrecking won't get us there any faster. Be quiet and let me concentrate.”

Marc shut up, able to feel Adrian's fear. It was as bright and nauseating as his own. Marc tried to scan what had happened, positive they were close enough for him to be able to do so even though he was tired. He didn't care about the tracker. He cared about Angie.

"I see lights. Do you have your glasses?"

Marc dug through his kit. He peered through the powerful, bent glasses as a narrow road came up in front of them. "It looks like there was a battle. I see burning cars and bodies."

Adrian slowed the truck. "Do you want to go straight in or circle around?" He already knew the answer, but he wasn't the leader of this team. He was required to ask.

"Straight through."

Adrian increased speed to get up the hill behind the chokepoint, positive the drivers behind him were aware of the situation and bracing for action. Adrian also made sure his gun was in reach, though he was out of ammunition once he emptied this mag.

"Just follow my lead. I'll do the shooting."

Adrian was aware of Marc using the small amount of energy they had both recharged over the last two hours, but he doubted it would be enough. Adrian pushed the truck faster over the ice.

Ahead of them, lights flashed a code that allowed both men to breathe again. It was the all-clear signal.

“They want us to keep going and fall into the rear of the convoy.” When Marc didn’t answer, Adrian steered around Kyle and Kenn, taking him to the boss.

No one tried to stop them.

“There she is.” Marc flew from the truck as soon as it stopped.

Adrian followed Marc as he rushed to where Angela was sitting on the icy bumper of Kenn’s semi. Gritting her teeth against the pain as Neil put clumsy stitches in her calf, she was surrounded by protection and the other injured. Those men, waiting their turn, wore proud expressions that told the team they’d insisted Angela receive attention first since Neil was the only medic here.

Angela waved them toward Adrian. “He knows how to do this too. Get it done so we can get back with the camp.”

Adrian’s pleasure sent a blast of warmth through all of them.

Please?

Angela nodded at Marc’s plea.

Marc abruptly slammed the mental door between the team, cutting all lines of communication.

Not expecting it, all three team members groaned at the searing pain. Kevin got the least of it and was able to shake it off first because he wasn’t a descendant. Kendle and Adrian glared at Marc for breaking the connection without a warning.

Marc ignored their displeasure. It was another weakness in Angela's army—one he would need to fix if there really was a final battle coming for them. He was positive that fight would push all of their limits and then some.

Marc watched Kendle and Ray drive by, following Angela's orders to catch up with the convoy. He was glad to see them go. Tired and hurt, he was ready for someone else to be in charge while he recovered.

Angela curled a hand around his wrist, lending warmth and love. "Fifteen minutes."

Marc nodded. He could do that long. "Kobi said there were reinforcements on the way." He handed her a small notebook. "I wrote it all down."

"Did he say how many?"

"No, but I caught the image in his mind. He thinks it's enough to wipe out every survivor left in our country."

Angela sighed. That meant another hard choice. If they got out fast enough, they could avoid that final fight. If they gathered what they needed, the battle was inevitable.

Marc leaned in. "You have that covered, right?"

Angela stood up and dropped her pant leg.

Eager for praise, Kenn stepped forward and put his hand on Marc's shoulder. "Check this shit out."

Marc observed without comment as Kenn and the Eagles, with Angela in the center, used the High Ground technique to attack the refugees at a chokepoint. Unable to escape or go around, it had

made them sitting ducks for the grenades and snipers. Angela had gotten hurt because the snow and darkness had blinded them to the tracker sneaking up in a blind spot. On the other hand, the snow and gusting wind had destroyed his perfect shot and given her a minor leg wound. The tracker was lying in the snow nearby with five bullet wounds and a knife sticking out of his chest. Marc was satisfied as much as he could be and let it go. She had survived. That was what mattered.

Kneeling to sew Ivan's trim, Adrian echoed the thought. No matter how awkward it got, they both wanted Angela to live. Despite the deals they had made, neither of them would slack in that duty.

Angela knew what both men were thinking and feeling. It was what she had experienced when the radio had gone crazy with sightings of them and the accidents. Now that they were both within sight, her heart had settled into a normal rhythm and the haze was slowly clearing from her eyes. They were home. She could breathe again.

As Neil and Adrian finished tending their wounded, Marc took charge. He could feel Angie's need to be with the camp. It matched his. She was safer there. He regarded Ivan, who was providing protection for the boss with his team. "Get to where you were assigned in line. I want everyone in their places ASAP." Marc pointed at Adrian before any of the Eagles could argue with his order. "Drive the first shift. We'll switch off at breaks."

Stunned, Adrian hurried to get the truck started.

Marc motioned to Kenn. “All of us are unsafe to drive. We need replacements.”

“I’ll handle it. No worries.”

Marc was confident Kenn would. The Marine wasn’t the same man he’d once wanted dead.

Marc scooped Angela up, so she didn’t pop the stitches before they had a chance to set. He carried her to the truck and slid her into the center, where she would be hit directly by the heat. He could hear her teeth chattering.

He closed the door and turned to sweep the scene, making certain all of their people left first. It was what Angela wanted, but it was also what a leader did and as much as he didn’t want the job anymore, Marc was good at it.

The rocky hills around them were dark, spooky icons that pretended to give protection, but actually gave ambushers the advantage if they attacked from that direction. Much like Angela had done, Safe Haven would be trapped.

Marc also sensed nature growing upset again. It was in the sharpening of the wind and the stiffening of the ground under his boots.

Angela huddled against Adrian’s shoulder for warmth as he got the heater going, shivering. She had used almost all the remaining energy she’d gathered during their days of camping in the tiny town. She’d also shielded the site during the fight with the descendant tracker, trying to keep other refugees from hearing the noise or seeing the lights. She was exhausted again.

Adrian fought the urge to put his arm around her, aware of the stares and glares from Ivan and some of the other Eagles. No one wanted him here, but he was staying until Marc told him to get lost. Adrian doubted it would be long. He and Marc only tolerated each other for short periods. This mission had already crossed that limit.

Marc got into the truck. “Wait until all of them are in line where they’re supposed to be. Angie will tell you where that is. Then take us to the front.” Final order given, Marc locked the door and slumped against the seat. The pain in his chest was almost unbearable.

Realizing he was injured, Angela began to grope him.

Marc grabbed her hand before she could touch his chest. “That’s where my broken ribs used to be. Now, it’s just bruised ribs, but the nerve endings haven’t caught up yet. They still think I’m broken.”

Angela gave Adrian a nasty frown. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Adrian shrugged. “My bad.”

“Say what?!”

Adrian let out a sound of derision in response to her annoyance. “He’d do the same for me.”

Marc chuckled, then groaned. “You know it.” *Life with you around is never boring.*

Angela frowned as the men chuckled, but she didn’t complain. Any peace between the two, even amusement at her expense, was welcome.

Hating his pain, Angela used the last of her reserves to send a blast of healing energy into Marc. When she slumped against him, unable to fight the exhaustion, Marc curled her into his body and covered her with an extra jacket from his kit. He rotated the vents toward her feet and then shut his eyes, leaning against the seat.

Adrian felt it when they both dropped off. Enjoying the sensation of being in charge of their lives again, he followed Marc's instructions to the letter. Once everyone was in place in the convoy, he pulled around to lead Safe Haven for the first time in months. The feeling was indescribable.

The radio lit up again. "Who has a location?"

Adrian shut it off to keep from disturbing his passengers. Ivan and his tank were rolling in front of the convoy, clearing a path. The pushed-aside drifts created a barrier that made it difficult for a vehicle to slide out of control, allowing him to bounce along in the rut minus the tension that had accompanied most of the driving he'd done thus far. It was a relief. It also might have been a little monotonous and put him to sleep except for the woman next to him. The excitement of being with Angie, though Marc was in the truck too, kept him wide awake and eager to do a great job.

5

"How awkward do you think it is in that truck?"
Tonya snickered at her observation.

Kenn chuckled as he stayed on Adrian's bumper. "About as awkward as this one." He looked over at Kendle, who hadn't been happy to learn she was assigned with them.

She'd expected to be grilled the entire trip, but all she wanted to do was sleep. Kenn had surprised her by not asking a single question. Almost dozing now, Kendle gave them a bit of details as a reward for their patience. "This trip let them sort some stuff out. I'll bet Marc is asleep. There is no tension."

Kenn and Tonya hadn't considered that. Despite the entertainment of having the two men always at each other's throats, even they were sick of the drama.

"Good." Kenn reached over to increase the heat, then pointed the vent toward Kendle. The cold coming off her was putting an actual chill into the cabin. "Get some sleep. We'll wake you at the first break."

Kendle was surprised. She had expected the ride to be tense, but if they weren't going to harass her, it was perfect. She trusted both of them. That was another surprise. She drifted off while considering how much she'd changed since returning to her homeland.

Tonya was proud of Kenn, but she didn't want to embarrass him by saying so in front of Kendle. She settled for leaning against his arm in contentment.

Ray and Kevin didn't have an assigned spot in the convoy because they hadn't been in camp. Unsure where Angie wanted the men, but unwilling to disturb her, Kyle had directed them to the rear. Now that the tension was over, Ray was asleep in the passenger seat with Dog curled up on his feet.

Next to him, Kevin suffered through the chatter from their rookie driver, again simmering with resentment at being ignored despite participating in the run. Being placed in the rear of the convoy was a reminder that he was no one in Safe Haven.

6

"Pit stop." Adrian pulled the truck in behind the tank.

He had let them sleep for four hours, counting on Ivan and his team to know the route. Adrian was certain Angela had given them a map. When the soldiers had flashed a light at hour two, indicating a possible bathroom stop, Adrian had denied it without asking Marc or Angela. They hadn't been far enough from their last known location. At hour four, when Ivan had once again contacted him about a possible stop, Adrian hadn't pushed it. He couldn't drive any longer without it becoming unsafe. "We're making a stop for bathrooms and driver switches."

Marc yawned. "Sounds right." He stepped from the truck to supervise the stop in Angela's place.

She immediately curled up on the seat in his warm spot and went back to sleep, content they would handle it.

Adrian stayed in the truck. This was the way he and Marc would handle her security anytime they were responsible for it. He hoped the Eagles observing them would copy it.

Some camp members and Eagles waved in recognition of Adrian being in the lead rig. It made others frown unhappily, but most people were relieved. With everything Safe Haven was going through now, and might face in the future, it was a relief to know their original shepherd was nearby to offer assistance. It was obvious that he was still needed. More than a few people regretted not lifting his banishment. They were hoping this recent adventure with Marc might allow him to return to being part of the camp. It didn't feel right without him.

Adrian was catching some of those thoughts, but not many. He waited groggily for the bathroom stop to be over so he could go where Marc told him to and sleep.

Adrian flinched as the passenger door opened.

Marc leaned in. "Baby-cakes, come take a pit stop."

Angela allowed Marc to help her from the truck, barely awake.

Marc looked at Adrian. "Slide over into my spot."

As the door slammed, Adrian smiled. When Marc rewarded a man, he knew exactly how to do it. He was giving Adrian the only reward he wanted—to stay in the truck with them.

Marc was aware of Adrian's pleasure, but he didn't care. Right now, keeping Adrian in the truck was another layer of protection for Angela. The radio was telling them of small groups of refugees converging on their last known location. Soon, those people would view the wreckage and get on their trail again. Safe Haven needed to vanish.

Around the convoy, the storm had finally stopped. The wind was down too. Over the next few days, the land would begin to thaw. Marc was looking forward to that as much as he was dreading it. He hated being cold, and driving on the ice sucked, but once the ground dried up, their pursuers would be able to make better time than Safe Haven could as they repeatedly stopped to clear the path. At some point, the refugees would catch up again.

Marc assumed Angela had a plan for that, but he wasn't going to bug her about it right now. The mood wasn't great. They didn't need a delay while leadership chatted. The decaying amusement park winding around the huge parking lot for miles in the distance glistened with edges of roller-coaster tracks and faded display stands, drawing the attention of everyone, including Eagles. The cold fog covered most of the park around them, but not enough to keep people from missing their old lives.

Angela finished quickly and let Marc put her back into the truck through the driver's door. Shivering, she groaned as he pushed her over against Adrian's warmth.

"Make her comfortable." Marc couldn't help the curt tone. "Do it the way you would if I wasn't here."

Frowning, Adrian slipped an arm around Angela and pulled his jacket tight around them to create a small cocoon of warmth as Marc tilted the vents.

"Thank you." Angela tried not to shiver or move against him, but it was hard. She was cold.

"As if I wasn't here."

Stunned that Marc was ordering this, Adrian placed his jaw against her cold cheek and connected them. His warmth was hers now.

A few seconds later, they were asleep in each other's arms.

Marc led the convoy away from the amusement park, not looking at the couple in the truck with him. Of all the things he'd had to do over the last 10 months, moments like this were by far the hardest. Putting his jealousy second and Angela's needs first would never come natural to him, but as long as he was in control of the situation, he wanted that. In time, it would no longer be a problem, because Adrian would be gone.

Marc was looking forward to that for the most part, but after this latest adventure, he was dismayed to discover that a part of him would miss the rivalry

with Adrian. When he'd said life with the former leader was never boring, he'd meant that in a good way this time. Even after all the misery Safe Haven had been through, Marc still needed excitement to feel alive. It had been part of what caused him to leave Angie behind for the Marines when they were young, and it was part of what might allow him to accept Adrian in her life now. There was no one else who could match him here. *If I kill Adrian, I might get too bored to stay.*

Chapter Nine
Getting Gone

November 11th

1

“**A**re they supposed to be stopping yet?”

Angela roused herself from the warm spot between the two males to peer around. She slowly nodded. “It didn’t look this way on the map, but yes. We’ve been in the cars for over a full day now. Everyone needs a break.”

“For how long?” Marc didn’t like the idea of stopping yet, though they hadn’t heard from any of their followers in hours.

“I was hoping for a two-day break, but make it one. Kenn has point for the setup, with Zack on camp security, Neil over the injured, and Jennifer with the kids.”

As Marc parked behind Ivan’s tank, Adrian got his notebook out.

Angela pointed. “We’ll need a small quarantine zone set up over there.”

“Really?” Adrian’s voice went up in hope. “Is Safe Haven accepting survivors again?”

“We will always take good people. It’s up to them to approach us in a way that doesn’t trigger our defenses. It will be harder for everyone now.”

Angela stretched and yawned as Adrian wrote it down. When he caught up, she continued. “I want security up before anyone gets out of the vehicles. Pass that code now. Zack and Kyle are coming.”

As Marc did it, Adrian asked, “What do you want Kyle doing?”

“Supply run. He already knows.”

Zack came to the window and took the order from Adrian without comment, not caring. The trucker was just happy to be out of the vehicle for a while. He’d forgotten what it was like.

“The top two levels are going out on supply hunts. I want them ready in three hours. They have one day to make it to their location and do pickups, then catch up to the camp. That will put us short for security overnight. Get all the camp members involved that you can. They aren’t trained, but they can walk a shift.” She paused, aware of Marc waiting on her other side for orders. “Teams are not to have contact with anyone. No radios. We’re all on silence. Orders will be handled by code. I don’t want to hear a single transmission while we’re here.”

Adrian wasn’t certain how she was going to enforce that unless Marc refused to deliver the radios that they’d collected from the UN base.

“We’ll leave those in the truck for now.”

Adrian nodded at Marc’s choice, glad that they wouldn’t have to worry about it. Only a few people in Safe Haven had a radio and those Eagles could be trusted not to use them. “Anything else?”

“As soon as camp is up, I want you out of here.”

Expecting it from her, Adrian nodded. There would be time to mourn later.

Angela wasn't concerned with his emotions. She cared about the reaction of her camp. Yesterday, when they'd been under attack, no one had cared Adrian was in the lead rig with them. Today, they were getting half curious, half hostile stares and Angela didn't have the time or patience to explain to each person what was going on. That meant Adrian had to leave.

“I'm going to overrule you until the teams come back.” Marc didn't look at her. “I need him on duty.”

Angela frowned at him. “If we make an exception, what happens a week from now when the same teams are out or we're still shorthanded?”

Marc let out a sigh of frustration. “I'm not going to lift his banishment.”

“I didn't ask you to. In fact, I just kicked him out. Let me work.”

“Not this time, Angie. He stays until I'm ready for him to go. Tell the camp to talk to me.” Marc left the truck before either of them could argue.

Angela focused on Adrian. “What happened between you two?”

Adrian shrugged, making notes in the book to hide his delight. “I have no idea, but I'll try hard to repeat it.”

With one of the biggest dramas settled for a bit, Angela lit a stale cigarette and mentally ran through

the other issues. She wanted to verify everything was covered before letting the camp out. Right now, there were 163 people in Safe Haven. They were low on food, water, and fuel. They had injuries, and they'd been forced to travel through the remains of a blizzard that had dropped two feet of snow. Radiation levels were a little high in this area and under the snow was a layer of ash from Yellowstone. The trees were covered in moldy snow and the melting drifts were turning the ground into an endless mud puddle. They had ants and refugees following, the roads were in terrible condition, and they didn't have any toilet paper left. She had enough problems. She didn't want to miss anything and add to the list.

Adrian stayed close as Angela fastened her parka and exited the truck. He could feel her deciding what part of her list was priority. Instead of helping with it, Adrian enjoyed being there while she sorted it out. Her mind was a machine few could compete with and that included him.

Eagles and camp members stared in surprise as Adrian stayed with the boss, making notes as if he were her XO. Those who had voted to lift Adrian's banishment were thrilled he was being allowed in for any length of time. Most of those who had voted to have him executed were angry he wasn't being told to leave now. They studied his every move, hoping he screwed up so they could demand a new punishment.

Marc was aware of the unrest over Adrian, but they had bigger problems than a former traitor hanging around to fill in as a warm body. Later, when those same people saw Adrian out in the bad weather, miserable, they would understand what Marc was doing. Or at least, they would think so. Marc wasn't in the mood to tell them he didn't feel like Angela was safe with both Special Forces teams leaving camp. Adrian would keep her alive no matter where she was, but he could only do that if he was able to stay close to her. Marc wanted that job himself, but he couldn't have it. He was leadership and that meant his time was already filled.

Angela waved toward the parking area, where a minor fender bender was holding them up.

Marc moved that way.

Adrian and Angela walked the perimeter the Eagles were putting up, yellow tape flashing them both back to a time when they'd done this without such atrocities between them. Having a sudden rash of conscience, Adrian thought about apologizing.

"Save it!"

Adrian did, for a time when they were alone, so he could figure out how to reach her.

"I can't wait." Angela swallowed her sarcasm. She motioned Ivan and Kendle to join them, not wanting to be alone with him.

As Adrian fell in step and Ivan took the other side, Angela felt protected for the first time since the mission team had split from camp. Adrian and

Ivan were killers. That was a comfort in her weakened condition.

Kendle was surprised to have duty over the boss at all, let alone in broad daylight with everyone watching. She didn't mind being in the rear. It helped perk her up after the horribly long ride.

Angela glanced at Adrian. "The perimeter men need a copy of these orders."

"Do you want me to translate?"

"Yes."

Adrian began delivering the orders in hand code to those on duty.

Ivan made notes to tell the team leaders.

Kendle realized she had security over the boss. She did a fast sweep for problems and then did another scan to determine if a sniper detail had been set up yet.

"They have two people headed out, but they're not in place yet." Angela gave Kendle a subtle scan over Adrian's shoulder.

Kendle tensed. A small group of people was coming to surround Angela and she wasn't sure if that was okay.

Adrian touched Kendle's wrist to calm her, but he didn't pull his attention away from Angela, who was now giving him locations on where the teams were heading for supplies.

Kendle let the people through because Adrian thought it was okay. He wouldn't risk Angela's safety. Kendle hadn't been here for Safe Haven's travel time. She didn't know how it worked yet and

she needed time to observe so she could learn the patterns.

Right now, Angela was as safe as it got. Kendle was with them so she could learn the job. Adrian assumed she would have more responsibilities later. The castaway had earned a fair shot.

Angela looked at Kyle. “There’s a water treatment plant 10 miles north and another one 30 miles northwest. If neither of them has what we need, that mission team needs to keep going to the next location. I’ve marked them all on this map. We have to have water. The snow will hold us during this stop and maybe the next, but after that, we’ll be out. This is the one team that is not allowed to fail.”

Kyle was confident he and his team could handle it, but he didn’t want to offend Neil, who was also capable of doing that duty. “Either of us can.”

“Good, because fuel is our second biggest problem and it’s as dangerous as being without water. Here are the maps I have for possible fuel locations.” She handed them to Neil. “If you guys decide to change locations or run them together for more protection, that’s fine. Adrian always said when I wasn’t certain which team should do the run, to let the team make the choice. This is the first time I’ve ever done that. Be careful.”

Proud and worried, Neil and Kyle left, comparing maps to make their decision.

“I wish I had a third Special Forces team to send out for food in the morning,” Angela complained

before the next group got in earshot. “The level six team is good, but not enough yet.”

Ivan found his mouth opening before his brain thought it through. “I could take care of it.”

That was fast. Adrian stared at Angela. He hadn’t known she was working on Ivan that way.

Angela ignored Adrian’s observation and Kendle’s frown. “How about Peter, James, and two others of your choice? I’d give you Kendle too, but she has a team run.”

Kendle and Adrian hadn’t been in camp for the new rule about no women being sent out on runs, so her choice drew no reaction. It would become clear to the camp that members of the council were going to be exempt from some of the rules. Angela didn’t want to do that, but Kendle was more of a man than some of the rookies were and they needed every fighter they could get on these runs. Food and fuel was hard to get, and water took longer to procure. She needed the castaway out there fighting for them.

Kendle wasn’t sure exactly what to do or who to pick, so she waited for more details.

Angela gestured at James, who was nearby in one of the small groups. “He already has it sorted out. He’s coming for confirmation.”

Kendle lifted her brow. “Marc wanted me with you for security...or should I go find my team?”

“Your team.” Angela turned to the next group waiting for her attention.

Kendle was suddenly eager to be gone again. This mission would be like the one she had handled with Tommy and her guys.

Swallowing a smile, Adrian continued to translate, wondering what Angela had planned for him. He now had no doubt that she'd known he would be allowed to stay in camp for a while.

Angela gestured at Zack after he gave her a signal that said the perimeter security was up. Zack was changing his flab to muscle and it was noticeable. Camp females watched him walk by, not hiding their appreciation. Angela found it interesting that Zack didn't notice, though his sons did. They chuckled and tried to pick the woman they could accept in their dad's life. "I want you and your team on point for the first 12 hours. The next level down will take over as your relief to cover the 12 after that. Then you're back on duty. That schedule will alternate until Neil returns."

Zack was honored. "I'll handle it." Zack waved for people to follow him for instructions as Angela focused on the next group.

Around them, the camp watched and waited.

Before Angela could hand out the next order, Conner and Charlie appeared. Both teenagers waited impatiently for their duty, trying to hide grins.

Angela rolled her eyes. "Conner and Charlie have transportation and livestock detail."

Happy, the boys ran off.

“Brittani and Gus’s brothers said they can handle the meals for us. It’s early afternoon already, so tell them to cover a generous, early evening mess and skip lunch. I want Gus with his team.”

“You got it.” Adrian wasn’t familiar with that family, but as far as he knew, they had been taking care of Safe Haven’s meals for the last month anyway.

“All level fours will help Zack’s team. They work when he works; they sleep when he sleeps. Level twos are off duty right now, as well as level ones. Both of those teams will be back on duty in eight hours. We’ll overlap the shifts to have it all covered.” Angela drew in a breath, knowing her next order wouldn’t go over well. “Rookie level one, Ivan’s team, will have personal security over council members between their runs.” She turned to Kenn, wanting him to understand he was in charge of the next order. “Get the supplies sorted and the camp outfitted. Start with the groups leaving, then move to camp members. Take your team.”

Angela ignored the mental and verbal protests, finally getting around to Adrian. “You and Marc will map out our route of travel and breaks.” Angela gave a glare that no one was able to mistake. It said to get busy.

Adrian took a step closer, not wanting to question her openly. “Only level ones on duty tonight, and new people providing council security?”

Angela might have resented anyone else for asking, but this was her mentor. “Ivan’s team won’t be leaving until morning, but they’ll be too wound up to sleep before then. They’ll provide guidance and support overnight. He has a little bit of your problem, plus a lot of Marc’s problem. I’m as safe with him as I am with either of you.”

Swallowing his jealousy, Adrian had one more question. “How did you get two teenagers to be happy about livestock and travel duty? I’ve never been able to manage that.”

Angela smirked. “When all camp areas are set up, the boys will crash and then get up to see who has point overnight. If you notice, I didn’t assign that.”

Adrian grinned. “That’s what keeps them from bitching about transportation chores and vying for all the other shit work.”

“Of course. They’re Eagles. They need something to compete for.”

“Do you give one point and the other XO?”

“No. Neither of them has set themselves apart yet. So far, I’ve made them share.”

Adrian was impressed with Angela for being able to keep all the details straight. He shouldn’t have been after everything she’d already handled, but he was, just the same. She was made for this job.

Ivan and his team took up security posts around the camp where they would be able to view her at all times.

Angela started rounds of the camp. She would pitch in wherever she was needed.

Adrian understood he'd been dismissed, and went to Marc. He wasn't certain it was okay for him to be around anyone else. Angela had outlined his duty. Everyone who heard it assumed that as soon as he helped map the route, he would be kicked out again. As much as he knew it needed to happen, Adrian hoped Angela took her time. He was hoping to at least accompany Marc on rounds since Angela hadn't invited him.

Marc nodded to Adrian as he fell in step, busy directing vehicles into place around their half mile camp.

“Where do you want me?”

Marc gestured toward the truck Kenn had been driving. “I'd bet she has maps in the glovebox. I'm going to segregate you from the camp. If they believe you're working, they'll leave you alone.”

“I will be.” Adrian rotated toward the truck.

Marc spared the man one narrowed glance and then returned to directing traffic. He had no doubt Adrian would design an ideal travel plan. The Eagle was trying to re-earn his slot. Marc was going to let him, up to a point.

Marc didn't feel the usual jealousy that permeated his soul at the thought of Adrian being in the camp. The situation they were in called for every experienced hand they could get, and he wasn't petty enough to want the camp to fail just to witness Adrian suffer. In fact, leaving Adrian in America

was probably a bad idea. It would give the traitor a chance to gather a new herd without paying for the mistakes of his first command, but more than that, if Adrian were in America and Marc were on Pitcairn, he wouldn't be able to reach the man anymore. He wanted to be able to use Adrian or lash out whenever the mood struck. He couldn't do that if they were thousands of miles apart. In the end, Adrian might really end up on the boat because Marc needed the whipping boy.

Several descendants caught Marc's reflections and allowed him the moment of fantasy. Adrian's presence was temporary. Angela would throw him out if Marc didn't. They knew because she'd given her word.

Angela's sense of safety vanished as soon as Adrian left her sight. This setup was okay, but it wasn't the same as having sentries she trusted with her life. Angela hadn't been able to take the mood drop from camping around signs of their old lives like she had the amusement park. Some of her people had enjoyed fond memories, but the majority had cried themselves to sleep over lost loved ones and that was intolerable. For this break, she'd shifted them to a nature preserve. As a result, the camp would only get to see trees, but that was better than the alternative. This was supposed to be a break for peace and relaxation, but this wasn't the time for a party. Right now, they had to cover survival so they had a reason to celebrate.

Angela stopped to smell the air, taking a deep lungful that reminded her of home, but not in the bad way that it usually did. If she was wrong and she survived the final battle, Angela thought she might want to go back there and build a new home to symbolize how far she'd come. Like here, the smell of corn and cow shit would wake her each morning and the sound of crows and owls would sing her to sleep. She had no idea what the island would be like, but she knew it wouldn't be home. *I'm going to miss my homeland for four years. I don't know if I'll make it half that long.*

Across the camp, Adrian caught the thought and agreed with all his heart.

2

“Are you ready to go?”

“We're on an Eagle team together? Cool.”

Tommy realized Kendle hadn't viewed the new teams list yet. He led her to the wall of the mess truck, where a taped copy was suffering in the wind.

Kendle read it in surprise, finding her name where she'd least expected it. “But I'm not...” Kendle spun around to search for Angela. “I wasn't even a rookie.”

“You're a level four on your own. You've survived stuff none of us could. After our last run, where you brought down Market Town, you earned a nice bump.” Tommy held out his hand. “Welcome to Special Forces.”

Kendle grinned like an idiot, not caring that she wasn't on Tommy's team. "Angela knows how to make a girl happy."

Tommy draped an arm around Kendle's shoulder. "That's not all the good news." He led her toward the vehicles. "She knows you won't cut it as a den mother. You don't have to stay in camp when your team goes out. And your team is leaving soon."

"I need to get my vest." Kendle jogged off, not waiting for him.

Pleased by her enthusiasm, Tommy returned to the vehicles that were being lightly loaded. They were hoping to come back full. He got busy checking the supply sheet. Neil had told him to collect Kendle, knowing it would improve his mood. Tommy hadn't wanted to leave her behind. He hadn't known council women were exempt from the new rules.

Tommy saw Samantha lurking in the perimeter shadows with a guard and assumed her concerns were caused by fear of losing her remaining mate. Tommy understood. He also knew it wouldn't be long before Samantha was out there risking her life again too. It was in their blood. Eagles couldn't fight it any more than they could fight the weather. Trying only brought misery.

Tommy wasn't different, despite the horrors he'd been through. He and his team had gone out to collect what the thieves had stolen, including the remaining poisoned water. Those jugs were clearly marked on the bottoms—easy to see in the daytime,

but not at night while being stolen. Tommy reflected on the bodies that had been scattered around and was flashed back to arriving at Safe Haven Mountain. The entire valley had looked like that, but he was still eager to go out into the wastelands to scavenge.

Tommy felt Kendle coming and waved her toward her new team. Neil was giving instructions that she needed to hear.

As she joined them, exchanging comfortable words, Tommy felt his heart settle into a rhythm of peace. He had a soulmate and a respected place in camp. *I now have everything I need.*

3

“Neil and Kyle are leaving now. They decided to stay together.”

Sitting at the center mess table, Angela made a note on her sticky pad and handed it to Ivan.

Ivan hurried off to deliver it, hating the surroundings. The preserve didn't protest their presence. It watched suspiciously, waiting for them to be gone. If they stayed, nature would become hostile and then violent. This area hadn't hosted humans for some time. He was both relieved and horrified. He was also glad Marc was staying by the boss. This place was creepy.

Angela smiled up at Marc as they were left alone. “Another hour and you can sleep.”

Marc yawned. He was eager for it, but happy enough just to be stationary. Like the rest of the mission team, he was tired of traveling. “Anything I should know?”

“Neil and Kyle were worried about making it back in one day. I told them to take two since they’re checking for both water and fuel.” Angela was writing the next silent note. “I haven’t told the camp yet.”

“Makes sense to me. What’s next?”

Angela held up another sticky note as Kenn joined them.

The Marine took it and left the couple alone.

“This is kinda spooky,” Marc commented as Theo came to the table.

Theo delivered an approving smile to Debra as she left. Following Kenn around as a new member of that team, Debra was delighted to be observing. Theo was positive Angela would give the deaf woman more important chores as soon as she was ready. He was also dreading that. Theo read her note.

Gather your team and get in a tent. Work on engineering lists for the boat.

Theo gave her a look that said he wouldn’t come out of the tent until the list was perfect.

Angela didn’t doubt the man. It was why he was still leading a team even though his injury would prevent him from being a full member. Theo was brilliant. It astonished her that he had been happy as an engineer. Driven by his need to fix and invent, he

could have been famous. Instead, he'd been thrilled to head the engineering department at MIT. It was sweet. Theo was a good man. Once he settled things with Candy, his dramas could be marked off her list.

Marc rotated for a sweep. Other than himself, Angela didn't have personal security right now. Despite giving Ivan's team that job, there was too much to be done to have men and women standing around with their thumbs up their... Marc glanced down at Angela.

Angela held up the sticky note she'd just finished.

Marc read it, expecting a job.

The camp likes you next to me. I do have two snipers up. Stand there and look pretty.

Marc chuckled and resumed scanning. This time, he tried to find the two men. *You know I'm tired when I miss shit like that.*

Angela smiled as she wrote the next note. She would make sure he got eight hours full of rest and a few hot meals before they went back on the road. Marc was their strength now. *He's also a weakness. He didn't ask why I'm using sticky notes, didn't care except to view it as a joke. Adrian would know better.*

Angela refused to even glance in the direction of the parking area, where Adrian was still in the truck. She hadn't ordered food sent to him or given permission for him to use the showers or equipment. He needed to leave before she broke in front of the camp and gave him the hero's welcome he

deserved. Safe Haven was almost to the ocean. In a few weeks, they would reach the destination he'd chosen long before she joined. He deserved to be honored. Instead, he was alone, cold, hungry, and working to be forgiven by people who wouldn't even be alive if not for him. It was a bummer.

4

Angela was still in the mess when Conner entered at midnight. The camp was sleeping.

“I switched Adrian to the QZ.”

Angela kept eating, waiting for the rest of the updates. The slightly reheated stew wasn't as good the second time around, but Angela was pleased Brittani was stretching their food. *At least cold storage isn't a problem.*

Conner dropped a sheet of paper next to her, then went to stand in front of the stove, splaying his frozen fingers. It was impossible to take notes fast enough with gloves on.

Angela skimmed the paper, noting the boy had put everyone's messages on the same page. Angela didn't mind shorthand. It made her think of a new layer of code they could add for emergencies when the threat might be one of their own. Only senior men and women would be taught the triggers.

Conner waited while Angela made notes in her book about the notes in her hand, glad to be in the drafty mess tent. The temperature was hovering at

freezing. Not as bad as during the storm, it was still rough.

“Samantha says there’s a break coming.” Angela agreed about the miserable conditions. “Maybe we’ll have a beach party when we find the boat.”

Conner brightened, young mind immediately going to women in bikinis strolling happily through the surf. Just as fast, his fantasy vanished. “They won’t, right? The water isn’t safe.”

Angela wanted to lie, but if he was old enough to be an Eagle, he was old enough to know what the future held. “We’ll have a pool on the boat. I believe every cruise ship has them, plus gyms, game rooms, theaters.”

Conner’s mood improved so fast that Angela couldn’t resist inhaling some of his youthful energy as it smothered her.

Conner turned toward the zippered exit, hiding a grin. Now that he’d done what he came in here for, he could report it to Kenn and then fill Charlie in on all of it. Angela’s son was almost as manipulative as she was, but in the good way. Charlie knew she needed energy. Conner had bet him he could get her to take it.

Angela blocked her thoughts. It was best if people believed they were able to be a step ahead of her. If they knew the truth, she would be burned at the first stake they could whittle.

In a moment of pity, Angela dropped her chin to let a few tears flow. Despite her great act, she didn't feel remotely human anymore.

"Got a minute?" Jennifer joined her.

Angela rubbed one arm over her face as if she'd been yawning and her eyes had watered. "What's up?"

"I have a new gift. I'd like to practice it."

"What is it?"

"I can lift moods, if I'm in a good enough place." Jennifer stared pointedly. "I figured if it succeeds on you, it will be handy on the camp."

As much as she wanted to allow it, Angela shook her head. "There are people here who've lost husbands and children. Use it on them. Their happiness will feed mine."

Jennifer pouted. "I wanted to test it out first. I don't know if there are side effects."

Angela chuckled at the clever trap. "Fine. Go blast Samantha. She's crying harder than I am right now. I can't take much more of it."

Jennifer was gone an instant later, but she wasn't placated. Angela had forgotten that her happiness made the shield come to life strong enough to protect them. The camp was relaxing now, but the shield wasn't appearing because their leader wasn't certain they could make it to the boat.

Jennifer was still taking measurements, but she suspected Angela was underestimating the camp this time. Safe Haven wasn't full of users and abusers anymore. They knew they were chosen to

be the future and that would give them strength to reach new levels of success. At some point, the council would be in need and the camp would come through for them. Jennifer hadn't foreseen it, but she knew what she knew. The people here had finally changed.

Chapter Ten
Spa Day

1

“Hey!”

Distracted by reflections on his coming tryst with Tracy, Charlie jerked around with guilt etched across his face.

“Over here.”

Charlie found Adrian at the edge of the QZ tape and went that way. He and Adrian hadn’t had much to say for a while. Glad his dad had come back alive and that his parents weren’t fighting, Charlie was tolerating Adrian’s presence. He knew the man wasn’t staying.

“Can you give your mom a message?”

Charlie’s brow puckered. He and Conner were sharing overnight point again, which meant it was his job to gather messages. “What is it?”

“Tell her I’ll be around if she needs me.” Adrian held out a notebook. “She asked for this.”

Charlie tucked the notebook under his arm to keep it dry from the light drizzle that had replaced the wind and snow they’d been driving through since fleeing the mountain. “You’re leaving?”

“Conner moved me in here this evening. Marc didn’t overrule it. That means he’s ready for me to be gone again.”

Charlie understood and agreed. “Happy trails.”

Adrian turned toward the darkness, wanting to warn Charlie not to do what he was thinking about, but he kept his mouth shut. Angela knew it was coming. If she hadn’t warned the boy, then she obviously didn’t want anyone else to either.

Adrian slid into the cold driver seat of his van and started the engine to let it warm up for a minute while he memorized the sight of the camp he was once again forced to abandon. Every time he had to do this, it ripped him open a little deeper. He suspected Marc knew that and kept doing it on purpose.

Tap-tap!

Adrian waited for Conner to slide into the seat and close the door before leaning over to give the boy the hug he had come for.

Conner held onto his dad, sad that the man was leaving again but also relieved. Once Adrian was gone, the team leaders would stop being reminded of his betrayal and the guards would stop studying him son as closely. If Adrian was gone for a while, people might even miss him this time. “She told me to come.”

Adrian tried to ignore the way his heart leapt. “Marc has a way to reach me.”

Conner wasn’t worried about that. “Will you be okay?”

“Better. I’ll be busy. This camp needs a lot before we get on that boat. I’m in the unique position to be able to gather it any way I see fit. Could be fun.”

Conner was glad his dad had a good attitude about it. Sensing the man wanted to be gone, Conner stepped out of the vehicle. Before he closed the door, he leaned in to hand Adrian a familiar item. “See you.”

Conner returned to making rounds of the camp.

Adrian stared at the sticky note with his heart in his throat.

Our captain is in Montgomery. His name is Cole. Go offer him a ride.

For the first time ever, Adrian was happy as he pulled out of Safe Haven’s light.

2

“We didn’t get here first.” Kyle handed the binoculars to Neil.

The Flat Rock Park Springs didn’t impress Kyle. He’d been to at least a dozen springs during their water runs for camp and for some reason, he still expected to find a botanical garden around it, complete with history scrolls and crystal rocks. He knew it was his movie-minded brain working on him, but he couldn’t help the disappointment that rose each time he found only a swimming hole or worse, a wide hole in the ground with a rickety well set over it. Flat Rock was no different. Big boulders

lined swampy gaps dotted across the barren ground. Distant trees framed the springs in isolated despair. The hills around them were still rocky, but no longer as tall as they came to the end of the mountain range. In another week, they would be in flat land and then slope toward the ocean that was gradually eroding the shore. Water was relentless and they were going to try sailing on it. Kyle shook his head. *We're nuts.*

Their teams were with the vehicles below the small ridge that the leaders had climbed to get a better view of the natural springs they were supposed to scout for water.

Neil peered through the glasses, also unhappy with what he found. The spring had owners. "Why does it always come to this?"

Kyle didn't feel like going into the philosophical side of the apocalypse. He settled for short, hard truth. "Because most people suck."

The gang was clad in thick coats, gloves, and warm boots, with small fires and tents. The armed men eyed the line of traders for items they wanted, but they also kept track of their surroundings or nursed wounds that told Neil the gang had been busy keeping what they'd claimed. From the lack of a permanent setup, he didn't think they were the first owners. "And you won't be the last."

"Let's go." Kyle was glad the snow was mostly gone as they trudged down the small incline toward their teams. They wouldn't leave footsteps to lead a patrol to their vehicles.

Neil followed Kyle, willing to let the mobster take this one. Kyle was better at ambushes and Neil didn't have as much stomach for death as he had before Jeremy's demise. He waited on Kyle's right, ready to take notes or add details. It told the rest of the team that Kyle was the leader for this run.

Kyle hadn't been concerned about Neil challenging him for leadership, but it was still a relief to know the trooper was standing down. Unlike Neil's team, Kyle and his men had stayed up on their training while in the mountain. "We have a gang of 11 men controlling the water. There are people coming in to trade. The gang is taking slaves, food, and fuel." Kyle knelt to draw a small map of the encampment, using dirty slush. "The leader is in a tent and only comes out if someone has an item of value." Kyle and Neil had studied the site for the last two hours to be certain they had an accurate count. "Like usual, if we cut the head off the snake, all the little ones will probably run."

"Maybe we could trade with them instead of killing." Kendle hadn't wanted to speak up, but like the rest of her team, she was tired.

Kyle motioned her toward the incline. "If you can find a way to do that, I'm all for it."

Cheeks flushed from the attention, Kendle went up to do her own scouting.

A few members of her Market Town team were now Special Forces. They were confident she would come up with something.

Kyle and the other men who had remained with Safe Haven for that run watched her dubiously.

Kendle returned a few minutes later, furious. “They just traded a little girl for a tank of gas. I’ve changed my mind.”

Kyle pointed to a spot on his melting map. “Three of us will take her in to trade for water. As soon as she gets the leader, the rest of us will take out the water crew. From there, we’ll handle it like we used to do.” Kyle looked around. “Does everyone remember the V?”

Both Special Forces teams nodded. Kendle didn’t, but she was aware of the efficient attack formation of the Eagles. She didn’t expect to have any problems staying in line once the action started. She paused, glancing up in confusion. “Wait a minute. What do you mean *she*?”

Kyle and Neil laughed while Tommy and Kendle frowned at them.

Kendle realized she was going to be the bait this time. Even a scarred healthy female was sure to get the leader to come out of his tent or to get her sent in. It was an overused plan that would probably succeed. The men she had observed were drinking and enjoying their supplies. They weren’t true killers.

Kyle passed out the extra mags he’d brought, then handed Kendle a knife. “Put this somewhere good.”

Kendle slid it into her bra, adrenaline flowing. “I’ll need time to evaluate the leader. Don’t rush the action because you’re worried about me.”

Kyle recognized her mood change. She was definitely one of them.

Tommy wasn’t allowed to protest. Instead, he insisted on being one of the three who would escort her in.

Kyle had been counting on that. He waved Tommy into place. “Take her other weapons.”

It hurt Tommy to disarm her. He was worried about her being hurt before they could spring the trap.

Kendle understood his hesitation, but she was a killer first and a lover when there was time. It was clear to her which one this situation called for.

Kyle gave her the nod. “We’ve got you covered. Let’s go.”

Kendle led the way up the incline at Neil’s motion, understanding it was to avoid revealing their vehicles. Heart thumping in her chest, she stumbled over the slushy ice toward the gang.

“More people coming!” one of the lookouts shouted.

“I don’t like this. Get a man on them!”

Two members of the gang hurried forward with shotguns aimed at Neil and Kyle. They ignored Kendle and Tommy, assuming he was only a slave guard by the way he kept pushing her forward.

Kyle and Neil kept their hands in sight as they came to a stop a few feet away from the two guards.

Behind them, the line of people wanting water paused to observe the show.

Kyle took the lead. “We’ll trade the woman for water—a lot of it. She’s a breeder.”

“Let’s see the goods!” One of the guards ripped Kendle’s hood from her pale face.

“She’s kinda marked up.”

Kyle shrugged. “Kids won’t be.”

“True.”

Kendle suffered the man’s roaming hands and nasty sneer as Kyle and Neil ignored her treatment. Haunted by a sudden flash of Ethan, she cringed.

Tommy almost blew his cover by stepping forward to protect her.

Neil gave a subtle shake of his head.

Tommy dropped his gaze to the ground as the gang member squeezed Kendle’s breast. *I’m going to kill him for that.*

“She does feel healthy!” The inspector grabbed Kendle’s arm and shoved her toward the pen in the front of the tent where their other slaves were being held.

“Send her in here.”

Everyone looked toward the boss’s tent at the order.

“The other ones cried too much. Tell me she’s a fighter.”

Instinctively following the role, Kendle jerked out of the inspector’s greedy hands and kned him in the balls.

Sliding to his knees, the inspector gasped. “You asked for it, Boss!”

Two other gang members laughed as the hurting man pushed to his feet and shoved Kendle into the tent. Face red, he pointed at Kyle. “Get in line. We’ll sort it out after Grayson decides what she’s worth.”

The three Eagles got in line behind a dozen civilians waiting to hear how much water they would be given for what they had brought. Around them, gang members with guns, knives, and bored expressions watched in hopes that they were troublemakers. It was clear the men didn’t like babysitting a trade line. They wanted action.

Vengeful bugs bit everyone in line, causing noisy slaps that made the Eagles flinch even when they tried not to. Their reactions told the gang they were more alert than the other survivors here, but because they had given up a scared, scarred woman, the water crew assumed they were the same as everyone else—corrupt.

Unlike most of the gangs they’d come across since the world fell, these men didn’t have identifying marks, codes, or an obvious chain of command. As Neil studied them, he realized they resembled each other. He added up the clues. *A family*. The leader was probably the father, eldest brother, or the best fighter among them.

Kyle memorized locations and patrol patterns while they waited.

Tommy studied the tent where Kendle had disappeared, hands clenched into fists to keep from following her. He couldn't help worrying. It was the worst side effect of love.

3

Kendle had staggered at the shove into the tent, almost tripping over a small rug. After the outside brightness that was magnified by piles of snow, the dim tent was disorienting.

Kendle squinted, catching stacks of goods and a small wing that was covered in a thick tarp, preventing her from viewing what was inside. The magazines stacked along one wall were all graphic, as were the paintings. It told Kendle exactly what the slaves were being used for. Fury bloomed in her heart when she thought about the young kids shivering in the roped-off pen outside.

The smell of the tent hit her next. She gagged.

A hand clamped on her shoulder and spun her around.

In moments like this, Kendle couldn't help but question her sanity. The man was a full foot taller than she was, with a short mullet and fat hands covered in scabs and scars. He looked like he'd spent his weekends boxing before the war, though she was almost certain he was more of a jailhouse fighter. He was heavier, bigger, and cursed with a mean streak. Kendle should have been terrified to

face him alone. Instead, she smiled at how alive she felt. “Thank you.”

The abusive brawler scowled. “For what?”

“For giving me moments like this.”

“What’s your name?”

Kendle grinned at the man she could barely view through her blurry eyes. “The Black Widow.”

The gangster frowned, drunken glare coming through a beaten face that said he had to fight regularly to keep command of the ragtag gang.

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

Kendle shook her head, glad she hadn’t been recognized. “It’s just what they call me.” She took a small step closer. “What’s your name?”

The man opened his mouth.

Kendle snatched the open blade from the front of her shirt and plunged it into his throat.

As he slid to a bloody mess at her feet, she gave him a tender smile. “Without change, there can be no peace.”

The man stopped gasping, slumping to the ground.

Kendle retrieved the knife and swept the tent. She froze at small eyes in the far corner. Gawking at the naked toddler, Kendle was unable to stand humans at that moment. Behind the little girl, her mother’s corpse glared in a haunting scream that Kendle could almost hear.

Kendle knelt down. “We need to get out of here, sweetheart. Can you help me?”

The little girl flung her body at Kendle, babbling. The gibberish didn't make sense, but the mental words were a stinging shout in Kendle's mind.

Kill them all! Make them dead like my mommy!

The child was a descendant.

Kendle's mind snapped a little as she held the shaking child. Leaving the girl with her mother's corpse was a control method. *I wish I could kill him again.*

Make them all dead!

"I will, sweetheart. Here's what I want you to do."

4

The silence from the tent tortured Tommy as they waited. He was glad to be distracted by the water crew as the line moved up enough to view the four gangsters in charge of disbursing the rations. The man in the front of the line—a short, braided-beard, tattooed male of undeterminable origins—held a clipboard and watched them all with dead brown eyes.

Kyle and Neil were encouraged by the silence from the tent, unlike Tommy. This gang didn't seem the type to delay gratification, which meant Kendle should have been used right away. The lack of noise implied she had already handled it. Kyle and Neil had agreed to attack as soon as they were next. Only one other refugee had gotten in line behind them so

far, which would lessen the chance of people being caught in the crossfire. In the crags and hills around them, Kyle and Neil could feel their teams also waiting for it to begin.

“What are we doing about the slaves?” Neil was studying the small pen where a number of men, women, and children had been tied up and still sat in abject desperation.

Kyle shrugged. “The adults can go their own way. The kids will come with us.”

“Shouldn’t we return them to their parents?”

“No. Angela will never sell them for water.”

With it put that way, Neil agreed.

The slaves in the pen were hard to look at, mostly because of their ages. The Eagles had spent months with kids now, learning to love and cherish them. Witnessing a five-year-old bound and crying in the slushy dirt was enough to convince the men what had to happen here. The people who came to make these trades didn’t deserve sympathy either. While their kids mourned being sold off like chattel, the parents and guardians haggled over how much water they were worth. Kyle didn’t care if Kendle protested. There was going to be killing here today. The water crew reeked of homemade alcohol, giving him hope this would be a quick takedown. Drunken reflexes were slow and inaccurate.

Confident Kendle was watching them from the dark tent, Kyle gave her a subtle nod.

The line moved again, bringing them face-to-face with the water crew.

Kyle lifted his gun.

Used to robbery attempts, all of the gang also lifted their guns.

Braided beard grinned at them. “You’ll never make it out of here. Take what we give you and be happy with it.”

Following the instincts that had made him top Eagle in Safe Haven, Kyle lowered his weapon. “Are you guys hiring?”

Caught off guard, the man stared at them, trying to work it out. “You want to join us?”

Before Kyle could answer, everyone’s attention was drawn by the sound of thumping feet. A young child toddled from the tent and disappeared into the weeds behind it.

An instant later, Kendle appeared, glowing red orbs proclaiming the start of the fight. “Kill them—all of them.”

The team felt the finality of her choice. It almost sounded as if Angela was with them, ordering the removal of more evil.

Distracted by Kendle’s appearance, Tommy was the last of his team to fire. He had the urge to run forward and check on her, but he knew that was a bad idea as long as her eyes were crimson. Instead of hugging as he reached her, Tommy finally began to shoot at the gang.

Kendle controlled herself by a hair, fighting the urge to use her gifts. If not for Angela forbidding it because it would endanger their camp, Kendle would have laid waste to this place herself while the

team watched. Unable to join the fight because she feared slipping, Kendle stayed next to Tommy and let him protect her while she shivered in fury.

On both sides of them, Eagles ran down the incline, firing.

Kyle and Neil had already shot the crew on the water hole. Their teams were picking off the rest like targets at a carnival.

Refugees who needed water stayed on the ground and waited for it to be over. This wasn't their first gunfight and the need for the precious liquid hadn't changed, no matter who controlled it.

Tommy spun around, searching for the man who had inspected Kendle upon their arrival. He found that man screaming for help as she cut his fingers off with her knife. Blood was spraying over the slaves who were holding onto the man to keep him from escaping Kendle's wrath.

Before Tommy could rush over to help, the man screamed and jerked out of their hold. A sharp stick jutted from his neck.

The woman who had jabbed it in as deep as she could stared at him with an expression of triumphant hatred before scooping up one of the children next to her. As she took off running, other slaves did the same, leaving Kendle and her team to deal with the rest.

The fight only lasted for a few minutes, but that was enough to make the Eagles nervous about how much attention it might have drawn. As they swept the camp together, removing the few wounded, the

desperate refugees grabbed some water and took off.

Five minutes after the attack began, the two teams were alone in the gang encampment with a few slaves who were too young or weak to flee on their own—including the toddler Kendle had used for their distraction. The small children stared at the Eagles in hopeful fear, but didn't speak. In their short lives, they had already learned to keep their mouths shut. It was heartbreaking.

Kyle knew the best thing to do was to load up the buckets and cans that were here, but he couldn't do it. They didn't have enough water to make it to the boat and this natural spring held more than the camp could use in a lifetime. Making a command decision, Kyle began to hand out orders. "Neil and his team will stay here and secure the site. My team and I will go find trucks and do a fuel scout."

"That means we'll be late getting back to camp."

Kyle nodded at Kendle's comment, happy with her performance. "The boss will understand."

Kendle was positive he was right and eager to help now that she wasn't in danger of losing control. There were no more targets. As a member of Kyle's team, she stayed close to him and waited for more orders.

Tommy didn't like the idea of Kendle going out, but he wasn't allowed to protest, like he hadn't been allowed to argue earlier. *This is the part that may kill me.*

Tommy went to Neil. Once they secured the campsite, they would have to get a few defenses ready in case anyone found them here before they got the trucks. It was hard to tell how long Kyle might be gone or who might show up in his absence.

Kyle and Neil were thinking the same thing.

“We’ll be back within a day. Let people have all the water they want.”

Neil nodded. “We’ll stay out of sight unless there’s trouble or someone else tries to own it.”

“Perfect.” Kyle motioned his team toward the incline and their vehicles.

Neil and his men began sorting through the supplies that were left. Most of it would be taken to camp, but some of it would be used right now to make a hot meal for the kids.

When Neil waved him toward the scared children, Tommy was glad for the distraction. He liked kids and kids liked him. Tommy’s mind slipped into future mode. *I wonder if Kendle wants babies.*

It never occurred to him that she couldn’t have them.

5

Angela pulled the stitch through with fingers that shook, unable to warm up. She was off duty and tending her injuries in the chilly camper that Ivan and his team had found and brought back a few hours ago. She planned to use it for their ambulance.

“I’m glad that’s healing.”

Angela dropped the half-dissolved stitch into the garbage pail. She applied the ointment while Marc knelt to examine the wound.

“You’re going to have scars all over your body.”

Angela grunted, pressing the medicine in. “I don’t bitch about yours.”

“A man’s body should be scarred.”

“Says you.”

“Are you saying you don’t like my body?”

Angela laughed, sliding the bandage into place. “That, you’ve never heard from my lips.”

Marc would have kissed her, but the radio blared to life.

“Does anyone have a fresh sighting?”

“There hasn’t been a word from them in days. They took off again.”

“Well, keep your eyes open. They have to be here somewhere.”

Angela flipped off the radio. The calls made her stomach boil. Not wanting to panic the camp, Angela did a fast scan to determine how the news would be taken if she told them to load up now instead of in an hour like they’d planned.

Before she could complete it, Dog joined her. Angela regarded the wolf with a friendly smile and a mind braced for new problems. It was easy for her to read his mind. He didn’t like it here either.

We’re being followed.

Angela nodded as she exited the camper with Marc. *The refugees won’t give up.*

I mean animals.

Angela scanned the late morning perimeter and found ants.

Not those. Dog directed her attention to the rear of camp, where the vehicles were lined up near thin, scraggly trees. As she concentrated, a tall shadow distinguished itself from the others.

Angela recognized the stalker and relaxed on that front. It was just Jack's horse. "We have room if that's what he wants. Can you talk to him?"

I already have. He wants to be a part of camp and still free. Is that possible?

Angela shrugged. *I don't see why not. Tell him to stop by for meals and medical, and we won't lock him up at night.*

Satisfied with that answer, Dog went to join Charlie at the shower camper. Despite the awful draft in there, it had gotten a steady workout all day from people who wanted to be clean. Dog didn't understand the attraction. The layer of dirt he carried in his fur was a protection from the wind. Since the humans didn't have fur at all, a layer of dirt would be the next best option.

"People are getting worried about the Special Forces teams." Marc stayed close.

Angela sighed, enjoying the body heat he was sending to her. "I know."

"Should they be?"

Angela rubbed sanitizer on her hands.

Marc frowned. "Do you want me to go get them?"

“No. Those 14 Eagles are the best we have. If they fail, it’s all over anyway.”

Marc wanted to argue that view, but couldn’t. She was right. He and Angela couldn’t leave camp each time they needed supplies gathered. The Eagles had to be able to handle it. “When will we know?”

“I’ve estimated three days for their return. Any longer...and we need to make other plans for the future.”

Marc refused to ask what those would be. He already knew he couldn’t stomach the answer.

“Let’s load up now. The camp will see us getting it ready and know what’s going on by the time I make the call.”

“We could just tell them we’re not feeling safe here and get going in half that time.”

Angela sighed again. *He’s never going to get it.* “No.”

Marc didn’t argue or care why she’d denied him. He was just eager to be in a warm truck.

Angela knew. Her disappointment was hard to hide. If Marc never learned how to handle the camp, he would eventually be eliminated from the council. He didn’t know it, but he was on his last chance with the Eagles. If he screwed up again, she wouldn’t be able to protect his place in the chain of command. When the army called you out, you were out, and only they could bring you back in.

Chapter Eleven
Wake Up!
November 14th

1

“It’s been three days.”

Angela didn’t respond. Jennifer was worried about her mate. Angela was worried about all of them.

“We could send out a hunting party.” Jennifer wasn’t upset enough to panic, but the feeling was growing. If they went another day without hearing from Kyle, she wouldn’t be so reasonable.

Angela understood, but she had sent both Special Forces teams because they were the best. She had faith they would accomplish the missions and return to camp as soon as they were able to. Despite her confidence in that outcome, Angela did hate not being able to use her magic. It was making her short tempered and that wasn’t good for anyone.

Jennifer shoved up from the table. “You bought yourself a day.” She left before Angela got mad. Jennifer understood having faith, but she didn’t want to take chances. It was possible both teams were in trouble and needed help.

Sitting at the mess table, Angela let out a breath of frustration. Neil and Kyle were not the only ones

who were late. Not being able to check in with the crews, even over the radio, was driving her crazy. It didn't help that each day of travel took them further from their teams, but reaching the boat was her top priority now.

If she didn't keep moving, every danger following them would catch up. It was imperative the camp stayed mobile. Even these short breaks were dangerous. Safe Haven couldn't keep using parks and preserves. These frozen forests were about to be buffets where people would be snatched into the darkness by any number of creatures.

As if to prove her thought, a small flock of black birds flew over, cawing furiously.

The guards tensed, some of them remembering being attacked by birds and bats.

Angela prepared to bring up the shield even though she would probably collapse afterward.

It was a relief when the angry flock kept going.

Footsteps crunched into the mess tent, drawing attention from a few people who were there to finish lunch.

Kevin hurried to Angela. He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Someone's coming in."

Angela got up.

Aware of Zack following, Kevin escorted her to where they had built a makeshift barrier with semis and a UN tank.

Angela forced herself not to use magic to determine who it was. They were camped at another

chokepoint, making it impossible to view until the person came around the last turn.

“That’s ours!”

Everyone relaxed at the sight of trucks rolling their way with lights flashing a familiar code.

“It’s the food team!”

Angela motioned Kevin to stay and help instead of escorting her around. She couldn’t take any more of his preening.

Angela marched away to avoid having to talk to anyone. She wasn’t as patient as they all needed her to be right now. Marc, on the other hand, was a fountain of pleasantness that made the guards yearn for his shift to begin at dusk.

“What’s her problem?” Ivan joined Kenn at the front of the trucks. They were filled with nonperishable food.

Kenn frowned. “Figure it out.”

Ivan spent a moment doing just that. “She was fine until right before I left...” His eyes widened. “When Adrian left.”

“Bingo.” Kenn led the way to the rear of the trucks to help sort and unload. “She won’t admit it, but we all know. As soon as he left camp, her mood hit the ground. It will stay that way until she gets to see him again.”

“When will that be?”

“Hard to say.” Kenn motioned Ivan into the assembly line that was forming even though Ivan and his team had just brought it in. “His banishment was reinstated, so he can’t come in unless there’s a

problem. Not many people are willing to wish for new issues just so she can spend time with him.”

Ivan didn't like the personal drama leadership was going through, but he understood it a little more. After being her guard, Ivan appreciated the need to stay close to her. He still didn't believe she was worth as much trouble as Marc was willing to put himself through, but Ivan was giving her the benefit of the doubt now.

Kenn snorted. “You're like I was, not seeing the forest and all that. When it hits you, I'll have the smelling salts ready.”

Ivan chuckled at the wording, not worried. “I've got three hots and a cot. I'm good.”

Kenn remembered those days, but not with longing. He preferred the person he was now.

Around them, Eagles and camp members listened to each other's conversations, worried about the missing teams, and enjoyed being outside even though the weather still sucked. Other than Angela's mood, things were good for them for the first time in months. As far as they knew, the Special Forces teams were on their way back with water and fuel. Their injured were recovering, they didn't have any illnesses, and the refugees didn't know where they were. It allowed them to laugh and smile, sending peace and calm through the camp that had experienced very little of that under Angela's leadership. Except for friends and family of their missing men, the good vibes held much longer than Angela expected.

Marc had point over camp as darkness slid across the land and evening updates were delivered. Each person brought their paper on everything that had happened while he slept. He made inquiries, but every question was met with a solid answer. Marc was almost enjoying this part of his duties as he sipped Brittani's strong coffee and read the notes.

In the mess tent around him, the evening meal was over. Most of the camp had trudged to their drafty tents to get set for the night. Angela had provided a variety of entertainments from the mountain, but people were bored. Marc was working on a way to keep them entertained for the next month while they traveled to the boat, but he was mostly worrying over the Special Forces teams who still hadn't reported in. Besides being the most important Eagles in camp, both their missions were invaluable. According to Angela's notes, they only had enough water to last three more days and fuel for half that. If the Special Forces teams were unsuccessful, Safe Haven wasn't going much further than where they were right now.

Marc skimmed notes again, trying to determine where Angela wanted to go next. He and Adrian had mapped it out, but the boss hadn't approved it yet.

The food team found rail cars. They didn't have enough men to secure the site, but it might be more food.

Marc frowned at Angela's voice in his mind.
You should be asleep.

I'm trying. I'm worried.

About the teams?

When Angela didn't answer, Marc fought the urge to go comfort her. There was nothing he could do or say.

Marc felt her try to drift off again and gently closed the door between them. If she couldn't hear his thoughts about the camp, maybe she would be able to sleep.

Marc deliberated on her choice to explore the railcars and decided that was good. It was a nice coincidence that Ivan's team had located train cars that hadn't been looted.

Marc wondered how long they would remain at that location and then remembered the fuel numbers. Safe Haven had enough gas to reach the railcars. From there, the camp would have to wait until fuel was brought to them. It was a dangerous situation.

Pushing everything else out of his mind, Marc retrieved all of the maps he had of the area and scoured them again.

3

"Oh, yeah..." Adrian groaned, rolling over so he had better access. "I love you so much. I can't tell you how much."

Harsh winter wind rocked the RV, sending a warning.

Adrian felt it, but the woman in his arms was willing and he wasn't stopping until she was his. He wanted her in ways—

Wake up! The ugly shout conveyed coming violence.

Adrian ignored it, deepening the bond. “Always love you...”

The gunshot echoed for miles in the stillness of the night, bringing a camp of people to terrified alertness in an instant.

Adrian jerked awake as a bullet slammed into the RV window and kept coming. Two inches lower and it would have plunged into his throat instead of the books on the small headboard he'd built.

A few hundred yards away from the van, Marc grabbed the rifle from Angela, amazed at the shot, but angry she'd disturbed the camp on his shift without telling him what she was doing.

Angela sent out a blast of hatred so strong that Marc took a step back even though it wasn't aimed at him.

Angela shuddered. She wanted to calm the camp and the man waiting in confused anger for her explanation, but the hatred for Adrian was so strong it blocked out everything else. She spun toward the tent where she'd been resting when Adrian's dream had connected. She hadn't been able to stand it.

Marc zeroed in on the target of her anger and quickly understood what had triggered her. He was grinning as he calmed the semi-panicked citizens. “Our traitor is too close. The boss doesn’t like it. We’ll send him further out.”

“I’ll handle it.” Jennifer had reached the couple right as Angela fired. She was sorry she hadn’t been able to stop it.

Marc snorted. “Yeah, like you could have.”

Jennifer shrugged. “Maybe not this time.” The teenager smiled. “But it was good, in ways, right? Her anger?”

Marc nodded, glad the camp and Eagles were hearing the conversation. “Yes. She’s recovering.”

“Recklessly.” Kenn joined them, flushing as Marc and Jennifer both sent sharp, silent reprimands. “Fine. I do agree it’s good she’s back.” Kenn sent his own mental message, thrilled to be able to do it with Marc too. He hadn’t been sure if he would be blocked since they hated each other. *I need to talk to you.*

“I’ll be in the mess.” Marc’s cold glance narrowed. “We can discuss you, as well.”

Kenn nodded stiffly and got out of Marc’s sight.

Jennifer chuckled. “Nice.” She went to find Angela, spreading calm with her amusement. “I’ll handle Adrian next.”

She doesn’t know, Marc realized suddenly. *Jennifer doesn’t know how strong she is yet.*

Kyle does, Marc decided. *He’s known all along.*

Marc went to the mess, where Kenn was already waiting. He didn't know what the Marine wanted and that had him on edge. He tried to sweep Kenn's mind, but the wall was too thick to view through unless he wanted to blast a hole in Kenn's mind. Marc would if he felt he needed to, but he didn't want to restart the fighting. Kenn was submissive to him. Marc needed it to stay that way.

"It will." Kenn waved at the mug of coffee he'd sat down. "Thought you'd be ready for a hot drink."

"Is it poisoned?"

Kenn laughed.

Marc sat down and held the mug between his hands to warm them. "I notice you didn't answer the question."

"Didn't need to." Kenn pushed his own cup toward Marc, still snickering. "Take mine, badass."

Marc did.

Kenn's happiness faded. "We were joking. You didn't have to do that. Now they all believe I was trying to hurt you."

"Were you?"

Kenn didn't know what to say. He'd believed they were over this.

"So did I."

"What changed?"

Marc sat the cup on the table to lean forward. "What's with the wall?"

Kenn's tension slid down with his wall. "That's against Tonya."

Marc saw what Kenn had been hiding and picked up the cup Kenn had brought for him and took a big drink to declare it okay to the few witnesses. “I didn’t even think of that. I’ll talk to the Eagles on duty so they know you’re not a new problem.”

Kenn shrugged it off. “I’ve earned that. I understand. You know what I want. Will you?”

“I’ll run it by Angela first, but probably.”

“Cool.”

“Will she agree?”

“Not a chance.” Marc smirked. He did a fast sweep of the camp and found too many of them awake for him to linger in the tepid warmth of the mess tent. “Do rounds with me?”

Kenn brightened. “You know it.”

Marc sighed, standing. He almost missed the old Kenn. This suck up reminded him too much of their time together in the Marines—time that Kenn had been living with Angela and beating on her.

Kenn got up and left the tent. Marc didn’t want his company. He’d only offered because of the mistake over the mental wall.

Marc made a quick gesture. *Can’t take a joke. No problems.*

Relieved, the sentries resumed sweeps and patrols.

“Incoming!” Guards on the gate began shouting as lights and engines came.

Fear spread through the camp, bringing Marc and Angela, plus other council members. Everyone prepared to fight.

Lights on the trucks flashed a code. It was the new one Angela had provided right before they left to ensure it wasn't a wolf in disguise. They'd been using Adrian's code for a long time. It wasn't a stretch to think some of their enemies would have learned it by now.

"The teams are back."

Harry's voice hadn't faded before cheering echoed through Safe Haven at the return of their men.

As more lights flashed across the camp, people came toward the parking area to show their support.

Marc let them. Everyone had been worried.

Bleary-eyed, Angela stayed next to Marc as their barricade was pulled aside to allow the two teams in. Angela fought to keep from crying as she realized every one of the Eagles was driving a water truck or fuel tanker. "They did it."

Angela's relief swarmed through the camp, bringing a burst of tension that everyone felt deep in their bones.

Yawns came next as the crash hit.

Marc tugged Angela into his arms and kissed the top of her head. "They're all here and we have what we need for a while. It's okay."

Angela dried her tears on his shirt, not wanting the camp to see how worried she had been, how emotional she was. It was an embarrassment that

she couldn't control herself, but also a concern for the future. If the camp saw her have too many weak moments, it might cost her leadership.

“Quarantine?”

Angela reluctantly nodded.

Marc left her with Ivan as he took charge, calling for tents to be erected in the rear of camp.

Relieved friends and mates were disappointed as the teams were herded away from them, but they understood the need for caution. Having everyone home allowed most of the camp to settle down. As soon as the tents and heaters were up in the QZ, a skeleton crew took over and lights out was called.

Marc went to the parking area, where Jennifer was slipping into the rear of the semi that contained their winter gear. She had stuck around to witness for herself that Kyle was home, then faded into the groups around the caution tape. By the way her mind was racing excitedly over details, Marc assumed she'd been bored. He hadn't been yet, but it was different when you were one of the leaders. Jennifer was set to inherit that place, of course. Marc still wasn't certain he approved the choice, but it was clear the teenager would be formidable when she was older.

“She is now. You're blinded by her youth.” Samantha, on her cane and being trailed by Greg, paused next to Marc to observe Jennifer gearing up for her run.

“You think?”

“Yes. I felt the same way about her when the boss picked our pecking order on her team. Cyn and I...” Samantha teared up and regained control with a ragged breath of icy air that hurt.

Marc waited. Angela’s hollow point scar often sent him there, but as a man, he wasn’t allowed to show it.

“I hate those stereo-typical roles for all of us, just so you know.” Samantha glanced toward Neil, who was standing outside his QZ tent, staring at her. “He still hasn’t broken down in front of me. I could never be that strong.”

“Finish what you were saying.”

Marc’s sharp tenor brought Samantha back. “Cynthia and I hated her.”

“Because she’s a descendant and Cynthia wasn’t. Youth jealousy for you?”

Samantha winced. “I’m not that old, Marine.”

Marc chuckled. “Hey, I’ve heard the stories about how catty you all are.”

Samantha realized he was joking to distract her and smiled. “We can be. In this case, it was because we both realized she already is what we’ve both tried to be all our lives and failed at.”

“What’s that?”

“She likes herself.”

“Lots of people like themselves. It doesn’t mean they should be leaders.”

“I don’t mean the vanity type of liking. I mean she *likes* who she is. She’s comfortable with being gifted and hiding it when she has to or using it when

it's needed. And she knows the difference. I never could tell when to keep my mouth shut about something I'd detected or felt. She has a skill for that. Cynthia said it was the fight with the troops for her. She was out there for all of it. She saw Jennifer take out a base by herself. After that, we had to take her seriously."

"You still think she did it alone?"

Samantha's head bobbed intently. "I've viewed it in the minds of the men who picked her up. They found her team outside the gate. It hadn't been breached. I've also seen it in her mind the one time she let me in. She was naked in a box. Conner slipped her a gun and left her there to go on with his mission, like the boss ordered. She was alone."

Marc studied the teenager who was about to vanish into the tree line before Kyle could spot her. He was standing by his QZ tent, actively searching for her. Marc could feel his concern.

"I could distract him for a minute."

Marc nodded at Samantha's offer. "Yes. We'll let her work alone and face him tomorrow if it doesn't go well."

Samantha snorted, waving for Greg to help her so she could get to Kyle faster. "I feel sorry for anyone she meets. Jennifer's happy to be going out there and she has her oil filter on."

"That's a cheap suppressor and she weighs next to nothing." Marc didn't like this. He'd assumed she would travel in a vehicle. "Adrian isn't worth her life."

“I couldn’t agree more.” Samantha grimaced as Greg scooped her up, next words coming out in a hiss of discomfort. “Go with her, mentally. Greg and I will tell Kyle he has point as soon as he’s cleared so he can’t go after her. If there’s a problem, you can help.”

Marc was satisfied. “Deal.”

Samantha held on as Greg carried her away.

Marc concentrated on finding Jennifer and opening a private mental line.

Jennifer felt Marc connect them as she left camp while rookies on the parking area were distracted. She’d caught all of his conversation with Samantha. He needed to know she wasn’t a lucky kid who had to be protected. She was a killer. If she ran into a threat, she would handle it.

Marc stayed in the front, not reading any deeper than her surface thoughts. He didn’t doubt Jennifer’s intelligence, loyalty, or passion for the job, and that was already more than he could say about most of the people who would be evaluated for leadership over the years. Safe Haven’s citizens were flawed humans getting a second chance. Some of the flaws were uglier than others and would always hold that person back. Kenn was one of those, as was Adrian.

Jennifer didn’t mind the hard ground under her boots that tried to send her sliding into a nasty fall, and the icy air was a blessing that would keep her awake and let her smell anyone coming from the

direction she was going. The wind was blowing directly into her face. What she minded were the critters. She could feel them hating her and hoping she revealed a weakness so they would have the courage to attack. They could sense her gifts and her youth—a double strike. If she fell, they would be on her without hesitation.

Lost in his viewing, Marc hardly felt it when a thicker coat was draped over his shoulders.

Zack continued on his rounds, hoping Marc didn't get anything bad from the search.

Jennifer was able to relax when Marc stayed still and quiet. She didn't have secrets, but he was intimidating. It was a relief to know she didn't have to defend herself from him. She wasn't certain who would win—him or Kyle after they found her body.

Marc chuckled. *I've been told you can handle your own. It would probably be a good fight.*

Jennifer snickered. *I'd hang as long as I could.* Cold, she took off running through the snowy darkness, using the moon glare to navigate. She quickly warmed and began to sweat. *This feels good. I miss being active.*

Marc knew. Leadership meant paperwork half the time. It usually sucked. Tonight had been a rare exception.

Marc knew it wasn't wise to stay away from camp this long, especially when there could be trackers in the area, but he stayed with Jennifer anyway as she jogged to Adrian's campsite. Marc

wasn't sure how she would find it, but he assumed she had picked the location from a guard's mind. He wasn't as concerned about where the information had come from, so much as he was Angela's reaction to it. *I don't remember the last time she got that upset over me.*

Jennifer didn't remark on his thought or allow an opinion to form, but Marc knew she had one. Tempted, but not crazy, he remained silent.

Jennifer was relieved. She had almost reached Adrian's camp and she wanted to practice her infiltration skills.

Impressed with her seriousness, Marc settled in to observe.

"Marc?"

Marc snapped out of the vision as a warm hand settled onto his shoulder, mind screaming as the connection was broken. He glared up at Harry, reminded that an interrupted connection hurt as it severed. "What?!"

The level two Eagle flinched at the hostile tone. "Sorry, but we need you."

Marc sighed. Jennifer would have to take care of Adrian on her own. He had work waiting.

4

"I already know why you came." Adrian was leaning against the door of his van. He had just finished taping both sides of the window that had

suffered Angela's anger. "You shouldn't be out of camp."

Disappointed that she hadn't gotten to sneak up on him, Jennifer tried to find a snarky reply. Adrian's campsite was a barren spot where cars had been parked, judging by old oil spots. His vehicle, a white cargo van, was packed and running. He was obviously on his way out.

"If she forgives me, will you be able to?"

Jennifer was surprised by the question. "I didn't know my opinion mattered to you."

"Neither did I." Adrian sighed. "I used to be better than this. I'm trying to get back there."

"Angela and the Eagles recognize that, but until Kyle forgives you, I can't." Now that she wasn't moving, the cold was sinking in, making it hard to stay angry. "And why do you care if I'll be able to forgive you?"

"Because I've disappointed you. As a leader, that bothers the hell out of me."

Jennifer liked the words, but she knew better than to trust the man they were coming from. "I'm heading back to camp now. Get lost."

Adrian stared at the teenager. "Do what you can to help her forget."

"Do you hope being away from her will break it?" Jennifer moved from foot to foot in an effort to warm her frozen toes. They were the only part of her body that wasn't okay. She hadn't been able to find a size small enough in what remained of their

cold weather gear. These boots weren't as waterproof as their manufacturers had claimed.

"No." The old Adrian she had been afraid of upon her first arrival appeared behind his bright blue eyes. "I'd like a private channel with you and updates once a week."

Jennifer scowled, hand coming to her hip. "Even if I was allowed to do that, which I'm not, why would I?"

"Because if you don't, I'll have to come and get the updates myself."

Trapped, Jennifer let out a deep grunt. "If she finds out, I'll lose her trust. You're asking a lot."

Adrian dropped his head, ashamed. "I'll be miserable without her. Isn't that payment enough?"

"No, but your life belongs to Marc and I won't interfere. Fine. I'll send you updates. Just stay away from them." Jennifer turned toward camp. "Maybe we'll all get lucky and you'll die out here."

Jennifer was acutely aware of being alone as she jogged back to Safe Haven. The excitement of being on an adventure by herself had faded into cold discomfort and an edge of nerves. The alpha had forbidden the use of magic and that included scanning while on runs.

Jennifer saw animal prints in the snow as she jogged, trying to hit bare places that wouldn't leave a trail. She had a long way to go in training, but moments like this were great practice for her. All the Eagles were eager to get into shape. They had missed a lot while in the mountain.

Jennifer breathed a sigh of relief as the yellow caution tape came into view. It was cold and dark, and she needed to warm up, but most of all, she was hoping to be able to sneak back into camp without being caught. She would deem this a successful run if she could...

Jennifer almost screamed as she slipped under the caution tape and found Kyle leaning against a nearby tree.

Kyle stared at her in reproach.

It was obvious he had determined where she would reenter camp and settled in to wait. She could view a rut line in the snow from where he'd been pacing. What she didn't see was footprints from the guards. That meant they knew he was here, and she hadn't been. *I'll do better next time.*

Kyle was trying hard not to speak. After spending all day watching Tommy control himself, the mobster wouldn't accept any less. He didn't like this constant struggle to do what was right. The few moments he and Jennifer had shared had been her idea or happened by accident during the battle with the government. Anything that happened now, he wanted to be aware of and ready for. He'd made that clear to Jennifer before they left the mountain, but as she stared at him now, covered in the success of her first quiet run, Kyle wanted her more than he ever had. In this instant, it was impossible to view her as the innocent, slaved-out teenager he had rescued. The young woman in front of him was everything he wanted in a mate and a team member.

Jennifer was impressed that Kyle wasn't reprimanding her, but his hot gaze revealed what was on his mind. Positive he wouldn't allow it, Jennifer wondered if she could push him into a private moment. She had enjoyed their short interludes.

When Jennifer took a step toward him, Kyle froze. He knew what she wanted. His hard body and the blood pounding through his veins said he would take whatever she wanted to give him right now and feel bad afterward.

Jennifer slid into his arms and tilted her chin up, not thinking about anything except the way it felt when Kyle kissed her.

Kyle wouldn't have refused in that moment even if she had asked for his life in exchange. He slowly pressed their lips together, hands coming up to her hips.

Jennifer leaned into his hard, warm body and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Doing a round, Marc spotted them and paused for a moment of observation. He had come to terms with Kyle wanting Jennifer, but this was the first sign he'd witnessed that the girl wanted Kyle.

Marc was impressed with Kyle's control when Jennifer slid a hand between his legs and the mobster only clenched his hands into tight fists against her hips.

Kyle's tortured groan rolled through the stillness, followed by Jennifer's giggle.

Marc left them alone. The updates he needed could wait. From the sound, it wouldn't be long. Kyle was already on the edge.

5

Jennifer stepped back, grinning.

Breath coming in heaving gasps, Kyle stared at her in satisfied remorse. "I don't like it when we do that."

Jennifer chuckled, straightening her shirt. It hadn't taken much to send him over the edge, not even a full minute of her rubbing. "Well, I do, so you're SOL."

Kyle wanted to insist that she stop, but it was impossible to be angry with her smell filling his nose and the happy mass of flesh twitching in his jeans. "I didn't want moments like these to happen while we're standing in the freezing cold with witnesses and no time for me to love you the way you deserve."

Jennifer's heart melted. She stepped back into his arms for a quick press of her lips to his that gave both of them a chill. "I love you."

Kyle groaned, sweeping her up against his chest. "When you say stuff like that, I forget how to breathe."

Jennifer giggled again, happy that she'd pushed. The horrors she'd suffered were fading in place of the love Kyle had been giving since they'd met in Cesar's semi. They had both played a long, hard

game, but it was almost over now. Before they left on the boat, Kyle would be allowed to have what he'd been longing for and Jennifer would be fully committed to the only male on the planet she would ever trust. It would be good for both of them.

6

“You’ll need entertainment for the kids tomorrow, especially the new ones. I won’t have time to do the nightly meeting with them and they’ll be restless. Make it good.” The twins were in their seats on the tabletop, both awake and studying Angela alertly.

Samantha thought it was odd, but didn’t say so.

“They’re learning to distinguish between edges and colors, and apparently, I have a glare they’re mesmerized by.”

“A glare?”

Angela shrugged. “More alpha stuff.”

Samantha went back to taking notes. “We’ll cover the kids.”

In the mess, the rest of the council had gravitated toward hot coffee and companionship as a buffer against the hostilities of their surroundings. As tired as everyone was, Angela didn’t think there would be problems with the youngsters yet, but she didn’t want to take that chance. Average children were temperamental. Descendant kids were the things nightmares were made of when they were bored.

Taking a break while she waited for a batch of results, Tonya was at the table with Samantha and Jennifer, while Gus and Kenn collected mugs from the line. Everyone wore relief at the return of their teams.

As Marc ducked into the mess, he wiped his mind clear by falling into plans of how to sort the railcars at the next stop. He had just gotten an update from Jennifer before ordering her to go to bed. He hadn't mentioned anything else, but he'd given Kyle's untucked shirt a glance when he'd joined them on the edge of camp. Marc didn't like keeping secrets from Angela, but she didn't need to know about the deal Jennifer had made with Adrian. If that kept the former leader away from them, Marc was all for it, and like Jennifer had told Adrian, maybe they would get lucky and he would die out there alone.

Attention seemingly on the babies in front of her, Angela acted as if she'd missed it all. She brought up a thick wall around her heart and hoped she survived the separation.

Chapter Twelve
Don't Slip

1

“Thank you.”

Tommy held her tighter. “I’ll get better at it the more we do it.”

Kendle laughed at the double entendre. She was impressed that Tommy hadn’t tried to hold her back during their run. Even now, he wasn’t trying to convince her to quit the Eagles or follow the new rules about women not leaving camp. They were snuggled in his sleeping bag, in the rear of the tent that held the few other team members who hadn’t been cleared yet. In a few minutes, all of them would be soundly sleeping. It would take Tonya and Angela all night to finish their blood tests.

In the tent next to them, the rest of the Special Forces, and the children they’d rescued, were enjoying the one heater Safe Haven had to spare, and the hot meal that had been delivered. All of them were basking in the safety of being home. It didn’t matter that they were camped in the middle of a muddy path. They were together.

“I have to break up with you for a month.”

Kendle's good mood faded. "Yeah." Not caring about their audience, she rolled over into his arms and sealed their lips.

Tommy allowed her to have what she wanted, though he did try to keep her mouth covered as she shivered and shuddered in his arms. He made sure she was satisfied before he let her end the embrace, hoping she would hold onto it while she was single. He was worried about her still wanting him when the next adventures were done.

So was Kendle. She kissed him harder and tried to forget what she really wanted.

2

"I need a favor."

Kyle's nervous tone was a surprise. Marc had expected anger over Jennifer being allowed out of camp last night alone. "Name it."

"Give me an excuse to move out of Jennifer's tent. I want her and the baby to have it. It's a good tent." He had just been cleared and asked to be put right back on duty.

Marc didn't have to ask why. He'd watched Kyle and the girl, and respected Kyle's strength, but this was nobler.

Kyle denied Marc's approving vibe. "I'm not a good guy. You know that. Don't expect it."

It was the first time Marc had ever heard Kyle talk that way. He had to argue. "Yes, you are, or Adrian would have removed you months ago. Your

behavior isn't always good, but in this new world, you're a perfect man. Jennifer knows it and so does every other woman in this camp. They envy her. If you move out, they'll cut you to the bone in days. You'll be feeding the sharks."

Kyle hadn't considered that. "They won't want me."

Marc nodded toward the mess.

Kyle scanned the three women staring at him overtop mugs of stale hot chocolate. One of them was Pam. Kyle blanched. "Oh, hell."

"Yep." Marc slapped him on the shoulder. "Tell your fiancé you're on night shifts with me until the wedding."

Kyle sighed in relief. "Thank you. I owe you big."

"Do right by her, always, and we're even." Marc studied him. "You know she'll find out, right?"

"Not if you don't tell the boss."

Marc shrugged, amusement cooling. "Why not? There's plenty the boss hasn't told me over the last 10 months."

Kyle wanted to defend Angela, but Marc was right. Kyle left with lighter steps and an aching heart. He didn't want to be away from Jenny, ever. But it was the right thing to do. "Now I just have to convince her of that."

Seeing it was 3am, Marc did a fresh round of the camp, hoping everyone was sleeping this time. He went by the community tents first, hearing conversations and complaints. He made notes for

Angela to read in the morning. She would be happy to know her plan to flush Brittani into the Eagles was working. That woman was currently nagging Gus, whose shift with Kenn had just ended. Marc doubted it would be much longer before they needed a new cook. He made a note on it as he walked by the second tent.

The children were all in this one, including the new kids the Special Forces teams had brought back. Angela had cleared them first so the den mothers could get them cleaned up and fed. They were all healthy considering what they'd gone through.

Marc listened to the cries of an infant waiting to be fed, but he wasn't sure if it was Mandy's baby or Angela's twins. They'd been in camp almost a week now. Marc hadn't tried to bond with them. Any free time he had, he spent with Charlie or Cody.

Marc passed the mess next, viewing half a dozen shadows inside. He identified two of them. Occupying tables at opposite ends, Marc was positive if he went inside, he would feel a sharp tension that implied the pair had been exchanging glances. The camp was all a buzz about the secret romance. Everyone knew except them.

Marc had already scanned their minds and found a lot of confusion. It had persuaded him not to interfere. Neither Candy nor Conner was a threat to the others or to the peace in camp. *Unlike the other people in the mess.* Kenn and Tonya were at another corner, making plans to open a lab for her

to resume oil testing on their cancer patients. The update on those people was also in the notebook in his pocket, but Marc didn't look at it. He had no faith in the experiments, except as a way to keep Tonya out of trouble.

The tunnel kids were at the table with them, enjoying a cup of warm hot chocolate with a stale cookie. Marc wondered if Kenn had proposed and decided he hadn't. If Tonya was engaged, the camp would know about it by now.

Marc returned to his rounds. The next area held tents of the people who had chosen not to be in a community canvas. One of those was Jennifer. Marc considered what had happened with her and then pushed it aside. Angela had probably been right to name Jennifer her heir. Despite being a killer, Jennifer was innocent. She wanted a good life for everyone, and she was determined to redeem her mobster in every way. After his conversation with Kyle, it was clear the teenager had already been working hard on that.

A tent on the far edge caught Marc's attention. Because of her relationship with Adrian, Nancy was being treated to coldness from the camp and the Eagles. Marc wasn't sure if someone had told Nancy to put her tent there or if she had felt it was where she should be. He made a note to find out. He liked Nancy. He didn't understand her desire for Adrian, but anything that kept the former leader away from Angela had Marc's support. If Nancy wanted Adrian, he would put them together.

The bathroom tents had a short line as Marc went by. Shawn and Missy were huddled together to avoid the wind. He was listening to her chatter while scanning the darkness. Shawn acted like any other father in camp. The thought made Marc frown and add yet another note to verify fatherly affection was all Shawn was feeling for the girl. Angela, along with every other woman in camp, was keeping track of Shawn's thoughts. And actions. If he stepped out of line in the least, he would be removed. As long as he only viewed Missy as a daughter, it would be fine.

Marc spotted two shadows slipping into the rear of a semi on the side of camp that had the least amount of sentries. Marc wanted to let them have the moment. Instead, he made a motion and sent a guard to interrupt. Charlie was on duty. Sneaking off for 20 minutes of privacy with his mate right now wasn't allowed.

Marc didn't stick around to witness the boy's embarrassment, but he was confident the Eagles would make sure Charlie was. Unlike Conner, who had been surviving it all his life, Charlie was still adjusting to being an open descendant. Also unlike Conner, Charlie was able to spend time with the focus of his desires, allowing for more distractions. It would almost be better if they broke up.

As Marc reached the other side of the parking area, Zack came to him, followed by his sons. They were helping with security.

“Everyone is settled and accounted for. The boss is back to sleep. The radio is quiet.” Zack moved off to resume his rounds of the camp.

As soon as he was out of sight, Marc detoured to the guard on the farthest edge. This was his last stop of the night and the one he wanted to concentrate on the most.

Brandon tensed as Marc came toward his post, heart thumping and adrenaline flowing. It was clear from the way Marc was zeroed in on him that the man knew his secret.

Brandon swallowed nervously and hoped he wasn't babbling like a baby by the time this was over. He wasn't dumb enough to ask how Marc had discovered his secret. He'd been lax in his thoughts since allowing his shield to come down.

Marc didn't tell the man Angela had ratted him out. Marc was just glad she had. He didn't want secrets between them and this one would have been a doozy. Marc had agreed not to tell the camp or the Eagles for now. He was here to confirm Brandon was worthy of that risk.

“What can I do to prove it?”

Marc had a hard time placing this brown-haired and eyed man with the Mitchel family. He saw them as blue-eyed, blond devils. *I didn't know they could assume other forms.*

Brandon saw Marc's weariness and his anger, but he didn't find extra hatred and that was a relief. He'd been expecting worse. Conner was protected

because of his youth. In his late twenties, Brandon didn't have that defense.

Several thoughts of payback went through Marc's mind, but he refused to lower himself to follow through with any of them. He settled for delivering a stern warning. "If you cross me or betray us, even in defense of your family, I'll let the camp tear you apart."

"I'm not like them." Brandon had rehearsed several explanations. He chose the one he felt at this moment. "If you think back to everything you've seen me do and heard me say since you've been a member of this camp, you'll know that. I'll do my job the way I'm supposed to. I expect you not to treat me differently because of who I'm related to."

It was an open challenge to Marc's fairness.

Brandon staggered backward as Marc's fist slammed into his jaw. He slipped on the slushy ice and lost his balance, landing on his ass.

"There's a little fairness for you." Marc left him sitting there to come up with his own excuse to the guards. He didn't like Brandon now, but not because he was Mitchel. The man had lied to them for so long that it was going to be almost impossible to tell when he was being deceitful.

Rubbing his sore, cold knuckles, Marc calmed as Dog joined him. He hadn't seen much of the wolf since they'd returned to camp. Dog was spending his free time with Charlie.

As the wolf and his master finished the circuit of camp, everyone who saw them was flashed to the

days of Adrian's leadership when Marc had first begun these responsibilities. It sent a wave of peace and contentment that almost brought the shield to life. Nightmares shifted into restless dreams and uneasy slumbers became soft snores. Moments like this were so rare for them now that it woke Angela from a dead sleep.

Surrounded by children in the center of a community tent, Angela allowed the peace to feed her determination. From now on, her needs and secrets would no longer be on display to embarrass or distract. It was time to accept that her desires would never be fulfilled. As long as her people survived, that was enough. The dream was bigger than her heart.

Headed west, away from Safe Haven, Adrian felt Angela shut the connection between them.

Heart shattering, Adrian increased his speed. She'd given up on them having a future, but the charm he'd used made it impossible for her to close the barrier completely on her own.

Respecting her wishes, Adrian shut the connecting line in his mind. He felt isolated right away, but severing this link wouldn't stop the Maker's bond. Only Angela could and she didn't know how.

“Morning mess with Safe Haven. This feels like old times.”

Angela smiled at Kenn’s comment as he joined her at the center table. Surrounded by most of the camp, it really did, even to the buffet breakfast. The UN supplies had brought a lot of their levels up, maybe even enough to get them to the boat. Angela hoped the railcars would give them another chunk of what they needed to make it to the island. The numbers were so short on it that she refused to read them until they had a larger stash.

“You lied!” Brittani slapped food onto Gus’s plate. “You said you wouldn’t, but you did. Get out of here.”

The anger drew attention and caused embarrassment. Gus was smart enough not to keep trying to explain why he’d joined the Eagles. He went to the table with Nancy and Debra, who were on his team.

Given a new piece of gossip, the camp resumed eating and chatting. They were discussing a variety of topics, but the most common was the new rules. In a far corner of the mess, female Eagles were having their first run as den mothers, fueling the talk. Trying to get 31 kids fed was a chore for anyone, let alone for women who had adjusted to a fighting lifestyle. Even Kendle was helping with the toddler she’d rescued from the water gang. That child was happily chewing on a teething biscuit while Kendle wiped her fingers. Tonya was busy with the tunnel kids. Across from them, Samantha

was trying to occupy the boardinghouse children who had finished eating and were eager to get to their warm tents and entertainments.

Angela swept the mess and found Candy sitting in the corner with Theo. Angela assumed he was apologizing from his expression, but Candy's scowl and crossed arms said it wasn't going well.

Ignoring the soreness of her body, Angela nodded to Mandy and Pam, who were taking care of the three infants. Cody was next to them, whispering with Leeann and Missy. *That trio will become a handful.* Angela didn't assume it would be bad. It was good that the kids were going to grow up with others like themselves. *And they'll have strong role models.*

Angela scanned again and was pleased to see the teams were following orders. Some were in line for food together, while others were in line for the bathrooms or already settled at a mess table for breakfast. They were all uncomfortable, but it would ease. Throwing them together would allow them to develop the trust that usually only came over a long time.

The mood lifted as Jennifer entered the mess with Autumn on her hip and Dog at her side. It was another flash to when Safe Haven had felt safe.

Jennifer went to the coffee line. She was quickly surrounded by people who wanted to visit with the cooing child in her arms. Autumn was learning to communicate with other descendants. It was a fun time for whoever she chose to speak with.

Angela didn't put a stop to it. Jennifer had a shield around the baby to keep her thoughts from traveling very far.

In the opposite corner of the food line, their newest members were eating and observing with the intentness of people making choices. The two women and two teenage boys had come in together after being liberated from the water gang. Jennifer had made sure they were safe to add to the herd.

Movement caught Angela's attention.

Candy left the mess, stomping by Conner without acknowledging his presence. The boy had just woken from his night shift and was staring at her in concern. Angela was proud of him when he went in the opposite direction.

"Grow up!"

Daryl's shout snapped heads toward the food line.

Daryl pushed Kevin out of his way. "Idiot."

Kevin gawked. "What?"

Daryl's action told Angela the man had once again been insensitive. It wasn't hard to guess that Kevin had brought up Cynthia. No one spoke that name now for fear of upsetting half a dozen people. Shaking her head at Kevin's immaturity, Angela noticed he still had a guard. Quinn was trailing him. Wondering who had arranged that, Angela made a mental note on it and then swept for the sniper on duty. Marc had wanted three. She'd agreed to one.

Angela found Morgan in the tree in the center of camp. He was bundled up and very cold.

Everything okay?

Just checking in.

Nothing moving, Boss.

Angela withdrew from Morgan's mind and spotted Brandon near him. She was grateful to have another descendant Eagle. Angela didn't know what happened between him and Marc, but the guards from that shift swore the bruise on Brandon's jaw had come from him. Brandon had refused to tell anyone why, but Marc hadn't removed him from duty, so the Eagles couldn't add their displeasure. Angela doubted the secret would hold until they reached the boat. Several people knew Brandon's descendant status now. One slip of a thought around their kind would be all it took and then everyone would know who he was. Angela wasn't looking forward to that moment. She gestured at Kenn. "I'm ready now. Updates."

Kenn took out his notebook. "Food levels haven't changed. What we've used in the last 24-hours was the equivalent of what was brought in. We're great on fuel and water, however. We might have enough of those to last until we make it to the coast." Kenn glanced over to ask if she had figured out a solution to the fuel that they would need for the return trip on the cruise ship. He paused as Tonya came around the corner of the mess, escorting one of the tunnel kids who had needed to use the bathroom.

The young boy slipped in the mud.

Tonya reached out to grab him.

Kenn saw the fall coming and realized she was going to land directly on her stomach. Without considering the consequences, he hit her with a blast of his new gift.

Tonya was held in place by an invisible force that also shoved the child back up and into her arms.

Every descendant in the mess turned to glare at Kenn.

The tent went silent.

Tonya was also staring at him. Not only had he broken the no magic rule, she hadn't known about his new ability.

Everyone expected Angela to discipline Kenn as he found the courage to look at her.

Angela laughed. "Guess you don't have to worry about that anymore."

Kenn grimaced in relief and apprehension as Tonya stomped toward him. "It might've been easier if I had let her fall, but I didn't want the baby to be hurt."

Understanding he had saved the baby, most of the descendants returned to their meal with Kenn's new gift to talk about. The few who resented him for being allowed to break the rules didn't complain about it. They were used to a boss who made exceptions.

Candy was standing at the edge of camp, fingering a piece of tape coming loose from the tree. “I was mad for a minute. Now I’m just cold.”

Conner hit her with a blast of warmth without stepping closer, aware of guards watching them. He’d gone the opposite direction, then circled back around to avoid Angela’s attention.

Candy moaned as her toes warmed and goosebumps broke out on her skin. “It’s amazing that you can do that.”

Conner had always thought his gifts made him a freak. It was nice to hear something good. Not sure what to say that wouldn’t ruin the moment, he waited for her to speak again. He could feel her unhappiness. He didn’t want to leave her alone.

Candy turned to stare at the boy, expression torn. “I told him no about being on his team again. He’s only giving it to me because the boss called him out for being unfair. I don’t want it that way.”

“You’d have to take a break soon anyway.” Conner eyed the slight bulge of her stomach.

“I know, but it makes me angry that it took Theo this long to understand he was wrong.”

“Theo seems like a good guy. I bet he tries to make it up to you.”

Candy shrugged. That wasn’t what she wanted either.

Always scanning her, Conner couldn’t help himself. “What *do* you want, baby?”

Candy refused to let her mind form the answer that often came late at night now, when loneliness was creeping over her soul.

Conner understood she didn't feel comfortable answering. He gave her a polite smile and moved away. "I'll be around if you need me."

Candy let him go, almost positive at some point she would call him. He was the only one who seemed to care if she lived or died.

5

"Safe Haven will be leaving in one hour. I repeat: we leave in one hour." Angela looked around the mess, where most of the camp was gathered. "To help get us through the next day of travel, I have two announcements. The first is we're rolling until evening and then we're taking a full two-day break at the site."

Angela waited for the cheers to pass, happy that she could give them some good news. When it quieted enough to be heard, she gave them a reason to cheer louder. "When we reach a quiet spot where security thinks it's okay, we're having a party to celebrate the moments we missed in the mountain. At the same time, we'll also have a wedding. Kyle and Jennifer have decided they would like to become an official family in Safe Haven and we're going to wish them well!"

Almost everyone clapped or turned to look at Kyle or Jennifer, who flushed and blushed at the attention.

Kyle's team and Neil's offered genuine congratulations, as did some of the camp, but it was mostly awkward.

"Our supplies are too low to hold celebrations for all the events we would like to, so we're going to consider this an *everything* party—from birthdays to weddings. If anyone has a stash put up, the party would be a great time to bring it out." Angela gestured toward the flap, where the vehicle crew was listening and waiting for her order to get their transportation ready. "We roll in one hour."

Angela waited at the table with Kendle, her guard now, until everyone else cleared out.

Kendle stayed alert in case Angela wanted to talk to her, but there was only silence. Hoping she hadn't done something new to offend the boss, Kendle waited for orders.

"Thank you for looking out for him." Angela was referring to the mission run. She motioned Kendle to follow as she left the mess. "I didn't assign you as one of the den mothers. It wasn't because you aren't safe around kids. You clearly are. I need you on a team."

"It's cool." Kendle was relieved not to have babysitting duties. She followed Angela across the camp that was packing with smiles and chatter. It felt surreal after the UN base.

"Ride with me until the first stop?"

“You know it.” Kendle wasn’t looking forward to any conversations they might have, but she did want to be seen helping the boss like any other Eagle. She’d caught the Safe Haven infection.

“Put your things in the lead rig and find some maps. I’d like to work on the location of the detention center and plans for it in case we drift too close to them while on the boat.”

Kendle left.

Angela heard heavier footsteps catching up, along with an annoyed male huff. She turned around, but kept walking—backwards.

Ivan glared, but didn’t comment on the challenging expression. *You’re restless.*

Angela swung back around at his astute observation. She was, but she didn’t want Marc to know.

“I won’t tell.”

Angela ignored his mind reading. It wasn’t time for revelations yet. “That’s why I replaced her with you until we leave. She and Marc will both believe it’s a goodwill gesture, like the moments he gave Adrian.”

“But you’ll have to ride with them. Marc is driving your truck.”

Angela’s cruel smile didn’t match her innocent tone. “Makes it a perfect time to pick up dangerous thoughts.”

Ivan chuckled. “I love it here.” He didn’t need to ask who she suspected of future trouble. Marc wasn’t the problem. Ivan was certain the man

wouldn't screw things up with Angela just for a tumble with Kendle. It would only happen if Angela died...or if Kendle put a charm on Marc.

“And now you know what to watch for.”

“That's why you really traded! So we could have this talk.”

“What else?”

Ivan felt the eyes on them. “So we're seen together.”

“And?”

Ivan grinned. “Because I'm a fast study?”

Yes, you are. Prove it by telling me why I would do all of that for a soldier who killed some of my people before switching sides.

Ivan paused, adding up the evidence instead of wasting time being offended. *You're teaching me... Handling people, scoring points, giving me camp secrets, keeping me by your side to observe since you don't need a guard with snipers up... Ivan remembered her words in the tiny house and stiffened. Why are you grooming me to run this camp?*

Angela kept walking.

Ivan didn't ask again. He caught up casually without drawing more attention.

His automatic caution was yet more proof to Angela that she'd made the right choice. Safe Haven had to have a leader who wasn't a descendant or she and the others could never return home. Ivan was it. He was the third person to know. Adrian had

figured it out just by observing her for a few hours. Marc wouldn't get it until someone told him.

6

“We only have an hour until the camp leaves. Can this wait?”

Jennifer's hand came to her hip. “If it could, I wouldn't be bringing it up.”

Kyle's eyes narrowed. *She's angry. I wonder why.*

“Don't you play innocent with me! I know what you did.”

Kyle yawned. “What are you talking about?”

Jennifer waved a hand. “*That's* what I'm talking about. Why are you on Marc's night shifts?”

Kyle sent her a flash of their moment in the cold darkness.

Jennifer had the grace to flush, but she didn't back down. “You like those moments. Don't lie.”

“It's not the way I want it to be, Jenny.” Kyle took a step closer. “I'll switch shifts back after the wedding.”

Jennifer glared at him. “Who says I even want to marry you now?” As she stomped off, listening to the sound of Kyle's heart shatter, Jennifer refused to relent. Kyle was doing everything he could to keep things between them, despite telling her all along that nothing ever would be. She was pissed.

Kyle started to go after her, but a scene across camp drew his attention and kept him rooted in place with the other witnesses.

“I will!” Tonya threw herself into Kenn’s arms, squealing.

The claiming kiss Kenn delivered told people what was going on and sent a small cheer through the camp in celebration of another couple making a commitment to each other.

Word quickly spread that Tonya had accepted Kenn’s proposal. The shiny ring on her finger confirmed the rumor as they entered the mess a few minutes later. They were surrounded by people offering congratulations.

Watching, Kyle grimaced. News of his wedding to Jennifer hadn’t generated excitement. Most people hadn’t been sure if it was okay to support it. As a result, Jennifer wasn’t getting the attention a young bride was supposed to. Kyle didn’t like that. He would talk to the boss about it. *I won’t tolerate her being treated unfairly in any way. She loves me—a killer—after suffering Cesar. I want her to have everything her heart desires. I’m gonna spend the rest of our lives making sure that happens.*

“What do you mean, *no*?”

Kyle turned with everyone else at Charlie’s raised voice.

“I can’t marry you. You’re just a kid.”

Dog pranced aside as Tracy came from the shower tent, wrapped in a towel and a robe. She

shoved through the small crowd, ignoring sympathetic comments from those who'd heard.

A moment later, Charlie also emerged from the shower, looking like he had been punched in the gut. He obviously hadn't expected her response.

Angela turned away from the scene before Charlie saw her, positive he wouldn't want to speak to her about it. She had considered warning him multiple times about the thoughts in Tracy's mind, but he wouldn't have listened, and she hadn't needed the extra stress. Now that Charlie knew, he would go to his father for answers.

Sorry that he was hurting, Angela went to the vehicle area. Marc had duty over it, but he now needed to spend that time helping Charlie adjust to the future.

Chapter Thirteen

Riding the Rails

1

Marc didn't speak as Charlie joined him near the vehicle section of the perimeter. Marc could feel Charlie's need for a conversation. He didn't know what had happened; he pulled it from the teenager's mind.

Angela stepped into Marc's line of sight, giving him a subtle nod.

Relieved, Marc turned his post over to her and faced his son. "Have you figured out why?"

Charlie shrugged. "There are too many voices in my mind."

Marc draped an arm around the boy's shoulders and led him toward the mess that was being packed up. "Let's grab a cup of coffee if Brittani has any left and talk."

Charlie agreed. He was embarrassed so many people already knew his proposal had gone badly, but he needed to know how to get Tracy to change her answer.

Marc hated to be the one to tell him. "She isn't going to change her mind, son."

"I thought she loved me. I don't understand why she said no."

“What did she tell you?”

Charlie clenched his fists. “She said she can’t marry me because I’m just a kid!”

Marc wasn’t sure in what way Tracy meant that. “When you calm down, talk to her about it. Until then, let the camp work on her.”

Charlie snorted. “These people don’t want us together because of the age difference, like with Kyle and Jennifer. They’ll be happy if we all split up.”

“That might have been true in the beginning, but not anymore. This camp needs babies and happy endings. Maybe Tracy overlooked that in her considerations.”

Charlie wanted to have hope, but the tone Tracy had used implied it wasn’t to protect his place in camp or hers. She honestly didn’t want to marry him because she thought he was too young.

Marc took them to a corner table, skipping the coffee. He could feel Angela wanting to be on the road. “I’m sorry.”

Charlie didn’t hear surprise or condemnation, only sympathy for his pain. He realized his father had known this was going to happen. He stared reproachfully. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“For the same reason your mom didn’t.” Marc pointed at the boy. “You wouldn’t have listened.”

Charlie wanted to argue, but Tracy’s true feelings were a complete shock to him. He hadn’t realized he was being used.

“I’m not sure I would call it being used. Your relationship has caused her more problems than her assault did. People who used to be her friends have turned away from her and she’s the center of gossip every time she comes out of her tent. Maybe she’s just tired of being a circus show attraction and it has little to do with your age.”

“You think?”

“Honestly, no. That all added to it, but your age difference is a problem for her. If she can’t get over it, you guys won’t be a couple.”

Charlie was heartbroken at the revelation. He hadn’t known it was an issue.

“That’s part of why she said no, I’d guess. You recently...took your relationship to the next level, right?”

Charlie nodded, cheeks reddening.

“If I know, then the camp knows. I would imagine Tracy is being treated to bad attitudes because of it. As a female, she can’t be beaten for crossing the line, but she can still be punished. The only reason you aren’t is because you’re the leader’s son.”

The truth of that warning was in the subtle glances now coming from the members of camp still in the mess. They obviously agreed.

Furious, Charlie forced himself to listen to his father. He knew it was solid advice, though it wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

As the males worked through Charlie’s issues, the camp continued to load up, giving them privacy.

Both men were glad, but at the same time, they were unhappy someone else was able to do their jobs. Charlie had caught the Eagle virus too, and didn't understand why Tracy didn't feel the same. As long as he had her and some kind of respectable duty in his mother's army, life was perfect.

“What happened to leadership?”

“And spend every waking moment like you and mom do? No, thanks.”

Marc sighed. “Son, you need to find out what Tracy considers to be a perfect life and then decide if it's something you can handle. Without happiness on both sides, it won't work.”

Angela appeared in the flap of the tent. “We're leaving now. Let's load up.”

She vanished, not wanting to witness the tantrum she felt coming.

Marc gestured the boy toward the front of the convoy. “You can help me, and we'll keep talking.”

Angry at the interruption, Charlie shoved away from the table. “I have stuff to do!” He stormed from the mess.

Marc hoped he wasn't going to confront Tracy so soon. It was obvious he needed to cool off, but Angela wouldn't be pleased to have their departure interrupted by teenage drama either. Tracy also wouldn't be happy to be embarrassed again. If Charlie pushed this and the boss or Eagles scolded Tracy, the chance of her changing her mind would drop to nothing. Marc hadn't wanted to tell the boy

Tracy's problem was deeper than just an age difference.

Charlie wasn't satisfying her, but he was blind to it because of his youth. Tracy wanted a mate in the chain of command or at least high up in the Eagles so she would feel safe. Charlie didn't have an interest in that now. Tracy had figured out sex meant more to the boy than the future of their people. That was the real problem. Until Charlie matured, they were probably going to be spending a lot of time apart. If Charlie wasn't careful, Tracy would find someone else who cared about more than just himself and his mate.

"We leave in two minutes!"

Marc snickered at the annoyed tone and went to join her in the front truck. He had no doubt Angela was talking to him.

Jennifer and Brandon passed Marc, but neither of them approved of his attitude.

Why does he like it when she's upset?

Why don't you ask him?

Brandon opened the truck and waited for the woman and child to get settled. As he shut the door and went to his assigned ride, Brandon could feel her waiting for his denial. Using that famous Mitchel intuition, he kept her waiting.

Jennifer chuckled at the tactic, but she didn't give him what he wanted. She hadn't decided if she would mentor him, but it didn't matter. She would only do it with Kyle's permission and supervision, and that meant her man would have to be told who

Brandon really was. Angela had already forbidden it and Jennifer refused to cross her. She didn't mind keeping the secret so long as Angela was the one wielding the hammer of justice when it finally dropped. She was the shepherd that Adrian had been too corrupt to be. The boss cared about every life, no matter how small.

2

“I need help. Please!”

The radio call brought a fresh wave of tension to the lead rig. Marc glanced over to see how Angela was taking it.

Angela kept writing in her book, but the white knuckled grip she had on the pen gave her away. The caller was a child. She was trying hard to ignore it, but Marc doubted that would hold if the kid kept calling.

He switched off the radio. They'd been hearing it all day, but if Safe Haven asked for a location, mentally or over the radio, refugees would know where they were. When they camped, Marc expected her to send a team to find the wheezing child.

Kendle didn't wake up. They'd spent three hours beating around plans and scouring maps for their boat trip before she'd dropped out in the rear bunk. Marc had been able to relax then. He didn't know how Angela stood the tension when she was around him and Adrian. He'd never considered it

from her point of view before. It had been a relief when Kendle suddenly declared she needed a nap and then took one.

Angela didn't tell Marc that she was perfecting her copy of Adrian's sleep spell. She could now target a specific person in a small group.

"We'll be at the site in the next half hour. You'll stay with your security?"

Angela bobbed her head.

Marc felt her restlessness, but he didn't know what to do about it.

Angela didn't either. What she wanted, she couldn't have. "I'll be with the kids after we get camp up. We've missed our meeting the last few nights." Kyle's team had been sent ahead, along with Ivan's, to secure the site.

Marc was satisfied she would be occupied while they scouted the railcars.

Angela was relieved when Marc turned his attention to things other than her mood. He didn't understand what it was like to be under a spell that stole rational thoughts and replaced them with garbage.

Angela concentrated as a wave of tension swept the convoy. She narrowed it to a rear truck, then pinpointed it to Charlie.

"I talked to him, but he wasn't ready."

Angela sighed deeply, hating her son's pain. "Do you think she'll change her mind?"

"Not until he changes his behavior. She thought she was getting an Eagle, not a horny kid."

Angela tensed. She hadn't known the couple was consummating their relationship. "That makes it harder."

"Yep." Marc scanned the vehicles he could see, also able to feel Charlie's anger and confusion. "He has a lot of growing up to do."

Angela grunted. "That's another thing I didn't want to tell him. He's like us. He'll learn life the hard way."

Marc chuckled, reaching out to stroke her hand. "We made it through."

Angela smiled, squeezing his fingers. "Yes, we did."

It was a nice moment for both of them, but it was destroyed with thoughts of the man who was always between them now.

Angela pulled her hand away.

Marc let her withdraw, unable to help being jealous even though Adrian wasn't with them. Until the spell was broken, Adrian would always be in Angela's mind and there was nothing Marc could do to fight it other than love her when she would let him.

"We're all working on it." Angela thought about Jennifer, who was currently monitoring this conversation from her place in the kids' semi.

Marc knew. He was tolerating the teenager spying on them because he hadn't figured out why she was doing it.

"It's her job. She's learning about people, like I told her to."

Marc hadn't realized Angela had ordered the girl to become a snoop.

"I told her she didn't understand human nature. After everything she's been through, that sank in and festered. Since she isn't the type to challenge me openly, she decided to listen and see if I'm right."

"You are."

"Yes, but she's catching up fast. With so many older, wiser minds open to her now, she's able to compare opinions she didn't have before."

Marc struggled to open a private line of communication.

Angela didn't help him. He needed to sharpen those skills too.

Marc grunted as he got it. *I saw her mind. She's stronger than anyone here, except you. I almost understand why you chose her.*

Fate chose her. She's the only descendant who can keep me out for any length of time.

Angela didn't usually share details about her gifts with him. Marc knew it was because she feared his reaction, but he'd realized that was a mistake. To understand everything she'd gone through during the changes, he had to include their abilities. *Do you have as many doors as Jennifer?*

Angela's shoulders tensed. *So many I haven't opened them all yet. She has a warehouse. I have a cargo ship.*

The boat reference was Angela's way of letting him switch the topic if the knowledge she'd given him was too much.

Marc steered around an old wreck and did a fast scan in his mirrors. *Will one of them break the charm?*

My witch says no. She knows more about the doors than I do, but she has a lot of time to listen to them.

Angela had locked her demon inside the mental cage again. His own demon was too scared of him to misbehave, but Marc had restricted it so much that the grumbling in his mind was common. Most of it was about how unhappy Angela's witch was, so Marc ignored it. He wasn't going to instruct Angela on their gifts. She'd had hers for a lifetime. He'd only been using his a few months. *Why are you different from the other alphas?* Marc didn't see her flinch, but he felt it.

I'm not an alpha anymore. I'm Byzantine.

I don't know what that means.

Are you sure you want to talk about this?

Absolutely.

Angela wanted to smile at his eager tone, but couldn't. She was too worried about his reaction. She forced herself to answer. *I have all your gifts. I have everyone's gifts. The doors are all there, just locked until I have an evolution or make a copy. The matching cell snaps open and I can do it. I only need to view it once.*

Marc was stunned. *How much energy does that drain?*

Only a little, as long as I don't use any of them. Angela pushed her graying curl behind her ear. *I'll never have enough energy to use them all in the same fight.*

Is this normal...or is this for the final battle you didn't want me to know about?

If I didn't want you to know, you wouldn't. Angela's tone was calmer than her words. *Nothing about me is normal. Even Adrian isn't sure why I'm so powerful. He was hoping your scroll diving would yield results.*

Now it was Marc's turn to twitch. He hadn't thought she knew about that.

I know everything about all of you, she stated ominously, mental mood falling into desperation. *He's hurting right now. It rips me apart.*

Marc sent a blast of love and then covered her with his mental shield, hoping it might give her a little relief. Learning about her gifts wasn't bothering him. Knowing she was in pain was. The consolation was knowing that Adrian was also in agony. To distract her, Marc kept to their topic. *I found a scroll called The Blessing, but only a pure soul can do it.*

None of us are that, except maybe you.

I would have tried it already, but there's a catch. The pure soul can't be biased, or it will backfire.

Please don't, then. I've had enough of backfires.

Marc's lips twisted. *Yeah. I'll be diving again when I'm strong enough. We'll keep looking.*

We?

The demons help me hold my breath and pull me up when I get too tired to swim.

I'd like to come along.

We'll need to leave the camp in good hands.

Angela felt Jennifer prying at the corner of her mental barrier, young ego annoyed at the block. *I think I know someone who can handle it.*

Marc began to chuckle, filling their cabin with peace.

“What?”

You'll put her on nights, but Kyle switched to nights to avoid being around her until the wedding. She ambushes him with orgasms. He said he can't take it anymore.

Angela laughed so hard she started crying. “I knew she was the one we should have been watching out for!”

3

“We should wait for the call. Don't get out yet.”

Angela exited the truck, slamming the door so Kendle knew not to join them. She couldn't take being closed-up with the woman anymore.

Marc joined Angela with a frown. The guards were clearing the railcar site and he wasn't getting alarms on his grid, but she wasn't supposed to break the rules.

“Let’s get people fed early and settled. Music is fine, but no open radio channels. I don’t want them hearing the calls tonight.” Their campsite was the thawing ground along both sides of the railcars. She was declaring Safe Haven to be the owner of whatever was in them.

Marc took notes as they stood outside the truck, stretching while the guards finish taping the perimeter.

“Same schedule as last night for security, but rotate the rookies. They need to be comfortable as fill-ins on all shifts.”

Marc had made the schedules and hated every second of it. “I kept the teams together like you want.”

“Good. What we begin now will continue on the island if it works out. This will keep us from losing so many fighters if there are future problems.”

“If?”

Angela sighed. “When.”

“That’s better. What’s next?”

Angela ran through it in her mind again to be positive she’d covered it all.

The camp watched the Eagles impatiently from their vehicles.

“We may have a visitor in the night. Leave a bucket of grain and water behind the animal area.”

Marc caught her thoughts of the horse and smiled. “The kids will love that.”

“I thought so too. Dog’s working on it. Either way, we have extra animal feed until we find more livestock.”

“All clear.” Kyle and Neil joined them, providing security over the leaders until their personal guards were available. Marc and Angela weren’t supposed to be outside yet. Neil frowned at them.

Marc held up a hand. “I followed her so she wasn’t out here without a guard.”

Kyle snorted. “Sure.”

The camp relaxed as Marc’s chuckles floated over the convoy. Most of them had windows down despite the chill.

“Do you want the nightly meeting set right after mess?” Marc knew she needed more sleep. They both did. If they got the meetings out of the way early, they might get to bed sooner.

“Yes.”

The kids who were listening eagerly passed the word.

Ivan and his team surrounded the council, scanning evening shadows.

Angela stretched, getting ready for walking.

“How’s the leg?”

“Fine. Don’t even feel it.”

Marc left her alone about it. He would ask one of the den mothers to eye it for him.

“Let’s get set up.” Angela strode into the camp that was now taped off and had cans lit at the four corners. She began pointing out places for the

community tents and bathrooms first. The mess would go on the other side of the railcars. This would be a two-day stop and she wanted it right the first time. Kenn would have been able to cover it, but he and his team were on third shift again. They would eat and take over around midnight. Until then, Angela had point over the setup while Marc handled everything else.

Angela grinned as she remembered hating getting this duty under Adrian's leadership. Now, it was a relief to only concentrate on one task.

"Please, help! We're sick!"

Angela's improving mood plummeted as her radio delivered the child's misery again. Marc was right. She wasn't going to be able to ignore it, but not because she wasn't strong enough. That was the easy part. The hard part was making the choice to risk lives for just one child who was so sick he probably wouldn't live anyway. His coughs and wheezing suggested he wouldn't survive another 24-hours.

Walking by, Kenn caught the images in Angela's mind and detoured to go finish her outfit. He'd been working on it for days despite not receiving a confirmation that she wanted him to. He hadn't needed one. Their 12 years together allowed him to see what only Adrian would have if he'd been here. Angela needed a release. The boss was leaving camp and the herd wasn't going to be told.

“Can you deliver this to Jennifer? I need to hit the head.”

Kyle took the sticky note. He needed to find the council a more private way to communicate until they could use radios again. As Marc left, Kyle couldn't help glancing at the message.

I want Jennifer on point overnight—indefinitely. You tell her, Kyle. Do it now.

Kyle flushed, peering around to see if Angela was standing somewhere watching him. The way she could predict people's reactions was scary. She'd known he would read the note.

Kyle told himself it wouldn't be that bad. If Jennifer was in charge of the camp, she would be too busy to ambush him.

Kyle found his fiancé with the other women and kids. They were hurrying to the latrine. Kyle wasn't sure which group was doing the funniest dance as they tried to hold it in.

Jennifer snickered with him as Pam danced by with Missy, showing her the leg-cross technique that only worked some of the time. Most of the kids hadn't traveled like this in a while and some hadn't done it at all. There had been a few accidents and not all of those had been kids. The adults weren't used to it either.

Kyle handed Jennifer the note and immediately left to resume his duties.

When her blast of joy slammed into him, Kyle was able to keep walking, but the grin covered his

face. It was so unusual for him that people all over the site stopped to stare.

Jennifer stayed in place for a few seconds of celebration and then planning mode took over. There was a lot she could accomplish during the nights. The boss would always be happy when she woke.

Brandon trailed Jennifer, scanning her thoughts. Assigned to protect the girl, Brandon had been relieved to get the order. It told him his secret was still safe. More importantly, it said the bosses weren't holding it against him.

Yet. Jennifer couldn't help responding as she walked ahead. If they treat you differently, people will want to know why, but your punishment for lying will come. Count on it.

Brandon's relief faded. She was right.

I can help you with that, but not for free.

Brandon frowned. *You knew.*

Jennifer smirked. *No one keeps me out, except the boss and even she has to work on it. Of course, I knew.*

Why didn't you tell her?

Why do you think Adrian released you right before we left the mountain?

Brandon was dismayed by the only answer that now made sense in context with this conversation. *He knew you were about to tell on me.*

Yep. He hopes he saved you being confronted and exposed, then banished. He's probably right. It wouldn't have gone well.

How long have you known?

I figured it out the night of the quake. You were laughing and having a memory of doing something with a cousin. I almost didn't recognize Adrian.

And then the quake hit.

Yes, we had more important problems. Then we started to recover, and I needed to tell the boss about you. Adrian felt it coming or maybe he picked up something from you. Sneaky bastard, your cousin.

They all are. Brandon locked down on his doors. Other descendants might pick up images from him.

Jennifer didn't have that problem. When she talked this way with someone, it was always on a private line.

How do I do that?

Jennifer kept walking without giving him an answer, but she was certain she would help him learn the skill. Angela didn't want the camp to know Brandon was a Mitchel and Marc agreed. Helping Brandon would help them. "I hope." Keeping a secret this big was dangerous for everyone.

5

"Tonight's lesson doesn't have new rules." Angela was in the center of the largest community tent, surrounded by kids of all ages. Both magic and non were here, along with their guardians. The heat

from so many bodies had them all on the verge of sweating.

“I’m going to tell you a story and then we’ll talk about it while we have snacks and get set for bed.” Angela motioned to Morgan, who was in charge of security over this tent. Thirteen other Eagles were spread out in the darkness around them, ready to grab people if there was a problem. By now, everyone knew it was dangerous to put descendants in the dark. It also wasn’t wise to have all of their power in one place, but Angela needed them together for this lesson.

“There once was a princess who liked to take long walks on the beach...”

Many of the adults were able to pinpoint the story to a book called *The Princess and the Scorpion*, though few of those could remember the author or origin. They assumed this was another lesson on trust and let their minds wander as they rested. It was good to have the kids occupied.

Angela knew. She wasn’t concerned over it yet, but the adults wouldn’t like how this one ended.

She finished the short story, repeating the final line. “You knew I was a scorpion when you picked me up.”

Angela waited a minute for the kids to get it, though the younger ones wouldn’t. They were just here for safety and companionship. “I see it bothered some of you. Because she died?”

Leeann was quick to speak. “Because she was so stupid. Everyone knows not to pick up scorpions.”

The kids around her nodded. Several of them had survived stings since the war.

Angela nodded. “It is stupid. Doing something risky, when you believe bad things will happen because of it, is stupid.”

The adults were listening now, though not as enrapt as the children were. They’d been hoping for more rules or revelations.

“So, if you know and do it anyway, that’s your fault, right?”

The kids nodded solemnly.

“What if someone throws a scorpion at you and you get stung. Is that your fault?”

“No!”

Many of the kids yelled their answer, happy to be sure of that one.

Feeling the moment arrive, Angela looked through the crowd, making eye contact. “What about the war? Is it our fault? Are we responsible for the sins of our government?”

Silence fell through the tent. Some of the kids shook their heads, but the adults didn’t want to face that query. The answer was disturbing.

“I think that’s why life is so hard for us. We’ve been cursed. Not because we personally picked up the scorpion, but because we allowed someone else to and we were hit by it. It wasn’t our fault, but we’re the ones left to pay for it.” She kept glancing

at people, including them. “That has caused us to feel more pain and hatred than we ever have. What we’ve all been through isn’t fair.”

Angela took a sheet of paper from her pocket and unfolded it in the awkward silence. “This is where we’re going. I want it to be a fresh start for all of us.” Angela handed the paper to the eager kids at her feet who hadn’t viewed the island yet. “We have to leave our mistakes behind and move forward with the wisdom that came from those tragedies. It’s okay to forgive ourselves. We’re not perfect. We’re never going to be, but we are decent people who’ve earned the right to live in peace. We deserve that.” Using her red orbs to make them think magic was being used, Angela lifted her hand. “We are no longer cursed once we leave this land!”

Before she could roll her eyes at the theatrics, Angela got up and left the tent. She couldn’t take the misery in people’s minds over the errors they’d made, the mistakes and oversights that had cost so many lives. Angela didn’t want them carrying that weight at all, let alone lugging it to their paradise. Half her people would believe they had been freed from the curse and the others would act like it to keep her secret. Angela didn’t know if the placebo effect would work, but she’d had to try something.

Ivan followed, once again impressed with how she protected people. He’d finally concluded she loved them. It wasn’t their energy or to serve a power trip. Angela wanted humanity to have peace. Ivan was determined to do everything he could to

help her achieve that impossible goal. He was hers now.

Angela swung around to face him. “Prove it.”

“Name it.”

“Kenn has gear for me. I’ll need a team to provide escort.”

Ivan’s scowl took up his entire face. “You’re leaving camp. Why?”

The radio on her belt crackled.

“Please, help me. I’m in Franklin. I’m sick. ...is anyone out there?”

Angela switched off the radio.

“Okay, yeah.” Her pain was making Ivan’s stomach turn. “I’ll handle it.”

“You’ll handle what?” Marc came from the shadows behind Ivan.

Angela waved Ivan on, stepping in front of her mate. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I wish you’d just send a team.”

“We don’t have a medic who can tell what type of sickness he has. Just me. Maybe.”

“Maybe.” Marc didn’t want to agree, but she was the boss and he was delighted she even wanted to go on a run. He’d thought she was done with all of it after the mountain broke her.

“I’m recovering.”

“I’m glad.” Marc kissed the top of her head. “You’re sure Jennifer can cover a point shift?”

“For a day or two. If I’m gone longer than that, you’ll have trouble.”

Marc sent a small blast of his energy into her, trying to protect her for the trip.

Angela shot her own, wanting the same for her mate while she was gone.

Chuckling, they walked away to hide the sudden tension that sprang up from the coming separation. Neither of them expected to sleep until her run was over.

Chapter Fourteen

Permission Revoked

1

“Is something going on?” Tonya joined Samantha and her guard near the semis.

Annoyed at the interruption, Samantha turned to Tonya with an ugly glower.

Not easily intimidated, Tonya put her hand on her hip. “What?”

“I’m watching for something.” Samantha couldn’t help following through. “Are you able to do anything because you’re carrying a descendant baby?”

“W-what?” Tonya couldn’t lie to a descendant.

Samantha knew how to handle the camp gossip. She leaned in. “I don’t want to hear you ride Kenn’s ass anymore about not telling you he can move shit and read minds. Understand me?”

Now very intimidated, Tonya nodded and started biting her lip.

Samantha returned to studying the early morning sky around them, enjoying Tonya’s discomfort.

Tonya hurried off, now worried that Samantha would tell Angela her secret.

Around them, the camp enjoyed the show and waited for the boss to get up. They didn't like it that she was still sleeping.

The Eagles were already working. Most of them knew Angela wasn't in camp, but she wanted the railcars cleaned out. After opening them at dawn to start an inspection, the sentries understood why she'd camped around the rusting mementoes of the old world. Ivan's find was going to make him a hero.

Samantha saw Marc heading for the cars with a helper and approved of Quinn being used for more than just a guard on Kevin. They needed strong backs and those who weren't going to stick around needed to be used quickly. Kevin was currently helping clear room in the vehicles for new supplies.

Samantha nodded to Marc. She and Kendle had point over camp until Jennifer appeared. Samantha expected the teenager to be out and about before noon despite the third shift duty she'd pulled. That might buy a few hours, but Marc needed to be ready to handle an upset camp by the time he returned for lunch mess. If he didn't, it might get ugly.

“We've been airing it out for hours. The boss had teams assigned. I have all of them waiting by the correct car or already working on it.”

Marc nodded at Quinn, pleased. With his arm in a half cast, Quinn, like many of their injured, wasn't able to perform his full duties yet, but he still wanted to help. Those people were being used for messages,

spying, and paperwork. “Has anyone been in the engine car yet?”

Quinn stepped closer to deliver the answer, not wanting anyone to hear without knowing if it was okay. “We found the engineer lying on the floor of the car. It looks like he was shot from a long distance. Nothing has been touched.”

“Just shot? The cars weren’t looted?”

Quinn shook his head, voice filling with loathing for the war. “No. Someone just shot him and kept going.”

“It’s not the first time we’ve witnessed stuff like that.”

“No, but this one is a little unusual.” Quinn dug in his pocket.

“How so?”

Quinn handed Marc a moldy logbook. “Check out the destination.”

Marc scanned the page Quinn had opened it to, nose curling to avoid the smell of rot that came from the book. “Pinetucky Restoration Center.” Marc looked at the note scrawled next to it, assuming it was the engineer’s handwriting.

Richie Bunker.

Marc started to smile. “What’s in the cars?”

“You won’t believe it until I show you.”

Marc followed Quinn to the tall, rusting relics. There were seven of them. As they moved to the first, where a level four team was on guard, Marc felt an ominous chill run up his spine. Hoping it

didn't mean Angela was having problems, he tried to concentrate on the job in front of him.

"This first car has power sources, lights, and packages of medication. We checked a few of the expiration dates. Most are still good." Quinn stepped aside so Marc could enter.

Fully stacked, the great vibes of the team guarding it told Marc there was enough here to cover all of their needs for the trip to the boat and maybe even to the island. "Does she have assigned places for everything?"

"She does." Quinn handed him another sheet of paper. "This is where we're supposed to put the inventory."

Marc approved it and then gave the paper back. He made a note on his clipboard so he would know where to send other items that fell under these categories. "Carry on."

Quinn stayed with Marc as he traveled the small train, gathering notes and information. The crates of dry goods and water were the most valuable, but even the designer fashions intended for the wealthy would clothe their people now that winter was here and their gear was low. It was an almost impossible find.

It took Marc a while to travel all the cars, distracted by the amount of supplies they now had from this one stop. It would take them all of today and most of tomorrow to move everything into the semis. It was a shame they couldn't just run the train

to where they needed it. According to the location on the logbook, the train had been scheduled to arrive forty minutes after the last completed stop. That meant the bunker had to be close enough for them to explore and maybe find another stash.

As the late morning sun fought through the grit above them, Marc finally reached the rear of the train. The last two cars appeared to be for livestock. The smell coming from them, while not overpowering, wasn't pleasant.

Quinn didn't want Marc to get upset, but he assumed the man could handle it better than Angela would. "Kyle thinks they were bringing in hired help with all the supplies."

Marc took a fast look inside the cargo car and quickly stepped away. Judging from rotting clothing and bodies, he assumed the hired help had been Mexican slaves trafficked into the country. "People suck."

Quinn bobbed his head in agreement. "Where do you want to go next?"

Marc headed for camp. "I need to be seen during lunch mess and I want to wash up. Make sure everyone who works out here washes up or sanitizes."

Quinn made a note of it and stayed with Marc as they reentered camp. He would be the go-between while the man handled both sides.

Marc felt the problem coming before he reached the food area, but he didn't shy away from it. The camp knew Angela was gone.

Marc stepped inside the tent and crossed his arms over his chest.

A dozen camp members immediately came to him, clamoring for answers.

“Did you know?”

“Where is she?”

“Is she okay?”

Marc waited for them to quiet.

“Where’s the boss?!” someone in the rear of the crowd shouted, drowning out everyone else.

“She and a team left camp last night to go help with the calls we’ve been hearing on the radio.”

Marc’s fast, honest answer took a little of the fight out of the tent.

“Why did you let her go?!”

“When is she coming home?!”

Marc forced himself to grin. “Since when has she ever told me that information?” Marc waited, diffusing their anger with cynical mirth each time they fired.

“You should have told us she was gone!”

“She should have sent someone else!”

“I mentioned both of those things and she told me she was an Eagle first and our boss second.” Marc grinned again. “It felt like my Angie. I got out of her way and let her do what she wanted. Like you’re all going to.” He went to the line for coffee, hoping his next words were the truth. “If she needs us, she’ll call. Until then, we’ll make her happy by doing our jobs.”

Stated with the right amount of tolerant resignation, it doused the last flame and allowed the camp to ease away from a deadly edge. Marc didn't think it would work even once more. He felt that way because it had barely worked on him. If they didn't have Angela back in camp soon, Safe Haven would tear itself apart while he went searching for her. One reckless choice might sink them all this time.

2

“Are we getting close?” Ivan was driving the jeep. He wanted plenty of time to stop and study the situation before Angela went in.

“Less than an hour.” They had traveled until an ugly dawn and then Angela had insisted that they pull over to sleep. She didn't want to go into an unknown situation without rest. They'd been listening to refugees on the radio. The call from the sick child had come twice more. The good thing about the trip was that it had been dark for most of it and they hadn't been able to see the horrible landscape around them. Now that it was early afternoon and they were nearing their destination, they'd had their fill of the sights. This area had been hit by the draft. Even after 11 months, it was clear what had happened here by the kicked-in doors and wrecked government vehicles. The people in this area had fought back. Angela applauded them even as she mourned their loss.

Ivan concentrated on the road, still a little stunned about how they'd woken. He had insisted Angela and the three Indians on their team take the first rest. He had reluctantly gone to sleep when it was his turn because he hadn't been able to stay awake longer without being too tired to be sharp. When she'd woken him four hours later by slapping his shoulder, Ivan had snapped awake to find a body next to the jeep. When he asked Angela what happened, she said the man snuck up on her. From the way the corpse had been drained, Ivan wondered if the man had been a descendant. Angela had refused to answer, but her gray hair was once again a glossy black and there were no wrinkles showing at the corners of her eyes. Ivan had been observing their gifts and figured out descendant lifeforces gave them a full recovery.

Angela didn't care about Ivan's thoughts. She was trying to look ahead to the town and figure out how she could help them and get back with her people before nightfall. She was hoping it was something simple. She had only brought a small variety of medications to try.

Angela jumped at the sound of someone in the backseat biting their fingernails. They were all nervous. Eagles hated not knowing what to expect.

"Which way?" Ivan slowed at the intersection. They hadn't been using a map.

Angela concentrated for a minute and then pointed. "Twenty minutes down that road. Find us a place to pull over for recon."

Satisfied that she wasn't going to have them rush in without doing reconnaissance, Ivan followed her orders.

The other men in the jeep were crowded together. Angela hadn't wanted to split them up even though it would have been a more comfortable ride. The three soldiers from Tonya's hostage situation, and the three Indians from Natoli's camp who had chosen to stay with Safe Haven, didn't complain. They were honored to be chosen for a run with the boss.

Ivan had no problem locating a good spot to pull over and hide their vehicle. As everyone emerged, he waved them into the formation Kenn had been having everyone practice when there was time. They were rusty and awkward, but at least they knew the moves. Ivan was determined to get his team in shape, no matter if they were in camp or out of it.

Angela followed his lead, allowing the men to surround her with protection. As they walked, she filled them in on how she hoped things would happen. "I'll go in and tell them I'm a doctor and I heard the call. I'll examine them and try to figure out what the problem is. Hopefully, I'll figure it out quickly, give them the medication they need, and then we'll get gone. I'd like to be back with the camp by dark."

Everyone was relieved to hear that. Despite liking the adventurous lifestyle of Safe Haven, all seven men were nervous because she was along.

“I won’t be using my gifts. It’s not a good idea for these people to find out who I am. Be careful what you say.”

That was another relief for the men who hadn’t been sure about her intentions. If it had been up to them, they would have made the same choice.

Angela fell silent, picking up waves of misery from the small town ahead. She had brought a rookie crew in hopes the strangers would believe she was traveling with hired protection. She wasn’t going to tell anyone about Safe Haven, even if they were good. Once she made it back to camp, she could send a team for them.

“Hang here while I look.” Ivan didn’t get out of sight as he observed the town.

The team behind him waited with barely hidden impatience.

3

“I’m heading in.” Angela was tired of waiting for Ivan to give the signal. They’d been watching the town for a half an hour and only seen a few people the entire time—all of them ill.

Worried about their ability to keep her safe, Ivan sighed and led them in.

They were noticed right away. People came to the doors and windows to stare, but not in welcome or hope. These people expected to be robbed. Considering her team was heavily armed, Angela

understood. Hoping to minimize the fear, she waved to children and smiled at adults.

Few of them returned the overtures.

Angela hated the feel of the town. Judging from the older ages, she assumed these people hadn't been wanted for the draft. They'd banded together, but an illness had struck. Angela didn't find evil as they walked through the square, but she was picking up anger. It was obvious things were not going to go well here.

More people glared from their windows, some flashing rude gestures.

"What did we do?" Travis, one of the Indian men, moved closer to her.

"I think you guys look a little too much like what you are, and I look a little too much like what I am."

Her answer confirmed their concerns about trouble.

As they moved across the square, the team picked out details. The most obvious was the smell. In the center of town, near the barn, the odor of rotting flesh was unmistakable. The flies and insects surviving in the cold weather gave the team a good idea of what was inside.

Most of the houses in the center didn't appear to be damaged, but all of the structures on the outer edges had broken windows and doors that hung ajar. The draft had come here, but she was positive there had been problems after that.

Ivan came up with the answer. “This was the wave of family members following the trucks.”

Angela frowned. “You mean after the draft took their family, they followed and looted towns?”

“Yes.” Ivan kept his voice low as they passed a trio of townsmen who looked healthy enough to put up a fight. Their clothes were a mix of old and new, patched with pieces of cloth that appeared to have come from curtains and pillows. The variety of genetics in this camp implied out-of-towners had been stuck here after the war and done the best they could to survive. Judging from the number of graves in the small cemetery and the wrapped corpses waiting for holes, they hadn’t been successful. Around the town, sickly pine trees with black patches of mold climbing up trunks dripped rain continuously, creating a mud-coated ground that tried to trip them. “Look at the graffiti on the walls. Read it.”

Brandy, we went to Atlanta. We love you.

Ahmed went to Atlanta.

This is Terry. I missed you in Huntsville. Going to Atlanta.

Angela forced herself to stop reading the messages, believing Ivan’s theory was right. Friends and family had followed the draft in hopes of rescuing their loved ones, but they had needed to eat and survive the cold. The war had happened just days before Christmas, catching so many people on the road that waves of survivors had swamped any town near them. Angela was sure many of those had

tried to help people, but there was only so much food to go around.

“Over there.” Ivan pointed at a sign painted on the inside of a window.

Strangers come here first!

Ivan smelled a trap and waved the team closer to the boss.

Bracing, Angela stepped inside the rental office. Cramped with makeshift beds and tent shelters, the people she had sensed stared at her and her men in wary fear.

“How do they all fit in here?” Travis was horrified. The office didn’t have any furniture beyond beds. No one was well enough to use them for anything more than wood in the fireplace that was nestled in the far corner. The smell was staggering.

“When you’re cold, you do what it takes to stay warm.” Angela waited for someone to come forward to talk, listening to coughs and grunts of pain from people who were too ill to stand.

“What do you want?”

Angela turned around to find an older bald man sitting on the floor behind the door. He coughed into his hand, leaving specks of blood.

Angela knelt in front of his thin frame, ignoring the concern of her guards. “I’m a doctor. I heard your calls for help.”

The Mayor stared at her for a few seconds before letting out a sigh of mistrust and agony. “Please help us.”

“I will, in one way or another.” As Angela dug through her bag for a testing kit, she was aware of the soldiers spreading out, while the Indians stayed in a tight circle around her. It was another of Kenn’s new formations.

“Who are you?”

“Mercenaries. We won’t hurt your people as long as your people don’t try to hurt us.”

“We can’t pay.”

Angela fought to find the words that wouldn’t give her away. “We like to pay it forward. Fate’s a harsh mistress.”

“Tomas.” The Mayor wanted to hold his hand out to shake with her, but he didn’t have the strength.

“Angie. What were the first symptoms?”

“We stay exhausted all the time and we can’t get enough to drink.”

“When did it begin?”

“We’ve been suffering it since summer, but it got bad a month ago.” The Mayor coughed again.

Angela stopped asking questions so she could listen to his chest.

She was frowning as she put her stethoscope away. “It will take me a few hours to run tests. I’d like to draw blood from a few people for comparison so I can be sure before I give anyone medication. Is there some place I can work?”

“Morty will take you. We...have empty houses. You can...take your pick.” The Mayor looked up at the man who had come to stand near them. Tall and

wide, he was the only one in the room who was armed. The dented shotgun on a strap over his shoulder had obviously seen a lot of use.

Angela gave the Mayor a gentle pat on his arm, positive he would be dead before morning. "I'll do everything I can."

"You can't give them permission!" Morty's shout was loud. "As soon as you die, I'm in charge!"

"And not...a second sooner," the Mayor wheezed out.

The crowd of sick people around them nodded in agreement.

Morty pointed a hard finger toward Angela. "The minute he dies, we're throwing you out of here. He already let soldiers in and that cost us everything! We're not going to let you do it again."

Angela was careful to control her anger at the threatening tone. These people were sick and dying. They had nothing left to lose. She assumed the Mayor had been a good leader for them to be still supporting his choices while he was so weak. In most situations, the Morty of the group would have already killed him and taken over.

Aware of Morty glowering at her, Angela kept her head down and tried to ease the Mayor into his last hours.

Ivan and his team kept their hands on their guns, facing the mob. Only half a dozen of the men were healthy enough to put up a fight, but if the sick people joined them, it was enough to take the last of the ammunition in the attempt. That would leave

them dependent upon fighting skills and Angela's magic. Ivan refused to put them in that situation unless he had to. "What happened here after the war?"

Morty's big fists clenched. "People like you is what happened here! Your kind came through and said they could keep us from getting sick. Our Mayor trusted them and now we're all dying!"

"Doctors or army?"

"Both, together!" Morty spat, glaring at Ivan with hatred. "Before that, the draft and then refugees. They've wiped us out."

Angela thought of her conversation with Adrian about the government having no one to keep their experiments in check. These survivors were all lab rats with no scientists left to record the results.

"Maybe they can help us!"

Morty spun at the weak yell. "That's how we got into this mess! Every time we trust someone, they call their friends. We treat them right and they come back to destroy us. I refuse to do it anymore."

"Stop." The Mayor leaned his head against the wall, gasping for air.

Angela left the office, not wanting to witness his demise if it was happening now. She had underestimated the illness in this town. She was still hoping it was something she could treat, but rushing in this way had been a bad idea.

Morty pulled his plaid jacket together and buttoned it as he led them to the center of town. He stopped near the narrow bandstand that had been

stripped of everything burnable. He began to point. “All the houses with Xs on them are empty. All the houses with curtains have residents. Stay away from them. No one likes strangers.” With the rules laid down, he stomped off.

Ivan snorted at the rudeness, but didn't comment. It was obvious these people had been through hell.

Angela looked around. Now that they had been cleared by the Mayor to help, the people out here were even leerier, fearing she and her crew were government stooges coming to finish them off. Several of the refugees Safe Haven had taken in since the war had told stories of escaping horrors like that. Angela had hoped never to see it, but the terrified thoughts slamming into her from all directions couldn't be ignored. These people were terrified that the government had resurfaced.

Angela wanted to find a way to let them know that wasn't the case, but she could also sense another form of leeriness in their thoughts. It was a fear of the unknown, of magic. These people had experienced things, probably from the dangerous landscape surrounding them. Angela had felt it as they arrived. Nature didn't want humanity to recover. She wanted humankind gone. Because of that vendetta, the residents here were on the lookout for anything strange. If they got even the smallest hint that she was different, she and her team would be in grave danger.

Angela picked a house facing the square because it was the smallest and most defensible for her team, but also for the recon value. They could see the rental office from there.

As soon as they were inside, Ivan and his team hurried to check doors and windows, and then set up a patrol on the perimeter.

Angela went to the kitchen counter, the longest space, and cleaned it off so she could work.

Outside, people went about their routines, but they watched the home where Angela and her mercenaries were stashed, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

4

“Please! I need help!”

Angela reached down and turned off the radio on her belt. “Go find that boy. Get him to quit sending out messages.”

Ivan scanned the men and found all of them willing. He motioned toward the Indians, who had spent their entire lives being taught how to slip under the radar. Natoli had trained them well.

The Indians went out a rear window and into the small alley that limited the view from the other buildings.

Angela kept setting up her equipment on the counter, hoping the Indians didn’t find trouble.

The dusty home had been cleared of all furnishings except a bed in the rear room. The same

was true of cabinets and drawers, though it was second nature to check them anyway.

Walking through the kitchen, Peter and James explored. They weren't searching for supplies. They were looking for clues. This town had an odd feel they hadn't placed yet.

Angela let the men go. She didn't think they were looting, but she didn't care if they were. Safe Haven had been surviving on looting the dead all along. This wasn't any different as far as she was concerned. Plus, it kept them busy so she could work.

Ivan took up a post at the front door as voices echoed. He was dismayed to see half a dozen town members carrying a body. The people lugged it awkwardly to a rear building with a large red X on the window. The clues kicked in for Ivan. He turned to Angela with wide eyes and panic in his voice. "It's contagious."

Angela knew. That was the mistake she'd figured out as they met the Mayor. It had been obvious after scanning people in the room. The way these people were living, she would have given other theories a chance, except she already had a slight tickle in her throat. Whatever it was, it worked fast. "Yeah. We're not going to make it back to camp tonight."

An hour after arriving, Angela had narrowed the illness to three possibilities. Two of them were treatable. One of them was something the old world would have quarantined the town for and maybe even destroyed to keep it from spreading.

Angela moved toward the rental office that had become a bunkhouse for the most ill, subtly scanning for her Indian crewmates. The radio call from the sick child hadn't gone out again, so she had assumed they'd been successful.

Ivan held the door for her as she went in and then stood in the opening, letting the cold enter. He was hoping it might clean out some of the poison air.

Angela knelt next to the Mayor, not surprised when the man didn't respond to her touch. He wasn't dead, but he might as well be. Angela examined the rash on his neck and then the dilated pupils, trying hard to ignore the misery around her. Everyone was watching, aware that this was their fate. Even though she had come to help them, they didn't view her as a savior or a Samaritan. They were waiting to see if she was prey or a predator.

Angela didn't want to waste the small amount of medicine she had brought on the Mayor when it was obvious that he was too far gone for anyone to bring back without magic. She stood up. "I need four volunteer patients."

There was immediate activity as people rose. They didn't trust her, but they didn't want to die and

there wasn't another option. The fact that a doctor had answered their calls at all was amazing.

Angela tried not to spend any more time in the house with them than she had to, but as the tickle in her throat became a steady scratch, she knew it was too late. Whatever it was, she had it, and that meant her crew did as well. She had a limited time to figure out what the problem was before the illness zapped her strength and slowed her down. Her guards would fall quicker because they didn't have her host to put up an extra battle on their behalf. Then she would be in a strange town, sick, without protection.

Angela hurried back to her workspace with her samples, glad to find the three Indians waiting. Standing next to them was a young boy with a shaved head and small splatters of blood around his nose and mouth. A thin frame cloaked in filthy clothes trembled, telling them all how weak the small boy really was.

Angela's heart dropped. Even if she found the cure, he was too far gone to save with medicine.

She motioned Ivan to get her kit and do what he could for the little redhead. As she began to work with the samples she'd collected, tears rolled down Angela's jacket and landed on her muddy boots. If she saved the boy, she would have to destroy the town. She would lose men. Each time she was forced into a choice like this, it ripped her apart and increased the darkness in her soul. *Soon, there won't be room for anything else.*

6

The next three hours were some of the hardest Angela and her team had gone through as far as dealing with children since the war. Listening to the little boy die was torment. The team knew they would be hearing the sound of his little hacking gasps for air long after they left this place.

Angela hadn't spoken since they'd gotten back. After her tears had stopped, she and the witch had begun to plan their escape. There was no way she could let the child die, but as soon as she saved him, the town would know she was a descendant and they would be under attack. Adding to that stress, she and the men were getting tired. They shouldn't be, not so soon after having a rest this morning, but the illness was already sinking in and draining them.

Angela swallowed to keep from coughing and kept working. She had narrowed it to two possibilities now, eliminating one of the easier illnesses to treat. In the next 15 minutes, the final test would be done, and she would know if they had the plague or influenza. Either way, it wasn't their biggest problem. She didn't have the right medication to treat either of those illnesses. Both required powerful antibiotics to have a shot. The weak kind Angela had wouldn't knock it down. She had to leave and find the medication or call someone to bring it. Either way, the risk was high that she would be discovered as a descendant or a Safe Haven member by doing so—presumably both. After

spending half a day in this place, she didn't want to expose her camp. Despite them not being evil, these survivors were a threat. This town didn't like magic.

In the house around her, Angela's team was waiting restlessly and worrying. None of them were feeling well and all of them were having trouble listening to the boy cough. Everyone hoped Angela would break her rules and help the child, but they needed it to be soon, before the illness prevented them from protecting her during the fight afterwards. They also knew trouble was coming.

"He's getting worse." Travis came out, unable to take it any longer. He regarded Angela expectantly.

Angela waved at the testing kit on the counter. "That has 11 minutes left. When it finishes, I'll have the answer. As soon as I do, I'll handle it."

Everyone in the house breathed a sigh of relief, even the little boy. Caleb wasn't a descendant, but he knew an angel when he saw one. He had faith that Angela would save his life. He had prayed for help and help had come. Caleb had lost his entire family to the illness, so it was easy for him to bond with the strangers even though the rest of the town wouldn't. He was lonely, scared, and he didn't want to stay here. There were too many ghosts.

Angela and the team waited impatiently for the time on the test to pass. Ivan had them repack everything they had used. He also designed a quick way to bring the boy with them. He wasn't sure if

they were going to be able to walk out of here or if they would be running.

“Make a plan for both.” Angela was scanning for problems and finding them. The town was twitching because she hadn’t come out to give them an answer yet and now, someone else had died. She assumed it was the Mayor. “Our permission to be here has just been revoked.”

Chapter Fifteen

The Last Thing We Needed

1

“**T**hey’re carrying a body to storage. A lot of them are armed now. Morty’s directing.” Peter was watching from the front window of the house. “I guess he’s the mayor now.”

Angela checked the timer again. “Eight minutes.”

Tension thickened as they waited to see where the small crowd went next.

“They’ve gathered outside the barn... They’re looking this way.”

Caleb let out an awful cough that sent a chill through Angela. He didn’t have eight minutes. She moved toward the bedroom, motioning Ivan to help Peter. “I need time for that test to finish. Keep them busy.”

Ivan and Peter stepped out on the porch to talk to the townspeople as they arrived.

James hurried to cover them from the window.

The Indians stayed with Angela. Ivan had made it clear someone had to be with her at all times.

“We know who she is. Hand her over!”

“What are you talking about?” Ivan prepared to fight.

“That’s the Safe Haven woman!”

“There’s a UN reward for her!”

“We can split the reward, just grab her!”

Fury radiated from every inch of Ivan’s muscular body. “You’ll have to kill me.”

“There’s the loyalty!” someone in the crowd shouted. “It *is* Safe Haven. That’s Angela!”

“I told you I recognized her voice!”

Too late to do anything about that mistake, either. Angela was listening as she helped the child.

The Indians also listened, wishing time would hurry up so they would have the results. It felt bad here and that feeling was growing stronger by the second.

Angela sat on the bed next to the dying child, glad he was unconscious. She placed her hand around his wrist and allowed the last lifeforce she had taken to come back up in an attempt to be free. As it struggled out of her, she forced it into the boy, not letting the soul escape. It was exhausting.

The Indians stared in astonishment.

A gunshot brought everyone’s attention back to the problems outside.

The door swung open. Ivan dragged Peter inside. “Someone shot at us from the crowd and everyone scattered. They thought we were going to kill them all for it. Now they know better. It won’t stop them next time.”

Angela hurried to check Peter's wound even though he was walking on that leg and she didn't see a lot of blood.

"Just a trim. I'm good."

Angela quickly wrapped a bandage around his wound and then went to check the test.

"Two minutes." Angela decided to go ahead with the mental call she needed to make. At this point, it wouldn't matter. As soon as the townspeople saw the boy was healed, they would know the truth. Any descendant trackers in the area already knew what she had done, and this call would help narrow her location. Angela concentrated, opening a connection. *I need you.*

The town came to a grinding halt around them.

Angry, scared people who might have been willing to stay away until they left flipped into furious, vengeful beasts who immediately rushed back toward Angela and her crew.

"No magic here!"

"Get the woman!"

"They're coming." Angela drew her weapon and checked it like she had learned, encouraging the others to do the same. "One minute on the test."

Hoping to stall for one minute, Ivan didn't wait for the people outside to attack. He tapped the corner of the front window glass with his gun to break it and started shooting.

Angela wanted to tell him not to kill, but that was a bad example to set. If a few bodies

encouraged the mob to break up, it was a small price to pay.

Instead of breaking up, they crowded together as if they had fought this way before and ran up onto the porch.

“I can’t hold them!” Ivan got away from the door as more slugs flew into it.

Angela grabbed the test and crouched under the counter with Ivan and Peter. She heard the Indians moving to the back room to cover the boy.

A shotgun blast came through the window over their heads.

Disoriented, Angela was barely able to keep a hold of the test in her hand as people shoved into the house and grabbed them. The ringing in her ears prevented any distinction.

Angela held tight to the plastic as they were dragged out into the square, edges cutting into her palm.

The soldiers and Indians were beaten when they resisted.

Angela didn’t so the test in her hand wouldn’t be destroyed.

Coughing and curses punctuated hits as the townspeople vented rage that mirrored what they’d experienced in the mountain. The difference was that this time, Jimmy’s side had the advantage.

Praying enough time had passed, Angela doubled over to look at the test. As she saw the results, and the boot flying toward her, she was able

to give Ivan a comforting nod. “It’s not the bad one.”

The fist slammed into Angela, knocking her to the ground.

She lay there, stunned and groaning as the test was ripped from her hand and ground under a boot.

Fists and feet rained from the enraged crowd, forcing the team to curl into balls in futile attempts to protect vital areas. They weren’t allowed to use knives or remaining ammunition until she gave them the order, but Ivan was almost at his limit. She was being hit and kicked. He couldn’t stand it.

Angela fought to control the witch. These were innocent people who didn’t understand. When they delivered a punishment, they would be kicked out.

“Get her kid!”

“He’s one of ours.”

“Not anymore! Get him!”

Caleb screamed.

Angela’s eyes turned red as she brought the witch forward.

2

“You can’t leave.”

Marc ignored Samantha, stepping around her in the supply truck. He was gearing up.

“I mean it, Marc. You can’t leave. Everyone will take off if you do this.”

Marc still didn’t respond. Angela needed him and he was going.

“She called Adrian. He’ll handle it.” Forced to take drastic measures, Samantha reached out with her cane and rapped Marc on the shin.

Marc jumped, yelling.

Samantha’s guard wasn’t sure if he should try to defend her against the Ghost.

Samantha waved Greg off. She only had time for Marc. “People are watching right now. You’re scared and so are they. You have to stay and do her job. That’s why she left you here.”

Marc didn’t want to listen. Angela’s message had terrified him.

Standing under umbrellas and tarps, the camp was muttering and cursing him for not going already. Everyone had felt Angela’s call for help, but the kids had the worst of it. Unlike most of the camp members who were falling for the crocodile tears, Marc understood the children were stirring things. They wanted the alpha home and they were willing to do anything it took to get her here.

“I feel the same way every time Neil leaves camp, but you have to send someone else. You can’t go.” Before he could protest or make the choice to ignore her again, Samantha lowered her voice. “We have another storm coming.”

Marc knew she wouldn’t make it up. He swore, using curse words he’d learned during his time in the Marines.

Samantha waited for his frustration to pass, aware of guards on the parking area signaling to get his attention. “We also have company.”

Alarm finally triggered, Marc hurried from the supply truck to see who was coming into their camp. With Angela not here and Jennifer working the night shift, they didn't have a descendant capable of a deep scan to verify new people were okay.

As Marc made his way through the twitching, unhappy crowd, it was impossible to miss. Samantha was right. If he left, there was no way the rest of the council would keep these people together.

Sam frowned. "They're flashing Eagle code with the lights."

Marc knew who it was. He went to the caution tape.

Adrian glared at Marc as he came to a stop in front of him. "This is the captain she sent me to pick up. I need antibiotics—Zanamivir and Streptomycin."

Marc motioned Harry, the level two medic on his team, to go get it as a front-heavy man in a blue beanie got out of the passenger side. Marc refused to give Adrian an explanation for not calling him or for letting Angela leave camp with only a rookie guard. It wasn't Adrian's decision or business anymore.

Adrian didn't expect it from Marc, but that didn't stop his anger. When he had been in charge of Safe Haven, Angela had been safe.

Marc sneered at him. *Really? Because I remember it differently.*

Put in his place, Adrian continued to glower, but didn't say anything else. He didn't care what had happened to allow Angela out of Marc's protection. He only cared that she was. Adrian had narrowed her location by the feel of her after the first call, identifying a place in his mental map where it appeared magic had been used to heal someone. It was obvious she had gone to answer the call on the radio. Adrian had hoped Marc would do that personally to keep her from it, but he hadn't.

"She needed to get out."

Adrian understood Marc had been forced to give her freedom. If Angela had insisted, Adrian probably would have agreed too. He just would have gone with her.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Not exactly, but I'm tracking her. I won't be able to send you word or they'll trace it right to here."

Marc already knew that. "I was on my way out."

Adrian looked up at him with the face of the old leader Marc had admired for a short time.

"Why do you think I'm here? She insisted I stop you. This dream has always meant more to her than it has to you. It always will." Adrian took the kit Harry handed him and put the van in reverse. He was out of Marc's sight a minute later, increasing speed as he hurried toward the woman he loved. He hadn't told Marc that Angela's call for help had been weaker than what it should be. Adrian had a sinking suspicion she was sick.

While Marc stared after Adrian, Kyle motioned the Eagles to take the new man to the quarantine zone. It was currently empty.

Filled in on the way here, the captain didn't protest the curt behavior or lack of greeting. Adrian had told him what to expect. Cole was glad people who were civilized had found him. Having a chance to get back on the water was just icing on the cake.

As Adrian pulled away, Marc turned around to find over half the camp blocking his path. He was quick to drop both hands to the deadly Colts on his hips. "Nothing will stop him from finding her. You know that."

Pam, with Leeann not far behind, gave Marc a warning look as she delivered the decision the den mothers had reached overnight. "If we don't have the boss back in 24-hours, we're going to get her—with or without your permission. Don't even bother getting us ready to travel south in the morning. We aren't going."

Marc didn't know whether to be mad or cry. "If we haven't heard something by this time tomorrow, I'll lead the search party."

3

Adrian made it in half the time it had taken Angela to get here. He didn't care who noticed him and he wasn't worried about wrecking. He made record time. If he wasn't so worried, he would have been proud.

Right before the town came into view, Adrian noticed smoke coming from the tree line. Now aware of it, his nose registered the harsh smell and the feel of death. “Angie, what have you done?”

Adrian pulled down the dirt road. He spotted the child standing partially behind Angela, who was surrounded by her team, and let out a deep sigh of common misery. In moments like these, it was impossible for him to believe it was only charms and spells connecting them. The boy was almost certainly the reason the town around them had been reduced to ashes.

Adrian flipped his headlights in the code. As he came to a stop next to the sooty team, he found what he had feared. Angela was leaning against Ivan, coughing.

Ivan glared at Adrian. “She told us a ride was coming. We expected Marc.”

“Is that headlights?”

All of them squinted in the direction Boothe was staring.

“Yes. Load up.” Adrian stayed alert as the team put the boy and Angela into his vehicle and piled in. He quickly took them down a small incline behind the house and used a backyard to get out of sight.

Everyone was relieved when the radio stayed quiet.

As the town fell behind them, Adrian felt Angela’s attention settle on him. Despite her condition and the tension filling the vehicle, sparks

immediately lit up. Adrian smiled at her. “I can’t leave you alone for a minute.”

Angela chuckled, drawing the attention of Ivan. Crammed into the back, he observed them in jealous fascination.

Adrian reached over and placed his hand on Angela’s to send some of his strength. “Take what you need.”

Angela tried not to be greedy as she absorbed his energy, but it was hard. After dealing with Morty and his crew, she was empty. They were dead.

Passengers snapped up as a hum of energy filled the cabin, but all of them went right back out as soon as they verified Angela wasn’t burning anything else. Except for Ivan. He continued to observe the couple, comparing their interactions to what he’d heard about them.

Angela shut her eyes and withdrew her hand, wishing Marc had been able to come. She had no doubt he was trying to find a way to get to her despite knowing Adrian would do it. Marc wasn’t the type to stay with the camp. If she had known things would turn out this way, she wouldn’t have come.

Adrian wanted to offer comfort in that area too, but she was right. It was very likely that Marc would leave the camp to come find her. They needed a way to let him know she was okay before he threw away Safe Haven’s future.

“We have a vehicle back the way you came.”
Ivan pointed.

Adrian took them to it, scanning the woman who had already leaned against the seat and started to doze. He assumed the little boy by her hip, glowing with good health, had also been the reason for the weakness that was allowing the illness to harm her.

“His name is Caleb. He’s from the radio.”

Adrian was glad to hear her voice and at the same time, his concern deepened. She sounded worse than sick. “What is it?”

Angela peered over with haunted, bloodshot eyes. “Influenza. I’m calling it a superbug because of how fast it spreads. It took less than five minutes to present.”

Adrian swallowed his fear and pulled in where Ivan directed. As half of the crew got into the jeep, Adrian consulted his map. He couldn’t take her back to Safe Haven.

Angela let exhaustion drag her into sleep. Adrian would find them a place to hide while they waited to discover if the medicine he’d brought would save them. While they waited, Adrian would get the fun of experiencing it too.

Adrian was thinking about what he and Angela had discussed in the cave while waiting for Marc to handle Sonja’s people. The biological agents that were released had included influenza. If this was the random kind, they had a chance to beat it. If it was the weaponized form, she and her team would die.

Adrian found Ivan in his mirror and instantly recognized a kindred soul. Before he could tell the man to dig out the medicine and give Angela a shot, the soldier leaned over the seat.

“Don’t mean to be rude, but she can’t wait.”

Adrian hadn’t realized how worried her team was. He scanned Angela again and groaned in frustration. Her heart was beating unevenly; her breathing was rough.

Ivan filled a syringe from the only bottle in the kit, making sure it was exactly where Angela had told them before Adrian’s arrival. She hadn’t been sure she would be alert enough to do it by the time he came. Helping the little boy had weakened her. She was succumbing faster.

Ivan slid the needle into Angela’s arm and pushed the plunger, willing it to work fast.

“What happened?” Adrian needed to know for when he contacted Marc.

Ivan stared at Angela as Peter took the kit and began dosing the others in the vehicle. “They were beating on us. One of them figured out who she was. When he grabbed the boy, Angela exploded.” Ivan sighed tiredly. “I don’t know how else to explain it. When she was done, she was on the ground looking like she was having a heart attack and the town was burning around us. We stayed there until she woke up. That was right before you arrived.” Ivan coughed and wiped bloody fingers on his pants. “Where are we going?”

“North, for the moment. I need to find a place where you can rest while the medication works.”

“You too.” Ivan coughed again. It was getting harder to breathe.

“What?” Adrian was thinking about what was around them.

“You need the meds too. This shit is highly contagious.”

Adrian suddenly understood why Angela had called for him instead of Marc. He was expendable. The wolfman wasn't. He also wasn't going to stay put without hearing from Angela, but there was no way she could make a call even if she wanted to. Adrian could feel a tracker in the area. If they sent a message over any medium, they would lead the refugees straight to wherever they holed-up. Not sure how to handle that, Adrian concentrated on finding a place to hide. First, he would get Angela tucked away and healing. Then he would figure out a way to keep Marc from joining them. The last thing Safe Haven needed right now was an outbreak.

Adrian swept the soldiers in the van, aware of the jeep behind him weaving. He needed to find a place fast. Without medication and rest, this super flu would kill them all faster than being found by the refugees.

“There.”

Angela's mutter directed Adrian into a veterinary clinic parking lot. Seeing the door had been kicked in, he approved the choice. If people

thought it had already been cleaned out, they wouldn't bother to come in.

4

Angela tried to hold onto Adrian as he carried her inside, but her arms felt like they weighed 100 pounds. She was forced to settle for dropping her head onto his shoulder and groaning.

Those who could followed him into the dark building. They all tried to watch for trouble, but ended up leaning against the walls for support as the walk finished off their remaining energy.

Caleb tried to help Adrian get the team into the clinic. He had been completely healed by the lifeforce Angela had shoved into him.

Adrian motioned the boy to grab kits instead of people. While the boy brought in the gear he was able to carry, Adrian made repeated trips to get the people who couldn't make it on their own.

On the last trip out, he found Travis and Ivan halfway to the door, crawling on their hands and knees. Ivan had insisted the others be taken first.

Adrian got them inside, then directed Caleb to an office chair in the corner of the room, putting his finger over his lips to let the boy know he needed to be quiet.

Ivan had given the child his spare blanket while they traveled. Caleb pulled it over his lap now and laid his head on the seat to wait for instructions.

Adrian had placed Angela on the dusty couch. He waved Ivan to the floor next to her.

Ivan dropped down with a grunt and then went silent.

The other men also surrounded the boss with their sick bodies, determined to protect her no matter their condition.

Adrian was forced to leave them alone while he moved their vehicles into the mechanic shop next door. He disguised them with tarps and debris, and worried the entire time.

5

An hour later, Adrian hurried back inside the veterinary office. He was relieved to find everyone where he'd left them, but their conditions had deteriorated another level. Red cheeks said a fever had arrived. Adrian hoped it was a sign of immune systems fighting as he locked and barricaded the entrances and windows.

The office had three exam rooms, a few closets, the reception area, and a bathroom. In the reception area, a brittle Christmas tree had toppled as it dried out or maybe been shaken over from a quake. Broken ornaments and fading cards were scattered across the floor.

Adrian narrowed in on the rug under the tree and found the edge of a hatch. He slid the coffee table overtop it, then got busy seeing to the team. Only half the men had been medicated.

“Her first.” Travis groaned.

Adrian injected the man. “I already did.”

Travis tried to nod and passed out.

As soon as Adrian finished with that chore, he double-checked the barricades he’d erected, and then added to them. The animal cages contained skeletons that didn’t smell, but still screamed in rage. Adrian felt the guilt as he grabbed blankets from a cabinet and stuffed them into his drawstring bottom coat. It was made to stay snug and help carry items.

The rest of the office also held treasures he hoped to come back for later. He tried to hurry, but it was impossible to be fast and silent at the same time. It felt like hours before he made it back to the reception area.

When he saw none of them had moved, but they were all breathing, he allowed himself a minute to think. He needed a defensible area and the ground floor wasn’t going to cut it if anyone tracked them here.

The hatch.

Adrian moved the table and opened the dusty hatch in the floor.

He grimaced as his flashlight fell on corpses who appeared to have died from the same illness that was threatening the Eagles. Five rotting men and one woman stared in reproach at his late arrival.

Steeling himself, Adrian moved down the stairs to stack them in a far corner. He needed those makeshift cots. Dead people didn’t.

Adrian scooped Caleb into his arms for the first trip, knowing without being told that Angela wanted it that way. It's what he would have insisted on.

Angela didn't budge when she was moved, adding more fear to the men who staggered down when Adrian called. Dropping where he directed, it wasn't long before Adrian was the only one awake.

6

Adrian climbed out the tiny window an hour later. He didn't want to leave Angela, but he needed to be sure it didn't look like anyone was here. Throat tickling and body dragging, he went outside to secure a perimeter.

“Ah!”

Adrian ducked a lunging shadow at the last second, heaving his body around to tackle the man.

Adrian grunted, shoving his hands around the man's filthy neck. He didn't have time to get his knife and this had to be quiet. Where there was one tracker, there were more.

The man under him gasped as Adrian's thumbs crushed his windpipe.

Desperate, the tracker jerked his knife sideways.

Adrian felt the motion and rolled, knee coming up to separate them.

The suffocating tracker lunged forward to drive the blade home.

Angela opened her eyes, refusing to moan. She didn't know where she was or what was going on.

The first thing she saw was bodies.

Angela jerked up against the wall, lungs hurting as she tried to draw in breath around the horror. "I killed them."

Footsteps hurried toward her in the darkness. She identified them as Adrian's, but it didn't matter. She was overwhelmed with grief and remorse. "I got them killed."

Adrian slid onto the bunk and wrapped her up against his chest. "That's not your team, baby. Those bodies were already here. That's not your team."

Instead of being comforted, Angela cried harder, pointing.

Gut churning in dread, Adrian looked at the other bunks.

"Damn."

He scanned Boothe's body to determine how long the soldier had been gone. It couldn't have been long.

Adrian swept the rest of the team and was horrified to discover one of their Indian teammates, Magnus, had also died. Blood was dripping from one of his nostrils.

Adrian turned around to comfort Angela and fell off the side of the bed.

Unable to get up, he fought to stay conscious as weakness swarmed his body. He felt Angela come to help him and then there was only darkness.

Chapter Sixteen

Straight Through

Byzantine: *extremely complex or intricate; marked by deviousness or scheming. Also, a power struggle.*

1

“I’ve never been in an ash storm.” Instead of rain, dirt was falling. Greg kept waiting for wet drops and got dust flakes instead. It was odd.

Evening had come with a wintery blast of wind that covered the camp in an inch of thick dust. They had been able to get some of the camp under cover, but the kids had refused, demanding a bugout. Because it was coming from descendant children, the guards had sent for Marc. That man was heading to handle it now.

Samantha nodded at the comment from the guard. When the storm started and Angela didn’t appear to calm people or tell them what to do, panic had spread like fire. When Marc refused to let people call her, they’d gotten angry. Marc had then made the mistake of going back to work on the railcars instead of staying to calm the herd. He’d assumed the council and Eagles had it covered. The

guards stayed on top of keeping people in the perimeter, but any more would have required physical confrontations, which the guards had refused. They might have considered it if the biggest rebels hadn't been kids. Samantha was monitoring several areas, including the coming confrontation. She hadn't been this nervous since she was on the bottom level of the cave, surrounded by people who hated her for what she could do.

Around them, rain fell in heavy sheets of brown ash, coating everything. Lightning shot across the sky, followed by a loud crack of thunder. Sam jumped. The weather certainly wasn't helping the mood.

"Let's go in now." Greg led Samantha into the shelter of the mess, where the noise from the storm pounded in their ears.

Kyle and his team, with Neil and Zack, were patrolling the camp in rotating formations. It reminded Samantha of old movies where guards tried to keep prisoners inside. The feel was ugly. If Marc didn't handle it right, the camp would take off into the storm. Adrian had been gone for 10 hours. The fragile peace had been disturbed almost immediately after he left by descendant children crying for the alpha. Not allowed to use mental calls, the kids were blasting the adults here with their anguish. Sam knew Marc had intended to have extra guards on the kids tonight to be positive none of them ran off on their own, but the fragile peace wasn't going to hold that long.

Shouts echoed outside the flap, making Samantha's guard step closer to her. Unlike when they were trapped in the mountain, they now had options for an escape. It allowed Greg to keep his gun in the holster as a group of descendant children came into the mess.

"Are you with us?" The kids were covered in ash and defiance.

Samantha nodded. "So is everyone else. If you're going to do it, do it now. If the storm gets worse, our vehicles might get stuck."

Leeann and Missy led the children back out of the tent.

Greg turned to Samantha. "I can't believe you did that!"

Samantha wasn't feeling good about the decision. She was terrified that endangering the camp this way would have awful consequences, but there was no way she could deny the ache inside when she thought about Angela. The alpha was in trouble. Everyone could feel it.

Kenn appeared in the flap of the mess tent. "The kids are going to challenge Marc! What do I do?"

Samantha didn't answer. Instead, she sent him a blast of her unhappiness at being separated from the boss.

Kenn's ash-lined eyes widened. "I should have known you guys would stick together! He's the boss now. We do what he says!"

Samantha stared at Kenn with an expression saying he'd better get on their side or there was going to be trouble.

Kenn backed out of the tent. "I'm not crossing Marc." Kenn moved toward the kids now cornering Marc in the community tent. He had no idea how he would be able to help.

"We're going!" Leeann shouted at Marc, not responding to the obedience waves he was pushing over all the angry children. "That won't work on me. You're not the alpha!"

Marc winced as he pitched a stronger blast, not wanting to hurt the girl.

Leeann groaned, but she knew how to withstand it. Leeann clenched her dirty hands into fists and sent a wave of rage back at Marc.

Marc was stunned the child had fired on him. He stared at her for a long moment as his demon absorbed the hit and prepared to toss it back. Coming from him, the child would be hurt.

Marc kept his thumb on the demon, but allowed the little girl to pick up the indecision in his mind so she would understand the danger she was in.

"You'd better hit us all, then." Cody moved up next to Leeann and put his ashy hand on her wrist. "We voted. We're going."

Marc didn't know what to say as his son disobeyed him in front of 100 camp members and 50 Eagles.

The other children crowded around Cody and Leeann to offer support and protection.

Forced into admitting how he really felt, Marc gestured angrily. “Don’t you think I want to?!”

The kids waited for more, wanting to follow him.

Marc didn’t think the truth would work, but he reminded them one more time. “If we go there, everyone in this camp could get sick. She said to stay away.”

Leeann lifted her hand to point at him. “Either take us or we’ll find her ourselves! We can track her as fast as you can, and you can’t stop us by yourself. You’re too new.”

Marc turned around to motion Eagles into place. He didn’t want to hurt the kids or get his men hurt, but he wasn’t letting their children... Marc paused, reading the expressions of the ash-dusted guards moving into position around him. He lifted a brow at Kyle, who was leading them. “Do you think you brought enough help?”

Kyle blanched at Marc’s tone. “Not even close. None of us wants to do this. Please just agree.”

Marc assumed Jennifer had been working on the mobster. As he caught sight of her stunned face in the flap, Marc realized Kyle had fallen in with the kids on his own.

Jennifer frowned at the baby in her arms. “Autumn?”

The infant pretended to be asleep.

“That explains you.” Marc knew Kyle would do anything for the baby. If Autumn insisted Kyle agree with the kids, he would. “You’re gonna lose your place over this.”

Kyle shrugged, glancing over his shoulder toward Jennifer. “She wants me to settle down anyway. I might like just being a camp member.”

Trapped, Marc turned back to the children to find they had crowded closer. Shaking, they were prepared to do their share to restrain him.

Marc broke. He dropped all pretense of doing what was right and let them view how tormented he had been all along. “Make sure you tell her I tried.” He gestured toward the parking area. “Let’s get cleaned up and then loaded up. The boss needs a ride.”

Cheers echoed, drowning out the storm for a brief moment. It spread across the camp to where Samantha was waiting in the mess tent. She let out a sigh of relief and limped toward the open flap. “We can go now. They don’t need me to help.”

Greg followed her from the tent, frowning and shaking his head. He had no idea what would happen once Angela was back with the camp, but he was certain this sort of rebellion was forbidden. He understood everyone’s need to help her, but he also knew Angela had given orders to keep rolling for a good reason. If they got sick now, they only had themselves to blame.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better.” Angela looked over Adrian’s shivering body to where Ivan had raised up on an elbow to dig in the kit next to him.

Ivan wasn’t certain what to say. He hadn’t felt this bad in his entire life, but it was better than six hours ago. When he had staggered down the stairs and collapsed in a cot that held dried blood from the previous person, he’d been positive he would stay here forever. It was such a relief to be alive that he was afraid to joke about it—especially with two of their team lying on top of a stack of corpses. Covered with a ratty curtain, it was disrespectful and morbid.

Angela and Ivan were the only ones awake. Even Caleb was out. The trip here, where he had stayed awake to listen to the adults and worry over Angela, had tired him out. It allowed Angela and Ivan uninterrupted quiet, other than the occasional snore from the soldier in the bunk above her.

“Check the office!”

Everyone snapped awake except Adrian. The town was crawling with people. They’d heard footsteps in the building above several times. Small groups had been coming and going for the last two hours.

Angela tried to keep Adrian quiet, but his fever had risen, and he was muttering. She had a syringe ready to sedate him, but she hesitated to do it. If there was a battle, he would be defenseless while knocked out and none of the team was well enough

to handle themselves, let alone cover him too. Forced to use their connection, Angela shoved into Adrian's mind and bathed him with cool images of the ocean around Pitcairn Island.

As Adrian slowly subsided into the occasional shudder and then stillness, Ivan and the other team members breathed sighs of relief. They were slowly improving. Hunger and thirst were their most pressing needs and after that, a latrine. Ivan didn't want to think about doing that down here, but they would have to at some point. They couldn't go out in their condition.

Needing the distraction, Ivan brought up a curiosity. "You called him, instead of Marc."

Angela didn't answer. It was obvious she had, or it would be Marc in her arms, maybe dying.

"It was to protect Marc, right?"

"Everything is to protect him or the camp."

Surprised she had admitted that, Ivan pressed his luck. "You love them both."

Angela ran a tender hand over Adrian's brow. "Actually, I hate this one as much as I love him. The other one, I'd slit your throat to protect."

Ivan admired that type of loyalty and found the aggressive answer attractive. He had never liked submissive women.

"You're beginning to act like Adrian did when I first joined Safe Haven. After all the stalkers I've had, Marc will kill you in your sleep if you don't stop."

Ivan had already told himself the same thing, but they were alone right now, with no guarantees of survival. He didn't see any point in pretending something that may not matter anyway.

Angela settled into the cot, trying to bring her body flush against Adrian's hard form. As soon as his fever broke, the chills would come. After that, he would need to sleep and then he should begin to recover. All of them had gone through the same pattern after getting the medication...except for the two men who had died. Both of them had been in the vehicle with her and Adrian.

Ivan stared. Her cot was illuminated by the tiny bit of dawn light coming through an upper corner of the blocked window. "Do you talk to Marc about how different you are?"

"Not usually. People don't like being reminded of it, even my kind."

"Do you have a kind?"

Angela winced. She'd been thinking the same thing. "Does it matter?"

Ivan shrugged. "Maybe. If there were others as strong as you, and they were good too, we might be able to fix the world."

Angela let out a deep sigh, thinking about the man who was on his way to rescue her even though he knew it wasn't what she wanted. "If there were others like me, we would destroy what little remains. Death walks beside us, holding us up when we can't make it on our own. We have survived on the souls of your kind for thousands of years. Your

fate will not be different.” Her voice was deep and dark as the witch blended in. “We thought you knew.”

The chill of death flew through the basement, searching for a target.

Angela staggered out of the cot, hurrying toward Travis. The man had just stopped breathing.

“Weak.” Adrian struggled to communicate through his illness. Her terror had brought him up. “Stop her. She’s too weak.”

Ivan tried to grab Angela as she hurried by him in the darkness, but she ducked under his grip and fell across Travis’s still chest. She exhaled violently, heart stuttering.

3

“I have Angela trapped in the town of Brooks! This is Kojak. I’m a descendant tracker and I have located the leader of Safe Haven. She is hiding in Brooks, GA. I need help to flush her out!”

Radios went crazy, forcing the tracker to wait for a pause before he could respond. Kojak had been tracking his kind all his life. He was almost disappointed with how easy it had been to follow Angela from the smoldering town. After seeing evidence of what her power could do, Kojak had been hoping for a fight, but it appeared Angela was all bark and no bite despite the stories and warnings he’d heard upon taking the job from Benjamin. She’d chosen to run and now he had her trapped.

The drawback was the plan. He couldn't be a part of the refugee wave that would blanket the town. Like Angela, he was a target because of his gifts.

Kojak keyed the mike on his radio. He needed to keep the refugees whipped up to get them to come out in this early morning freezer. "Angela, the leader of Safe Haven, is trapped in Brooks. I'm making this call from just out of her range. She won't know we're coming because she can't have a radio on to make noise and give away her location. I repeat: I have the leader of Safe Haven trapped..." Kojak paused, picking something up on his grid. "Hang on a minute... I've got something right here." Kojak left the mike depressed to keep the noise of responses from giving away his location. He squinted... "I don't believe it!"

Coming down the street right in front of where he had pulled over to look at the map, a semi carrying a familiar face glared at him in warning of what was to come. "That's the Ghost!"

Kojak dropped the mike to go for his gun.

The radio became a garbled blur as Kojak thumbed the safety off his weapon. *I can't hit him from here. I'm not good enough.*

I am. Marc's bullet slammed into Kojak's throat, knocking him backward onto the muddy ground.

The convoy cheered.

Safe Haven had listened to the tracker's calls for the last three hours, with many people signaling Marc to handle it. Few of them had realized he was

already headed there until the transmissions had become clear and the lead rig had slowed. Then they'd all gone silent to watch the Ghost in action.

Marc pulled his rifle through the window and set it at his feet. "How long until we get there?"

Kenn increased the speed. "Half an hour."

Marc raised the window and began to reload. "Do the best you can to protect the kids if things go south."

"They won't need it." Kenn had put the kids and weaker members of camp into the steel plated semis, along with Tonya. "Everyone is pissed right now. They want to fight."

Marc understood, but he didn't want this camp turned into wild killers who couldn't be redeemed. With every turn of the wheels that took them closer to Angela, the further his dream of building the perfect society got from reality.

4

"I'm sick. If you come here, you'll get sick too. Please turn around!"

Angela's voice on the radio was enough to convince a few of the smarter refugees to do what she was pleading for. It enraged the others, who assumed she was trying to escape the trap the tracker had set.

For everyone in Safe Haven, it brought waves of panic and rage that allowed them to battle their way into the town without the usual remorse some

of the non-Eagles usually expressed upon having to defend themselves. As vehicles were run off the road, tires were shot out, and guns blasted brains across windows, the only thing the camp could hear was the desperation in Angela's voice.

"This is the Alpha. I am ordering you to go back!"

Everyone in the convoy felt that order, but Marc and a few of the other descendants had brought up a shield around the camp to help minimize the damage as they fought the refugees. While it didn't prevent Angela's order from getting through, it allowed all of the camp a resistance. It also made them even more determined to reach her. She felt as weak as she sounded.

5

"You can't do it." Adrian was slowly recovering, but not enough to get out of the cot fast enough to stop her.

"Kill them all."

The witch flew out of the basement and began to lay waste to the refugees swarming the town. Flames and screams filled the air.

Adrian groaned. "Pull her back."

Angela opened a mental gift...and then another.

"You'll shut down! Stop!"

"Safe Haven is coming here!"

Both men flinched at her scream.

“I have to kill as many of them as I can, or we’ll lose people!”

Adrian refused to trade her for the camp. It’s why he couldn’t be their leader anymore. He flopped off the cot and crawled to her.

Ivan tensed for an attack as more screams came. Something was clearing the closest threats out there.

Adrian grabbed Angela’s shoulder and jerked her down. “Stop!”

Angela was hit with their bond. She struggled against him, but the witch was off conquering in her stead and Angela was sick. The doors slammed shut.

Adrian held her when she began to cry. “Marc will cover it. If he doesn’t, the other fighters will. Call the witch back before you pass—”

Angela slumped in his arms.

“Damn it!” Adrian gritted his teeth as he forced a connection with Angela’s witch. He wouldn’t have been able to do it without their bonds. *Come home or find a new host.*

The witch slammed into Angela’s body so fast she jerked upward, making Ivan yelp.

Adrian held her, panting. *Thank you.*

Safe Haven is coming.

“Get ready to move.”

The team tried to do as Adrian ordered. It became easier when the gunshots started and fresh adrenaline began to flow.

“Adrian knows we’re here. I can feel it.” Kenn spotted a blue van approaching fast on their left with a side door open and people hanging out. Kenn used his semi for a battering ram and bumped the van down the incline. It flipped repeatedly, scattering debris.

The closer they got to Brooks, the more people they were running into. A lot of refugees had gotten here ahead of them. Signs of a battle were filling the sky in the distance, layering it with so much smoke that everyone in the convoy knew Angela was responsible.

“We’re on the way! Wait for us!”

Marc switched off the radio before responses came. Refugees from all over the country were begging people not to spring the trap until they could arrive for their share of the glory. It was sickening. It was also one of the most frightening situations Marc had experienced since arriving at the rest stop. He had no idea how they were going to get to her without losing half the camp and even after that, they were likely to be infected with whatever Angela and her team had contracted from the town that was now a pile of smoldering bricks and resentful ghosts. Safe Haven had driven by it on the way, memorizing the scene.

Bodies had been in an ugly circle, some shot and stabbed, some burnt beyond recognition. From the ages, Marc made the same assumptions about the draft removing the young and able. He knew Angela

had done it, presumably to keep the illness from spreading.

Yeah, keep thinking that.

Marc ignored his demon. The homes had still been smoking, but survivors hadn't been picking through the wreckage. She'd allowed no survivors.

What does she have? Marc was terrified it was so awful she'd decided not to take a chance on letting it spread.

Marc's demon laughed at him.

Kenn pointed at the intersection coming up. "They've set a barricade of cars at the entrance to the town."

Marc motioned toward the horn. "Let the boss know we're here."

Excitement stretched across his face. Kenn shifted the truck into a faster gear and laid on the horn. They were going straight through.

"Safe Haven is coming! They're here!"

Radios across the convoy and the country echoed with the desperate cries of people in the blockade who spotted them.

Instead of moving when they realized Marc wasn't going to stop, refugees drew the weapons they'd gathered since conquering the mountain.

Marc began to fire his rifle, aware of the men and women in the cars behind him doing the same as vehicles swarmed toward them from every direction. As Kenn pushed the rig to its limit to give them the maximum amount of force during the

impact, Marc sent an apology upward. *I didn't want it to be this way. I'm sorry.*

Time seemed to slow as the response came. *This is why I left.*

Marc felt the Creator withdraw. He was filled with a stunning amount of shame at the failure, but it was much too late to stop as their truck slammed into the front bumper of a beaten Cadillac, sending debris and screams into the air.

“Safe Haven! Get them!”

Because of the tracker's plan to surround the town, the refugees were spread out to complete the trap. It allowed the convoy to plow through one area and get into the town without having to face everyone, but once there, the streets were covered by people in cars and on foot trying to determine where Angela was.

Marc reloaded in a nice blur, hearing thuds of tires crushing bodies while the guns he had ordered Kenn to give out were fired at people turned to face them and those turned away. Blood began to cover the town, along with horrible sounds of death.

Marc picked up magic use on his grid and gestured. “That way!”

Kenn led the 35-vehicle convoy of shouting, screaming, shooting camp members. The refugees around them were also shooting, but they had been unprepared for all of Safe Haven to come in defense of their leader. The refugees had numbers on their side, but they were outgunned.

The vehicles in the rear of the convoy held the toughest fighters. Hanging from the sides of their jeeps and trucks, these Eagles took care of the refugees who tried to swarm them at each intersection when the camp was forced to slow to make a turn. Several of the boldest tried to come alongside the vehicles, but Kenn had prepared people for that.

Grenades thrown by those with the most experience exploded around the convoy, removing more of the threats and keeping the others at bay. If there had been more survivors here, it wouldn't have worked, but the 300 would-be ambushers who had converged on this town so far were no match for Eagles who could empty a mag and reload in seconds. The sound of gunfire was deafening.

“She’s in the clinic!” Marc fired again. “Under the clinic!”

Kenn was already following the trail of burnt bodies and buildings. He had no doubt Angela was responsible, though he wasn't sure how she had managed it if she and her team were underground. Storing the question for later, he swerved into a dented Cadillac coming up on the left.

The impact knocked it into the brick wall of the alley and shattered every window.

Kenn spotted a cluster of vehicles trying to get into the parking lot of a strip mall and assumed the clinic was there. Instead of challenging them, Kenn made a wide circle to come around the rear. He

looked at Marc, wanting approval for what he was about to do.

Marc kept reloading his weapon. “Straight through.”

Kenn shifted into gear and headed for the back of the clinic, no longer excited. Now, he was just scared.

Next to him, Marc nodded in dread. “I know exactly how you feel.”

A few seconds later, they crashed into the building.

7

“Our ride is here! Everybody up!” Adrian had been able to provide enough energy to Angela for her to wake, but that was it. He struggled to get her to the hatch.

Travis and Ivan heaved the weaker men toward the stairs, not noticing the shower of dirt and debris raining over them as the building above protested the impact.

It hurt Angela to leave the bodies of their teammates, but there was no time to insist as the hatch to the basement was jerked open and Eagles rushed down. They came for her first.

“Get the boy,” Angela croaked.

Caleb didn’t resist as men hauled him out of the cot and handed him up the ladder in an assembly line of strange hands that grabbed wherever they

could reach. As long as he was going where Angela and her team were headed, he was happy.

Angela couldn't help as they took her up and shoved her into a semi with Kenn.

"Here they come!" Kenn was monitoring the refugees in the front of the building who were recovering from the impact to come in on foot. In a few seconds, they would be overrun.

Behind them, the rest of their convoy had veered off around the building to make a circle so they would have an exit. Refugees who had seen them were also coming.

"Time to go!"

Angela's team was dragged up and shoved into the rear of Kenn's truck in less than a minute, but in that time, the refugees from the front of the building made it inside.

Angela placed her hand on Kenn's beefy arm and let the witch loose again.

Around her, descendants began doing the same. Magic flew through the air, hitting refugees with the blasts of anger and frustration that the descendants had been storing for months. The deaths of their loved ones and the restrictions in their lives allowed many of them to draw reserve energy they wouldn't normally have been able to access.

"Stop them!" Adrian staggered to Marc, coughing and spitting blood. "Too much!"

Marc sent out an alpha command to the descendants to quit, but they only did when Angela

slid from the seat and fell onto the ground at Marc's boots.

“Oh, shit!”

Angela's hair had gone completely white. Her cheeks were sunken hollows and her eyes were the parched dunes of a desert. As she shut her eyes, unable to make a sound, the last of the refugees fled.

“We won.” Kenn was shocked.

“Yeah, but at what cost?”

Marc ignored Adrian's fearful comment as he grabbed his mate and got into the semi. He didn't want to know the answer.

“Get them loaded up!” It was hard to believe the shriveled creatures Kyle was looking at were the Safe Haven descendants. All of their hair had white patches, mirroring Angela's—though not as drastic. Even Jennifer with her boundless youth looked like a shriveled hag. It was startling.

“Come on, baby! Come on!” Marc shot energy into Angela.

Adrian slammed the door and reached over to help.

The semi jerked around them as it rolled over debris that had fallen when they crashed through, but neither man paid attention to it. Their concern was for the corpse lying across their laps.

Marc and Adrian directed their demons to use any means necessary to bring her back, not caring if it endangered their health.

Angela's body arched as the healing orbs finally begin to reach vital areas, encouraging both men to try harder.

Throughout the convoy, everyone was doing that. Non-magic users were helping exhausted descendants recover. Now, people understood why they had been told to save their energy.

Straining, the kids shielded the convoy as best they could from the few bold refugees in the town who threw bottles and curses at them as the vehicles left. The multicolored defenses were obvious, sending frustrated longing into the hearts of the refugees who had been refused admittance. It was kerosene on dying embers. These people would never stop searching, but this battle was over. The display of power had convinced them Safe Haven wasn't as weak as they'd been told. They grouped in small clusters behind buildings and cars, waiting to follow.

Kenn knew the bluffed refugees wouldn't stay that way for long. If they had arrived later, when the majority of those on their way had come, their exit wouldn't have been as easy. As it was, radios on all channels were being flooded with requests for information and warnings.

Kenn tried to keep his attention on the road and also on the few refugees who were trying to follow them, and not the magic taking place in the seat next to him. He increased speed, shifting gears as the sound of an engine filled the cabin of the rig. He wasn't sure that Adrian and Marc had enough power

between them to save her. Adrian's condition didn't look much better than hers. It was obvious all of them had been deathly ill because the glow wasn't as bright as what he was used to. Realizing he had energy to spare, Kenn slid his hand onto Angela's head.

A bright blue shine lit up the semi, causing Kenn to move his hand and use it to shield himself from the glare. He placed it back on the wheel, impressed and a little worried over Marc's reaction.

Marc didn't pay him any attention. He was still sending energy into Angela.

Adrian sat back, lungs and throat burning. "She'll be okay now."

Marc pulled Angela into his arms.

Adrian moved over to give the couple as much room as he could, stomach twisting. As the landscape blurred by, he was able to see Safe Haven in the mirror.

As if they knew he was looking at them now, lights began to flash in a welcome home code.

"That's for her, not you!"

Adrian smiled at Marc's snotty remark. "Of course, it is. I've never inspired that type of loyalty from people. Even when there were assassins in camp trying to kill me, Safe Haven wouldn't have gone to all this trouble. I'm storing the memory for her."

Marc thought of the mini-riots that had happened and the accusations that had been tossed around against various Eagles, including himself.

“Actually, they would have at one time, but you disappointed them.”

Adrian looked over at Marc with a touch of sarcasm and a lot of pity. “Like you did, by not coming to get her right away?”

Marc stared at Adrian in recognition of the truth, hating the man all over again.

Adrian leaned against the cool window and shut his eyes. “I’ll be gone as soon as I can.”

“No, you won’t.” Kenn interrupted the fight. “You go when the boss tells you to and not a second before then. If you two would stop screwing with her plans, this shit wouldn’t keep happening. At some point, the camp will have had enough of both of you.”

Kenn flipped on the music before either man could strike back, furious. How dare they fight over the spoils! Kenn had done so much changing since Angela joined Safe Haven that it was unconscionable to him that the two men he had admired for so long were actually as broken as he was, just in different ways. It was more than a disappointment. It was enough to put Kenn firmly in Angela’s corner for the first time in their lives. *None of the men in this truck deserve her.*

Chapter Seventeen

Nothing Gets in the Way

1

“I want us back on the road in 10 minutes.” They’d been driving for eight hours.

Kenn approved of Marc’s curt order. They were making a fast bathroom and fuel stop, which would allow their sick and injured to be moved into the medical camper. One of the larger models, it would accommodate the entire team as long as a few of them didn’t mind being on the floor in sleeping bags.

Adrian opened the door as soon as the all-clear call came. Being crammed in here with Marc was bad, but Angela’s scent made it twice as hard. Even while dirty and ill, she gave off a vanilla haze that was addictive.

Angela didn’t react as Marc carried her to the medical vehicle.

The camp stared in concern, but he couldn’t allay their fears. It was a waiting game now. The medication was working, the illness was trying to conquer, and she had used more energy than a descendant was allowed to. As a result, it had pulled the strength from her body and almost shut down every organ. If not for the healing they had done in

the truck, she would be dead. Marc believed any other descendant would have been anyway. Angela's soul just refused to die no matter how many times the Grim Reaper swung his scythe at her.

Adrian followed, trying not to cough. People were alarmed enough. He didn't want to add to it.

Neil cleared a path so Marc could take Angela into the camper. He waited impatiently for him to put her in a bunk, then cleared his throat. "Samantha wanted me to tell you preventative medicine is important."

Marc started to tell Neil to buzz off and then realized what that meant. "Yeah. Get the team medics going on it. Pick two of them to be in here with us. I want it done fast. The clock is ticking."

The trooper rushed off, waving men to help. Everyone on the senior teams was able to give injections. Before they left, the camp would have a dose of antibiotics in case Angela and her team had infected them. Samantha was brilliant. Neil planned to tell her that as soon as there was time.

Around the stopped convoy, tense Eagles and twitchy rookies stood guard. They hadn't heard anyone close to them in the last few hours of travel, but that didn't mean much if there was a tracker out there. The flat farmlands surrounding them allowed a clear line of sight, but no protection if they were attacked.

The camp hurried to use the bathrooms.

The Eagles willed them to move faster.

“We got the injured treated while we were driving. A couple of minor trims and bruises from the fender benders, but nothing major.”

Neil and Kyle were giving each other updates so they would be covered when the boss asked for them.

“We’re having food and water sent to the descendants.” Kyle’s tone revealed his concern about Jennifer.

Neil sympathized. He wasn’t as upset because Samantha hadn’t been able to get out of the vehicle to use her energy the way the other descendants had. Her previous injury had likely saved the babies. She would have drained herself to help the camp. Neil was certain of it. “We’ll keep the water and food flowing at every stop and make them rest. I don’t know what else to do.”

Thanks to his conversations with Jennifer and Adrian, Kyle already knew there wasn’t anything. He moved to the rear to check in with the guards there.

Neil headed for the front of the convoy to do the same.

In the medical camper, Marc stepped aside so the other team members could be brought in. They all looked better—even Ivan, who had been the worst of the team upon being brought out. Marc believed that was because Ivan had been feeding Angela energy while they were under attack. He would find out later, when he had time to scan her mind and view what had happened.

Marc leaned against the wall next to the bunk where he had placed Angela, waiting for Adrian to enter the camper. When the blond finally appeared, looking like he was about to fall over, Marc grabbed his arm.

Adrian let Marc help him inside.

Marc pointed at the floor by Angela.

Adrian pulled away and took a spot on the floor as far away from her as he could get. Adrian needed peace from the hostile glares of the Eagles. He was too sick to defend himself right now. Angela was alive and that would have to be enough.

“I’ve never felt anything like that.” Ivan was stunned by the battle that had taken place before Safe Haven arrived. Now that he’d rested for eight hours, he wanted to talk it out. “I mean, I saw the fight with the UN, but there was a lot of power there and it didn’t feel so…” Ivan tried to keep his voice down to keep from waking Caleb, who had crashed in one of the cots as soon as he was brought in. The child had refused to leave Angela.

“Miraculous? Terrifying?” Adrian supplied.

Ivan nodded. “Both.”

Marc was curious about their topic, but he was busy scanning the surroundings. He made a note to ask one of them about it later, preferably anyone but Adrian.

Ivan was stuck in the moment. “I didn’t know they could use their gifts over distances. When I saw the smoke out the window, I thought refugees had set the town on fire above us.”

“Only the alpha can do things like that.” Adrian sighed tiredly. “And not just any alpha. Tragedies have made her evolve faster.”

Ivan glanced toward Marc before asking his next question, not wanting to draw his ire. “So only Angela?”

Adrian knew Ivan could be trusted. He wasn’t worried about saying anything that would be repeated. “As you witnessed, it takes an extraordinary amount of energy to control gifts like that. Most people’s minds can’t handle magic as it happens. They shut down or refused to believe they’re responsible. Angela accepted her gifts as soon as she was old enough to realize she had them. She spent her life hiding it, protecting her witch. She’s Byzantine. In the labs, everyone called it the mythical stage because they’d only read old documents on it. As far as we know, the last Byzan in the world died 400 years ago.”

Marc’s attention was snagged. “What exactly does that mean?”

Adrian didn’t have the energy to explain it. He yawned. “She already gave you the answer. I know she did.”

“Not to my satisfaction.”

Adrian snorted. “She hasn’t denied you any other type of satisfaction, so that still puts you one up on the rest of us.”

Adrian’s mind went to the basement where he hadn’t been sure if he and Angela might die together. It had been just as grave as the rest stop

where she had been shot, except this time he had been too weak to help her. After saving Travis, Angela had attacked the wave of refugees that hit the town together, burning them and two blocks of houses. As the screams filled the air, Adrian had worried over the reaction of the men with them. Even though she was fighting for them, people who couldn't accept magic often flipped out at the sight of it in its extreme form. It had been a relief to find Ivan and his team staring in awe and then a shock as Ivan offered her his life so she could escape. Instead, Angela had taken most of his energy and used it to keep fighting. When that had run out, she'd turned to Adrian.

Adrian felt Marc tense as he came to the part where Angela had slid into his arms and connected them. Adrian relived the memory as if he were a drowning man gasping for air. The way she had clutched him to absorb his energy, the feel of her underneath him, body arching against his, would live in his mind forever. When she had created this master scheme to get him and Marc to want something more than her, she'd assumed he would be a pushover as long as Safe Haven was protected. She had underestimated him and her allure. An alpha descendant was almost always male because a female had such an attraction that the men around her were incapable of resisting. Adrian had the double punch of admiring her on top of it. While they'd been connected, she had viewed the truth. He loved her as much as Marc did and he would give

up the camp for her. In fact, he had. Angela had gotten to see his decision at the rest stop while she'd been unconscious, reliving it six months later.

“So, there’s nothing we can do?”

It was a realization that the other men there had already come to accept and loathe.

Adrian didn’t answer Marc’s demand.

The witch reached out to Adrian. Will you give them up? Trade the herd for her?

Can’t I have both?

Never. Not without a small measure of pity, the witch withdrew to her fiery den instead of making him feel worse. There were always prices to be paid. Having descendants together was wonderful in the uses, but it was also heavy in the weight. Adrian would carry as much of her discomfort as he was able to ease, but in time, he would need the same favor. Heartbreak was not to be lightly dismissed. It was one of the most dangerous things that humans gave to each other.

Sure she wouldn’t be awake much longer, Angela took advantage of the respite to fulfill a promise that she’d made to herself while Adrian burned her.

Thank you for choosing us to stop the slavers. It was our honor to serve as YOUR hand of justice.

Still connected, Adrian flinched as if stung. He had turned her into a killer, and she was thanking God for it. Is there a more perfect woman anywhere? I don’t think so.

Shortly after, Adrian had begun making plans to give up leadership no matter what happened in Arkansas. Then, he'd intended to go after her openly and face failure. Before her injury, he hadn't noted a response that implied his charm had been successful. It wasn't until he took a turn warming her at the country club that he'd discovered it had. Even he had been surprised by how much. So surprised that he'd put the new plan into motion immediately, opening to her whenever she needed it, trusting her with his other secrets. Unlike Marc, he'd given Angela everything he had.

"Finish it." Marc wanted the story from the beginning.

"I'm tired." Adrian was.

"Finish it."

"Let him rest."

Marc glared at Ivan. "You're here because you were smart enough not to cross me. Has that changed?"

Ivan paused, considering it. "Actually, yes." Ivan looked up with a milder copy of Adrian's loathing. "While I was saving her life, she wasn't calling for you. Leave him alone. *You're* the one who's lucky to be here."

2

"I think it will be a long time before these people accept Marc as a leader again."

Kenn glanced at Tonya in surprise. She had just joined him in the lead truck. Kenn had wanted to refuse in case he was now contagious, but it was too late for that. He welcomed her with a kiss on the cheek instead. Their fight, for the moment, had been forgotten. “He did a good job. None of our people died.”

Kenn wasn't counting Angela's team because they hadn't been under Marc's supervision.

“He couldn't control the camp and now he's more concerned with her than he is with them. Can you imagine Angela reacting this way to anything that's happened?”

Kenn was forced to agree, but it felt disloyal to speak it. He grunted instead and started the engine on the truck.

The medical camper headlights flashed. The latrine tents were down and Marc wanted them rolling.

Tonya kept the rest of her observations to herself, but she was positive she would hear her opinions validated later by the camp. Angela would always be Marc's priority. The people here were painfully aware of that. Safe Haven had just gone back to a single leader setup and Marc would probably be the last one to know it.

As the medical camper began to move, Marc breathed a small sigh of relief. The need to be gone was slamming him in thick waves. Other refugees were still coming to the scene of the slaughter. He could feel it and view it on his grid. They had a

small window to slide through without drawing notice, mostly because it wasn't fully dark yet. By the time lights were a requirement, they should be far enough out of range to be safe for a while. Marc hoped to keep traveling for the next 20 hours, but it would depend on the camp. If people were sick, he would find a place to pull over and wait it out.

Marc scanned the team in the camper, noting their relieved expressions. Gratified to know he wasn't the only one nervous about being stationary, Marc delivered nods of approval to those awake enough to receive them, though he skipped Adrian and Ivan. Angela was alive, as was most of the team. It was clear the men had done their duty.

Glad Marc wasn't angry with them, the team settled in for the ride. Boots and jackets were removed for the first time since they'd left camp, bringing groans and grins.

Marc noticed Adrian was curled onto his side away from everyone, not removing anything or getting comfortable. As much as he wanted to toss Adrian out, Marc couldn't. It would make him look petty, something he didn't need. The unrest over his leadership was in the front of his mind, thanks to Ivan's comments. Until Angela recovered, Marc had to command obedience after being overruled by children and Eagles. He wasn't sure he could repair the damage that had been done. He also wasn't certain he was going to try.

Ivan and Peter stayed awake. Peter was allowing the medic from Kyle's team to examine his

trim. He was positive it had become infected, but the doses of antibiotics were clearing it up. He just wanted a verification that it was on the mend.

Ivan was studying Marc, comparing things he had learned on this run. Thanks to the connection with Angela, Ivan understood more about their relationship now. He had questions he was hoping to get answered to confirm his theories. Among those, was that Marc and Angela were not together because of love.

Adrian snorted. “Boy, are you wrong.”

Ivan flushed. He wasn’t going to back down from Adrian either, but he did keep his voice lowered so the boss could rest. “Has it occurred to you that the spell backfired because she was already under one?”

Silence fell. The only person in the vehicle who had thought of it dropped his head and began to make plans for the next stop.

Adrian laughed. “I knew it!”

“And you did it anyway?”

Adrian’s amusement dropped at Marc’s growl. “I figured it out *after* the backfire.”

Ivan scowled at them. He didn’t understand.

Busy placing a bandage over Peter’s wound, Brandon took pity and filled him in. “He laughed because you think Marc put a charm on her when they were kids. The opposite is true.”

“Is the angel gonna be okay?” Caleb was staring at Angela.

“Yes. She just needs to rest.” Marc motioned toward the bottle of water that Brandon had put near the boy’s feet.

Caleb retrieved the bottle. After a long drink, he shut it and lay down, happy to be in a warm vehicle with Angela and people who seemed nice. It didn’t take him long to begin drowsing.

Adrian rolled over to look at Marc. *You do understand he’s the reason she did this, right?*

Marc gave a curt nod. That had just occurred to him.

I knew it the minute I saw him standing next to her as I picked them up.

Marc felt the scold, but he couldn’t help his nature. He didn’t understand why Adrian was so in tune with Angela when he wasn’t.

“How long until we know if we’ll infect everyone?” Peter was tired of the tension.

Brandon pointed to the equipment he was setting up. “I’m running tests to determine that. How long did it take before you started feeling sick?”

The next few minutes were taken by the medic asking questions and the men trying to remember. They didn’t spare any details, not sure what might help.

Marc gritted his teeth as they explained how the town had turned on them. When Ivan got to Caleb saving Angela’s life by shoving someone who was about to shoot her, Marc studied the boy. The child wasn’t a descendant, but something about him

seemed important. Vowing to figure it out later, Marc turned his attention back to the medic. “So, if we go another six hours with no symptoms, we’re in the clear?”

“I think so.”

Marc sat near Angela and leaned against the wall. He used to think this was the hardest part, but after all the adventures in Safe Haven, he was beginning to look forward to the crash after each rush. It was the only time he wasn’t stressed.

3

“It’s been nine hours since the last stop. We have to let everyone use the bathroom.”

Kenn knew she was right. The complaints from people with leg cramps and upset stomachs were causing an almost continuous flash of driver alerts.

Kenn motioned Tonya to get the maps out so they could pick a place, assuming Marc would approve it as soon as they stopped. As he slowed the truck, one hand helping her hold the map in place on the dashboard, lights flashed in his mirror again.

Kenn decoded the message. “There’s a bowling alley just ahead. The boss wants us to stop there for 10 minutes.”

Neither of them was sure if that meant Marc or Angela.

Tonya narrowed it on the map and showed it to Kenn so he would know which way to go.

As he pulled in front of the bowling alley and three teams rushed out to clear it, Kenn watched his mirror, hoping for another message from the medical camper. Everyone was waiting for the test results.

Frowning when nothing came, Kenn directed Tonya toward the semi with the children and then went to help get latrines up.

In the camper, the tension was thick despite there being no signs of contagion in Marc or the medics. The team was improving—including Angela, who now looked like she had been deathly sick instead of just dead. She still hadn't woken, however, causing tension. It had been 17 hours since they'd rescued her.

"She needs to put in an appearance." Brandon was worried about the camp now moving around them. Some of the glances were too suspicious, as if they suspected she had died.

"Let everyone know this camper is under quarantine." Marc waved at the medic. "Don't go out there." Until they were positive about the contagion, he didn't want to push their luck and it was a good excuse.

"Not a good idea." Adrian couldn't help speaking up.

"Mind your own business!" Marc hissed to keep from disturbing Angela.

"Wake her up. She has to go out."

"Fuck off!"

“If they think she died and we’re hiding it, they’ll tear this camper apart. She’ll be hurt. *You’ll* be hung.”

“Just shut up! You don’t have the right to make these choices anymore.”

“Is that all you care about?”

“I care about *her*. She’s not going out!”

Brandon wondered if Marc wanted an excuse to avoid facing the camp after everything that had happened. Having the adults and kids revolt against his leadership was definitely an embarrassment.

A small bell on the counter dinged before Marc and Adrian could continue the hissing argument, drawing attention.

Brandon examined the test he had been waiting for. This one wasn’t related to the illness Angela and her team had suffered. Those were already finished.

Wake up, baby. Adrian forced the connection, hearing the unrest outside. *The herd needs you.*

Angela groaned.

Marc hurried to her, helping her sit up when she wasn’t strong enough to do it on her own. He glowered at Adrian. “I want you gone at the next stop.”

Angela’s face puckered, heart clenching. “No.”

Marc opened his mouth...

“I’m sorry.” Angela stared at the team, mind already switching to the two men she had lost.

Marc had planned a forgiving speech to deliver in this moment.

Adrian and Ivan had also rehearsed phrases and platitudes they thought would offer comfort.

Brandon turned around. "You shouldn't be sorry for saving the camp." He came over and held the test out so Angela could read it. "This is from the ash storm. Samantha asked me to check it, but there wasn't time until a little while ago."

Brandon tilted it toward Marc. "The storm was dropping poison on us. If we'd stayed, Safe Haven would be sick now with something more dangerous than influenza."

Forgiveness was instant in the camper. Everyone assumed she'd done it intentionally.

Angela refused to let herself off so lightly. "I didn't know Safe Haven was in danger from the storm. I just... I couldn't stand listening to a little boy cry for help anymore." That, and her need to run off restless energy, had overruled her common sense. The result had been the loss of two lives. When she'd told Ivan death walked beside her, she hadn't been exaggerating.

Marc winced.

Adrian sighed, sorry he'd put all of this into motion, but also glad of it. "They'd all be dead if you hadn't gotten restless. Try to let it go." Adrian sighed. "The kids are coming."

Marc thought of what the former leader had told him about how he spent time with the children to avoid his pain. If Adrian was already monitoring the kids, that meant he was hurting. Marc refused to give the man a break. Adrian couldn't make up for

everything he'd done, not even by saving Angela's life. Marc gestured for the door to be opened.

Angela struggled to get out of the bed.

As little faces appeared, with suspicious adults behind them, Marc let her do it herself. He wanted to help, but knew she didn't want to be viewed that way. Everyone had witnessed what she looked like with all of her energy drained. She needed to replace that memory.

Because she'd been healed by three descendants who loved her, Angela's skin had regained a youthful glow and her hair was a wild mess of beauty around her face. Other than the pale skin and sunken cheeks, it was hard to tell she had been ill until they noticed the shaking legs and hesitant steps that feared tripping.

The kids waited patiently for her to reach them, seeing everything Marc had and more. As they braced for her scold over their behavior, Marc was suddenly sure she wasn't going to do it. They'd shown an incredible loyalty.

Angela leaned against the frame of the camper as her legs threatened to give out and her lungs complained about the workout. It would be a while before she felt like herself again, but she'd been waiting for this moment since realizing the herd wasn't going to turn back. She hadn't wanted to die so far from her family. "I feel the same way about all of you. My life is nothing if we're not together."

Smiles and relief broke across the crowd that moved closer in hopes of a private word.

Marc gently pushed her down onto the cold step so she could at least sit while she talked to them.

Angela brought her hand up to cover his. A blue spark of connection flared, warming them both.

Angela smiled up at him. “Thank you for not killing any of my wayward children.”

Marc chuckled, as did the adults, who knew the kids were never in danger of true violence from Marc.

“Anything for you.”

Angela sighed in contentment at the feel of the approval and love. Coming from so many directions, it was wonderful after being sure she was lost for good this time.

Listening from his bed, Ivan was happy for them. He rolled over to get up and hit the camper bathroom... Adrian was staring at the couple. His jealousy and longing was obvious. Ivan had already made his choice. *I'm not going to be like that. I'll leave first.*

Adrian pinned the soldier with a bitter sneer. *Don't you think I tried? When she calls, you'll come. Your morals and ethics won't matter in that moment. When she calls for a man, nothing gets in the way of answering.*

Marc was forced to agree with Adrian. Everything about Angela warned men to stay away from her, but it was impossible. All it took was one intense smile to twist a man's heart up so badly he would die for another.

Ivan headed for the bathroom.

Adrian tried to doze while he could.

Marc stayed close to Angela, fingers tapping his belt as he waited. They had one more of these short stops left and then Safe Haven would be far enough south to camp for a day. It depended on them maintaining this awkward silence from the rest of the world for another 200 miles.

It felt like 1000.

4

“You’re slowing. Are we there yet?”

“Last fuel and driver switch. I’m done.” The low fuel light in his truck, the one that used the most gas so they could keep track of the vehicles behind them, had just hit yellow.

Kenn and the truck had run out of energy at the same time. The road in front of him kept blurring and Kenn was positive the drivers behind him had noticed him weaving. All of them were exhausted. They had made the trip to rescue the boss in 20 hours, broken by one short stop. Now, they were six hours from where they had been before Angela left and it was time for the final shift of drivers to take over. He and Marc had put the hasty schedule together while Eagles were gearing up for battle and the den mothers were forcing sullen kids to wash off the ash from the storm.

“Where do you want me?” Tonya was too tired to argue about whatever he picked.

“If there’s room, we’ll use the bunk in Kendle’s truck.”

During their last switch, Kenn had given Kendle the responsibility of driving the plated semi transporting the kids. Eagles had viewed it as an honor position or making peace, but Kenn had just been concerned with putting the best person for the job in that position. Kendle was determined to stay with Marc and she could see him right in front of her. A twister wouldn’t get her off his ass. The kids were also happy with it because they were close to Angela.

Kenn pulled into the gravel lot of a flea market, hating the dark trees and houses around them. He was tempted to turn on the radio to find out if they were still being tracked by the refugees, but didn’t. He was certain others in the convoy were listening. They would fill him in. Right now, he needed to get them fueled and back on the road as fast as possible. They had lost a full day of everything, including time.

Everyone waited in their vehicles while Neil’s team secured a perimeter. As soon as they waved, people hurried out of the vehicles and began harassing the men setting up the latrines.

With the camp occupied by covering basic needs, there was a lot of noise and chaotic sounds that worried the people in the medical camper. Even Angela came out of her drug-induced daze to stare at them with bleary eyes and wild hair.

“Fuel stop.” Marc was on the floor at her feet.

Angela did a scan of the camper and was instantly reminded of the two losses.

In the corner, Adrian stayed still and silent, but it tortured him to do so. Angela needed to be comforted, but Marc didn't see it. Adrian made a note to tell him what was going on as soon as they had a moment alone.

Taking advantage of Angela's weakness, Marc shoved into Adrian's thoughts without her knowing.
Tell me now.

Adrian stiffened. *Can she hear us?*

Maybe after more sleep. Tell me.

She's been awake twice since the battle. Would you like to guess what she was thinking every time or should I just tell you?

It took Marc a few seconds to figure out what Adrian was referring to. His first thought was that she was right to feel bad about the deaths. It would keep her in camp, where she was safe.

Adrian rolled over to glare, suddenly not caring if Angela picked up the conversation. *I would never do that to her.*

Marc glared. *No, you always do worse.*

If you keep holding her back, it's going to cost you everything. Adrian still had no idea why Angela loved Marc. *You've been told that by everyone. Why do you keep doing this?*

Marc growled. *Because you're evil. You can't be trusted.*

Adrian sat up. *For someone who can't be trusted, I sure keep saving her and the camp. Where have you been?*

Before Marc could answer, Adrian shoved to his feet. *I'll find another ride.*

"Stay!" Angela glowered at Adrian with red eyes.

Adrian paused. He wanted to, but he needed to go.

Angela understood how hard it was for him, but things needed to be said. "Thank you for coming."

"It was my honor. Please don't leave camp again."

Angela didn't smile. "I won't."

"Your word on it?"

"Yes. Jennifer will send you updates this time. I'll handle it."

Adrian's gratitude at the public support burst forth in a blinding array of orbs that slammed into Angela's chest and knocked her backward on the mattress. As she struggled to recover, groaning from the pain of his energy trying to heal her, Adrian left.

Angela gasped as another ripple ran down her hip and hit a nerve. Adrian's love was old and strong. It was digging into her remaining weaknesses and healing them.

In the bunk next to Angela, one of the Indians, Robin, had sat up. He locked eyes with Angela as she stopped shuddering, causing her to brace. She

was expecting a harsh reaction over the death of his friend.

“What you told us is not true. Death does not walk beside you or hold you up on the souls of humanity.”

Angela sensed what was coming and held her hand up to stop him.

Robin had decided Marc needed to know. “Death chases the Ghost. Others are hit by it when you interfere.”

Angela glanced up at Marc, not sure how he would handle the information.

Marc looked at her as if she had two heads. “Don’t you think I know? You’ve saved my life so many times since the war that only an idiot would be able to miss it. If I left this camp, you guys might have peace.”

Marc exited the camper, ignoring her protests. He caught sight of Adrian sliding into an abandoned vehicle and went that way.

Chapter Eighteen

Not Good Enough

1

Adrian felt Marc coming, but didn't prepare for a fight like he knew he should. He felt miserable, and now that Angela would live, he just wanted to curl up somewhere to recover. It was what most of their kind did after going through an ugly battle.

"I want the full."

Adrian gestured to the cold seat next to him. He was working on wires under the dash. Even the vehicles that weren't wrecked or stripped had been damaged by nature. Rooting around in the slush piles in the bottom of a car with your bare hands for a key was a bad idea. He'd chosen to hotwire the wagon.

Marc sent a blast of heat into the car as he shut the door, aware of Adrian shivering. He could hear the man's teeth chattering. It was annoying.

"Where do you want to start?"

"From when you picked them up." Marc needed to know everything to be able to help her.

"Nothing you can do will help her, except to set her free. She's not supposed to belong to either one of us and you know that, so moments like these are incredibly tiresome."

“What’s tiresome is how you continuously pop up in our lives!” Marc punched the icy dash, not feeling the pain. “What do I have to do to get rid of you?!”

“I’ll tell you the same thing you told Charlie when you guys first came to Safe Haven. You can’t get rid of me. Only *she* can.”

“But she can’t! You made it impossible for her to get away.”

“Do you think the Maker’s Call binds her to me or my weak-ass charm?”

Marc was forced to consider it. He had forgotten about the call, other than the moments where he and his demon scroll dived. “What do you think?”

Adrian leaned back in the cold seat to shove his hands into his pockets. “My charm isn’t strong enough to do this to us. It’s the Maker’s call. *That’s* the bond you have to break.”

“How?”

“You have to get one of us to deny the bond in such a way that the magic recognizes the dissolution of the agreement.” Before Marc could insist that he do it right now, Adrian distracted the man. “It’s never been done.”

“I thought you told us there had never been a call?” Marc quickly pinpointed the inaccuracy.

“I said that I knew of. Since then, I’ve had reason to believe it’s been tried before, with much less success than what we had. In the past, the civilization who made the call was destroyed.”

“He let you both live.”

Adrian nodded. “Yes, and after this latest adventure with your mate, I can honestly tell you I believe she is the only reason why.”

“Because she’s fascinating or because she’s dangerous?”

Adrian was always dismayed at how fast Marc was able to put things together. This was no exception. “Both, I’d assume, though the latter seems more likely. Maybe she would be a threat to the higher power. If she can be destroyed, that kingdom would be safe from her. ...or maybe she’d make a good mate for someone stronger than either of us.”

“What do you mean by all-powerful?” Marc was remembering his recent conversation with Angela where she’d admitted she was stronger than all the other descendants in camp combined.

Adrian waved a cold hand. “That.”

“So it’s not me causing the deaths?”

“Of course, it is!” Adrian snapped. “There are two ways to break Angela—her kids and her men. If we die, so will she!”

There was silence for a moment and then Marc remembered why he was in the icy car with a man he hated. “Show me.”

Adrian didn’t want to relive it again. “Just take the memory from me. You’ve taken everything else.”

Marc did.

Guards outside the vehicle watched in concern, unable to hear what the men were saying. Unlike times in the past, the Eagles and camp weren't happy to witness Adrian being punished. If not for him, Angela would be dead, and everyone knew it this time.

“So, the boss here is a woman?”

Neil's attention was drawn to the new man walking by with his guard. Cole hadn't met Angela yet. Neil made a mental note to have the captain scanned before that happened, then returned to watching the windy landscape. As far as he could tell, they were in another abandoned part of the country, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

“The boss wanted me to tell you to check the animal trailer.” Morgan joined Neil for a brief moment where they watched Marc and Adrian, and exchanged agreeing glances. Marc was on his last mistake with the Eagles.

Morgan returned to his post outside the medical camper that had been labeled with a quarantine tag to keep the camp members and kids away during this stop.

Neil motioned a rookie to take his post and went to check the trailer.

A familiar sound broke his heart as soon as he reached it. Neil hurried in.

Samantha sitting next to their new horse, crying.

As Neil went to comfort her, he sent a quick *thank you* that he knew Angela got by the way the

trailer around them warmed. While it was a relief to know the boss was improving, Neil wished she could do something for the woman now sobbing in his arms as if she would never stop. He didn't know how long a woman's grief usually lasted, but he was guessing it was a long time. Not being able to help Samantha get over Jeremy might kill him.

Safe Haven pulled out of the bowling alley a few minutes later in a 40-car convoy of hope, recovering health, and happiness.

In the rear, Adrian didn't move.

When the last car disappeared over the horizon, he finally drove out of the parking lot. He followed their path in the slush for a few minutes and then took a street that would carry him west. As much as he wanted to stay with them, he couldn't.

Angela swallowed a moan as a wave of coldness hit. She clenched her fingers into her palms to keep from reaching out. There was only one thing that had ever made her feel this way. Adrian was leaving.

Marc was aware of how hard she was fighting not to interfere. He left her alone, but he hoped she wouldn't call the traitor back.

Angela remained silent.

Adrian kept driving west.

“We’re clearing a wreck. Stay in your vehicles. We are not stopping here!” Unable to keep avoiding it, Marc had emerged to help with security during the unscheduled stop.

“Adrian’s gone.” Word had spread quickly among the Eagles. Kyle had come to let Marc know.

Marc stared back, waiting for the next update.

Positive he should leave it alone, Kyle couldn’t. “I’d like to talk to you.”

Marc allowed Kyle to lead him toward the camper where he hoped they wouldn’t be overheard, but Marc had already made up his mind before Kyle spoke. It wasn’t hard to figure out what was coming.

“We’d like to lift Adrian’s banishment to conditional.”

“Not a chance in hell.”

Kyle had been expecting the answer. “Over half the Eagles agree. If he does one more good thing for Angela or the camp, they’re going to overrule you. I’m talking to you about this because I don’t like what happened and I don’t want to see it repeated.”

Because Kyle was the main reason Marc had been forced to give in to the kids, anger flared. “There hasn’t been a punishment for that yet. Be careful.”

Despite not being afraid of much, Kyle found himself intimidated. “I’m just giving you a heads up. As long as he stays away, it’s a non-issue. When he comes back next time, it—”

“If he comes.”

“*When* he comes back, it’s going to be a problem for you. Part of my job is warning leadership when there’s going to be trouble. I can’t take this to Angela because she isn’t well, and even if she were, she wouldn’t do anything about it because she doesn’t believe she can be unbiased. That just leaves you.”

Marc hated the implication that he couldn’t be fair, but this wasn’t Brandon and he didn’t swing. Respecting Kyle for having the balls to say it to his face, Marc decided the easiest way to accomplish what he wanted was to agree so the conversation would be over. Kyle would then go help Kenn get the camp moving. “I’ll think about it.”

Kyle knew he was being blown off. It happened all the time from rookies and he was offended Marc thought it would work on him. To be positive Marc understood he was the top Eagle in camp for a reason, Kyle pushed harder. “If we can’t trust you, we’ll vote you out of leadership. There’s nothing she can do to stop it if the Eagles decide you’re not worthy of the position anymore.”

Kyle walked away, disappointed. He had always looked up to Marc and thought the man made a good XO for Angela. Kyle was also frustrated because there wasn’t anyone else who could handle the job.

Kyle immediately thought of Jennifer and forced his suspicions down. Just because she had been named heir to Safe Haven, that didn’t mean she was ready to take over now. Sure, the other

leaders were occupied, and the camp needed a familiar, firm face to keep them in line, but...

“Damn it.” Kyle began bracing himself for Angela to make that call. There was no doubt it was coming.

“Everyone will sleep in their vehicles. Driver switches are to be made now.” Eagles circled the stopped convoy, reminding people of time and rules. “This is a short stop.”

Marc and Kenn had agreed their last group of drivers could be switched out for the first, which would allow them to be back where they had been when Angela left—hopefully by dawn. Marc had instructed Kenn to find a spot uphill from where they’d been during the ash storm. He was hoping most of it had rolled into the valley below so they would have a safe place to camp, but he had also told Kenn to find them an alternate in case that wasn’t possible.

Tap-tap-tap-tap.

Radios echoing got Marc’s attention, along with everyone else who recognized the code. Doug was checking in.

Marc found Kenn leaning tiredly against the communication truck while he waited for Daryl to decipher the message.

“Have made it 50 miles. Too many storms. Everyone is fine. Will check in soon.” Daryl looked up at Marc. “That’s all there is. Should I send a reply?”

“We’re still on silence—boss’s orders.”

Daryl perked up. “Is she better?”

Marc nodded. She was. She was also ready to be out of the camper.

He turned around as a cheer sounded, sighing. Apparently, her patience for those tin walls had run out.

Marc went to the camper to provide security.

Angela wasn't pushing herself. Sitting on the steps, she enjoyed the attention of her people and the fresh air that quickly reminded her it was still winter. She was feeling stronger now, though not enough to take being jogged around in the lead rig. She was hoping to resume that place tomorrow—mostly because it would please the camp to have her back in the front. The medical camper was well guarded in the center, but it wasn't where the boss was supposed to be.

Marc came up behind the large crowd.

Angela gave a nod to let him know everything was okay. He smiled, obviously seeing something that pleased him. She had no idea what it could be in her frazzled state, but her heart pounded. No matter what happened, she would always love Marc. Nothing he or fate could do would change that.

Marc waited for the crowd to thin, occasionally reminding everyone they were due back in their vehicles soon. As it reached three minutes to go, he began to give harder stares to get people to move faster.

Hoping to help Marc repair some of the damage that had been done to him by her recklessness, Angela waved the crowd off.

Less than a minute later, they were alone other than the men in the medical camper and the guards standing nearby. Caleb had finally been moved into the semi with the other kids, against his protests. Angela had assured him they would have time together after she healed.

“You’ll have to do the nightly meetings for a while.”

Marc was glad she had brought it up. “I think that’s a great idea. Do you have material you’d like me to use?”

“No. I expect you to scare them and I have no doubt you will.”

Marc almost flushed. His first lesson was planned. It was the dangers of listening to the voice inside instead of listening to reason.

Angela knew, but the descendant kids now felt like they mattered in this camp. They had insisted on something and it had happened. Things could work out as long as Marc regained their respect. If he didn’t, there was a chance she would have to take away their gifts until the kids learned to obey authority. Angela didn’t think that would become a problem, but if it did, someone else would be chosen to handle it. After they’d come to such adamant defense of her and risked Marc’s wrath like even the Eagles wouldn’t do without support, it

would be hard to punish them. She loved the kids for it.

“We are out of here in one minute! Get in your vehicles!”

Marc and Angela shared grins as they realized they were the only people still out here now. Kenn was yelling at them.

Marc held the door for her to enter and then followed, nodding at the guards coming up in jeeps on each side. It would tell anyone where the boss was, but it would also make it the hardest spot to reach. They would travel this way until Angela was ready to be in the lead rig again. He planned to stay by her side when that happened and then beyond. They weren't going to be doing split shifts anymore. Jennifer and Kyle could handle the nights, while he and Angela covered the days. It was why they had extra hands. It was time they used them correctly.

In all the excitement, none of the camp members asked where Adrian went. Other than leadership and a few of the guards, no one noticed he was gone.

3

“Why isn't she recovering faster?” Marc was standing next to Angela's cot while they waited for the all-clear call. They had finally reached their camping site.

“It's only been a full day.” Brandon and the others were also concerned, but not to Marc's extent.

“What can I do to help it along?”

Brandon tried not to sound defensive as he answered. “You sent away the only person who might have that information.”

Knock-knock!

Marc jerked the door open. “What do you need?!”

Kyle stiffened. “We want the boss to call it.”

Marc frowned. “She needs to rest.”

“The camp needs to hear her. It will only take a minute.” Kyle was prepared to keep arguing if it was necessary.

Marc stepped aside, throwing his hands in the air. It was impossible for Angela to get more than two or three hours sleep at a time. If it wasn't the kids or the Eagles, it was her nightmares.

Marc gently shook her shoulder. He knew she needed the rest because she hadn't budged in the time they'd been stationary here. “Angie?”

Angela came out of the deep slumber with a pounding headache and sore throat. Leftovers from the illness, it was still better than what she had been dealing with a day ago. She stared up at Marc and then looked at the open camper doorway where cold air was rushing in. “Give me a radio.”

Kyle had a portable set ready for her. He handed it to Marc. “We have an area secured in the parking lot of the mall. The tents are up, bathrooms are ready, and our cook is already slamming things around.”

Angela grimaced at the lack of images, unable to pick them up. The wall of exhaustion that had hit as soon as she was safe was lingering. She fumbled for the mike, not happy. She couldn't seem to get her hands to do what she wanted them to.

Marc pushed the button for her.

"Kyle has point for the setup. We're all clear."

The shortwave radios only carried half a mile in any direction and the camp was thrilled to hear her. None of them assumed radio silence had been broken, however and they didn't respond over the air waves. Their happiness came in the laughter and shouts as everyone began to get out of their vehicles.

Angela enjoyed the vibes, but she was too tired to respond. She shut her eyes and let sleep have its way again. Spending time looking normal in front of the camp was exhausting when she was this weak.

Marc glanced out the window of the medical camper, approving Kenn's choice. They were in the parking lot of a large mall that had been looted. Entire sections of the building had been burnt or knocked down, and everything was littered with gunshots and bodies. The battle here was done. It would take the Eagles an hour to get the rest of it ready and then they would be hidden in three directions by the tall building that sat in a halfmoon around the parking lot. If they got lucky, they might even find a few things they needed in the debris, but Marc wasn't concerned with that. The bunker the

engineer had wrote about in his logbook was due east of here. Teams would be sent in the morning to collect whatever remained or to make contact with anyone who might be alive in there.

Marc deflected camp members as they came by the window, trying to give her a few more minutes to rest before it was time to go in. The mall was a tall, glassy shadow hiding any number of dangers. The bottom floor had already been looted and damaged by the weather. That was common of malls now, but there was also an old battlefield here. The entire place needed to be policed and stripped.

Knock-knock!

Marc jerked the door open to find Samantha and Neil standing there.

“We have a spot ready for the boss.”

Because it had come from Samantha, it stopped Marc’s nasty response and allowed them to have their way. The camp wanted Angela back as soon as possible and the Eagles were going to make sure that happened, whether Marc liked it or not.

Marc clamped down on his thoughts and got Angela ready to be moved. He was done interfering with her and the camp. In fact, he was probably done with a lot of things.

“Please give it some time.” Angela struggled to sit up.

Marc didn’t promise anything, but it was obvious by the tender way he helped her that Angela’s wishes would be considered.

The team in the medical camper with them was relieved, but also concerned about the relationship between Angela and her protector. It didn't feel healthy to them.

Ivan stared until the couple was gone, controlling his thoughts by hating himself for having them. As the door shut, he allowed his true feelings to come through. *He's not enough for her.*

Brandon nodded at the soldier's thought. When the Eagles finally handled Marc, Brandon would be with them and it had nothing to do with the family name or honor. Angela wasn't happy with Marc even though she loved him. Much like with Charlie and Tracy, things had to change or they would both end up single and bitter.

Angela enjoyed the feel of Marc carrying her inside, but not the attention it garnered. Like each time she had made an appearance since being rescued, they were surrounded by eager people who hadn't gotten the opportunity to welcome her back yet or wanted to do it again.

Marc was finally coming to realize the gloved hands that Angela and Adrian used with the camp really were necessary. For a long time, he had thought they were being coddled, but now he realized it prevented the panic that led to riots and rebellion. Marc was embarrassed at the attention for that reason. Many of the people who had stood against him were in this crowd and he wasn't certain how he felt about it. He assumed when he'd had time to process it, he would be angry. He could feel

some of them expecting that reaction from him now, but he was too tired.

Marc shoved through the people and took Angela to where the den mothers had prepared her a canvas between the two community tents. It screamed of the old setup, of leadership. Marc nodded to the half dozen men on duty and then ducked into the tent.

As the couple disappeared from view, the crowd went to their tents and posts. They had just wanted to confirm that the boss knew how happy they were to have her back. Now that she was settled, they were eager to get out of the harsh wind and drizzle still following them from Georgia.

4

“I don’t want you to do it again to anyone, for any reason. Do you understand?” Jennifer didn’t wait for the baby to respond. Until now, she had been driving, fighting, or recovering. Reprimands hadn’t been a priority. “I can’t believe you did that. Do you understand what you’ve done to Marc?”

I’m sorry. Autumn’s sad mental squeak would have been enough to get Jennifer to relent, but the children walking around them to the bathrooms started mentally telling the baby not to worry about it, that she had done the right thing by convincing Kyle to go against Marc.

“Stop it! You’ll get her banished because of who she is!”

The kids flinched, reminded that Jennifer was an enforcer.

Jennifer snapped her mouth shut as she realized she had given away a secret. She looked down at the baby and was relieved to view confusion instead of anger in the tiny mind.

I'm not bad. I helped the alpha.

Jennifer had scanned the children and discovered Angela's twins had been the driving force behind the rebellion. The infants were too young to communicate, so all they had done the entire time Angela was gone was cry for her. After a full day of it, on top of their own concern, the children had broken. Jennifer understood, but at the same time, her fears were real. Because of who Autumn's father was, she would have to walk the line to prove she was nothing like him. Angela had sent Roy and Romeo away so they wouldn't have to go through what Autumn would when she was older.

Jennifer and the kids crowded around the bathroom. The weather was dreary, she was grouchy, and they were tired. There wasn't much chatter and no laughter.

Sighing, Jennifer let go of her anger. She had made her position clear. While she was relieved Angela was back, she had been terrified the entire time they were on the way that the camp would get sick and people would die, especially her little family. It had been horrifying and she didn't want it to happen again. The kids had to learn to take no for

an answer, even when it went against everything their little hearts were crying out for. That included Angela's twins.

Jennifer caught sight of Kyle heading toward the community tents to do his hourly check in. They were sharing point duty over the camp tonight. After yelling at him, then witnessing him challenge Marc, Jennifer wasn't sure how to handle the reunion that would happen between them at some point. Deciding to play it cool, she gave him a polite nod when he caught her staring and then herded the children toward a tent.

He thinks you're mad at him too.

Jennifer frowned at the baby. *I'm not.*

He thinks you are.

Jennifer didn't keep the conversation going, but she stewed on the comment. Any time Kyle was free from duty or sleep, he was with Autumn. His chuckles and her laughter were the highlights of Jennifer's day. If Autumn had noticed something about Kyle, it was true.

"I'll let him know I'm not."

Satisfied, Autumn snuggled into her mother's arms to drowse. This was the best part of life as far as Autumn was concerned. *I love my mommy.*

As Jennifer and the kids went into the largest community tent, Charlie came out. Also on night shift with the rest of his team, Charlie was doing rounds. The tent check had been an awkward thirty seconds where he looked at everyone except the

woman sitting in the far corner talking to Pam. Charlie had forgotten how much it hurt to feel alone.

As Charlie left the tent, Dog joined him. Without speaking, the pair fell into the previous routine they'd used, enjoying the company.

Passing the leadership tent, Charlie didn't pause as he heard clothing rustle. While he doubted that they were getting busy, he didn't want to take the chance. *Seeing your parents bump uglies is something no kid should ever have to witness.*

Inside the tent, Marc and Angela busted out laughing as they caught his thought.

Charlie chuckled against his will and walked faster.

"How's he doing?"

Marc dropped the pants he had just helped Angela remove and then went for the jacket she was having trouble with. After days in it, the ninja-like outfit Kenn had put together was almost crusted to her skin. Marc could swear he heard the sound of tape ripping as she pulled the shirt and coat up together.

"Not bad. They haven't spoken yet, as far as I know." Marc helped her remove the rest of her clothes, but she refused his help to wash.

Marc wished he could fill a bubble bath and let her soak. He knew women liked that. He would be just as happy swimming in the river, if it wasn't frozen.

It didn't take long for Angela to start shivering. She tried to hurry with her bath, but she was weak.

By the time she finished washing and was ready to dress, Marc's impatience had filled the tent.

Angela reluctantly relented and let him dress her.

Marc didn't comment on the yellowing bruises. Knuckles were outlined across her ribs and hips.

"I was thinking of asking Candy to just tattoo stuff all over me so you won't know when it's real."

Marc chuckled. "Mean."

Angela shoved her arms through the long-sleeved shirt and then Marc's Marine sweater.

Marc held out her Eagle jacket.

Angela pulled her hair through the shirts. "We won't need it. By dawn I'll be sweating, and you'll be opening the flap to let heat out."

Laughter at the old joke floated out of the tent and smothered Safe Haven in good vibes. It made people want to help each other.

5

"Are you going to tell us why or what?"

Tracy's chin snapped up from where it had been resting on her knees. "I came here so I wouldn't get questions like that."

Kendle and Jennifer exchanged smiles. Tracy had been riding in the semi for the kids, instead of with her new team. Jennifer wouldn't have been able to stand the semis without knowing the steel panels from the leader rigs had been welded to the

insides. The kids were rolling in a tank. Tracy had used it as a place to hide from Charlie.

Pam took one of Angela's twins over and set her in Tracy's arms. "Give it up. Why did you say no?"

Tracy stared at the infant who gazed back with such love and trust that she started crying.

"Hey!" Kendle was unable to take pain from a woman—any woman. "We were joking. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Tracy forced the sobs back, letting Kendle hug her as Pam took the baby back. "I'm too old and used."

Kendle and Jennifer instantly understood. Because they'd also been abused, they knew the feeling of being dirty and unworthy that lingered no matter what people said or how they acted. Kendle hugged the woman again, hating Angela for assigning her here overnight. Kendle had been expecting an easy shift. "You're letting the ghosts win when you have these moments."

Thanks to the one dream they'd shared, Jennifer knew Kendle was more equipped to offer advice. She listened intently. Jennifer sometimes still struggled with her own ghosts—especially when Kyle wanted to please her after she'd forced it on him. She hadn't let him yet because it felt like giving control away to Cesar again.

Kendle found it easy to defend Charlie because she wanted Tracy's tears to stop. "He loves you."

Tracy nodded. "I love him too, but you know that won't matter. When he grows up, he'll see he

saddled himself with a used whore and then I'll be crushed."

"I think you did the right thing by saying no." Nancy was burping the male twin. "He needs a chance to grow up, but he also needs to take his place with his parents. You're a distraction and many of the camp already resent you because of it. They couldn't care less about you having sex. It's the screwing around with our future that people have a problem with."

Nancy didn't duck from the glares and stares. "What? It's the truth."

Tracy's cheeks were scarlet streaks. "It's why I said no. I'm hoping he'll snap out of me and into his mom."

Chuckling at the wording, Kendle handed Tracy a tissue pack she'd kept from the UN run. "I'll bet if he knew the reasons, he'd straighten right up."

Tracy sniffled. "You think?"

The other females were hesitant to ask a personal question, but to provide an answer they had to. Pam did it. "You sleep with him yet?"

Tracy braced for more trouble. "Why?"

Pam and the other women laughed, exchanging knowing glances.

"He'll get the whisper he needs from one of us and you'll get your little man back. Try not to be sad. We need you angry for this to work."

Tracy didn't want to use sexuality, but she already knew it could work. She just hadn't wanted

to take the chance on reverting to her old self. “It’s not right.”

Even Nancy laughed. “No, but women have been controlling men that way for centuries, and men have been allowing it, while pretending they don’t have a clue about how it all works so they can have a goal to compete for. Some games never change.”

6

“They’re almost all asleep.”

Conner didn’t move from his post. He was surprised Candy had come to find him. If not for all the Eagles in the darkness around them, he would have insisted she return to the community tent. When he’d spotted her coming out, he had assumed she was making a bathroom trip, not a visit.

Candy stood next to the boy, aware of his tension at being alone with her. She just couldn’t force herself to go back into the tent. Everyone in her canvas was happy. It was hard when she couldn’t find the same peace, so she had stepped outside. Upon seeing Conner standing at the other end of camp on guard duty, she’d decided to join him in hopes he might be able to help her.

“You have to let go of your guilt.” Conner didn’t turn away from his post. “I think they call it being conflicted.”

Candy snickered. *That sounds funny.*

Conner enjoyed her amusement, but he wasn't sure if he was allowed to have visitors while on duty. He assumed it was frowned upon because it was a distraction. Conner glanced toward the Eagle on point near him, Whitney, and found the man watching.

Whitney motioned Conner to take a few minutes. Whitney had seen Candy approach the boy. Unlike the other people who were biased against it because of age or general dislike of who Conner was related to, Whitney thought they made a cute couple. He wanted them to have a chance to be happy. It was obvious they would be once they got over the things standing between them, but even more, Whitney wanted Lee's twins to be protected and a Mitchel did that for his woman. Angela and Adrian was all the proof he needed.

Conner turned to look at Candy, unable to keep from staring. *She's beautiful.*

Candy wanted to know what he was thinking, but she also didn't want to encourage him. She settled for chatting lightly about the adventure they'd had rescuing Angela.

Conner allowed her to deflect from her real emotions, understanding she still wasn't ready to talk about anything important. He was just thrilled she wanted to converse at all. Conner gazed in open adoration and hung on every word she said.

Candy soaked it up without hesitating. It was why she'd come to him.

Chapter Nineteen

Considering the Mood

1

“Do you think that’s a problem?”

Donald shrugged. “If it is, the boss will handle it.” They were watching Conner and Candy from the windows of the medical camper. Donald was in here because he had stepped on a rusty spike during rounds on their last pit stop. It had gone straight through his worn boot. He would be off duty for a week while it healed. It would give him plenty of time to worry about tetanus since he’d refused the shot.

Travis dropped the curtain and went to the cot, feeling the medication kick in. As he sank down and pulled the scratchy blanket up over his shoulder, he noticed Ivan staring where Angela had slept. Empty, even the man on the floor hadn’t felt right taking it after Marc carried her out. Travis lifted a brow. “You okay?”

Ivan let out a deep sigh that said no matter what his answer, he really wasn’t.

“I miss being around her. It bothers me.” Ivan looked at his team. “I’m going to volunteer us for a lot of runs to stay away from her. Everyone okay with that?”

The team was. Donald was also relieved to hear it. With Ivan not in the boss's face all the time, their last big problems in the camp were solved for a little while.

“He took off! Adrian went and gone!”

The sound of Kevin's slurred anger outside the medical camper made Donald grunt. “Guess there is still one asshole we have to deal with.”

Eagles hurried to hush Kevin.

They ended up subduing him when he turned on them, swinging. If he had gone for his gun, they would have killed Kevin. Because he only tried to deliver a beating, all he got was the same.

The camper door was jerked open so Kevin could be shoved inside, bleeding and groaning.

Tim, the medic in the camper for this shift, motioned Kevin toward the bunk where Angela had been, aware it would cause the rookie more trouble.

Kevin crawled into the bunk and passed out.

Ivan met Tim's eye, snickering. *He'll get shit for that when everyone wakes up.*

I couldn't help myself. Tim also used hand code. *Never met a bigger schmo.*

Fresh amusement echoed across Safe Haven.

2

“I should go in now.” Candy didn't want to, but it was cold, and she didn't want him to get in trouble.

Conner didn't plan to turn to her and say anything personal. It just slipped out. "Can I spend some time with you?"

Candy blushed. "Doing what?"

Encouraged that she hadn't immediately shut him down, Conner took advantage of the lack of descendant supervision and stepped closer. "Let's plan a surprise wedding."

Candy recoiled.

Guards moved forward.

Conner scurried away from her to prove he hadn't done anything wrong. "I meant for Jennifer! A party for Jennifer!"

Guards waved other people away, using Eagle code to explain it was a misunderstanding.

Horrified that she'd immediately thought the worst, Candy had to agree. "I'll be in the mess at dawn."

Conner nodded and returned to his duty so he wouldn't have anything in the way of their date. This was the next step in getting everyone to accept them together. He expected it to be a hard fight.

Candy returned to the community tent to get a few hours of sleep. As she moved among the snoring, mumbling camp members, she realized she was excited about something for the first time in years. It was such a wonderful sensation that she was able to ignore the anxiety from knowing the camp would see them sitting together in the morning. Even something as innocent as planning Jennifer and Kyle's wedding would cause a lot of

talk and maybe problems. If it came to that, Candy would cut off all contact with Conner. She refused to be a part of that side of Safe Haven.

Conner caught the thought and sighed. *Too late, darling. Way too late.*

3

As 2am came, most of the camp was sleeping peacefully. Everyone was relieved to be back with the boss and that no one else was sick. They would watch for symptoms for the next weeks, but it was clear they had dodged a bullet. Upon hearing how they had also accidentally avoided the toxic effects of the ash storm, even the most resentful people forgave Angela for her reckless behavior. The only one who couldn't was Angela.

The guards on duty tried to stay alert, but they were the same shift who had been watching out for the convoy while they rolled here. They searched the darkness for signs of trouble and prayed they didn't find any. To stay awake, some of the men discussed the training outlines Kenn had allowed them to pass around. Everyone expected it to be a big topic of conversation until training officially restarted. No one was sure if there would be tryouts for rookies, but several camp members had asked senior men if new people were being accepted into Angela's army.

Brandon and Morgan were on duty on the farthest side of the mall from the community tents.

Now on a team together, the two men had been cautiously feeling each other out since they met for the shift.

Morgan turned to look at Brandon. “I’ve never seen a Mitchel with brown hair.”

Morgan thought Brandon was going to choke. He stepped back with a hand out, mouth dropping open.

Morgan laughed. He’d been guessing from the small clues he had picked up from the thoughts and conversations of leadership. He hadn’t been sure. He sent that to Brandon in code so no one else would pick it up.

Brandon turned sideways so the two Eagles on duty a short distance away weren’t able to follow their conversation. *What do you want?*

Morgan controlled the demon inside at the challenge and flashed a quick gesture.

Brandon paled at the threat. “I’m sorry for being rude. You caught me off guard.”

Morgan sighed, realizing they were going to have to have complete privacy to talk or Brandon would give himself away by bouncing between conversation and code. Suddenly realizing Brandon was behaving like a rookie, Morgan asked the question that no one else had thought of so far. “Have you been trained to use it?”

Brandon shook his head. That was his last secret. “I didn’t want to turn out like them.”

“Which made it easy for you to agree when Adrian told you to hide it,” Morgan muttered.

“Yes. I’ve seen what Mitchels do to the world. I don’t want to be one of them, not now and not ever.”

Satisfied his partner wasn’t an assassin or another traitor, Morgan shrugged. “I think you should use the name Smith. It contains a certain ambiguity that implies you might be someone else, but still protects you enough to keep people from inquiring because it’s rude.”

Brandon gaped. *Wow. That was a lot of big words for Morgan.*

Offended, Morgan punched him in the mouth.

As Brandon fell backwards into the frozen slush, he was unable to miss the irony of this happening to him twice now. He slammed into the ground with a jarring thud. “Tell Marc.”

Morgan spun around. “Tell him what?!”

Brandon spat blood into the snow, head swimming through cold fog. “He hits like a girl compared to you.” Brandon slumped over. “Don’t leave...”

Morgan snorted and kept walking. “Sorry. I was too stupid to know you’d freeze if I left you here. My bad!”

4

“They assigned me with you? Great.” Charlie crossed his arms over his chest and turned his back to her.

Kendle flushed at the boy's rude behavior, but didn't comment as she began her post with him over the livestock trucks. The cold wind made it hard to stay angry. Despite Charlie being Marc's son, Kendle didn't have much use for him. Unlike Conner, who was always striving to prove himself, Charlie caused drama in camp that his parents didn't need. Angela had told all of them to take a camp member under their wing and help them become Eagles. Because of her affection for Marc, and her new sympathy for Tracy, Kendle had chosen his son.

Charlie spun around. "I'm already an Eagle!"

Kendle realized he hadn't bothered to look at the new teams sheet. "No, boy, you're not."

When Charlie would have stomped off to scream at his mother, Kendle stepped in front of him. "That's the last thing you want to do."

Charlie's anger almost prevented him from listening. He couldn't believe his mom hadn't assigned him to a team after all the work he'd been doing.

Kendle gestured at her team leader and received a nod.

Kyle knew what she was trying to do and approved. Safe Haven needed Charlie to take his place with his parents. Kyle understood the frustration because of his need for Jennifer, but like he had, Charlie needed to get his priorities straight. When the camp was safe somewhere, then it would be okay for him to resume his relationship with

Tracy—if she was willing. Kyle was positive she would be. Tracy had spent their time apart moping and watching Charlie. As soon as the boy demonstrated a positive change in behavior, she would be satisfied.

Kyle had also figured out Jennifer's problem. She now hated to be apart from him. If Safe Haven's situation hadn't been so dangerous, Kyle might have slacked off a little in his duty to celebrate too. That made it easy to sympathize with Charlie while Kendle continued to read him the riot act. It was the only noise.

With only the guards roaming, the camp put off almost no light or sound. It allowed them to go unnoticed by the few refugees moving through the area. Unaware of the dangers that were close, but ready to handle what came, the Eagles kept each other awake by doing rounds, telling jokes, and discussing everything that had happened. The most popular topics were not what Angela would have predicted. Instead of how she had looked, the deaths of her teammates, or even the drama between Adrian and Marc, the camp was interested in the party she had promised them.

Lying in Marc's arms, she spent a moment considering that, pleasantly surprised. As she realized most of the people dreaming around them were looking forward to just having fun, she vowed to give them a party they would never forget. They had earned it, along with more of her loyalty.

Angela allowed sleep to carry her off, content the night shift had it covered.

Jennifer felt Angela drop out. The heavy weight of leadership settled onto her young shoulders. Jennifer went to make her hourly round of the camp. Being in charge of Safe Haven was indescribable. She would never do anything to endanger her place here.

Jennifer caught sight of Kyle, who was also doing rounds, and gave him a smile, hoping he would understand she wasn't angry anymore. In fact, now that she'd had time to compare it to the behavior of the other couples in camp, she'd realized he was being honorable. Knowing their wedding was only weeks away allowed her to accept their separation and give him the right to hold his chin up as he made her his bride in front of his friends and the people who mattered most to him.

As Jennifer moved toward the mess, raised voices got her attention. There wasn't supposed to be anyone in there. She detoured with a hand dropping to the gun on her hip.

"I'm not going to, so stop it! I've had enough!" Gus stormed out, bumping into Jennifer.

He grabbed her arm, apologizing.

Jennifer waved him off. "I'm okay." She lifted a brow "Are you?"

Gus shrugged in frustration. "I'll have to give one of them up. She won't stop pushing."

Jennifer did a fast scan and didn't find any problems that would keep her from spending a few

minutes with the cook now slamming things around. If Brittani kept going, it would disturb the camp and then the boss. Jennifer waved Gus to his duties and stepped into the mess.

Brittani saw who was coming and guessed what was about to happen, but she wasn't scared of the teenage heir to Safe Haven. Only a few of the adults here inspired that behavior in her.

Jennifer got a cup of coffee, glad when the woman quieted. Instead of trying to talk to her about becoming an Eagle or leaving Gus alone, Jennifer studied Brittani and tried to figure out why the woman wouldn't become one of them yet.

When she thought she had it, Jennifer decided to get up and leave. When she did this tomorrow evening, it would catch Brittani off guard and allow a brief conversation where Jennifer hoped to allay some of the fears about Gus being injured. She would lie, of course. There was no guarantee for anyone, especially not the Eagles who were required to endanger their lives. It was something Brittani and everyone else who had a mate in Angela's army eventually had to accept.

As Jennifer left, Dog came from the shadows behind the mall.

Jennifer reached down to stroke his cold ears, wondering if they could put together some sort of boots so he didn't have to trudge through the snow and sludge in bare paws.

Dog enjoyed the attention, not in the mood to talk but still wanting company. He had listened to

Sally talk to herself so much after Jeff and Kevin had left that silence truly was golden in his opinion. Content to accompany Jennifer on her rounds, Dog kept an eye on her and enjoyed being home. When he had left after the fight with the government, Dog hadn't been certain he would return, but much like the humans he was once again protecting, Safe Haven's light had become a part of his soul. Without it, he was empty.

5

“What?!” Marc's growl would have discouraged most tent-tappers.

“Sorry to bother you. We have weather coming.”

Marc groaned. “Of course, we do. Come in.”

Neil wasn't comfortable with that, but he didn't want to disobey Marc and possibly wake the rest of the camp. He stepped inside the cool tent and tried to keep his eyes on his feet.

Marc snorted. “It's too cold for us to have skin showing. Spit it out!”

Neil couldn't help the chuckle as he realized they were covered from head to toe in clothes, jackets, and Marc's sleeping bag. The only thing showing was their faces and his hand, which was curled around hers. His gun was next to it—easy for both of them to reach.

“Samantha said roughly a day from now.”

Marc knew Angela had left instructions to be told immediately about changes in weather conditions, no matter how far away they were. Even though he was unhappy to have been woken, Marc agreed with the decision. Nature was fast. “We’ll take care of it.”

Neil started to duck out of the tent, but he was stopped by Angela’s tired voice.

“Council meeting, one hour before breakfast, in the mess. Mandatory for council members, team leaders, and punishment targets.”

“You got it.” Neil ducked out of the tent with a frown. He didn’t like Samantha being put to work already. She needed to rest and heal.

Marc tucked Angela’s hand inside his own as he realized she was getting colder. He pressed himself closer, trying to share his heat.

Angela carefully turned around in his arms and pressed her hands between them. She had been cold since the basement. It felt like she wasn’t getting full circulation, but all she could do was clench and unclench her fists. She wasn’t even strong enough to fire a gun.

Marc rubbed her shoulders, tangling their legs together. When he rested his head against hers, he felt her breathe a sigh of contentment and was ashamed of his tactics. It was the same position she had been in with Adrian in the basement and in the truck. Marc had skimmed those parts of Adrian’s memory, but he wasn’t above using the position now that he knew Angela enjoyed it so much. In

fact, there wasn't any method he wouldn't use. He had finally been convinced. He was going to do what Adrian and others had suggested, and act more like their former leader and less like the uptight man the camp was tired of. After his recent issues, it was obvious his style of team control would never work with Safe Haven.

Angela hugged him as she caught the thoughts, but she didn't push. Making big changes was hard for humans, especially when the person wasn't sure they needed to change at all. Marc didn't, as far as she was concerned, but she didn't make the rules. Fate wanted his life or his submission, and it wasn't going to stop. It was only a matter of time before Marc would be forced to choose between the two. Moments like this, where he was beginning to accept his fate, would make the choice easier. He was embarrassed over the way things had gone, but he had more support here than he thought. She needed Marc. As long as that was the case, he would always have people who were willing to die for him.

"I love you."

Angela melted. "I love you too."

She connected their minds before she went to sleep, so he could come with her while she dreamed. It was the one thing he wanted that she could give him.

It was the first good rest she'd had since leaving.

“Is everyone here?” Angela was sorting through papers, not looking at the mess of people at the tables around her. She couldn’t help the way her hands shook. This meeting was almost too much, but they needed it for more reasons than she cared to think about. This would lead them to their future.

Kenn handed the clipboard to Marc. “Yes.”

Marc sat it next to Angela. Kenn had made everyone sign their name or initial they were here for the meeting. The only people who weren’t here were on duty. Theo and his team, along with Zack’s, had security duty while the waking camp used the latrines and one shower camper. In a little while, all those people would fill this mess with expectations of breakfast, but until then, Angela was holding her meeting. Outside, voices were drowned out by an increasing wind that confirmed Samantha was right about another storm coming.

“I’d like to begin with how things are going to go for the next few days.” Angela slowly stood up, paper in hand. She was too tired to keep it all in her head like she usually did. “I’m sending a team to the boat today. I’m asking for volunteers. If anyone wants to go, let Kenn know. Other teams are going to be sent out today as well. Marc says the bunker is only an hour from here. It would be crazy of us to pass it by, considering the railcars were packed with so much of what we need. If we get lucky and find a lot of items, it will save us time when we get to the boat. I’m hoping to gather the rest on the way so we don’t have to split up again.”

Everyone liked hearing that, even the people who were considering volunteering to scout the boat location.

“We have another storm coming. Samantha will give us details.”

Everyone turned to Samantha, who was sitting at a table with Neil and other team leaders.

Samantha didn't stand up, but she did straighten her shoulders. “It feels like a tropical storm. It's coming from the south.” Samantha cleared her throat. “This is the beginning of our window.”

“You mean for leaving?” Angela clarified.

Samantha nodded. “Yes. There's a storm season on the ocean. Where we're going, it gets ugly. For the next three to four weeks, we have a window to get through.”

Angela gestured toward the flap beating against the tent. “Three weeks is our deadline for leaving. You can let everyone know, so they have time to be sure it's what they want to do.”

Angela consulted her notes. “Even without finding anything in the bunker, we're okay on food and water to make it to the coast. Kenn says if we drop five vehicles and cram everyone in, we'll make it on fuel too. Everything else is fine for now.” Angela glanced toward the mall behind the tent even though she couldn't view it through the dirty canvas. “There's a chance we'll find some supplies in there. I'm sending a team to scout. If there's anything worth scavenging, after the Eagles go through it, the camp members can have a turn to

pick out items for the party or themselves as long as they have protection. I don't want anyone going in there alone."

"I'll help sort out the teams if you like."

Angela nodded. Kenn was good at it. "I'd also like you to make sure everyone understands not to draw attention. We can't have radio calls or gunshots to give away our location. We're only going to be here for one day, but that will be too much if somebody hears us."

"I'll pass the word and so will everyone else."

Heads across the tent bobbed at Kenn. The descendants knew they were getting the order because of how weak everyone was. The camp members assumed Angela was so rough because she had been very ill, but all it took was one look at Ivan and the rest of his team to know that wasn't true. They had returned to almost full health, while Angela had limped into this tent and staggered to her seat without scanning anyone like she normally did.

The descendants had been drained repeatedly since the war, but this last battle had been the final straw for many of them. Right now, the children had more strength than the adults and that was dangerous. It was a struggle to keep those kids from knowing so they weren't tempted to take advantage. It was the same with the camp. They didn't need to know how vulnerable the descendants were.

Already shaking from the exertion of standing so long, Angela slid onto the hard bench and motioned Marc to take his moment.

Aware of the knowing and expecting stares waiting for him to make it right or screw it up further, Marc stood. He faced them without crossing his arms over his chest. He didn't need the defense. "You were wrong. Don't do it again."

Marc sat down.

Everyone felt the scold deeper than if he had shouted. Another silence went through the tent.

Angela patted his hand under the table, telling him he had handled things perfectly. She gave Kenn a nod.

Kenn put a notebook on the table. "I have shifts that need to be covered. The boss wants each team leader to divvy up chores, so all of us can make schedules or fill-in for any position we need." Kenn tapped the book. "Keep track of it here. We have shifts not being covered and we all know the situations that can lead to."

Given multiple chores, the council and team leaders were now writing things down.

"That's it. Have a good day." Angela made eye contact with two of the people as she dismissed everyone else.

Marc waited at her side as the tent cleared and her targets came forward. Kevin and Nancy had been in the back of the tent, waiting for judgment. One of them was going to get what they wanted. Marc suspected the other was going to be asked to

leave. Though he had his bets, he wasn't positive on which was which.

Suffering a nasty hangover, Kevin stepped forward first, wanting it over. Embarrassed and ashamed, he couldn't think of anything to excuse his behavior.

Angela looked up at him, letting out a deep sigh. "I can't bring them back."

Kevin winced. He hadn't expected her to go for the throat. "I know."

"I'm sorry for their deaths and for your pain."

Kevin's embarrassment grew. "I know that too."

"Then get on a team or get out of my camp. Make your choice by morning."

Kevin stared at her, wanting to tell her to go to hell while knowing she was right to treat him this way. It was a struggle to reach a new level of manhood. He made it by a hair. "Guess I'm a rookie again."

Angela waved him on. "Kenn has my wishes on that."

Kevin got out of her sight before he could change his mind.

Angela gave Marc a look.

Marc left the tent. She wanted privacy to deal with Nancy and he was more than willing to give it. He had no desire to listen to the two women fight over Adrian.

Angela waved at the bench on the other side of the table.

Nancy nervously sat, hoping she wasn't here for the reason she assumed.

"You are. Someone told me your secret."

Nancy frowned. "I haven't asked him for it. I hadn't even made up my mind if I was going to ask him. Everyone is jumping the gun here."

Angela didn't care. "You have my permission—not that you needed it."

Nancy stared, mouth half open. She had expected a jealous tirade and threats, along with reminders of how the camp would react. She had no idea what to say.

Angela stayed out of the woman's thoughts as much as she could, but it was impossible to miss the surprise and suspicion. "We need babies. I don't care who their parents are as long as they're healthy and taken care of."

Understanding that was the only answer she was going to get, Nancy stood up. "Thank you."

Angela let the woman leave without commenting further. The jealousy she felt at the idea of Nancy having Adrian's baby was because of the bonds she had been forced into with him. If not for that, she wouldn't care, which meant she needed to be fair. Ripping the woman's hair out and smashing her teeth down her throat wouldn't go over well.

Angela slowly stood up and went out to make rounds. Normally, she loved this part of her job. Today, she wanted it done so she could rest. Not

prepared to be mobbed, Angela chose to start at the livestock truck and go from there.

Marc saw her emerge. He fell in step, not speaking and trying not to think, but it was hard. He hadn't wanted to hear the catfight, but he did want to know the decision.

Angela smiled at him. "Why don't you steal a kiss and convince me to tell you?"

Marc chuckled. "Deal."

Chapter Twenty
Bunker Babies

Marion, GA
November 17th

1

“**W**hy didn’t you put me on a team?”

Marc and Angela turned to find Charlie behind them in the livestock trailer. The few animals they had were fed and watered—Marc had worked while Angela watched his muscles and longed for her health back—and the couple had been stealing a moment away from prying eyes.

“Because you don’t want to be an Eagle. When you do, I’ll put you on a *rookie* team like I would anyone else who has to start over.”

Charlie ignored his dad’s headshake. Instead of listening, he got louder. “It’s not fair! I work hard on night shift to run this stupid camp while you go off and do whatever you want!”

Marc groaned. *Big mistake, boy.*

The livestock stopped eating, ears tilting in alarm.

“Aww. Is your over-experienced girlfriend unhappy with your inexperience?” Angela’s sarcasm was biting. “It has to be rough. All I have to worry about is the survival of the human race!”

She left, hoping Marc would be able to help the troubled boy. Because they were so much alike, Charlie wouldn't accept advice from her.

Marc waited until Angela was out of earshot, then rounded on the boy. "Don't you ever talk to her like that again! If you do, I'll make sure you're never an Eagle." Marc waited for Charlie to get snotty, ready to tell him he had just lost his chance.

Charlie peered at his dad in desperate confusion. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Marc motioned toward nearby stools. "Let's talk."

Passing by on a round, Kenn doubted Marc would get through to him. Kenn had been Charlie's father for 12 years. In that time, he had never once had problems with him. Granted, it had been because the child was too afraid to disobey, but still, they'd had peace. Kenn considered giving Marc some advice and quickly decided against it. Marc wouldn't accept it from him, even if he was right. He had lost the chance to be the boy's dad a long time ago, but he had a baby on the way now, a fresh start. Kenn was looking forward to the good side of parenthood that he was witnessing here. Before the war, he hadn't had support. Things were different now.

"Are we ready for the storm?"

Kenn let out a high-pitched shriek at the voice in his ear. He staggered against the trailer, almost falling.

Angela's laughter was contagious. Everyone who heard it chuckled or smiled, including Kenn, who had to fight embarrassment at the same time. He hadn't seen her come back around the side of the truck.

"That was funny."

Kenn grunted. At least he was causing her to have good moments now. The more he changed, the more regret he carried in his heart for all the things he'd done wrong in the past. He had no idea how to make it up to her and Charlie, but they deserved justice. They hadn't gotten it yet because he was still here and had a high place in the hierarchy.

"Let it go. It's the past."

Kenn didn't meet her eyes. "I'm trying. Thank you."

"Do I need to ask you again?"

Kenn realized she had asked him a question before scaring him so bad that he now needed to use the latrine but didn't want to say so. "Right after lunch mess, we'll roll the camp in. We're putting it tight up against the sturdiest part of the mall. From what the team already reported, we can go up two levels before the structure becomes unsafe."

Content that was the best they could do, Angela moved on to her slow round of the camp.

Scott and Tim, her guards, followed. Both men had been surprised to get the duty instead of Ivan and his team. Those men were going with Kyle to the mall. Shortly after lunch, the camp would be

allowed in there to explore. That, and the coming party, was all people were talking about.

Angela was glad, but she was also sad. Not one person had mentioned Adrian's absence.

It didn't occur to Angela that they were doing it to spare her feelings.

"It's the Boss!"

Eagles loading vehicles to leave came over. Unlike when the camp mobbed her, Angela didn't need to be protected. The Eagles always kept their distance, respecting her personal space. It helped that Tim was over her shoulder, glowering.

Weary, Angela sat on the bumper of the truck like Marc was silently requesting that she do. "Update me."

The next crew to leave, Zack's, waited for him to speak while the others got out notebooks. He was taking four men along from his new team. Theo and Ozzie would remain here, where Angela could use their engineering skills in making plans for the boat.

"It will take us two days to reach the location you marked on the map. We'll check in twice a day. We took enough supplies to last double that, in case we need to make it back to you." Zack looked at her for approval, almost wishing he could rescind volunteering the team to make this run. The sense of something about to go wrong was strong.

When Angela didn't warn him of trouble, Zack motioned his team to finish loading so they would be gone on time.

As the next team leader moved forward, Angela watched Zack. She had caught his thought of a bad trip and wished she had the energy to send a magical protection with them.

“They’ll be okay.”

She sighed at Marc’s comment and forced her attention to the men waiting for her to approve their travel orders.

Seeing she wasn’t herself yet, Kyle wanted her in the safety of a tent or camper while they had so much activity going on. “We have everyone leaving in intervals of an hour. My team will go last. Zack’s is headed for the boat. Neil and Ray are taking the bunker. Myself, and a rookie team, are clearing the mall. The camp will be able to go in later this evening and tomorrow morning. Kenn and his team, along with Samantha, Daryl and the other rookies, will cover camp security.”

“Jennifer has point overnight.” Angela didn’t find any resentment in the men around her at the order. She assumed Jennifer had done well on her first night. Angela hadn’t scanned those notes yet.

“Anything else, Boss?”

“No.” Angela let Marc help her to her feet. There were a lot of things she wanted to add, but she didn’t have the energy to look ahead so they would have a warning of what might be waiting. It was frustrating.

Marc waited while Angela made rounds of the men leaving. She didn’t talk to all of them, but Marc knew she was scanning with the small amount of

energy she had recharged. Knowing she couldn't afford to lose it, he directed her attention to the mess, where a large number of camp members were eating breakfast. He lifted a brow to imply there might be a problem, and was rewarded with her turning in that direction.

Around the camp, people were staring and smiling at Angela. The mood lifted with every person who saw her. The same was true of the people in the mess.

Marc was forced to make nasty gestures to keep people from pushing into each other and bumping into her as she was noticed. While he didn't like the chaotic feel of things, it was different than the conditions he had endured.

Marc suddenly realized the mess was quieter than it should be for having so many people here. He narrowed it to a rear table where Conner and Candy were sitting with notebooks.

"Does anyone want to call for a trial?" Angela wasn't in the mood to deliver platitudes or walk them through the moment. Charlie's words were still stinging.

Despite the tension of the camp from watching the pair at a table together, no one was willing to speak up and disturb their newly returned leader.

"I can't work that way." Angela was forced to finish the scold "I've told you before. If you're afraid of me, I shouldn't be your boss."

Almost no one knew what to say.

“They should mind their own business.” Candy was tired of the drama and of being responsible for Angela’s stress. “I’m an adult. I can do what I want.”

With her desires made clear, the only recourse the rest of the camp had was to point out the age difference. The great vibes of camp were rippling in unease again; the few people who might have protested decided to let it go. If she got in trouble with the boy later, they would get to say *I told you so*. Until then, she was right. She was an adult who was allowed to do what she wanted as long as it didn’t cross the age line.

People slowly resumed eating.

Angela moved into the food line. She didn’t want any of the tuna surprise, but another couple was about to enter the mess. She needed to be here in case it went badly.

Tracy cringed in embarrassment as Charlie came toward her with flowers in his hand. She had no idea where he’d found them during an apocalypse winter. It was sweet, but she was mad and now, there were 90 people observing what should have been a private moment.

“I have a double shift after this. I would have waited, but I can’t have you spend that time upset with me.” He put the flowers on the table next to her tray. “I’m sorry. I am. I didn’t realize how much I was slacking off so I could spend time with you. Please give me another chance. You know I can do better.”

Tracy wanted to agree. She missed having Charlie next to her and it wasn't just for his protection or the amazing things he could do with his mind. He genuinely cared about her. Most of their time alone was spent talking, not fooling around. Embarrassed by all the attention, she hesitated.

"Give the kid a break," a female called from the rear of the tent.

As people turned to see who it was, others added their opinion.

"That's what you get for being with a rookie!"

Laughter floated across the mess, breaking more of the tension.

"Please?"

Tracy looked up at him in a stern manner. "I won't ever do this again. You get one shot with me."

Charlie smiled as he realized she was going to give him another chance. "You won't have to. I'll be great from here."

As some of the camp let out a small cheer, Charlie pushed a jewelry box across the table so it thumped against her tray. "Hold on to that. When you think I'd make a good husband, leave it somewhere for me to find and I'll know."

As he walked away, it was clear from the expression on Tracy's face that it wouldn't be long.

Happy for them, Angela forced herself to keep a smile on when she wanted to curl up and sleep. Her body was fighting off the effects of the illness and the powerful antibiotics she'd been overdosed

with during her time in the medical camper. The medics had wanted to be sure she was on the mend. She hadn't scolded them for it, but she was tired of the diarrhea side effect.

Conner and Candy weren't happy about Charlie's problems, but they were glad to be out of the center of attention. Conner had been here 20 minutes early so everyone knew she wanted to spend time with him. When she'd walked in and sat down, silence had fallen. It hadn't restarted until Angela arrived.

Conner kept his mind on the wedding plans. He was unable to keep them a secret from Jennifer as she scanned him to verify that he wasn't a threat. He did try to keep the details from her.

Instead of snooping like she wanted to, Jennifer collected coffee for the shift of people she was about to wake up and then left. It was nice they wanted her to have a real wedding. She didn't think it mattered to Kyle, but it had been a surprise to find out she wanted the works, or at least what was still possible. She even thought it would be wonderful if they could be married in a church, but she refused to bring it up to anyone and force the camp into an unscheduled stop. Angela already had their travel route planned out from here to the boat. Jennifer stopped near Kenn. He was getting updates before he ate. "Zack's team just left."

Kenn made a note of it. He would tell Angela if something important happened, but her round of the camp had worn her out. She'd refused to take

energy. Eagles were assuming she was obeying the same rules she had set for the other descendants. As far as Kenn knew, even the council members were obeying now. He certainly was.

Passing by on a round, Brandon caught Kenn's thoughts and stopped himself from telling the man the other descendants were gathering energy for the next fight. He was confident Kenn would figure it out. That's all life seemed to be since the apocalypse—fighting and then preparing to fight some more. Brandon was looking forward to being on the boat and having a break from the constant survival cycle that was destroying their hopes for the future. Like Marc, he understood a perfect society couldn't have people who killed, but he also knew that wasn't possible here. He, along with everyone else, was hoping the island would be different.

Brandon moved away, going to check the other side of the tents before he crashed. His shift was over, but he was determined to do his duty. After being punched by two senior men, it was obvious something was going on. He was suffering through looks and questions from the other Eagles. While under such scrutiny, he had to work twice as hard to get where he wanted to be. "Now I just need to figure out where that is."

Brandon saw Kyle and his team heading toward the mall. Backing them up was Ivan and his team, along with Kevin. Kevin was going to be on the Special Forces team for the next few weeks in an

effort to get the man to shape up. Angela hadn't said she was going to leave Kevin behind if he couldn't, but Brandon knew. Apparently, so did Kevin, because he was playing the role perfectly today. It had been a while since he'd witnessed such an effort on Kevin's part.

Kyle nodded to Brandon as they passed. He didn't like leaving a team member behind for any run, but Brandon had worked overnight and needed to sleep so he could get up and do it again. With a bruise on each side of his mouth, Brandon wasn't saying much, though people were asking. Kyle hadn't grilled him yet, but the moment was coming. Marc and Morgan had both punched him. There was a reason for it and Kyle wanted to know what it was.

Brandon sighed as he caught the mobster's thought. "That's not good."

He got out of sight.

2

"I can't believe we lucked into a find like this." Ben looked over at Neil. "You know what I mean?"

Neil nodded, holding a flashlight in his mouth to view what was in the crate. They'd arrived to find the bunker untouched and unlocked—two things that were almost impossible in this situation. The bunker had too many rooms to waste time counting, but most held things they needed. Beyond the food and gear, there were also stacks of personal care items, toilet paper, and an entire room of games, books,

movies, craft supplies, and other entertainments. It really was an amazing find.

The bunker had been disguised as a power substation, complete with a flimsy gate, poor, sandy soil, scraggly pine trees, and no security. After clearing it, and finding the gruesome scene below, Neil assumed the bodyguards had taken whatever they could carry and split. He certainly had the urge to get out of this musty crypt. Neil and his team had scoured most of the bunker, expecting a trap of some sort, but all they'd found was a shelter of supplies and the corpses of 15 well-fed bunker babies.

As if Neil's thought had transmitted, Ben's delight was replaced with a pensive frown the rest of the team mirrored. No one understood why the teenagers here had committed suicide. They'd left a note on the wall that hadn't explained anything, only said goodbye. It didn't make sense. The supplies here would have lasted them for years.

"Why do you think they did it?" Greg was staring toward the bedroom, where the bodies were waiting for burial. The longer they stayed in here, the more the question was eating at him.

"Maybe they found out their parents weren't coming." Wade wished they would visit a different topic. The generators were out of gas or not working, and Neil didn't want to waste time trying to get the power on and possibly draw attention from anyone in the area. They had orders to do a quick inventory and then get back to camp to collect

trucks and drivers if it was needed. That put them working in the dark. It was getting to Wade.

“You can wait with the vehicles if you want.” Neil was as uncomfortable as Wade was, but hiding it better.

Wade straightened his shoulders. “I’m good. Let’s get this done.”

His reasonable attitude encouraged them all to get finished. When they came back, it would be with two dozen more hands and a lot of lights. Safe Haven was now good on food for 10 to 12 months. Angela would be ecstatic.

“It looks like there was a movie playing.” Quinn had gone into the bedrooms to verify there was nothing Safe Haven needed from that section of the tomb.

Neil came to the doorway.

Quinn held up the CD case. “On The Beach.”

Neil grimaced. “It figures. I hated that movie. People wouldn’t just give up after a nuclear war, and I know that for sure now.”

“Agreed.”

Neil changed topics. “We cleaned out the bathrooms first. There’s a wealth of everything except painkillers and cold medicine.”

Quinn shook his head in disgust, digging through the drawers of the cabinet next to the television. “I want to take some of these movies. Can we keep our kids from knowing where they came from?”

Neil appreciated Quinn's sensitivity. "No, and we don't try to anymore. They're wearing the clothes of their dead friends. You can't hide the apocalypse. They're living it alongside us."

The Bunker Babies had been well preserved in the cool tomb, allowing the team to see they'd been healthy. The expensive setup verified they'd also been wealthy. Neil wondered if the lack of staff had mattered to the kids and decided it had. Forced to care for themselves, they'd refused to learn how.

"Make sure we get those coats." Neil pointed to a closet in the corner, opposite the bodies sitting against the wall. Only a couple of the teens had fallen over, giving the bunker a sense of the walking dead that was sure to haunt his dreams.

Neil paused, not sure if he had heard something. They'd swept the bunker before starting their inventory, but it didn't mean someone hadn't followed them in. This bunker wasn't on any map and none of them had ever heard of it. Neil believed there were places like this all over the country that the public had been unaware of. If he had been wealthy, it's what he would have done.

"I heard something." Ben turned toward where he thought the noise was coming from. The bunker was disappointing to him. He was grateful for the supplies, and he felt sad for the teens who had taken their lives, but the rest of it was boring. He'd expected something impressive, but all they'd discovered was another hole in the ground with

stucco walls and shag carpet hiding concrete and rat shit. “It sounds like scratching.”

The teams stayed together as they followed Ben into the next room. Once a kitchen designed for 100 people, it was now empty of everything except dust and piles of dirty dishes. The bunker babies hadn’t cared about cleaning. Neil was certain if they had come sooner, the flies and maggots would have made them gag. Because the teenagers had been dead so long, there was no odor.

Bang! The counter under the sink rattled.

Everyone jumped or grabbed weapons.

Neil waved Ben forward as he held the flashlight and prepared to fire.

Ben approached the cabinet before he could lose his nerve. He’d never been in a creepier situation.

Ben opened the cabinet.

A small, dark shape barreled out.

Wade shouted.

Neil barely stopping himself from firing. He had to force his finger off the trigger as he recognized the only living resident of the bunker. “Hold your fire!”

Determining humans were the problem, the cat stopped in the corner of the kitchen. It sat to clean itself while occasionally regarding them with annoyed yellow eyes. The cat was big and bushy, with no collar and long claws that had scratched deep furrows into the inside of the cabinet.

Greg shined his light under the counter and discovered a large hole where the cat had been getting in and out. “How did it stay alive so long?”

Ray shined his light at the counter. “There are mouse droppings. Or rat, maybe. I don’t know which is which.”

Neil knew without being told that the teams expected him to collect the animal and take it back to Safe Haven, despite it obviously being wild enough to survive on its own. Not wanting the hassle, but eager to please the boss, Neil reluctantly waved to Ben. “Find us a box. It’ll make a nice surprise for the kids.”

The cat, not happy to discover people in its home, put a matted tail in the air and stalked off to find a place to hide.

3

“I want to go Christmas shopping.”

Tonya and Samantha looked up in confusion. Their shift ended an hour ago, but the women were still in the kids’ side of the community tent, helping the other den mothers.

“What did she say?”

Samantha smiled. “Shopping.”

“Really? That sounds fun.”

Samantha caught the images in Angela’s mind and grinned. “Our men will have a heart attack.”

Angela didn’t smile like the women expected her to. “They’re going to go with us.”

Denied a tiny rebellion, Samantha sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Whatever.”

Tonya snickered. “My man will have a heart attack even if he’s there. I say we go for it.”

Angela turned to include the other women in the room. “I think the camp men can handle the kids for a few hours while we shop, don’t you?”

The women laughed.

The men frowned. Several of them wanted to say women weren’t allowed to leave the perimeter, but the mall behind them had stores that hadn’t been looted. Everyone was allowed to go. The men had just assumed den mothers would stay here with the kids and their injured, not them.

Shift change for the rest of the den mothers was half an hour away. Angela had scheduled it that way so the men coming from runs would be ready to sit at a mess table and eat. So would the kids.

Angela looked at the children in the room, being sure to include all of them. The babies were in pumpkin seats at her feet. “There won’t be any trouble while I’m gone, right?”

Knowing she would only be a few hundred feet away wasn’t the same as if she was leaving camp again, and the kids had all heard the word Christmas. There was a loud rush to promise they would behave. They were hoping for presents even though there had been an apocalypse.

That was part of what Angela loved the most about children. They were eternally hopeful. The world couldn’t survive without that. “Marc will be

holding the nightly meeting until we get on the boat. You can feel how weak I am right now. I need a rest, but I expect you to give him the same attention you would me.”

The older kids began bracing for the first meeting, positive it would include a reprimand and possibly even punishments for their rebellion.

Angela didn't set their little minds at ease. The kids had gone from being afraid of Marc, to ignoring him, to rebelling against him. That had to change now. Angela looked at Leeann and then Cody, who was sitting next to the girl. “I expect you to take care of the younger ones if there's a problem.”

Everyone in the tent stilled. Angela usually only gave out instructions like that if she was expecting trouble.

“I'm not, but everyone here needs to be more aware of our surroundings and situations. Without being able to see what's coming for us, we're not going to be prepared for the next big hit. We'll have to run if we are found, or maybe it will be a weather issue, or even the ground falling out from under us again. It's not like we ever get a real break.”

Understanding she was just trying to cover the unknowns, the kids returned to their thoughts of presents. So did the adults.

Angela got Leeann's attention and then left the tent. She waited outside as the girl found a good moment to excuse herself.

Leeann followed Angela's line of sight to where Marc was headed into the mess. "You want me to work on him, but I'm not allowed to use magic. How am I supposed to do that?"

"He likes kids. Be cute."

Leeann's face squished up in defense. "I don't know how."

Angela chuckled. "That's exactly why you will be. Just keep him smiling. Everything else will fall into place. Tell the other kids, but not the den mothers. They'll try to help and mess it up."

Leeann didn't understand, but she was happy to be getting a job instead of a punishment. "I will. You can count on me."

Angela ran a loving hand over the orphan girl's head, giving her one of those mother-child moments that all the children needed. "I love you."

Leeann couldn't stop the tears as Angela hugged her.

Around the camp, everyone approved of the bonding except Marc. He wasn't jealous of the children. He didn't begrudge them time with Angela. His unease was caused by Adrian's words about how he handled emotional pain while away from her. Now Angela was doing it.

Chapter Twenty-One
An Odd Parade

1

“This is weird.”

Marc, Kenn, and Kyle trailed the group of shoppers heading into the mall. A dozen Eagles led the way or covered the women from the sides, while their personal protection brought up the rear. It was an odd parade through the apocalypse.

Marc was glad Angela was feeling better, but he was unhappy she was pushing herself so hard. He was grumbling from the drag position.

Walking on either side of him, Kyle and Kenn were occasionally adding comments.

“When this is over, I’ve got an hour to put in with the rug rats. And not just the camp rug rats, who can be nice. I have to teach the demons from hell to control the evil within. God only knows what she has me on after that. All so I won’t know how much she’s doing.”

Kenn looked at Marc, tone rising. “You want to talk about an ugly evening? I have to attend that damn lecture!”

Kyle and Marc laughed as they realized Kenn had been ordered to join because Tonya was having a descendant child.

“Well, that almost makes up for it.” Marc smirked. “Never thought I’d see the day smart-ass Kenn Harrison would be taking parenting classes.”

Kenn couldn’t resist. “Me? You’re the one walking around with two kids in camp while trying to put a third in there.”

Angela smiled on the outside, but her heart squeezed. *There were others!* Kenn didn’t count dead babies.

Angela tried to be glad the men were bonding as they walked through the lower sections of the mall. She was headed for the stairs that had been checked by their engineers. Theo had assured her the second and third floors of the mall were fine for small groups of people to explore. None of them could explain why those levels hadn’t been looted, but Angela assumed the battle scene out front was responsible. The winners had been interrupted or led away from the stash of treasures. It was also possible these levels didn’t contain anything needed, but Angela thought that unlikely.

Surrounded by Special Forces and rookies, the three men in the rear of the shopping trip didn’t feel like they needed to be alert right now. The building had been cleared by Eagles and descendants. There was no one in here—at least not alive. Several bodies had been removed and stacked for burial if there was time or Angela insisted. None had been sick or had obvious traumas, providing yet another mystery Safe Haven would probably never be able to

answer. Their entire trip across this broken country had yielded the same.

Angela detoured, spotting a store she wanted. She gave Marc a curt gesture when he would have followed.

Assuming whatever she wanted in there was for him, Marc realized he hadn't found a gift for her yet. Because they had missed birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays, he wanted to get her something that would represent all of those. Marc read the signs on the stores around them and then nodded to Daryl, who had point over this trip.

As he headed for the jewelry store, Kenn and Kyle followed. Both of them needed wedding gifts for their brides. Marc had reminded them of it with his silent meditations.

While leadership and senior men enjoyed their shopping time, Daryl and his team paid attention to their surroundings even though the shops had been cleared more than once. Training was restarting soon and everyone needed to get back on their A-game, but Daryl couldn't help twitching because they were indoors. He hadn't realized he was carrying a bit of phobia from the mountain until now, but he quickly pinpointed it to losing Jeremy. He had liked the man.

Cathy's Crafts caught his attention and allowed a distraction. The store would have things Samantha and the den mothers could use for the kids. Daryl made a mental note to come back when he was off duty.

“Incoming!”

The shortwave radios crackled around Safe Haven and the group in the mall.

Before Angela or Marc could respond, Jennifer’s annoyed voice came. “Get off the line! I’ve got it covered.”

Marc recognized Kenn’s technique. Jennifer was skilled at emulating the senior men and women. Marc turned around to find Angela in the doorway of the jewelry store. Slipping his hand into his pocket, he went to her. “I’ll check them out as soon as we get back.”

They would already be hearing gunshots and more calls on the radio if the arrival was a problem. Because they weren’t, it was likely Safe Haven had just been found by the first good refugees since leaving the mountain. Violence was always the difference. Marc was relieved to know there were still some people worth taking in.

Angela returned to the chattering women in the first store. She watched them, glad she’d suggested this. Despite the extra energy it was costing, the vibes were great. Life was getting the chance to continue. She’d had too many brushes with death since joining Adrian’s camp. The Eagle fallback of absorbing good moments when they came was a blessing she couldn’t survive without. Anytime she was alone, the faces of those she’d lost haunted her—and sometimes when she wasn’t alone. The only time she got a break from it was when her mind or heart were dwelling on Adrian.

She had been trying to limit moments like that by replacing it with her joy of having so many healthy children in camp. One fifth of their population was under the age of 12. It was wonderful, but also scary. It meant there wasn't enough protection to make sure all these children grew up safe.

They needed more people to join, good people who could be trusted. The new arrivals now being treated to a deep scan by Jennifer, and hostility from the guards on duty, were hopefully the first of another 100 or so who would be lucky enough to find the camp before they left America. Angela hoped the people hurried, wherever they were. When that boat was ready to sail, Safe Haven would go and nothing would bring them back until all the descendants agreed it was time. "Ten minutes, ladies."

The women began grabbing items.

The men found bags and got ready to carry it all back to camp.

2

"Bunker team made it back, Jennifer."

Jennifer didn't like them using her name on the radio, but she refused to answer to the codename they'd wanted to give her. While Angela had been gifted with something cool—Raven—Jennifer wasn't about to be called Tweety Bird.

She keyed the button on her mike to let them know she was on her way back to the parking area. She had just left it after clearing the small family who'd snuck up on the guards. Finished scolding them, she had been about to do her next round of the camp that was folded in against the side of the mall to be ready for the coming storm. The wind was pushing, warning that Mother Nature was once again going to inflict misery upon the survivors.

Ivan trailed Jennifer. Helping with camp security while leadership was in the mall, Ivan was a tense, intimidating presence. It made Jennifer feel safe. Kyle had picked him personally, despite objections from some of the senior men who had been left behind. Kyle had insisted Ivan wasn't being given a fair chance to prove himself even though he'd kept Angela alive on the run. Kyle's reminder that Adrian hadn't been there for the entire trip had settled people down, but it had also brought awareness to the fact that he'd left without saying anything to anyone.

Jennifer nodded to the Eagle escorting their new arrivals into the quarantine zone, but kept going without rescanning the family. All brunette and short, the family was wearing mismatched clothes and scavenged gear that only made them appear dangerous. Jennifer just thought they were desperate. The two women, two men, and one teenage boy weren't a problem as far as she could tell. They needed to be tested for illnesses like anyone else, but Jennifer hadn't sensed problems.

The adults seemed to want peace, and the teenage boy was a deaf-mute whose mind Jennifer hadn't been able to penetrate no matter how hard she tried. She'd assumed that was because there was nothing behind the endless darkness. It was horrifying and gave her a deep sympathy for the boy. She would make sure the other kids didn't pick on him.

Neil was at the edge of the caution tape as Jennifer arrived. The team behind him stretched and groaned. They'd been making trips all day to empty the bunker ahead of the storm. Samantha had predicted it would hit them in a few hours.

“Any problems?”

Neil shook his head, yawning. He handed her a list of what they had brought in on this run, glad the next set of trucks were ready to go. “We want to get in one more haul before it gets dark.”

“That's why the trucks are ready.”

Satisfied with Jennifer on point, Neil waved a hand in the air and motioned toward their vehicles.

His team loaded up, eager to have the final run underway.

As Jennifer left the parking lot again, she passed by the quarantine zone and then the bathrooms. Next to them, the supply trucks were open for camp use. She wanted to make sure no one was fighting over anything. There were guards on the trucks, but the rookies wouldn't know how to handle every situation.

Nervous, and excited to be in charge of the camp during regular business hours, Jennifer made rounds and tried hard not to miss anything.

3

“Is everyone here?” Marc had come in and sat down without looking at the children or their guardians.

Standing by the flap, Leeann nodded. “I got them all here for you, Boss.”

Marc tried not to snicker at the girl’s copy of an Eagle response. He gestured for her to take a place with the other kids.

Leeann sat next to Cody, drawing a slight frown from Marc. Those two were a lot like he and Angela had been, only they didn’t have the same restrictions.

Marc began the meeting by asking a question he already knew the answer to. “How many people in this tent want to be an Eagle?”

He paused to give everyone a chance to respond by raising their hands, but it was more than just being polite. This was the first time he had used Adrian and Angela’s methods of handling the children. He wanted to do it correctly.

With almost every hand in the air, Marc studied the hopeful faces and changed his strategy. Instead of being the fist they expected, he needed to give them an open hand. He stood up, gesturing toward the flap. “Let’s take a walk.”

Adults hurried to get the kids bundled up against the wind. They were willing to trust Marc because they assumed Angela had preapproved the lesson.

Marc didn't tell them Angela was taking a shower and hadn't delivered a single piece of advice before they split up. Staring at the faces, he had realized the kids weren't happy and it had caused problems before this—like running away and needing to be rescued. The kids had begun acting up right about the time they'd banished Adrian.

Marc held the flap so everyone could come out, then led them by the mess tent. He made sure his pace was slow enough for little feet to keep up, determined to get his point across in such a way that the kids would bond with him. He knew it was what Angela and Adrian would have done, but he now understood why it was needed.

Marc pointed at the guards. He and the group slowed, making the sentries feel like bugs under a glass jar. They stood with tense shoulders and expressions that said they were sorry for the rebellion some of them had taken part in.

“They feel the same way you do about Angela, but if the kids hadn't influenced the adults, this camp wouldn't have left. The Eagles would have sacrificed Angela to save her camp.”

Not liking that revelation, the kids frowned but held silent.

“Stealing a person's decisions is wrong. All of you know that. You owe apologies to every adult you betrayed.”

Some of the kids immediately offered those.

The guards were embarrassed, but they accepted it because they didn't know what else to do. It was obvious Marc was having a lesson. They didn't want to disrupt whatever point he was trying to make.

Marc led the kids to the quarantine zone, where a single tent housed their new members. He stayed out of hearing distance of the strangers. "New people will see you influencing the adults and they'll know we're weak. They'll take you away from us. There won't be anything we can do about it once they get you, but even if we find you, you already know it doesn't take much time alone with a bad person to be hurt." Marc hated the images now going through some of their minds, but he was satisfied with the reactions. Being out in the cold and dark, seeing how serious the Eagles were, would help the kids understand they should have followed his decisions.

Marc led them by the parking area and toward the mall, where the first floor was lit up. A dozen Eagles were inside, getting things ready in case the camp needed to take shelter from the storm. Samantha had implied it might be bad.

Marc nodded to the guards on duty and led the group into the mall. As he took them to the dead escalators, guards from the first floor hurried to provide an escort.

Excited they were getting a tour of the mall for any reason, the kids stayed together and behaved.

Marc stopped in front of a store on the second floor, aware of joy bubbling up around him. Like the other shops up here, the toy store was in pristine condition except for dust and lack of power.

He flipped the switch on the spotlight that had been rigged up for people who wanted to shop. “This is not a reward. Your behavior was bad.” Marc let out a deep sigh. “And so was mine. I should have explained to you that I wanted to go as much as you did, but I will always follow the alpha’s orders. I’m sorry. Please go have some fun.”

As the kids ran by him, letting out cries of happiness, Cody stopped to give Marc a quick hug.

Drawn by their happiness, Marc went into the store to help the smaller orphans pick something out.

For Marc, it ended up being one of the best times he’d had with the kids and convinced him to let Angela spend uninterrupted hours with them if she wanted to. He wouldn’t forget that she was using them to push aside her pain, but he would be glad the children were getting the attention they obviously needed.

“Can we watch a movie?” Missy held up a dusty Disney CD still wrapped in plastic.

The other kids clamored for him to agree.

Marc glanced at Daryl. “Can we do that right here?”

Daryl smiled. “I’ll make it happen. You hang with the rug rats.”

Marc laughed. “Thanks. I’ll do that.”

The guards in the mall were happy with Marc, but distracted by the noise of playing children filling the second floor that now had three levels of Eagles on duty. Most of the off-duty guards had also joined Marc and the kids for the film or they were exploring the musty stores.

In Safe Haven, the camp members listened to the noise with tolerant nervousness, hoping it didn't draw retaliation.

On duty outside the camper, Ivan wasn't paying attention to Marc, the kids, or the camp. Angela had finally emerged from the shower and he was trying to form words. Staring at dripping curls and clothes molded to damp curves, it wasn't a physical moment. Haunting loneliness sank into his soul and told him that no matter how hard he tried or what he did, he would never have a mate and especially not one like her.

The guards around them became aware of Ivan staring and then Angela's tension as she also noticed.

Distracted, none of them noticed a tall, thin shadow sneak from the quarantine zone and climb into a supply truck.

"Safe Haven has more women now than it has in a long time." Angela was only able to read Ivan's thoughts in small bursts as weariness threatened to

knock her out. “One of them might like having her own soldier.”

“They won’t want me. I can’t have kids.”

His words settled his place with the guards. He wasn’t obsessed. He was trying to carve out a respected place, the next best thing to having a woman. All the single Eagles did that, making Ivan one of them.

Angela gestured toward the mess, where a group of camp women was headed in to eat now that everyone else was finished. “Neither can they.”

Ivan hadn’t been in Safe Haven for the camp meeting on population. He hadn’t known so many of their females were sterile.

Angela left him with the new thoughts, hoping she had helped. Ivan was a dependable man who deserved a good life, but she doubted he would receive it. None of her dreams about him had been nice, despite the fact that he was.

Reaching her tent, Angela’s weariness caused her to trip. She staggered against the canvas in awkward movements, trying to avoid a fall.

Angela threw up a hand to prevent the guard on duty there from helping her or calling Marc. “I just need to sleep!”

Morgan watched her disappear into the tent, but he didn’t call anyone, respecting her wishes. As the other guard on the tent made a note of what time Angela had returned, Morgan realized having Brandon on duty with him was a comfort. Not sure

why, Morgan refused to look at the man for the hour remaining on their shift.

He didn't want Brandon to think he had been forgiven, but Morgan was aware of how different he was from the other Mitchel males. He also knew how badly Safe Haven needed good people. He didn't think the 150-something souls here were enough to survive the island, make it back to face a final battle, then repopulate the country. If they didn't get more people to go with them on the boat, there might not be any point in leaving.

5

“The last team is home!”

Jennifer lowered the volume on the radio. She had already been on her way to do another fruitless round of the parking area in hopes of viewing headlights. The relief she felt had been echoed in Kenn's tone. He'd been just as worried as she was.

Jennifer had already verified the bunker team hadn't encountered anyone. Because the bunker babies had committed suicide, they weren't a threat. She waved the exhausted team toward the showers and mess instead of the quarantine area. She needed those 14 Eagles and 11 camp men to rest so they could get back up and work on first shift. Half the camp was pulling doubles right now.

Fresh laughter spilled out of the mall.

Marc was still up there with the kids. Teams had been going back and forth for an hour, bringing

lights and other things that made Jennifer assume the kids would be staying there until after the storm. It was a relief. The wind was whipping harder now, carrying an odd whine. Everyone would be safer inside. Someone would make that call soon. To be ready for it, Jennifer had pre-alerted the guards and camp members, refusing to let them get comfortable.

No one complained, positive she was right. Angela was in her tent. Marc was in the mall. Samantha was in the mess. One of the three would contact them when it was time.

Neil paused by Jennifer as he and Ben went by. “We need another day of gathering from the bunker.”

Jennifer made a note in her book. “It’s up to the boss.”

Neil spotted a familiar shadow in the mess and went that way. He hadn’t slacked off in his duty at all today, though he’d been in camp several times to drop off loads. Now, he was on his own time. He went where he wanted.

Samantha looked up from her map of the area as Neil entered the mess, able to feel him before he arrived. Instead of waiting, she used her cane to push off the bench and limp toward him.

The few people left in the mess were relieved that Neil and his team had returned. They could tell by his expression, and the multiple loads he’d brought in, that it had been a successful trip. They

returned to eating as Neil escorted Samantha back to the table so she would get off her leg.

More laughter echoed from the mall.

Neil looked that way, frowning. “The kids are in there?”

Samantha smiled. “Marc’s nightly descendant meeting hasn’t ended yet. He has them in the toy store.”

Neil chuckled. “That’s one way to win them over.”

Samantha had thought the same thing. She motioned toward the angry sky they could see through the flap as other people came in. “It won’t be much longer.”

“I can go get our stuff moved?”

Samantha gave him a grateful nod. She wanted to help, but she needed to be out in the open as long as she could to read the waves. Like Angela and the other descendants, Samantha was tired and recovering slowly. She wasn’t able to scan as far out as she used to.

Neil kissed her cheek and headed toward the community tent, where he had insisted that she sleep. He knew Samantha sometimes still felt self-conscious around the people she’d lied to and then forced to accept her relationships. He hoped to help her get over that. He also thought the distraction was good for both of them.

Samantha suddenly wondered where Adrian was and how he was doing. Since he’d vanished, Angela had only been seen a few times. Samantha

understood how sick Angela had been, but it also made sense that she was suffering from being away from their former leader. Today's excursion into the mall had exhausted her.

Samantha suspected that had been intentional to keep her from lying in her bedroll, tossing, turning, and worrying. Samantha applauded the effort. That was exactly the reason she was already on her leg despite the horrible pain she was in due to her refusal of more medication. Thoughts of Jeremy were never far behind the silence. Neil was right. It was easier when there were people around.

Samantha moved toward the flap as another peal of high-pitched laughter rang out, followed by a chorus of adult chuckles. She was looking forward to being inside. Despite her initial reluctance about assignment as a den mother, she had discovered it was a balm to her tortured soul. She was grateful to Angela for sharing the pain relief. It made it possible for her to get up every morning without crying. Ending the night was a different story, but she was still working on that.

Wind ripped the flap out of her hand as she exited, slapping it against the canvas. Automatically recoiling, she caught a nasty vibe to the wind.

Morgan grabbed Samantha's arm to steady her, sure of what was coming next. As she spoke, he made hand gestures to spread the order.

"Let's get everybody moved. It's time."

Morgan herded Samantha toward the mall as soon as he finished relaying the message. He was

under strict orders from the boss to get her under cover the instant her duty here was finished.

Samantha limped along as fast as she could, noting the second floor of the mall was throwing off shadows that said someone had rigged up a television. She couldn't wait to see what cartoon the kids were torturing the adults with this...

Pain slammed into Samantha's stomach, causing her to stagger and stumble.

Morgan barely kept her from falling.

Samantha groaned, doubling over.

Morgan looked around in panic for someone to help. He didn't know what to do.

Bring her inside!

Angela's voice directed Morgan to be careful as he scooped Samantha up and took off running toward the mall.

As he ran in, it drew Neil's attention. Neil hurried to catch up, recognizing the woman Morgan was carrying. "Sam!"

Instead of going upstairs to their medics, Morgan took her to a small store on the first floor. Off duty now, Conner and Brandon were clearing out the bookstore like Marc wanted them to.

As soon as Brandon saw them, he knew what was going on.

Morgan hurried to Brandon. "The boss said to bring her to you guys!"

Conner studied Brandon in surprise. He hadn't known the Eagle was a descendant.

Brandon ignored the boy as Samantha was shoved into his arms. He sat Samantha down while Conner knelt next to them. Both self-conscious but willing to help, they sent healing energy into Samantha's rigid body and ignored the witnesses.

Samantha didn't react.

Neil watched with his heart in his throat, terrified of losing her or the babies. He held her hand, hoping to comfort them.

Conner strained to find a reserve of energy. He loved kids. Angela knew from their time in the sewers in Little Rock. She knew he would give everything he had.

"He needs to stop now." Candy had been aware of Conner in the shop across the mall from her. She'd come over upon witnessing Neil and Morgan rushing in with Samantha. "He's using too much."

Neil didn't care about Conner's safety. He ignored Candy.

Brandon knew she was right and reluctantly put his hand on the boy's shoulder to control the strength of the pulse.

Power balanced between youth and wisdom, the healing energy was able to sink in deep enough to stop the cramping. Samantha's body slowly relaxed.

Now pale and breathing rough, the two men helped Neil gather her into his arms.

"Keep her off her feet." Conner controlled his boiling guts as his head spun.

"I will." Neil left to find a place for her to rest.

Morgan followed, noting the details in his memory. Any magic use had to be reported now, no matter the reason.

Sensing Candy wanted to be alone with Conner, Brandon slipped out of the room. He didn't think Conner was a threat to her, but he was also using the opportunity to avoid discovery. While he and Conner had been healing Samantha, the boy had witnessed things he shouldn't have. Brandon was hoping the moment alone with Candy would make him forget it.

Conner swayed on his feet. He slowly slid down the wall into a sitting position. He wanted to stare at Candy while they had a moment alone, but he didn't have the strength to keep his eyes open. He hadn't used his gifts very often even before the no-magic rule had gone into effect.

Unable to stand viewing him that way, Candy took a fast look around and didn't see anyone watching them, not even a guard. She stepped forward before she could change her mind and knelt next to the boy. "Take what you need. I give it willingly."

Conner immediately reached out and pulled her forward to seal their lips. Drawing hard and fast, it was impossible for her not to see what was in his mind and heart. As their bond strengthened, Conner was also able to see what she had been hiding from herself and everyone else.

He pushed her away to keep from drawing more energy than she could spare, gasping and groaning

at the pain and the pleasure. He was stunned that she'd done this for him.

Candy retreated to the safety of the doorway, taking another fast look around to verify no one had witnessed it. When she was satisfied that they were still alone, she glanced back to find Conner in the middle of recharging.

Though she had heard about it from the Eagles and camp members, she hadn't witnessed it herself. His sunken cheeks filled out. His brittle gray hair returned to spun gold. Those cloudy gray eyes lightened to sparkling blue and a deep blush came into his cheeks. As he gazed up at her, leering as if they were both naked, Candy allowed herself to give him a smirk of acceptance. They would have the relationship Conner wanted, as long as he could be taught what it took to satisfy someone like her. Lee hadn't been capable of it. Candy doubted Conner was either, but she had decided life was too short not to enjoy the ride down. *And Conner looks like a lot of fun to ride.*

Conner's laughter spilled into the hall.

Laced with a man's triumph, it sent chills over Candy's skin and need into her gut. She fled, not yet ready to face the full consequences of her choice.

Conner got up and returned to work. The bookstore was half cleaned out. Conner finished putting the musty titles into the boxes while reflecting. Candy did want him. *I was right!*

Chapter Twenty-Two

Through the Middle

1

“It’s here!” Radios blared with a warning from the guards who were still escorting the few remaining camp members into the mall.

Behind the warning, a harsh gust of wind slammed against the building, making adults and kids flinch. Safe Haven had been in the mountain for months. They’d forgotten how angry nature could get out here too.

Lightning flashed. Torrents of rain began to hit the walls and windows.

People moved away from the glass.

On the second floor, Marc and the kids were enjoying their quality time in the toy store. He was receiving updates from the guard watching both him and the shops around them, but he didn’t want to leave the kids to check it himself. There was a sense he needed to stay here, beyond the bonding. He looked at Shawn as footsteps echoed. “What’s going on out there?”

Shawn was staring down the hall, trying to figure out the answer to that question. It took a minute for the next guard to pass the message as it was relayed to him. “Samantha had some trouble,

but Conner helped her. All the camp is inside now, including new people. We have them quarantined on the first floor, in the rear.”

Marc did a fast scan for Angela and found her coming his way. Not picking up a guard with her, he scanned for that man and found him still outside.

Marc stayed with Ivan, curious where the soldier was going. When he saw Ivan enter the livestock trailer, he realized Angela had sent her personal guard out to secure their animals. Jennifer had forgotten, but Marc wouldn't hold that against her. There was always a lot to do and this was only her second time on point.

The storm intensified, drawing mutters and yelps from camp members who rushed in through the rain. Tripping over boxes of supplies, yelling and shoving each other, they added to the unease.

Marc gestured. “Go find them something to do.”

As Shawn left, the cartoon ended. Marc looked at the children, happy to see a few of the younger ones had relaxed enough to fall asleep. “What's next?”

As kids cried out for their favorite from the stack they had gathered, Marc did another scan to see where Angela was going. She'd just passed the toy store.

While following her, Marc realized she did have a guard, though the man hadn't been assigned. Brandon was off duty now that he and Conner had cleaned out the lower-level bookstore.

Marc stayed with them in case there was a problem. He hadn't trusted Brandon since he'd found out who the man really was. Because he felt that way, Marc had agreed to keep the secret so Brandon wasn't discriminated against. No one would ever fully trust a Mitchel again. Adrian had made certain of that.

Marc began to get nervous as Angela went into the small gun store at the end of the second-floor hall. He would have gotten up and joined her if not for picking up her relief that the kids were well protected.

Tension flew through the toy store.

Settled at his feet, Leeann looked up. "Please don't leave us."

Chills broke out on Marc's arms. "I won't." He did get up and go to the entryway, so he could scan both the mall and the kids.

The guards in the hall looked at him and each other in confusion, not sure what the problem was.

Crash!

Everyone jumped as something slammed into the side of the mall above their vehicles and then crashed onto the semis below.

Marc waited, hoping he was jumpy for no reason. While being in the room with so many descendant children and their constantly running concerns, Marc hadn't picked up much from outside the entire time they'd been up here. *It was wonderful. I get it now.*

Marc frowned as Angela picked up a .22 from the display cabinet the Eagles had unlocked in preparation for tomorrow's loading. When she began to gather bullets, Marc realized she was arming for a fight. The gun she'd brought out of the mountain required too much effort for her to fire. She was still so weak she had trouble even lifting her leg to dress, but the .22 would be easy on her during a battle.

Around the mall, camp members moved closer to Eagles, able to feel danger rushing toward them. The storm was so loud now that people had to shout to be heard.

Angela came to where Marc was standing, eyes dazed. She wasn't supposed to use magic in her weakened condition. There was only one reason she would be. Death was coming. Marc waited to determine from which direction.

Kenn ran up the escalator and joined them, unaware there was already tension waiting. "We have a radio missing."

Angela regarded Marc with the witch glaring from her dead sockets. "Guard the kids."

Marc didn't want to, but he nodded obediently and then waved all of the Eagles in view to follow her. She had to prove she was back—to the camp and to herself—but she didn't have to do it alone.

Angela ignored her escort, tracking the thoughts of someone in camp about to betray their location. She didn't want to give the chore to anyone else for several reasons, but none of them was her ego or

image. Everyone was already busy. Marc had the kids, while Neil was with Samantha and the other injured people. Kyle and Jennifer, along with Kenn and Tonya, were supervising the camp members and rookies. The people who were free to handle this problem were already on their way to do so.

Angela suffered her body's discomfort to jog down the stairs, making a sharp turn at the bottom of the escalator to take her toward the quarantine zone that had been chosen for the new people.

Jennifer ran up to her, mentally apologizing for all the mistakes.

There wasn't time to comfort the teenager. "Tracy went in to deliver trays."

Jennifer stiffened in rage at the thought of what might be happening right now. She looked around. "Where's Charlie?"

The window next to them blew in, showering the hall with glass and rain. Both women were knocked off their feet, banging into the front of a store that still had the metal awning drawn.

Guards rushed to help Jennifer and Angela, crunching across the glass. Thick wind and rain blew through the mall.

"Everybody upstairs! Everybody up!" Kenn and Tonya stampeded the camp up the escalators as fast as they could, able to hear the roar of something that sounded like an engine but could only be one thing. Safe Haven had survived tornadoes before, but they'd hoped to never repeat it.

Angela's witch helped her as she ran toward the storage room, healing what she was able to. Blood trickled down her cheek and wrist.

Jennifer had taken most of the glass, but she'd been wearing her thick Eagle jacket. Small and large shards were embedded all along the arm and hip. She removed it carefully, but refused to let a team medic check her out as she followed the boss. Jennifer didn't tell them she also had blood running down one leg and a loud ringing in her ears.

Angela stopped at the intersection right before the storage room. She motioned the Eagles to go in openly, then slid into the other hall to access the room's rear entrance.

The Eagles were careful to keep their minds blank so they wouldn't give her away.

Daryl waved the senior men in the group to come and then rushed in, gun up and finger ready. "Drop the knife!"

"Stay back!" The teenage boy tightened the knife against Tracy's throat, holding her with one arm while fumbling with the radio in his other hand.

The new family was clustered by the stacks of boxes, scared to move or talk. The storage room held a tent, three kits, a lantern, and blankets, but nothing else. It created a very dim room where gunplay wasn't advised.

Fury came from Jennifer as she realized the boy wasn't mute.

"Hey!" Charlie's shout was loud.

“I said stay back!” The traitor spun around, using Tracy as a shield.

He’s not deaf either! Charlie was furious and terrified as Daryl confronted Tracy’s captor. *He’s not disabled!*

Yes, he is. That’s why it was so easy for someone to brainwash him, Angela corrected. *He’s mentally handicapped.*

Tracy didn’t resist as she was dragged around again, keeping her eyes on the boy in the corner with the gun. Charlie was trained on her captor, waiting for his shot. Tracy was about to pass out, not sure who would end up killing her as the knife dug deeper into her throat and drew blood.

The traitor finally found the mike button and pushed it. “They’re in the mall! Marion, Georgia Outlet Mall! I’m in Safe Haven right now! Marion, Georgia!”

An instant later, Angela’s gun barrel went against his head and fired.

The body fell to the floor as Charlie rushed forward and grabbed Tracy.

Angela stared at the radio.

“We’re coming!”

“I’m on my way!”

The calls became too garbled to understand from refugees promising to arrive as soon as they could.

She’d had to wait for the teenage spy to turn around before she could come up behind him, and

the Eagles hadn't had a clear shot without hitting Tracy or Charlie. Angela's fury filled the room.

The Eagles turned their guns on the rest of the new arrivals.

"We didn't know! Please don't shoot!"

Charlie had one arm around Tracy, who was shaking against him. His gun was now holstered. He believed the family was innocent. When the traitor had grabbed Tracy, they'd been shocked.

"We picked him up a month ago! We thought he was an orphan and needed help."

"Please don't make us leave."

"What happened?"

"She saw the radio he was trying to hide as we came in with the trays." Charlie didn't look at his mother. "I felt her concern. I guess he did too."

Harry retrieved the missing radio even though it was too late.

"Pass the word. Emergency council meeting right now, team leaders too." Angela glanced at Charlie, glad to see Tracy's injury was minor.

When he shrugged, leaving the decision to her, Angela gave the new people a warning instead of banishment. "Whether you are responsible for this or not, people will believe you were. One small mistake and you'll be run out of here, no matter what I say. Be careful..." Angela froze as coldness swept the mall. *Look out!*

Marc felt the danger coming, but he still didn't know from what direction. He could have assumed

it was from any of the dark stores around them, but he had faith those places had been cleared correctly by the Eagles. The only place danger could come from was this room—

Glass shattered as something crashed through the center window and landed on the floor in front of the kids.

Marc drew in a blur, not hesitating. He fired twice, knocking the standing shadow backward into the television.

The makeshift platform tumbled over with the weight. The TV and DVD player crashed to the floor, bringing a halt to the entertainment.

Kids screamed, scrambling to get out of the way.

“Grab the babies!” Leeann directed the older kids before the adults could do it. This was her job.

“Get over there!” Cody pointed toward his dad. The children all took cover behind Marc.

Shawn verified the intruder was dead.

Footsteps echoed as Eagles rushed toward them from all over the mall at the sound of Marc’s Colt.

The sentries found him surrounded by kids who refused to let him leave the room.

“A predator followed one of the teams back to us.” Marc fought to control his rage from picking up the evil man’s thoughts as he’d shot him. The sick bastard had climbed the outside of the mall during the storm to grab a child, any child. “What happened out there?”

“One of...the new people.” Travis had run the entire way from Angela. “Boss handled it. We’re all good.”

“Have the lower levels get our vehicles ready to go.” Marc could hear calls echoing throughout the mall, ruining everyone’s evening. “As soon as the storm passes, we’ll leave.”

Travis started to tell him Angela had called an emergency meeting... He paused, head tilting. “Do you hear that whistle?”

“Down!” Marc grabbed the closest kids and shoved them down. “Incoming! Get away from the glass!”

The tornado slammed into the ground near the parking lot and roared toward the mall. Debris whizzed outward as the twister cut a path through the abandoned vehicles and slammed into the building.

Screams filled the halls and were quickly drowned out by the roar of wind as it scattered debris in every direction. Small, the tornado twisted ferociously in an effort to take human lives like it had been instructed to do.

Descendants brought up shields, but each of them knew it was pointless. Magic couldn’t stand against a tornado.

“I agree.” Angela and the team medics had just finished treating their injured. No one had died and only a few cuts had needed stitches. Even she and Jennifer had gotten off with minor slices and didn’t need bandages. The tornado had swept in one side and out the other in a few loud seconds. It had demolished a section of the mall, but most of the camp had been in the hall outside the toy store. That area had been spared except for a bit of blowing debris and some flying glass. If the base of the tornado had been wider, they would all be dead now.

Angela was tired of having that thought after each of their encounters. She was looking forward to a time when she could say the outcome had given them a good side effect. *How about eternal life? It keeps to the whole yin and yang thing.*

Jennifer snickered. Standing next to Angela, the teen was scanning for problems from the open section. The mall was still giving out shakes and shudders, emitting groans and loud bangs. Theo’s crew wouldn’t declare this structure safe now. Jennifer hoped it would hold a bit longer. Now that their injured were treated and everyone was accounted for, they needed that fast meeting to decide if their next campsite was still viable. Jennifer didn’t think so. An open park wasn’t defensible.

“I know.” Angela collected her bag and moved toward the toy store, where the den mothers and Marc had the kids ready to travel. “Let’s have that

meeting now and see what we can come up with.” Neither woman felt good about staying here for even a few more minutes, but rushing off blindly into the darkness wasn’t smart either. She looked at Ivan. “Ten minutes. Have it ready.”

Ivan was honored to receive point over the bugout.

In the hall around them, the camp waited nervously. The storm was going to abate, but the people still responding on the radios were already on their way.

3

“What if we don’t leave at all?” Kendle was curled up in the corner with Tommy and the toddler from the springs.

“You mean stay and fight?” Neil couldn’t believe Kendle was suggesting it.

“I mean, what if they just think we left?” She waved at the missing radio Harry had collected. “Misinformation could be as dangerous now as it was before the war.”

“We make some calls and say we spotted Safe Haven somewhere else?” Kenn picked up on it.

Kendle nodded. “It’ll have to be a voice they won’t recognize.”

Marc frowned. “Some people will still come here to find a trail.”

“I don’t have an answer for that, but I assumed we could figure it out together.” Kendle looked

around the room so everyone understood she wasn't just talking about her and Marc.

Marc considered the idea, shrugging. "If we can be quiet enough to convince people the mall is abandoned, it might work for a little while, but I don't think we should do that. I think the sooner we leave, the better."

"I agree with Marc, but I want to use Kendle's idea too." Angela gestured. "We're going southwest. Let's send them north and east."

Everyone was able to agree on that.

Kenn already had the maps out, tracing the route they were supposed to take to the boat. Zack's team should arrive at that site tomorrow afternoon. Kenn assumed Safe Haven was now going to drive straight through to avoid refugees. If Angela kept to the route they'd planned, there was a chance they would arrive at the boat right after the scouting team.

"Damn it!"

Everyone looked over to find Angela staring with glassy eyes that begged for a break.

"We have to go. Now!"

Panic split the air for a brief moment and then training kicked in.

Eagles hurried the camp into vehicles the rookies had started, using Kenn's notebook copy of where people were supposed to be for travel. Several of their vehicles had been damaged in the storm, forcing them to double up.

The camp was relieved to get the order to go. After listening to the radios for the last half hour, none of them wanted to stay here. Hoping to avoid the battle, the camp members helped each other out into the darkness. The storm was still roiling over them, but the awful wind was gone and the rain was no longer slamming down as if it was trying to impale them. They were all soaked by the time everyone was loaded and accounted for.

The Eagles didn't tell them there were already refugees in the area. They slammed the doors and slid behind wheels, eager to be gone.

Marc helped with the children, carrying and directing. Eagles followed him with kids in their arms.

Kenn stuck by Angela as she also carried one of the smaller children, telling her what was in the area. "There's a prison, a military academy, and a few small warehouses. We also might be able to use a terminal, like the UN troops were doing."

"We need something with a fence you can send power through, like we did on the mountain."

Kenn searched for something that fit the criteria, automatically scooping up one of the kids who stumbled.

As they got the last of the children into the semi with the den mothers and pregnant women, Kenn found a spot on the map. "What about this?"

Angela leaned over the map as Kenn shined his flashlight and the camp finished loading around

them. “That might work. Take us east first and then cut around. No lights.”

Kenn headed for the first semi, glad Tonya was in the truck to help with the twitching children. “You need a hand?”

Neil was going by with Samantha and a bag.

“Nope. Get us rolling!” Neil carried Samantha into the medical camper and placed her on a cot, glad Tommy had slid behind the wheel. Tommy was one of the best drivers here, along with being one of the best shooters. Neil trusted him to keep up.

Drugged and scared, Samantha huddled in the bunk and tried to think good thoughts. Her twins couldn’t take clenched muscles right now.

In the process of shutting the camper, Neil paused. Conner was headed for the rear jeeps that would provide protection for the ride. Neil made a curt gesture that surprised those who didn’t know about Samantha’s problem.

Neil waited as the jeep guard directed the boy to the medical camper. When Conner ran to him, confused, Neil pulled him inside and slammed the door.

The trashed side of the mall glared balefully at Safe Haven as they pulled out of the parking lot. Forty cars had come in. Twenty-eight rolled out. The consolation was they had been for passengers and not cargo or livestock. All of the supplies and animals they had gathered were still with them, as were all the people. That included the new family who would be watched closer than any other in the

history of Safe Haven to be positive they weren't like the orphan boy they'd tried to save.

The medical camper began to roll, allowing Neil to breathe a sigh of relief. As the mall fell behind them and the wind faded, Neil took a seat on the bunk next to Samantha and held her hand. He didn't know what else to do for her, but he did know he was going to have to restrict her activities or they would lose the babies.

"Why am I here?" Conner was tired but not at Angela's level. "I'm okay."

Neil looked at Samantha, who had already fallen into a restless sleep. "She's not."

Satisfied he was here to help if needed, Conner tried to forestall the next part of the process. "I did my job. The alpha will reward me if she thinks I deserve it."

Neil didn't glance away from Samantha. "What's the one thing you need most to be happy?"

Caught in a moment of vulnerability, Conner decided to give Neil the truth. "I miss my dad. I have my entire life."

Neil had expected time with Candy to be the teenager's focus, but it didn't matter what the boy wanted. Neil was now determined he would get it.

Conner stared, uncomfortable. As much as he wanted a Special Forces man on his side, he wanted the support to be honest. "I can't accept that."

"What?"

"I want to earn it. I'm an Eagle."

Neil was proud of him. “Then I’ll help you with that. No cheating, just oversight to be sure you get a fair chance.”

Conner grinned. “That, I’ll take.” His happiness fled. “They’re here.” He looked at Neil, voice rising. “Are we out of sight yet?”

Neil didn’t answer as headlights flashed through the rainy darkness.

The Naval Station. As fast as you can.

Kenn put the big truck into a faster gear at Angela’s mental order and hoped everyone would be able to keep up. The path they were taking had been clear most of the way here so far. Kenn hoped that trend held.

Safe Haven’s last vehicle disappeared over the hill just as the first wave of incoming headlights flashed across the parking lot. They had barely gotten out of sight in time. If not for the rain, and the wind shifting things around, their engines and movement would have still given them away.

Kenn glanced in the side mirrors to determine what type of light the convoy was putting off as they traveled through the rest of the storm. He was glad when he didn’t see much. No one had their headlights on against orders and the only time they were making light was when they had to slow down. If Angela’s misinformation tactic worked, the camp might just slide through again.

Wishing there was time to comfort the scared kids around her, Angela waved. “Do it now or someone’s going to see us. This lightning is as bad as the moon.”

Lightning forked overhead again, illuminating the windows and landscape.

The three camp members and one rookie who had been chosen to provide the misinformation nervously picked up the radios as the vehicle jostled them around. Their lines were written on sticky notes for them to repeat, but they were still worried about making a mistake. Safe Haven’s survival depended on the refugees believing they had gone anywhere but the direction they were currently heading.

“I found Safe Haven!” Pam ignored the cringes of the kids at the loud shout, putting excitement into her voice. “They split up! They split up! Follow the leaders!”

James keyed his mike on cue. “I’m following Angela!”

“Wait for us!”

“North! The council all went north! They’ll meet up somewhere! Keep following!”

Pam keyed her mike once again to finish the circle. “Don’t go to the mall, you idiot! They’re headed north! Cut them off!”

As soon as Pam let off the button, there was a garbled jumble of responses.

Angela concentrated. She didn't have the strength to search far, but she didn't need to. "We still have the trackers. They're not falling for it."

As if in response to her need, a powerful signal got through on the radio.

"Safe Haven is in the west!" Adrian's mocking tone grabbed and held attention. It was obvious from the distorted transmission that he was far from Georgia.

As soon as Adrian let off the mike, another blast came through, this one a familiar voice everyone in Safe Haven was happy to hear.

"We're right on your tail, boss," Doug promised. "We'll be in Texas in an hour."

As the radio garbled up again, everyone waited to hear who would get through next. No one mentioned Adrian's name but all of them except Marc were relieved to know their former leader was still looking out for them, no matter how far away he was.

Angela wished he hadn't called. Hearing him and not being able to see him was torment.

Adrian's voice echoed again, delivering a double warning. "Make sure everyone is with us and then get off the radio."

"Copy that, boss," Doug replied.

It took a while for the radio to settle this time. When it did, it was obvious the refugees were confused about which way to go.

Angela nodded at Pam. "Go with it."

Pam hit the mike one last time. “It’s not them! Dammit! Head west! Head west!” Pam handed the radio back. Safe Haven didn’t have enough for everyone to keep them.

“Was it good?”

Angela looked at Marc with the tired eyes of the witch who was constantly in attendance now, providing support while she was weak. “We still have the trackers.”

Marc wasn’t happy to hear it, but it didn’t surprise him. The misinformation campaign had been a desperate attempt to clear their path so they could reach the boat. Trackers weren’t easy to fool, whether they were descendants or not. “We’ll be ready to handle it when we get to the station.”

Angela motioned toward the maps. “Let’s look at those.”

Marc retrieved the maps, along with her kit. Inside was food, water, her medical bag, and her old guns. He now added ammunition for the .22 on her hip.

Angela put the maps across her lap and tried to gather whatever energy she had left. The transmissions that had just gone out might be Safe Haven’s last call. They would know within a few hours.

Chapter Twenty-Three
The Big Guns

1

“We’re getting close.”

Baxter glanced at his partner and then back to the road where he was steering the hummer around rusted wrecks and signs of an old battle. “What makes you think so?”

“That sounded desperate. Every one of those calls put out panic, not excitement. We must be close.”

Baxter was willing to take her word for it. Rachel was the best tracker he’d ever worked with. They’d been together for more than 10 years now, without a single problem. It was odd, considering how opposite they were. Besides being a white male and a black female, they also had opposite styles that could have caused problems. He preferred a knife, while Rachel was lethal with the Glocks she carried in four different places on her sinewy body. She preferred the plainclothes look of an old West cowboy, while Baxter liked the flashy clothes and jewelry so freely available now that the apocalypse had wiped out the need for money. Benjamin employed them and though the evil genius was gone, they’d been paid in advance to do a job and

they were going to. “Do you want to send in our decoys now?”

“Not yet.” Rachel reclined the seat. Searching for the Safe Haven descendants was the hardest job she’d ever had. Each time they had gotten close, something happened to prevent them from going in for the attack. The first time had been when the government sent troops into their way. If Benjamin had been patient, she and Baxter would have delivered Angela’s head to him like he’d requested.

After that, there had been a stone mountain surrounded by refugees and then a fight with the UN. Forced to adapt their strategies, they were now going to use the refugees against Safe Haven, but neither of them expected that to be enough unless they could get the camp pinned down somewhere. As long as the slippery descendants continued to evade them, there was little point in calling in a mob that would just as soon kill her and her partner for their tracking abilities.

Neither of them had other gifts, but they were both great with their weapons and they never quit until they got their man—which had always made up for it in the past, but Rachel knew determination wasn’t enough to get Safe Haven’s powerful leader. She was stewing on another plan. She had others already in motion, such as the capture of the team Angela had sent south. A small crew was now holding those people hostage in hopes that when Safe Haven arrived, they would be able to use them as bargaining chips. Again, Rachel wasn’t certain

that was enough. What they needed was to capture one of the leaders or their offspring. It was well known that Angela would do anything to protect her children. “Where would you go? Pull over and get the maps out. Tell me where you would go, within 50 miles.”

Baxter immediately pulled the green and black camouflaged hummer over, not caring about where they were or who might be around. This was how he and Rachel usually operated—not by throwing off the impression they were intimidating, but by actually being so. Anyone who rolled up on them would be sorry.

Baxter spread the maps out over the dashboard and began to list off locations.

Rachel stayed reclined in the seat and listened, positive it would be an obvious answer when she heard it. Safe Haven hadn’t been able to settle in the mall for long. That meant they might not have been able to form plans for where to go next, except for maybe a rudimentary choice allowing little time to find concealment. They would need some place to hold 200 people, plus vehicles.

“There’s a wildlife refuge surrounded by rivers on three sides. There’s also an old chemical factory roughly forty miles from here.” Baxter moved further south on the map. “There’s an airport and a naval station across the border in Mississippi.”

“That’s it.” Rachel sat up. “The Naval Station.”

Baxter put the maps away, not doubting her instincts, but curious how she had come to the choice. “What did I miss?”

“Remember the files we had on her friends and family? She lived with a Marine before the war. Supposedly, that same Marine is in Safe Haven with her. It makes sense he would pick a military location.”

“We were told her new man, the Ghost, is in charge. It’s in the most recent files, at least the ones we were able to salvage from the train and the bunker where Benjamin was murdered.”

Rachel nodded. “I know, but consider how many dead ends and wild goose chases we were sent on over the last seven months. Faulty intelligence sank us every time.”

“What do you mean?” Baxter wasn’t as smart as his partner.

“I mean, what if Safe Haven doesn’t have just one leader. What if they’re sharing?”

Baxter didn’t like it. “That would probably account for all the times they’ve managed to escape us. If they have that many descendant minds working together, it would explain a lot of things.”

“My thoughts exactly. Find us a place to spend a couple hours while we make plans. If we walk in there blind, we probably won’t come back out. No one else has.”

Baxter did as he was told, positive that she was right. Safe Haven didn’t like to leave survivors. Baxter respected that. *Neither do I.*

“Wow.”

Kenn and Marc were in front of the convoy, with three teams on duty around them while the rest of the Eagles cleared the site. The Naval Air Station Meridian in Lauderdale, Mississippi had been overrun, but the fence they needed was intact. Only one area of the Naval Station even had an electrified fence, where the confidential aircraft had been kept. That was where Safe Haven was going to hunker down. The hangar was large and sturdy enough to protect them for a little while. It was the only place big enough to hold everyone. The oddly shaped dome was also fireproof, earthquake-safe, and bullet resistant.

“It didn’t look like this last time we were here.”

“Yeah, that fence was a bitch for us.” Kenn remembered the quiet trip he and Marc had made during a training run. Charged with infiltrating the hangar if they could, the fence had prevented them from going through or over. They had been forced to go under, using a maintenance tunnel that hadn’t been guarded very well. It had been a fun run for them, even though they had been surrounded by Air Force pilots who only saw them as testing tools.

Angela joined the men, coming up between them to get her first look.

The station had once been a center of technology and innovation as new aircraft were

brought here for testing runs or developed here for covert programs. The main buildings had crawled with aviators—all eager to fly the planes and protect their country, but that had changed with the war. Broken windows and torched frames of jeeps were strewn across the station. The planes were charred frames or stripped carcasses. No one had been here in a long time. That was exactly what Angela had been hoping for.

The naval station was still impressive to those who hadn't viewed one before. A few of the planes weren't destroyed. Those were gawked and pointed at by both kids and adults. Angela wished there was time to tour all of the wonderful places and inventions of their country, but if they had that time, they wouldn't be in this situation.

“All clear.”

Angela waved for the security teams to set up camp, aware of the clock ticking in her mind. The trackers were closing in, but Safe Haven wasn't ready.

“What about driving through it?” Ivan could see that was a weakness.

“They can.” Kenn gestured. “We could have.”

Ivan frowned. “We'll need a big gun on all sides.”

Kenn nodded. “We have two.”

“We can use launchers on the other sides.”

“We also have descendants.”

Ivan realized the no-magic rule had been lifted.

“It’ll come in waves.” Angela tried to prepare them. “They won’t want to attack alone. We’ll probably be fighting from each side at the same time.”

Marc watched her walk away. “How long would it take Theo’s team to get the plates from the trucks and give us a small box of protection at each corner?”

Kenn estimated. “An hour, at least.”

“We have to try. Get it all set up.”

“Will we have time?” Ivan wasn’t convinced.

Marc grunted. “It’s not time we need. It’s more ammunition. The descendants are drained, the camp is fragile, and we haven’t found bullets. What we’re about to do won’t make a dent in the numbers if we’re found.”

“So why are we doing it? Why not go to another mall or a big warehouse?”

“Because it’s the only place we had the fuel left to reach that can’t be burnt down with us inside, will hold everyone and our vehicles, is out in the open enough that a storm will freeze people outside, and has bullet-proof walls—as much as any wall can be anyway.”

Ivan hated Marc’s grim tone. He realized what it all meant. “We’re not getting out of here, are we?”

“They’re watching us. Why haven’t they made contact?” Kenn didn’t care about Ivan’s question.

“Maybe they don’t want to give themselves away.” Marc was hoping for that. “There were a lot

of people on the radio. It would have drawn attention.”

Neil left it up to Marc, but made a mental note to mention it to the boss. No one trusted him to deliver all their concerns to Angela now.

Marc knew, but there wasn't time to sort that out. They needed to get the camp set up and the fences powered before the trackers called in their location to the refugee mob Jennifer had warned them was coming.

Marc moved aside as a group of women and kids came through to use the latrines. Samantha was in the center, being helped by Pam and Tracy.

Around them, teams watched the landscape with suspicion and fingers that wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger. Safe Haven had been harassed for hundreds of miles since leaving the mountain. They were sick of it.

“I want a surprise over here, like we talked about.” Marc pointed. “On the other side, do the same thing, but put it further out. We'll hit that one first and hope it buys us more time because they'll be afraid to come in close. On the third side, we'll set up the big guns and be ready with the grenade launchers we have left.”

Kenn wrote, pointed at a team, and wrote down who he'd assigned. He handled it as if they were back in the Marines. There wasn't much time for anything else.

Marc had already directed their vehicles to be brought in and lined up around the walls as another

defensive layer between the refugees and the camp. Suddenly wishing they'd picked a different location for this fight, Marc spun around at the sound of engines.

Seeing it was a group of Eagles coming around the side of the hangar in one of their jeeps, Marc forced his demon down and his hand away from his gun.

Angela's cold voice echoed next. "The best shooters should be at each of the four corners to back up the descendants. Put the children behind them to feed energy, but if the fence is breached, I want the kids moved below."

It wasn't hard to figure out what would happen from there. They would be standing overtop their camp, hoping to kill enough of the refugees before they ran out of ammunition and energy. Marc agreed with Ivan. *We're screwed.*

3

"They're here." Standing in the center of the hangar with the kids around her, Angela was trying to look into the future. Safe Haven had been here for an hour. "They're coming to the gate now."

"Incoming!"

Eagles hurried to activate the electrified fence that had only been finished for a few minutes. They'd been about to run a test on it, but there obviously wasn't time.

Eagles who were assigned to stay with the kids and weaker members of camp drew their weapons.

Everyone prepared for yet another fight.

Angela moved to the door of the hangar, walking by the men who were still welding the steel plating from the semis into small shooting booths. She paused, waiting for her presence to be necessary.

Marc had already stepped outside. As Kenn came to one side and Kyle took the other, Marc found himself comforted by the show of force they presented.

Jennifer trailed the men, staying near Morgan and Brandon, who were her protection. Angela had told them what to do when the trackers made contact, but as everyone began to play the role, the sense of it being futile filled the air.

Marc knew that was going to be the case as soon as he got a glimpse of the two trackers standing casually in front of their camouflage hummer—one smoking and the other leering. *We're going to need a new plan.*

Next to him, Kenn was already working on it. *We need to take them out before they make a call. Are we waiting to hear what they have to say or are we jumping right off?* Kenn wanted to be clear on the plan.

Marc scanned the waiting pair. *We need to buy time to keep preparing in case they do get a call out. Let's stall them as long as we can and go from there.*

Kenn thought that was a bad idea. It was only a matter of time before one of the trackers went for a radio to announce Safe Haven's location.

Rachel stepped forward as the trio of men approached. She didn't stop when they did. Instead, she walked right up to the man in the center, who she assumed was the leader. She didn't stop until their boots were almost touching. As she stared up at him, using her gifts to map out his abilities, her eyes widened.

Marc gave her one of his most evil stares, throwing alpha waves at her with every word. "You should get out of here; forget you saw us."

Rachel did take a step back, but only so she would have room to use the guns she kept in various places on her body.

Baxter came up to take her right flank, hands fingering his knives.

"We have arrest orders for Angela. Turn her over or I'm going to tell my men at the dock to kill yours. Then I'll let the refugees know where we all are."

It was obvious from the smirk on her lips that the woman wasn't lying. That's why Zack's team hadn't checked in on time.

Behind them, Jennifer relayed that information to the boss on the private channel she was keeping open with both Angela and Marc. She wasn't worried about picking up Kenn's thoughts.

"What if I just kill you right now?" Marc let his eyes glow bright red. "My snipers can take you out

before you can reach your radios to give any orders.”

Rachel laughed at the bluff. “I was told the Ghost never lies. Guess that was bullshit, like all the other myths about this refugee camp.” She looked behind him and found Angela in the doorway of the hangar.

Marc knew when Rachel spotted her target by the way her pupils dilated and her tongue came out to wet her lips. He instantly hated her.

“Angela!”

Angela stepped out of the hangar and walked toward them.

Everyone in Safe Haven knew Angela was so weak she probably couldn’t fight, but they weren’t positive. She’d done things they considered miracles.

As Angela reached Jennifer, the teenager grabbed her wrist. “Hold on.”

Angela waited for Jennifer, who was picking something up. Angela was too tired to do it. That’s why Jennifer was here.

“Another trap.” Jennifer swung to the north. “They organized a group and told them to come in quietly. They’re almost here.” Jennifer sent that to Marc.

Baxter and Rachel were aware of the mental conversation going on, but they couldn’t hear it. As Marc’s eyes turned to deep red and the two men on either side of him tensed to grab weapons, the tracking team realized they had been discovered.

The three Safe Haven men each fired a different weapon. Because of Kyle's lack of mental gifts, he relied on his gun. He hit the male tracker in the leg and then walked the next three shots up the man's chest to finish off with a shot in his head.

Kenn had been experimenting with his new gift. He used it now to prevent the woman from reaching a weapon. As he held her in place, Marc blasted her with his sonic gift.

All three men ducked as blood splattered.

Rachel's body fell, gun sliding into the mud.

"They didn't get a call out. We're good." Kenn was thrilled with the way things were going. He hadn't heard the mental warning.

"Incoming!"

The men swung around to find vehicles coming toward them from the north.

It's a trap! Jennifer's message got through to Kenn and Kyle this time. The men took off running toward the hangar so they could get it secured.

As the gates jingled shut behind them, electricity snapped on, making the fence hum.

Everyone hurried inside the hangar, where three quarters of the corner booths had been reinforced. As everyone crowded in, the sound of engines filled the air.

"It's Safe Haven!"

"Safe Haven is in the Naval Station in Lauderdale!"

The Eagles stared at each other in fear.

The kids and camp members did the same as the radios once again lit up with refugees saying they were on their way.

Kendle waved at their decoys. “Make some calls!”

Pam and the others began to send out misinformation calls, but it was obvious from the answers between their pauses that people weren’t going for it. As engines rushed closer and the radio became too garbled to understand, Angela motioned the descendants to take up a perimeter around the inside of the hangar. “This is what we’re here for.”

The descendants understood what she meant, though a few of them didn’t agree with it. Their duty of protecting the camp hadn’t changed the entire time they’d been in Safe Haven’s army.

“Can we get them out through the tunnel we used during our run here?” Kenn was hoping Marc had a better plan.

“I doubt it. Because we were able to get in so easily, I’m positive they closed it up. You can check if you want to.”

Kenn hurried. The service tunnel had led a mile down the road. Safe Haven would emerge out of sight of the hundred refugees now approaching the electrified fence.

“Open fire!”

The snipers and descendants began using power and ammo to prevent the fence from being rammed. The fence was great for anyone on foot, but not strong enough to stop anything larger than a bike.

The miracles they'd performed during the UN battle weren't possible here. They still hadn't recovered from doing it the first time.

Kenn flinched at a noise that sometimes still haunted his dreams. It had sounded like a giant bug zapper then and he had no doubt the noise was about to become a reality here.

"Everyone get your gun ready, but keep the safety on until we tell you to remove it. Keep those safeties on!" Kyle was preparing the camp for battle. Because the refugees were being held at bay by the fence for the moment, he was more concerned about one of the inexperienced camp members shooting themselves or someone else by accident. He walked through the people who were arming themselves, barking out instructions.

"Are the big guns up?"

Daryl nodded at Marc's query, slamming the last bolt into place on the .50 cal. "Load and fire when ready."

Marc motioned the men who had been chosen to handle the two large guns to get into position. Small gaps in the steel plating had been left in each corner of the hangar for the descendants and guns to work. It also allowed gaps for bullets to get through. Angela had instructed the children to use their energy to shield people standing at those gaps in hopes that only a few slugs would make it through. It was impossible to say how many refugees might show up, but there were already enough out there right now to bring down the fence.

These refugees weren't the screaming, fighting, chaotic mess that Safe Haven was used to seeing in their pursuers. This group had been organized. The Eagles could tell that by the way they didn't rush in blindly and were trying to make their shots count. The Eagles were doing the same, with many of them repeating their training mantra. *Aim small, miss small.* It had worked in the old world. There was no reason it wouldn't succeed now. All they had to do was keep anyone from ramming the fence.

None of them thought they could do it for long. The supply trucks were in the hangar with them, but those items were food and water. While both were much needed, they weren't going to be able to use supplies to buy these people off when their ammunition ran out.

"There goes another truck! Get the corner!" Marc tried to direct the descendant gifts into the oncoming truck before it hit the fence.

With so many vehicles moving through the drizzle, it was impossible to tell who was doing a round to check the weakness of the fence and who was actually trying to ram it. It added another layer of terror that some of the refugees appeared to be ill. Angela thought about the warning the kids had delivered in Roma. She realized nature had tried to kill her with the illness too.

Morgan hit a truck with a grenade as Shawn sniped the driver, sending the vehicle careening toward the fence.

Everyone watched in horror as it slid toward their fragile protection.

The truck stopped short, but they didn't get any relief.

"Here they come!"

Everyone was getting tired of hearing that.

"They're already here!" Kevin shouted at Jennifer.

Jennifer shook her head, pointing. "No, them!"

The Eagles paused in their firing as a new group of cars came over the hill from the east. Screaming into radios and firing guns in the air, it was obvious whose side they were on.

"We can't fight that." Angela directed children away from the gaps, ignoring their protests that they wanted to help. "Roll us in!"

Left with her final defense plan, Safe Haven began to crowd toward the small employee tunnel. Only half the camp fit, and the tunnel had been sealed off, which would prevent an escape into the woods beyond the refugees, but it would give their weaker members a small defense as their fighters stood over top them and battled for everyone's life.

Ivan gawked. "How can there be so many?"

"First the war and then Yellowstone forced people out of the west. Our battles disturbed everyone else. This is what's left of humanity on American soil and they know it. They won't stop this time." Angela drew on her remaining energy.

All around them, descendants and Eagles were lining the perimeter of the hangar, using careful

shots to eliminate people getting out of vehicles, while grenades and magic hit those who were driving. As the lack of energy took its toll, descendants stopped firing. The same thing was happening to the Eagles, except instead of energy, they were missing bullets.

Angela dropped to her knees, unable to stand any longer as she directed her mental gift toward those outside the fence.

Men and women burned by the dozens, but it didn't make a dent in the swarm of vehicles and people on foot that had come over the horizon to blanket the land. Some of those were fighting with each other, but most of them were centered on the fence around the hangar. This wave was going to breach it.

Down in the hole, 100 vulnerable people listened to the fight for their survival and prayed for their men and women to be victorious. Many promises were made to God as screams of rage and horror continued to echo.

Marc felt the last of his energy leave as he used a sonic blast to kill the driver of a truck about to ram a corner of the fence. Beside him, Brandon and Kendle were already on their knees, empty. None of them had felt what it was like to be drained. It was as if concrete had been poured over their bodies, making it almost impossible to even lift their heads and look around.

“I’m out!” Kyle fell back, dragging people with him toward the hole where he hoped there would be room for a few more.

A large zapping noise filled the air and then the ground shook at a small explosion.

“That was the fence.” Marc waved everyone into a tight circle around the hole where the camp was huddled.

Angela motioned. “Close the gaps and cut holes in the walls for spears!” Angela could barely talk she was so tired. Ivan was dragging her toward the hole while she gave the orders.

He didn’t glance down at her, unable to take what she looked like. “Get the axes!”

Eagles hurried to gouge baseball-sized holes in the sides of the hangar so they could jab spears through.

The sights and sounds of the refugees were intimidating to everyone, including the battle-hardened Eagles and their leader. 500 furious refugees raced toward the hangar, trying to reach the small group inside. Firing at their targets and at each other, it was obvious the refugees had gone mad.

The rat-a-tat-tat of the big guns provided a horrible background for the grenades, rifles, and handguns that fired in a symphony of death. Refugees were knocked from their vehicles and from their feet as the ground exploded in front of them, but the mob kept coming.

Daryl grunted as he swung the only .50 cal. with ammunition left toward a truck about to pierce the other side of the fence. Safe Haven's shots were also damaging that gate as they returned fire. Daryl shot again, entire body jarring with the recoil. They hadn't wasted time securing the big guns.

Click-click!

Daryl wrestled the empty gun away from the gap so Morgan could heft a steel plate over it. Bullets slammed into the side of the hangar where they were, peppering the plating.

Eagles recoiled to avoid being hit.

"Blow it!" Marc shouted.

Kenn pushed the button on the first round of explosives they had placed in the field along the hangar. As two-dozen vehicles neared the front of the fence, preparing to ram it, the ground exploded.

Thunder filled the air, and then screams and debris followed as most of the cars were caught in the explosion.

Other refugees who had been about to do the same thing hit their brakes and fishtailed away from the fence in sudden caution, but the first hole already had cars and people streaming through.

"What do we do now?!"

Most of the men turned toward Angela, though a few of them glanced at Marc. None of them was prepared for Jennifer's tired voice coming from the stairs of the hole where her guard had placed her as her energy faded.

"We reclaim them."

Inside the hangar, silence fell.

Marc wanted to protest.

So did Angela.

Neither of them did.

Marc grunted. “Be ready when I tell you. As soon as we have a group of them against the walls, we’re going to blow one side. We already have spear holes cut. Everyone will take one of those positions and reclaim as many as they can. As soon as we have enough energy restored, we’ll bring up the bubble around the camp and wait them out.”

“No.” Angela regarded Marc with regret as the screams outside grew louder, hungrier. “We reclaim them all.”

Greedy demons and witches perked up at the thought of being allowed to take so many lifeforces.

Their hosts cringed in revulsion.

Marc nodded. “We take them all.”

Angela drew in a deep breath, sorry that it had come to this. “May God forgive us. Our country never will.”

Chapter Twenty-Four
Swarming
Naval Air Station Meridian, MS
November 18th

1

“Let me up there or I’ll use it on you!”

Leeann’s voice caught attention as she came up the ladder. She and the other kids were supposed to be in the tunnel where they would be protected, but she and eight others were climbing up the stairs with determined expressions. Leeann had small flames flickering along her fingers to prove how serious she was.

At the bottom of the stairs, the guards had moved aside and were now staring after the kids without knowing how to handle it.

Leeann marched to Angela and took up a spot in front of her alpha. The other kids joined them, creating a narrow circle of protection. All that was left to complete the connection was for Angela to pick two shoulders to place her hands on. Once she did, all their gifts and energy would be hers to use.

“There’s another wave coming through!”

Marc saw four-dozen screaming men and women on foot swarm through the broken part of the gate and head toward his side of the hangar.

Thankful it was a spot they had ready, he helped get the kids away from the damage area, vaguely noting they refused to break the circle around Angela as she moved with them.

Kenn flipped the last switch, triggering the detonation.

Outside the hangar, refugees reached the doors as the mines went off. Thunder rattled across the naval base, along with screams and chunks of debris that slammed against the hangar like hail.

“Other side!” Kevin screamed.

Angela placed her hand on Cody and Leeann’s shoulders, then aimed toward the gap that hadn’t been closed by the steel plates.

Angela’s wave blasted through the center of the mob about to come through the gap and then spread out into a huge fireball that encompassed the entire side of the hangar. Human torches flailed their arms and cried for help, banging into each other and the walls as they burned alive.

“Get them below!” Angela moved toward the gap. She had a tiny bit of their energy left.

As the kids were forced back down the ladder, Angela fired again, hitting refugees she had missed in the first wave. Exhausted, she let one of them make it through. He ran straight at her.

Angela grabbed the weaponless man. “I reclaim you!”

All around her, descendants did the same as more refugees entered the hangar. Blinding flashes

of light bounced off the metal walls in shadows that revealed healthy bodies becoming husks.

“One big shield up!” Angela fought to use the reclaimed energy through the pain. “Wait for my call!”

Set up with a narrow door in all four corners, and a wide entryway at each end, the only way for them to defend the tunnel was to create a square around it, with a team and a descendant in each corner. It would have been elegant if not for how ugly the fighting was.

“Down!”

Neil and his team rushed together as the shield dropped, following Angela. As she grabbed lifeforces, they did hand-to-hand combat with anyone brave enough to come close to her while she was reclaiming. Greg, Ben, and Wade stayed on one side of Angela as Neil, Tommy, and Tim took the other side, all of them swinging, throwing, or shoving. It was complete chaos only broken when Angela ordered them back.

“Shield up!”

Eagles pulled weaker descendants toward the tunnel, grateful when each recovering magic user brought up part of a shield around them. Refugees had flooded through the broken fence and were now swarming. They crowded in, shoving, cutting, and hurting each other to get to the camp in the center.

“Hold the shield!” Angela screamed, straining.

All the descendants who were capable of it, young and old, added their energy to keep out the

bullets, knives, axes, and fists trying to reach them. Even though Safe Haven had spent the last 11 months in situations like this, it was still the most awful thing many of them had ever witnessed. Because they couldn't reach their targets, the refugees took their rage out on each other. Murder after murder happened in front of them, but they couldn't stop it. Bodies fell across the hangar floor; the walls dripped crimson. Big men, little men, women, and teenagers all strangled, stabbed, and shot each other.

As more refugees crowded in, there was a series of bangs and crashes outside. The main wave had made it through the fence and was about to arrive. Safe Haven had only been able to eliminate 200 of the 700 threats. The numbers were just too high.

“Down!” Angela dropped the shield and grabbed a life.

Distracted by the noises outside, the refugees closest to them were caught off guard. Not wanting to be consumed, many of those evil souls cringed backward to avoid final justice. They shoved frantically against other people who were entering the hangar, and were killed from both sides.

As the shield dropped and Marc stepped forward, Ivan's remaining team, along with Kenn and Kevin, hurried forward to protect him. Now using their last mags, this would reduce them to hand-to-hand combat.

Ivan shoved Marc down as something metal flew through the air. He spun around, taking the hit.

Marc picked himself up as Ivan sank to the ground, not stopping to check on the man. There wasn't time.

Pam shoved into Marc's hip, knocking him aside as another metal object flew through the air toward his head. He didn't know if the refugees had been told to target him the most, but it certainly seemed that way as another knife came flying through the air. It barely missed his arm.

Everyone was grateful when Angela called them all back.

The main refugee wave hit the sides of the hangar and shoved in, allowing no room for the terrified people inside to escape.

Forced to retreat further, Angela shoved more energy into the shield. "Hold it!"

Slowly being refilled each time they took lifeforces, the descendants were able to hold the shield, but there was still nothing they could do about the awful melee occurring just outside the barrier. The stacks of bodies continue to grow.

"A blast of our deadliest gifts on the next drop!" Angela instructed.

The descendants around her began to shove energy reserves through the mental door of their choice while Eagles drew knives and prepared to do physical combat to keep the descendants alive.

"Drop!"

As soon as the shield was down, all the descendants fired.

Blasts of ice, sonic, madness, and fire flew through the hangar, hitting in waves that eliminated large bunches of the people. It cleared room for more refugees to stumble into the hangar and trip over burning, frozen bodies. Distracted for brief seconds, it also left them open to attack.

Kendle and Kyle reached targets at the same time. As she absorbed the lifeforce and Kyle repeatedly stabbed a man with his knife, a third furious refugee darted between them to get to Marc.

“Shield up!”

Kendle swung around and tackled the man. They fell to the ground, rolling into the feet of Eagles who were backing up at Angela’s order.

As the shield came up, refugees were trapped inside with them again. The descendants and Eagles hurried to slash throats or take lifeforces.

Kendle shoved the dry corpse off and allowed Marc to help her up. As she regained her feet, she saw the body of another rookie who had been hit in Marc’s place, but there was no time to grieve or scan for other losses on their side as the next wave of people reached the hangar. In a moment like this, everyone was missing Zack’s team to help fight. Safe Haven’s low numbers were going to doom them.

“Down!” Angela grabbed another lifeforce.

The refugees who had been in the center of the group were now aware of what was going on. They pushed backward toward the exits, but it was impossible for them to fight the flow as hundreds of

refugees bunched up around the hangar entrances in a squirming mass of angry bodies.

Loud engines echoed, followed by shouts and gunshots.

From a spot along one wall, some of Safe Haven's defenders were able to peer through the holes they had cut to see what was going on outside. The energy flowing through their bodies was keeping the shield up with almost no effort now. The view was best on Marc's side, where one of the steel plates had been knocked over.

Two trucks came by with a wide net stretched between them. It extended as they widened the space. Coming around the corner together in a beautiful turn, the net scooped up a few dozen refugees and dragged them along. Crunched together, they were squeezed between the vehicles for a short space and then run over when the vehicles turned.

Marc spotted a similar setup rolling around the corner from the same direction as the first. He was unable to glance away as they veered directly into the crowd of refugees on his side of the hangar. Bodies flew into the air, crunching against the walls when the truck made a sharp turn and ran parallel to the hangar.

The other vehicle put space between them to stretch out the net. They scooped up another dozen running men and women who had nowhere to go. Marc could see other vehicles patrolling the outside

of the fence, preventing refugees from escaping back through the areas they had breached.

“Who are they?”

No one could answer Kenn’s question. Their rescuers were roughly 200 men and women in handmade clothes, with homemade weapons. Double bows on motorcycles were the most interesting, but the sticky bombs they were throwing onto vehicles and into groups of refugees were the most efficient. With fuses lit before they were tossed, the sticky bombs were as good as any mines Safe Haven had made. Shrapnel exploded, embedding in faces, hands, chests, and the walls of the hangar.

Marc admired the setup the strangers were using for the sticky bombs. Four men were in the bed of a rusty blue truck, one at each corner, with supplies in a crate between them. Marc hoped they’d brought enough to cover the hundreds of refugees now running toward them, recognizing the bigger threat.

Taking advantage of the opportunity while the refugees in the hangar with them were distracted, Angela silently signaled for the descendants to drop the shield.

Lights flashed in the hangar as they grabbed refugees and then used the energy to throw vicious blasts that cleared out entire corners of the large, gory room.

Now being attacked from both sides, the refugees tried to flee.

As the hangar slowly emptied, the descendants kept collecting lifeforces of those who refused to run.

New screams echoed as the netted trucks made another pass.

A new wave of refugees pushed and shoved into the hangar for protection.

Angela stepped forward to send out a wave of fire.

Daryl jerked Angela down as a knife flew over her head.

Enraged, Marc shot a blast of sonic that was the strongest he'd used so far. He watched in stunned amazement as two dozen men in front of him dropped to their knees, bleeding from their sockets. The sonic wave traveled the walls of the hangar and bounced back.

Angela snapped the shield up just as the wave would have hit them.

It bounced off the shield and then slammed into the remaining refugees before dissipating. All of them dropped.

Alone in the hangar for a brief second, the descendants kept the shield up and tried to remember how to breathe.

Outside, the trucks made another pass.

The fighters in Safe Haven admired the inventive weapons of the men and women outside who had arrived in time to save them.

“Wasn't that in Saving Private Ryan?”

Heads craned toward Ivan in contagious amusement. The soldier was bandaging his bleeding leg.

“Who thinks of movies at a time like this?” Neil joked as Eagles chuckled.

“Yes, it was.” Kenn wiped blood from his arms. “It became so popular during World War II that it was listed in the Ranger Handbook of Field Expedient Devices.”

More chuckles came. Despite still being in danger, the lifeforces had returned the energy of the descendants and with it, their confidence.

“Drop!” Angela lunged forward with a spear, taking out a big man about to fire at them as he ran inside the hangar.

Descendants and Eagles stepped forward with their own spears or knives, and took on the next wave of refugees who crowded into the hangar.

Outside, the engines grew louder. It sounded as if the hangar was surrounded.

Dread swept over the fighters. They had naturally assumed the people were here to help, but it could be a mistake to believe that.

Marc slid over to Angela. “How do you want to handle it?”

With her energy returned, Angela was able to scan the numerous souls around them, but it was hard to determine who was who. “We’ll let them finish clearing it out and then we’ll talk.”

It wasn’t comforting, but it was better than the previous situation. Marc estimated there were less

than 100 refugees around the hangar now. Most of those were trying to run between the netted vehicles to escape the clever trap. The strangers hadn't paused in killing yet, though small groups of refugees were stopping and holding their hands up in surrender.

The strangers didn't give mercy.

Marc was glad. He was tired of being constantly harassed. He scanned the parts of the battlefield that he could see from where they were standing, horrified by the number of bodies. He was also surprised by the silence on the radio as smoke and screams drifted over the site. Calls were coming in from people still on their way, but there were no calls going out. It was eerie.

Fresh gunshots echoed from the opposite side of the hangar, telling Marc the strangers were clearing out that part of the fence line. He and the rest of Safe Haven waited tensely with the shield at maximum strength.

2

“They're stopping outside the door in front of us.” Kenn was observing through the gap. “A couple dozen are getting out of their vehicles.”

As the gunshots faded, it was possible to hear voices over the engines and shouts for help. Safe Haven listened intently.

“Close those gaps! Don't let any of them get out!”

“Some have already escaped. Should we chase them?”

“Yes. We don’t need those animals around here. It will cause problems later. Catch up to us on the way home.”

“What do you want done with the bodies?”

“Give me a minute on that.”

“What about the people inside?”

“I’ll handle them myself.”

“Should we...”

The voices kept asking questions and delivering orders, bringing hope to the Eagles but also more tension. Anyone so organized was sure to be a hard fight and Safe Haven had already survived their limit. Despite the descendants being full of fresh lifeforces, none of them was strong enough to have another battle so soon.

“Do not go in that hangar until I make contact!”

Marc and Angela stepped to the front of their group, but they didn’t lower the shield as footsteps approached the hangar. While they waited, Angela tried not to stare at the bodies but failed. It was impossible not to see the faces screaming at her in accusation. Of all the descendants, she had once again killed the most. It was a horrible weight to carry.

“Hello in the hangar?!”

Marc looked at Angela. “I’ve got your back.”

Angela tried to smile and managed a grimace. “I’m grateful for that.” She dropped the shield and stepped forward to meet their rescuers or new

captors, depending upon how fate wanted things to go.

Streaked with gore and blood still dripping from their hands and faces, she and Marc were an intimidating pair that made some of the new people step back in alarm. The fighting had been messy.

The strangers were wearing thick coats of leather and other animal skins many of the fighters couldn't identify. Leggings wrapped in rope caught attention, as did cloaks made of what appeared to be fish scales, but didn't glint in the dim sunlight. All of the fighters either had ponytails or braids, and breasts... Eagles gawked. Their rescuers were mostly women!

Angela liked the feel of the strangers as she came face-to-face with them. They put off a sense of fellow Americans instead of the rabid hatred of the refugees. It was a relief.

"I'm Captain Charles Grant."

Grant had the cropped, receding hair of a man who'd spent years wearing hats, and his skin was leathery from exposure to the elements. He looked like a captain. So did his scarred hands and his sun-spotted cheeks. Black haired and blue eyed, he could have fallen off her family tree. The thought made Angela both smile and grimace.

She started to extend her hand in gratitude to the man who came forward to greet her. The sound of an engine roaring toward them jerked her around instead.

Captain Grant pointed at a team of nearby women. "Handle that!"

Angela saw the headlights flash a familiar code. "That's one of mine."

Grant rescinded the order. "Wait."

Everyone watched as an Army truck bounced toward them, crushing fence pieces and dead bodies under the big wheels. As soon as the vehicle was close enough for Eagles to recognize the driver, a small cheer came from Safe Haven.

Marc resented that reaction. Adrian had showed up at the end of the battle. He shouldn't be rewarded for it. Marc ignored the fact that if not for the new people saving them, Adrian would be arriving right now in time to save their asses with whatever he had brought. Marc had hoped Adrian had finally given up his obsession and abandoned Angela.

Never! Adrian brought the truck to a screeching halt a few feet away, sending dust over the strangers. He leaned out the window. "Let Safe Haven go or I'll blow you all up! I've got enough explosives in this truck to take out anyone!"

Marc snorted but secretly approved the ballsy bluff. As his eyes narrowed in on the flattened-out tires, he realized the former leader wasn't bluffing. That vehicle was loaded to the hilt, no doubt with exactly what Adrian was threatening.

"Stand down."

Adrian regarded Angela in confusion at the order. "What?!"

Grant looked at Marc. "He's one of yours?"

Marc was forced to nod. “Just a guard dog. Let us feed him and then we can talk.”

Grant motioned the women sneaking up on the truck to stop and resumed their places.

Adrian stared in confusion, not understanding what was going on.

“They saved our asses.” Kyle went to Adrian’s window. He wasn’t sure if the new people were a threat. He wanted to get between them and Angela.

“Sorry for the interruption.” She extended her hand to Grant. “I’m Angela.” As soon as their skin met, she shoved into his mind to do a deep scan.

Grant stiffened. “You could have just asked.”

His being familiar with her kind didn’t stop her from exploring every door in the man’s mental hallway to verify no evil was lurking there. When she was satisfied, she withdrew, but she didn’t apologize for the invasion of his privacy. “Thank you for the help.”

“We couldn’t let you have all the fun.” Grant let go of her hand as their people exchanged uneasy smiles. “I was sent from the town of Ciemus to see if you need a place to stay for a few days.”

“Where exactly is Ciemus?”

“One hundred miles southeast.” Captain Grant bobbed his head in that direction. “Our town waits for Safe Haven with open arms and heavy security.”

Angela smiled. “It would be our honor.”

Captain Grant shook his head, serious. “No, it’s our honor and we do not take it lightly.”

He picked up his radio, making the Eagles tense. None of them knew what to expect as he keyed the mike.

“Safe Haven is dead! I have captured the leader! Angela’s head is on the front of my truck! I have Safe Haven!”

As if it was planned—Angela was positive afterwards that it had been—other new people added cheers and shouts to prove they had conquered Safe Haven.

“I have the head of the wolf!”

“I’ll trade you my rifle. All I got is the mobster’s Glock.”

As various details were spread around in open, ruthless celebration, the Eagles brought Safe Haven out of the hole. They moved the camp away from the bodies, but not up against the remaining parts of the fence in case any refugees were still lurking. With all of the shrubbery in the area, it was impossible to be sure.

Angela looked at Marc. “Would you like to spend two days inside a high wall, getting clean and resting without being attacked?”

Marc grinned. “Where do I sign up?”

Angela turned to Kenn. “I want an update and Safe Haven ready to travel.”

Kenn immediately began motioning people to help with the chores.

Angela signaled Neil. “You have the kids.”

Neil and his team hurried to provide security.

“Daryl has the rest of the camp, with two Eagle levels.”

Before Angela could direct him to a minor chore, Marc stepped closer. He wasn't leaving her side.

“Have it your way.” Angela shrugged and turned to Adrian instead. “You have point over the bugout. Get busy.”

Stunned, Adrian hopped from the truck and went to join Kenn so they could organize things.

Marc stiffened, but didn't comment. He had forced that choice by refusing to do what she wanted. Such a rookie mistake was embarrassing.

Captain Grant studied all of it, but mostly, Angela. The feel of her in his mind had been incredible and intimidating. She was the most powerful descendant he'd ever met.

Captain Grant's men and women waited in and around their vehicles for orders. While they didn't slack off, they didn't give the feel of a rigid army either. That was comforting to Safe Haven considering they were about to spend two days as guests.

Adrian didn't have problems from the Eagles or the camp as he got them into vehicles and helped with their issues, not even from those who were dismayed to see him or had voted for his banishment. Everyone trusted Adrian to do what was best for the camp. It was a relief to have him here.

Marc was aware of the thoughts, but he had to remain quiet and allow Adrian control over the camp he had betrayed.

Adrian didn't care about any of that. There were still refugees in the area and he didn't know who these new people were. He wanted to get Safe Haven on the road, then ensure their new hosts weren't as dangerous as the bodies they were leaving behind. "Run my truck into the hangar. We'll burn it. Hopefully, everyone will believe we really are dead."

Kyle's team went to handle that. After Kenn, they were the best explosives men in Safe Haven.

Adrian scanned to confirm Kendle and Jennifer were okay, taking a second to wave at the children as they were being loaded into one of the semis. Adrian gestured toward the medic outside that vehicle. *Update?*

Morgan shook his head, signing. *They're all dead. Nothing I can do for them.*

Adrian winced. *How many?*

Five. Morgan went to tell the driver it was okay to move the semi into line with the rest of the convoy.

Adrian made a mental note about the deaths and moved onto the next step of getting out of here.

All around him, the camp observed. They watched the new people, they watched Marc and Angela, but most of all, they watched Adrian. He had always made them feel safe in moments like this

and they were expecting it from him now, despite everything that had happened.

Adrian wanted to give it to them. He knew it would be disrespectful to Marc, but stares from the elderly population as they were loaded into cars and trucks were too expectant. Many of those people had been with Safe Haven the entire time it had existed.

Adrian began delivering smiles, waves, and grins at the people he knew. Pushing the vibe of celebration, he sent them signals they recognized as him being pleased with a victory.

Marc watched in disapproval as Adrian lifted the mood of the camp. As more and more of the camp responded, returning Adrian's gestures with not only politeness, but open welcome, Marc began to boil.

As the last camp members were loaded up and the final vehicle was pulled in line for the convoy, Marc left Angela's side.

Angela didn't interfere, but she did turn to watch, once again disappointed with Marc for having to handle it now, in front of strangers. He still didn't understand that leadership was half showmanship. First appearances mattered.

The Eagles who saw Marc's reaction were upset. They wanted to keep the peace, but their agreement before this battle wouldn't let them. Senior men eased closer to Adrian as Marc approached him.

Adrian was standing at the back of a jeep. Kenn had tossed him the keys to trade for his. That vehicle was about to be rammed into the hangar. Adrian expected to hear it at any moment.

In the livestock trailer, Dog yipped furiously at the sight of Adrian. Marc had refused to let the wolf help with the battle because he was so weak from his trip. Quinn had been in there with him.

Marc's anger hit the roof at Dog's welcome for Adrian. "You're not staying with us!"

Adrian hadn't thought that. "I'll be gone before you guys are."

Marc crossed his arms over his chest and tried to think of something else to express how unhappy he was that Adrian was once again among them.

"It doesn't even matter that I was going to drive the truck in and die in an attempt to save you all?"

It did to the Eagles surrounding the men.

Not to Marc. "No. All of this is your fault!"

"We'd like to talk to you." Kyle was sorry to have to interrupt. "It'll just take a minute."

Marc rounded on him, knowing what was coming. "Don't you threaten me!"

Kyle didn't back down. "I don't see any need to repeat it. And it wasn't a threat. I'm doing it right now."

Before Marc could order him to stop or maybe even swing on him, Kyle looked around to include the other Eagles. "Leadership vote?"

Marc was stunned into silence as every Eagle turned thumbs down. Their silent condemnation

rang through his mind like a hangman pulling the switch. As the rope tightened around his neck, Marc swung around and hit Adrian.

The Eagles hurried to break it up, not caring that Adrian wasn't defending himself. Every second they delayed here put Safe Haven in fresh danger.

Marc jerked away to stomp toward Angela.

"I'm calling a vote on Adrian," Kyle's voice rang out. "Do I have support for that?"

Marc turned around to deny it.

"Aye!" The chorus came from everyone who had witnessed the short fight.

It hurt Marc to know how many of the camp members agreed. "He's a traitor! How can you do this?!"

No one wanted to answer. Everyone liked Marc. The only one who would, was Adrian and he did it silently.

Because I built this. They remember that. I earned their loyalty a long time ago.

But you destroyed it by lying!

I've earned that back 10 times over.

Not with me!

No, never with you. That's why you were just booted out of leadership. You've never been able to put them first, but I always do, no matter what it costs me. Until you can do that, you aren't worthy to lead. They all know it.

Kyle tossed Adrian the keys he had lost during the struggle. He motioned toward the rear of the convoy, where most of the Eagles would be riding.

Adrian went that way, but he wasn't proud. Instead, there was nervous anger. Even though his banishment might be lifted, he wasn't going to be with Safe Haven yet. He didn't know why, but the feeling was unmistakable. For whatever reason, Marc was going to get what he wanted. Because of that, Adrian's unhappiness allowed him a humility that made Marc look even worse.

To add insult to injury, several Eagles climbed into the jeep with Adrian in an open show of support.

Marc turned around to find Angela and Captain Grant observing everything. When she stared back impassively, not reversing the choices, Marc was crushed.

If you had waited, I would have told you he isn't staying. Angela's voice in his mind was brutal, without mercy.

"The vote stands." Angela took in a breath and did what she'd hoped she would never have to. "Marc, you have been removed from the Safe Haven Council and all leadership chores until such time as the Eagles change their decision. They have voted you out and only they can bring you back in."

Chapter Twenty-Five
Last Call

1

Marc opened his mouth to shout.

Please don't. Cody appeared in Marc's line of sight, staring up at his father. *It's hurting her to do this. She wouldn't have if you hadn't embarrassed her in front of the new people. The Eagles didn't want to do it either.* Cody took a step closer and put a hand on his dad's wrist. *Please? For me?*

Marc stared at the boy, trying to accept his punishment. He couldn't seem to help his anger at Adrian. *Maybe they're right. Maybe I can't overlook the personal issues to see his value.*

Cody shook his head. *No, you're absolutely right about him. Adrian's dangerous.*

Marc scowled. *Then why are we letting him off scot-free?!*

Cody pointed at the camp, moving in a half circle that included everyone.

Marc hated the answer. Most of the time, doing something for the greater good only served the greater bad.

Cody's fingers tightened on Marc's wrist. *We'll have time together now. It might be fun.*

The boy slowly began to get through Marc's rage. He forced himself to give a curt nod.

The people around them assumed he was responding to Angela, but she didn't. She waited for him to look at her to be certain it was over. She didn't want to do any of this. She had no idea what this would do to their personal relationship.

"I'm sorry. I accept your decision." It was hard for Marc to say.

Angela motioned toward her empty bodyguard position. "I always need that covered."

Marc came forward to take the spot he'd had during their trip to Safe Haven. As he moved into place, Cody at his side, he heard Angela give a sigh he hadn't heard in months. It only came when she felt safe. Because of that, Marc vowed to figure out whether the Eagles were wrong or he was.

He needed to know by the time they reached the boat. If he was right, Adrian couldn't be allowed to go with them. Marc would never be able to let go of this vendetta. If the Eagles were right, then Marc needed to stay here while Adrian and Angela took care of Safe Haven or he would eventually snap and kill Adrian in front of everyone. That ending was inevitable.

Captain Grant waved toward his vehicle. "Will you ride with me?"

Angela nodded before Marc could speak up, annoyed for the embarrassment. She could already tell Grant's people didn't allow refusal of orders. She had been able to tell by the way Grant's eyes

had narrowed. Marc had cost her a small layer of respect with these people. That would have to be regained at some point.

Marc picked up the thought and was wise enough not to comment. He sent her a silent apology, but didn't get an answer. Feeling the coldness, he dropped his chin.

Captain Grant admired the silent leadership. He led the couple toward his vehicle, not filling their ears with useless chatter that would be repeated once they reached his town. It was obvious Safe Haven had been in need of a break long before they'd been trapped.

Angela appreciated the consideration. As she climbed into Grant's netted vehicle, Kenn came up in the lead Safe Haven truck, with the convoy behind him. When Captain Grant pulled out—Safe Haven's vehicles in the center and then his own people—six jeeps of strangers brought up the rear to provide an escort few refugees left from the battle were brave enough to challenge. Sticky bombs quickly dispatched those who did approach. With fresh explosions and gunfire echoing overtop the new screams, Safe Haven rolled out of the Naval Station Meridian. A few rookies had been hit in the crossfire, but the price was lower than Safe Haven had expected to pay. It was a miracle that any of them had survived.

“This doesn’t mean you’ve been forgiven.” Kyle was in the passenger seat of the jeep. “None of us have forgotten how much drama you brought into the camp or how much pain you caused Marc. We like Marc. None of us wanted to do that to him.”

Adrian sighed. “I didn’t want it to come to that either. If Safe Haven hadn’t been in danger, I wouldn’t be here now.”

“We believe that, so we supported you. For whatever reason, fate decided you’re supposed to lead Safe Haven to the Promised Land. Now, I personally don’t believe all that bullshit, but most of this camp does. You have our support as long as you walk the line, but if it comes down to it again, we’ll pick Marc over you.”

Adrian grunted. “I’d pick Marc over me too.”

“Are we going to set it up with him the way we did Conner?” Morgan was in the backseat. He didn’t like Adrian’s bitter pain. “Cause I don’t think Marc will go for that.”

Kyle had hoped this moment wouldn’t come, so he hadn’t planned any further than how to get Marc to back down. “Ideas?”

“I don’t want to cause a rebellion.” Adrian steered over a pile of bodies. “The boss will have jobs for me and I’ll do them. Other than that, I’ll stay out of sight.”

“She won’t handle things that way now.” No one had been surprised when Kendle got into the jeep, except for Adrian. “Safe Haven likes seeing you.”

“The boss will give me jobs and I’ll do them.”

“What do you think the jobs will be?” Greg ignored Adrian’s firm attempts to shut them down. Greg had piled in the rear with the other Special Forces members and Kendle. This jeep was packed with killers.

“Training, I would imagine.” Adrian followed the vehicles in front of him.

Kyle pushed. “What else?”

“Descendant classes, plans for stops along the way and people we run into. Travel routes, dangers on the island...” Adrian snapped his mouth shut as he realized what they were doing. He didn’t need the reminder of how important the information in his brain was to the survival of their camp. It was killing him not to use it, but he had rules to follow and he was going to.

Kyle and the others left Adrian alone in favor of scanning the battlefield as Safe Haven left the Naval Station.

Adrian stared at Angela in the mirror and tried hard to think of anything except for how happy he was just to be able to see her.

In the truck ahead of them, Angela did the same.

“Why is Marc flipping out?” Kendle thought they’d formed a truce before the UN run and then settled the rest of it while removing Kobi and his thugs.

“We’re not trapped in a mountain anymore.”

She frowned at Greg. “What does that mean?”

Adrian grimaced. “It means our truce is over. He wants me gone and that’s all he can see.”

“I think he figured out how she lied.” Kendle pointed. “I tried to tell you guys during the UN run, but you called me jealous.”

“Tell me again?”

“He was promised if he built a perfect society, the Creator would remove you from their lives, right?” Kendle was verifying her own theories on what Marc and Adrian had talked about between beatings in the vet’s RV.

“Yes.” Adrian knew the people here could be trusted.

Kendle shook her head. “He can’t build it, which means he can’t get rid of you—ever.”

Adrian grunted. “The killing.”

“Yep. We’re always going to be needed for this. He’s bitter beyond belief over it.”

“I think it is possible.” Kyle had already known because Jennifer told him. “The killers have to get the camp to a safe place and then leave.”

Everyone thought of Angela’s words about the return trip.

“We’re coming back from that island alone.”

Kendle nodded at Kyle’s grave tone. “Yes. Right when we’re finally learning to be peaceful again, we’ll be sent back out to act like animals. For us, the island will only be a break between fights.”

“Are you sorry you didn’t get to fight?”

“No.” Conner was surprised that Candy was talking to him. Stuffed into a van with eight other twitching camp members, Conner hadn’t been sure if she’d be okay with having a conversation right now. Daryl was driving, which meant every word would get back to Angela.

Candy swiveled her seat so they were facing, ignoring the others who observed in surprise. “Lee would have wanted to fight.”

Conner shrugged. “My job was to stay with the camp. I did. So did Charlie and a few others.”

“Were you scared?”

“Sure. Weren’t you?”

“I mean, is that why you let her put you in the hole where you couldn’t fight?”

Conner scowled. “She knows what it might do to me to take a life force. I’m not a coward.”

“She didn’t know it would be needed.”

“It’s a mistake to think the alpha didn’t know.”

Candy frowned. “If Angela knew, why would she take us there?”

“Where else could we have gone?”

“I don’t know... Someplace easier to defend or higher up, maybe?”

“I have maps in the glovebox if you want to pick the next spot.” Daryl didn’t like the disrespect.

“She doesn’t mean it toward the boss.” Conner’s tone was wounded.

“Ah.” Daryl met Candy’s eye. “He’s a Mitchel. If he takes lifeforces, he’ll become a corrupt Mitchel. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

Candy shook her head, cheeks reddening.

“That’s why the boss put him in a safe space. If the enemy had reached the camp, Conner would have repeated his actions from the UN fight at the mountain.”

“Why didn’t Angela have you use it?” Candy remembered the powerful scenes. “You have strong gifts.”

“She wants me to stay good so I can remain with Safe Haven.”

Even after the other descendants leave?

Conner looked at her in surprise. *How do you know that?*

I just got it from your mind.

Now Conner flushed. He’d left the mental door open between them during the fight so he would know if she needed help. He’d forgotten to shut it and she’d gone exploring.

I’m sorry.

Are you upset with what you found?

Candy shook her head, aware of Daryl frowning over their switch to a conversational format he couldn’t snoop on.

Conner grinned. “Cool.”

Candy returned to her previous point to keep from smiling. “If Angela knew, why would she put the camp in open danger?”

“You want to know if she was aware of the strangers coming to rescue us.”

“Yes. Did she do it this way so she didn’t have to face a vote after convincing our camp to give these people a chance?”

“It’s a mistake to assume the alpha doesn’t know anything—including the way things are changing between us.” Conner dropped his head as he shut the connection. “I promised I’d give it a month before I started chasing you openly. It’s only been 16 days.”

Candy didn’t even flinch. “Should I stay away from you until then?”

Her reaction allowed Conner to give her the truth in front of witnesses. “It would make it easier, but no. I like you. I want the world to know you aren’t afraid of me.”

Candy pointed at a travel game stuck in the back of Daryl’s seat. “Beat me up at Battleship?”

Conner laughed. “It would be my honor.”

Daryl stopped observing the couple. They were already bonding as far as he could tell. The Eagle’s fears of Conner doing something to win Candy’s heart were well founded. It was obvious the boy was in love. If Candy developed the same affliction, it might work out. If she didn’t, life in Safe Haven might become very ugly for Conner. Daryl planned to point out this moment in time. She was playing with fire even though she knew it was likely to burn her. That wasn’t the fire’s fault. It was hers.

“Do you have descendants in your town?” It was the first words spoken since they’d left the Naval station two hours ago.

Grant didn’t take his eyes from the road. He was searching for signs that anyone had come through since he’d left this morning. “You’ll talk to the boss when we arrive.”

Angela approved the caution. She didn’t rush to assure the man that they weren’t a threat. It was obvious that they were. On a better day, Safe Haven could give anyone a run for their money.

Mindful of the boss’s orders to make them welcome, Grant pointed. “You’ll see our wall in a minute. We built it right after the war from the homes of those who died, and those who left and never returned. That area is where the boss has assigned you quarters for the duration of your stay. We’ve added a few things we thought you might need.”

“Thank you.” Instead of staring where he pointed, Angela shifted against Marc to view their driver. “Safe Haven has many descendants.”

Grant grunted at her obvious attempt to trade information. “I’d like to, but I have orders.”

“Excellent.” Angela leaned against Marc’s stiff shoulder and shut her eyes. “Men and women who can follow orders, even when they don’t want to, are a blessing.”

Captain Grant was unaccustomed to the type of approval Angela had just given. It was part of the reason their town didn't have drama. Uneasy due to the observations he'd made about Safe Haven, Grant steered onto the final road to his town. He was one of the few people who had voted against helping the harangued refugee camp, but only because of the trouble that seemed to follow them to every site. Ciemus had been monitoring the radios hourly for information.

Marc had questions, but he wasn't sure if he was allowed to ask. He made a mental list, swallowing a fresh wave of embarrassment. He couldn't believe this had happened.

Marc flushed a deep red as Angela nodded. She didn't say all of them were shocked. That was obvious.

"I'll let the boss know you have magic users. I'm sure she'll give us a day to get everyone settled before we try to introduce people."

Angela sighed. "That would probably be best."

The tone was meek enough to draw Marc's attention from his problems. He didn't like it when she sounded that way. No one did.

Angela forced more pep into her voice. "Do you allow guns?"

"Of course." Grant shifted gears on the truck, slowing the convoy for the next curve. "We don't let anyone in we can't trust, so it's not a problem."

Marc opened his mouth to ask how they verified that trust.

Angela's finger pressed into his leg.

It was a reminder of his punishment. Marc's anger rose again.

Angela sighed. *It's not always about you, Marc. I'm trying to do something here. Work with me or just watch!*

Stinging, Marc brought down his mental walls.

Angela let the silence and tension build. She was feeling Grant out, testing his loyalty by digging for small bits of information that wouldn't be possible once they were around his people. Everyone knew humans had one face they revealed to the world and a different one for when they were alone. Angela had been hoping to get the man to relax enough so he might reveal anything she needed to be concerned about.

The mirror on Marc's side glinted off the rear vehicles of the convoy, grabbing his attention. He fell into a replay of his humiliation.

Finally able to concentrate, Angela opened her eyes. Grant was stealing looks at her blood-crusted face and hair. By the way he was reacting, it was clear she could use the alpha draw to get information from him if she needed to. She hoped she didn't. It would be easier if these people were open and honest. She was tired of spending energy to scan people who had perfected such mental walls over the years that it took multiple attempts to get through and in that time, allowed the traitors to betray them.

It had happened in Safe Haven repeatedly and she was always on the lookout for a solution. So far, Jennifer was their only hope. She was the strongest mental shield the camp had, along with possessing an extra set of skills that went with being an Enforcer. When there was time for Jennifer to explore and strengthen those gifts, no one would be able to get into Safe Haven who wasn't worthy. Until then, they were doing the best they could.

A tall shadow came up on the horizon, filling in to become a wall running the length of the landscape in both directions. Moldy and covered in stains that could be dried blood or mud, the wall stood out in house-sized chunks of different patterns, shapes, and colors. As they drove closer, a wide section of the fence slid behind itself to reveal a 20-foot entrance that Grant immediately took them to.

The outside of the wall sent shivers over Safe Haven. Spotted in droppings and mud, it looked like a prison. Doubts about the decision to go in flooded the convoy.

Grant did a fast check of his mirrors to verify the rear vehicles were the same. They'd had issues in the past where refugees had tried to fall in line as they returned from a scavenging run.

The gate was fully opened by the time they reached it, allowing Grant to drive them straight in. He couldn't help feeling proud. They'd survived here for almost a year since the war. It was a big accomplishment.

Safe Haven vehicles rolled through the gate and got their first look at where they were staying. The tension faded a notch. The town was completely enclosed by the wall. Sentries on duty atop that two-foot thick barrier waved in welcome and then resumed scanning the wilderness.

The inside of the town gave a vastly different impression than the outside, allowing more people to relax as they rolled through the gate. The clean streets and smiling locals were a welcome sight, as were people coming and going without signs of fear or abuse. There was even a *WELCOME!* banner hanging over one wall panel.

Grant took them toward an area that looked like it had been hit by the tornado Safe Haven recently survived. People quickly realized the missing houses were still here, in the wall.

Now that they understood the reason for such barrenness in one area of town, people turned to speculating on where they would be put up. When the lead truck pulled around the bare lots and went toward a four-story hotel that faced the exit, cheers broke out. It really was a rescue.

5

“Nice form.”

Grant smirked. “Thanks. I train daily.”

Angela chuckled at his joke. She’d meant the welcome setup.

Grant pulled into the front of the hotel, where people were standing under the canopies and awnings of the lavish hotel. Five smiling townsmen edged the entryway on each side of the main glass doors, with a line of at least 50 more men and women waiting to their right. A slender woman in a black suit was standing directly in front of the entryway with two men who were obviously her security.

Marc stepped from the rig, but only held the door, making it clear he was also security. As he realized the weight of the camp was now off his shoulders, Marc was able to do the job without revealing his resentment to the people watching every move he made.

Angela looked at Grant before exiting the truck, giving him a taste of what he'd been secretly hoping for—proof that she was as powerful as he'd heard. She sent a tiny blast of alpha waves to swirl around him. “As long as they're good, Safe Haven will take any of your people who want to go with us. Now, stop worrying.”

Grant gaped.

Angela resisted the urge to pat his arm as if he were one of her Eagles. He reminded her strongly of them. “We don't have such rigid leadership and rules in Safe Haven. There's nothing wrong with wanting a different life—an *open* life. You'll just have to fight for it, like the rest of us. It's our only requirement for good people.” She slid out of the truck with the first seed planted.

Grant waited for her to secure the door and then pulled the truck over to the line of waiting town drivers. As he exited the truck and fell in on Angela's flank, the movement felt so right that it was impossible not to consider her offer.

One of the waiting people in the long line hurried into the truck and drove it away so the next Safe Haven vehicle could roll forward. Carrying the women, kids, and weaker members, it took a while for the semi to be unloaded.

While Adrian and the Eagles handled it, Angela went to meet the woman who had saved their lives.

The mayor was a tightly wired, coiffed blonde of Angela's height, but much thinner. Her prominent cheekbones and thin wrists implied the town needed more food, but the fighters were strapping specimens that made the males in Safe Haven stare in open desire. Big women with flexing muscles hurried to help close the hand-cranked gate.

Angela was able to hear some of the town's comments as more of her camp disembarked.

"That really is Safe Haven!"

"I see Adrian Mitchel!"

"And that's the Ghost!"

"How do you know?"

"He's the tallest, of course."

Angela hid a snicker.

The security in every direction was female. It led Safe Haven to assume the draft had taken the men, and the women here had stepped up to defend their town. Wearing jeans and plaid shirts, they

appeared more like lumberjacks than the fishermen they obviously were. The smell was prominent as the wind shifted, bringing attention to boats, decals about fighting, signs, and the distinctive shape of a cannery.

The mayor had been waiting impatiently for Angela to come under the canopy, observing it all with sharp intelligence.

Marc noticed. He wasn't sensing evil in the town, but he did find their leader to be too strict. Without knowing he and Angela agreed on that, he kept his opinions to himself, not wanting to anger her more than he already had. There would be time for his observations later, in notes or messages sent through other people if she didn't want to talk to him. He wasn't certain how things would go once the camp settled for the night, but the hotel probably had a couch. He expected to be on it.

Angela held out her hand, dropping her defenses so she would be able to get a deep scan of the woman in charge of such an organized town.

The mayor wasn't quite as willing to drop her defenses. She slid her hand against Angela's in a reluctant gesture. It told everyone she was intimidated by her guests. Since most of them were covered in drying blood, it was understandable.

Some of the men on duty around them, both Eagles and townsmen, moved closer in response to the mayor's nerves. The Eagles assumed if the woman felt threatened, Angela might be doing something that required backup.

Angela held up a finger to let her army know there wasn't a problem.

Donna was busy adjusting to the feel of Angela in her mind and didn't react at all.

"Let the ladies talk." Grant was now standing by the front of the semi where more of Safe Haven's women and children were being unloaded.

The townspeople immediately responded to the order, some snapping salutes at Grant. It was obvious he had a well-respected place here.

I'm Angela.

Donna.

Why did you help us?

We need something from you.

What?

I don't want to talk about it now.

Pausing in the mental conversation, Angela studied the woman's deeper thoughts while waiting for her to say more.

Despite being intimidated, Donna refused to give in. She kept the locks on her secrets and stared back with practiced defiance.

Angela slowly withdrew and let go of the woman's hand. "Give me your word as mayor of this town that we'll be protected here, and Safe Haven will consider any reasonable request you make."

The mayor's face dissolved into aging lines of relief. "Thank God. Yes, you have my word."

Angela circled her finger in the air.

A full Eagle team immediately surrounded them.

“We’re all yours.”

The listening locals let out a cheer.

Safe Haven men responded enthusiastically.

Women smiled back and delivered hair tosses that encouraged the Eagles to flash gestures and invitations. Angela would have scolded her army for such behavior, but the mayor was beaming at her women, telling Angela this was a planned welcome. Still, she felt the need to remind her men of their duty. Angela whistled sharply.

Eagles spun around, some even drawing guns to face the danger.

The townswomen let out oohs of admiration.

Angela rolled her eyes and let it go. She could already tell how things were going to go here.

“It doesn’t look like there will be trouble between the camps. That’s wonderful.”

Angela nodded at the mayor’s happy comment. Safe Haven needed the break.

Donna led the way into the hotel, now babbling. “We’ve been listening to you on the radio since right after the war. All of us have been rooting for you and waiting for you to reach us. We’ve been gathering things to help, though I didn’t realize we were going to have to be fighting while traveling until recently. Captain Grant improvised many of the techniques that were used to help you today.”

Angela stored the information. Grant was a captain and a battle planner. *Awesome. I need more of those.*

“We’ll put all your vehicles right behind the hotel so you can access them. My town will stay away. They have orders not to approach you. I’m sure you’ll put up your own security, but it isn’t needed. We have people on the wall at all hours of the night and day.”

“Do you have a lot of problems?” Marc couldn’t help but ask.

“No, thankfully. Almost everyone in this town lived here before the war. We were friends and neighbors, except for about two dozen we’ve given shelter to since the apocalypse. We didn’t even have our first attempt to breach the wall until Safe Haven disappeared into the mountain...” Donna looked over her shoulder at the rag-tag groups walking in behind them, pulling a face.

She isn’t convinced we’re the legend. Angela gave Marc a subtle gesture.

Marc let his eyes glow crimson.

Dog, fresh out of the livestock trailer, trotted up to Marc and took his place.

Eagles around them searched for the threat.

Donna’s edge of worry faded. “I’m sorry. I needed to be sure.”

So far, the woman hadn’t demonstrated a descendant ability. Marc wondered if she was really the power here.

She isn’t.

Angela's voice in his mind didn't seem upset. Marc pushed aside thoughts of what might happen between them later. She didn't sound angry.

Angela mentally rolled her eyes this time and followed the mayor into the large lobby of the hotel. It was easily big enough to hold all of them.

The hotel looked like any other Holiday Inn. The lobby had plush furniture and freshly scrubbed windows that welcomed them. Smells of hot food and cleaned rooms filled noses and brought tears to their eyes. In the old world, it had been a cheap place to spend the night. It hadn't even been on the radar for wealthier folks, but it was heaven to Safe Haven. The lights in the lobby, and the clerks behind the desk, were indescribable. Most of the camp had believed they would never experience this again.

“Sanctuary.”

The word was repeated through the crowd while they waited.

Donna waved toward the elevator, drawing attention to the fact that they had power. “We put you on the top floor, if that's okay?”

“My guards will pick my location, but thank you.”

Donna shrugged, not certain if it was an insult or normal procedure. She settled for believing what made her happy and gave another bright smile. “We have food and water in all the rooms. There's running water and electricity in half the bathrooms. It would have been all of them, but we didn't have

time. Honestly, we thought you'd died in the mountain."

"Many of us did." Angela hated to be rude, but as Eagles and camp members filled the lounge, she ended the reception. "I need to get them settled."

Donna waved at Grant. "Stay until they don't need you."

Grant had already planned on it.

"We assumed you would need a little time to yourselves." Donna ended the face-to-face. "We'll come to collect you for breakfast. Your entire camp is expected by our cooks." Donna smiled, trying to ease their dislike of her first requirement. "Breakfast here is at noon and we always have it together. It's the only good thing about the apocalypse. We get to sleep late every day."

Safe Haven's people groaned in longing at the thought. They had always been first shift people, even in the mountain.

"Thank you, for everything."

"It's our honor."

Angela watched the woman leave, wondering what she wanted. This type of generosity hadn't come free before the war and prices had doubled since then. *Whatever it is, I'll try to pay it. I hate leaving debts.*

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ciemus

1

“**G**et the floors cleared.” Angela waved at Kenn, then Adrian. “You have the vehicles and outside perimeter.”

Eagles hurried off.

Marc’s attitude improved slightly as Adrian left the lobby.

“Is there anything you need?” Grant didn’t want to intrude. He’d just realized how weary some of the people were.

“Honestly? No. You’ve given us a safe place to sleep. That’s honestly all we’ve ever needed from the survivors around us.”

Grant liked the answers he received from Angela, but he didn’t care for the personal tensions and attitudes of some of her members.

“You’re not viewing us at our best.” Angela frowned at him. “Now please, stop trying to make up your mind. I need to work.”

Grant flushed in surprised embarrassment. He hadn’t been put in his place in a long time and certainly not by a stranger he’d only known for a couple of hours. Grant looked around to see who had noticed and found her security guard smirking.

She gets all of us like that.

Grant hadn't known Marc was also a descendant. It explained more of the dynamic of Safe Haven and let him understand there would probably always be issues like these as long as they had a leader who used the alpha pull.

"What is it for, if not to be used?" Jennifer wanted to say more, but she could feel Angela's disapproval.

Grant found the owner of the voice to be a teenager walking by with a baby in one arm and a mobster on the other. While the baby was adorable, the Italian was intimidating. He was splattered with dry blood. His expression said he liked it.

Jennifer scanned Grant and nodded. *Safe Haven has room for you.* The fight had given her a new evolution. It would be impossible for anyone to keep her out now, except for the boss.

Grant stared. *So much power in one camp has to be dangerous.*

Eagles began to direct groups into elevators as other sentries cleared the floors. They were going to abide by the normal schedule and routines as much as they could, but word was flying about hot water. The thought of spending two days in a hotel, with amenities, had lifted the tension so much that people were now arguing about who was going to get on the elevators first.

Jennifer hadn't seen Safe Haven this eager to get settled since the trip they'd made to rescue the boss. It was amusing. Jennifer decided to stand next

to Angela and enjoy the feel. Safe Haven had survived. Everyone could tell by the grouching and laughing. Real life always sounded that way.

The front door opened as a townsman with no hair and huge hands entered. He came straight to Grant.

“This is Bucky. He’ll tell you anything you need to know about Ciemus.”

Kenn shook hands with the man, noting his chipped-tooth grin. “Dentists are hard to come by.”

Grant laughed. “Actually, Bucky did it himself so the ladies would stop drugging his drinks during dinner and then following him home.”

Kenn gawked. “Excuse me?”

Bucky’s cheeks had gone scarlet.

Grant answered for him. “Before the war, he was a masseuse who...made house calls. After the war, there was only one of him to go around.”

Kenn couldn’t stop his belly laugh. “You lucky bastard!”

Angela snickered with her Eagles.

Bucky shook his head, serious. “I can’t even take a dumper, man, without one of them handing me her stash of paper! It’s awful!”

“Did the chipped tooth help you avoid the attention?”

Bucky snorted. “No, but they do cook me special soup now.”

Kenn laughed harder. “Our guys are going to love it here if the bosses allow people to meet.”

“Oh, we’re counting on that,” Bucky informed him hastily. “You guys can take the load off us for a while!”

Kenn was wiping away tears as he walked over to sort the next load of elevator passengers. His good vibes helped the mood and pleased the boss.

“Mandatory camp meeting during dinner.” As the elevator took the first group up, Angela looked at Jennifer. “Make it happen.”

Jennifer had been expecting it. Everyone had. Marc tensed.

Cody ran over from the group of kids.

Marc let Cody take him to the elevators, where the father and son squeezed into the next group and went upstairs.

Cheeks once again red at being embarrassed in front of Grant, Angela let out a deep sigh. “I’ve thought about locking down on all of us, but we’d be dead. Our gifts keep us alive. That’s the only consolation when I think about all of the bullshit in this camp.” Angela motioned the next group to get in line and walked over to sort them out before Jennifer or Grant could respond.

Kenn stepped back to let her, glad the annoyance wasn’t directed at him or Tonya, who was already upstairs. She’d found the fire exits and snipped the alarm to go exploring. Kenn had spotted her entering the cafeteria as he came back. The baby was giving her a very healthy appetite.

Jennifer looked at the sleeping baby in her arms and thought about the little boy who should be in the other one. Kenn's reflections had sent her there.

As her wave of sadness expanded, it hit the man next to her and caused him to draw in a deep breath of air to steady himself. Grant wanted to grab the teenager and hug her, to tell her he was so sorry for her loss that he would do anything he could to ease her pain.

Kyle growled.

Angela pointed him toward the elevators.

2

"Have you seen this town, man?" Eagles were in the halls, about to go on duty or come off.

"I see paradise."

"It's not safe."

"Safe? I mean the women! What the hell are you talking about?"

Kevin fell silent, again being laughed at. He didn't feel bonding. He was the odd man out.

"We have five minutes until duty. Is that enough time to hit the top level with our glasses?"

"Hey! Great idea."

"Always choose the high ground," Ivan quipped as he dug in his kit. The thigh injury stung as the fresh stitches pulled, but he ignored it. "Take it all so we aren't late."

“Where are you three going?” Kyle asked from the doorway of the room, noting Kevin going in the opposite direction.

The soldiers shared grins, not sure what to say.

Ivan limped forward. “Pre-duty recon, *sir!*”

Kyle’s lips twitched. “Well, get on it then.”

The men ran by him, laughing. It was nice to have them all happy for a change. *This place might be good for us.*

“Hot water!”

“Toilet paper!”

“Light switches that work!”

Kyle grinned as a group of damp camp women in fluffy hotel towels ran by, giggling. Civilization definitely had its rewards.

“Let me look!”

Peter handed the glasses to James and took his turn guarding the end of the hallway where the exits and elevator stared in reproach. Angela wasn’t up here right now, so they’d been able to get by the guard at the opposite end who had already been doing his own recon.

“What do you see?” Ivan led his men.

“Bras hanging on wash lines, frilly curtains in most of the windows... Women on duty spots all along the wall...” James lowered the glasses to peer at his team leader. “They don’t have a lot of men.”

“Give that soldier a gold star.”

“Wow. Saved our asses and short on men. It’s like we’ve lucked into an old sci-fi show.”

“I sure hope not.”

James frowned, confused. “What?”

“Something always flipped at the end of those or the monsters came out just before the hero could leave. I’d like this to just be a nice, calm place with a lot of horny women.”

Riotous laughter filled the upper hall.

“Can we take a shower with us, along with a few of the hot tubs?”

“If you can fill ‘em.”

“Funny. I mean on the boat.”

“The ship has that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. What did you think? People were on a cruise for a week and cleaned up in the pools?”

“They have pools?”

“And saunas, hot tubs, bars, clubs. Has it all.”

“That makes me feel better about the boss’s choice.”

“Good. Now get to your post before I mark you late.”

“What about him?” James was watching the parking area now.

Ivan remembered his observations during his time with Adrian. “We’ll support whatever makes the boss happy. We can’t go wrong there.”

3

Adrian stayed outside even after security was up, not caring about the cold, early evening rain or

the stares from Eagles, camp members, and strangers. After helping get Safe Haven's vehicles parked and animals cared for, he planned to take care of anything else the camp needed. Thanks to Eagles walking by talking about it, Adrian knew Angela had called a meeting. Despite what Kyle had told Marc, lifting his banishment had to come from the camp. Adrian was full of tension about the way it would go. In a moment like this, he'd assumed whoever the Eagles supported would win, but it wasn't a guarantee when your opponent was someone like Marc. Adrian expected the vote to be close.

Also working outside, Conner nodded at his father as he went by, but he didn't stop to talk. Conner didn't want to be tagged for slacking off, but he also wanted to get back inside as soon as he could. He and Candy had made plans to finish the Battleship tournament they'd started during the ride.

"We're all done here." Greg stepped out of the last truck. He'd stayed out here to get things settled before he went in to get comfortable. With all the security and the good vibes, Greg was hoping he would be able to get a full eight hours sleep for the first time since they'd left the mountain. He expected it to be delicious. *And if one of the lonely camp or townswomen want to have sex when I wake up, that'll make it even better.*

Adrian chuckled at Greg's thought. Men were basic creatures. The surprise had been to learn that

women were too. What they considered to be basic was what a man considered to be a lot of work, however. Once he'd figured that out, it had been easy to seduce his way through a lifetime of females who had all been longing for a man who understood them. Of all the females he had loved, or allowed to love him, only two had mattered. One was dead and the other was thinking about him. He could feel it through their bond. Adrian didn't try to communicate with her. What had happened with Marc was hurting her. He wasn't going to make it worse.

Come in.

Adrian swallowed a protest and did as Marc ordered. He entered the lobby to find it empty except for a skeleton crew of guards. One from each team, the men were yawning and rubbing their eyes in an effort to stay awake. Adrian was certain Angela would call a shift change soon.

“In there.”

Adrian went where the guards pointed, finding a small bar in the rear of the lobby. Marc was sitting there waiting for him.

Adrian tensed, stopping.

Nose swarmed with the smells of fresh whiskey and old memories, Marc nudged a full shot glass with his finger. “Begin with that and we'll go from there.”

Adrian reluctantly joined him at the bar. He drank the shot with a shudder and set the glass on

the golden-edged wooden counter. “You can’t buy me.”

Marc glared at him through the mirror behind the bar, where half a dozen bottles of alcohol stared back in temptation. “They’re going to lift your banishment.”

“Maybe. It will still be conditional.”

“You and Angela would like it to be a unanimous vote.”

Adrian spotted the trap. “You got me like that with the last one. I can’t trust you now.”

“Have you ever trusted me?”

“No. I’ve only ever trusted one person on this planet.”

“Angela.”

“My mother.”

Marc snorted. He didn’t say that woman had to be Satan incarnate.

Adrian was trying to figure out Marc’s reason for this chat. They both had more important things to do. “What are you doing?”

“I want to break one of the bonds.”

Adrian had been hoping Marc would forget what he’d told him in the cold car before he left. “Mine *can’t* be broken.”

Marc swiveled on the stool and leaned against the bar to stare at Adrian. “What about the other?”

Adrian yawned. Now that the battle was over and the adrenaline rush was gone, his hip was hurting from where Marc had tackled him.

“I know it can be. I know because you told me so.”

Adrian really wished he'd kept his mouth shut. “It won't work until she's desperate.” Adrian shoved the bottle back at his nemesis. “I don't want to drink with you.”

“I don't want to live in a camp with you.” Marc poured a shot and downed it.

When he shoved the bottle this time, Adrian caught it and poured. He would have sipped, but his ego refused. He swallowed the shot and gasped for air.

“She already is desperate.”

Marc's mutter was unexpected. Adrian caught the images and replays, seeing how much time Angela had been spending either sleeping, hiding, or helping with the children. Even now, she was assisting the den mothers who were getting the kids fed and cleaned, then settled for the night so Safe Haven could have a meeting. “I don't think that's enough. She has to be on the edge of giving me what I want. You would have to trust me to do the right thing. I could get through to her right then and break the hold *you* have over her.”

Marc wasn't as concerned with that. “I trust Angie to do the right thing.”

Adrian watched Marc take the next shot. He shook his head when the bottle thumped against his hand and almost fell over. He caught it. “I'll scan her because I owe you, but it's not going to work

yet. We haven't been away from each other long enough."

"Excuse me?"

Both men turned to find Kenn in the doorway.

"I'm sorry, but the boss wants a second team sent out to secure the boat site and collect our missing men. She said for Adrian to lead it."

Marc looked at Adrian with his brow up.

Adrian shrugged. "I'll have to scan her first, but a few more days should add to it. If she's as bad off as you think, it could work."

Marc waved Kenn to go away. "Tell me how to set it up."

"I have to scan her first." Because of the debt he owed for seducing the man's woman, Adrian couldn't refuse. There were always rules to deals like these and this time, he had to pay. "The mayor of this town is not going to open the wall now that it's dark. I won't be able to leave until morning."

Marc frowned. He didn't understand what that had to do with their conversation. "So?"

"So I want to spend tonight alone with her in exchange for this."

"Agreed."

Adrian stared at the fast answer. "What?"

Marc leaned in, sneering. "I was expecting something like that. I know what a piece of work you are. I don't have a problem with it because I trust Angela, but even if she does let you have your way, so what? The bond will be broken and you'll

be away from her while I'm holding her every night after this."

"Does it hurt to carry so much hate in your heart?"

"You know it." Marc waited for other demands Adrian might make. When there was none, he stood up, fighting the buzz he had from the alcohol. "Someone will show you to your suite."

Adrian flushed at Marc's victorious sarcasm, but he didn't rescind the request. What Marc wanted would sever the strongest bond between them and eventually lead to his hold over Angela fading so much that it didn't interfere with the couple anymore. One night of her life was a small price to pay, but Marc was going to hurt their relationship further by suggesting this. Adrian would leave on the boat run in the morning, probably after having spent all night in his vehicle while waiting for daylight.

Adrian poured himself another shot.

4

"You want me to do what?"

"You heard me." Marc handed Neil a sheet of paper he could show the others to prove the order was valid, but he didn't think it was going to be a problem. After the camp lifted Adrian's banishment, the Eagles would be so busy congratulating him that they wouldn't think anything about Adrian being sent to Angela's room.

They would assume it was for an update or reward, and that the man would leave afterward.

Neil moved off to do as ordered, confused but not willing to challenge Marc on the decision. In fact, he was a little relieved. The Eagles had been planning a way to get Adrian and Angela alone together like both of them obviously needed. This way, they wouldn't have to.

Marc walked through the first-floor hall, not peering into rooms where the camp was settling in. A few of them were already asleep. The feel of the hotel was good and so was the town. If not for his personal issues, Marc would have also been getting tired now and ready to crash. As it was, he had no idea how he was going to spend the rest of the evening. The urge to spy on Angela and Adrian would be a horrible temptation, but he was a man of his word. If anything happened between the couple during the time they were alone together, he didn't want to know about it.

"Everything is secured and I'm off duty. Do you need me?" Kenn came from the room with their injured. He had just delivered supplies from the medical camper.

Marc shook his head, encouraging Kenn to hurry off. He didn't want the descendant to know what was going on and tell Tonya. If the camp found out later, they would deal with it, but for tonight, Marc was going to make sure the pair received what Adrian was asking for. He had many reasons for

doing it. One of them was a test of his own bond with Angela.

At one time, Marc had been certain nothing could come between them. He didn't think it would matter even if she did betray him tonight because love wasn't something that could be shut off, but it would certainly damage him. He needed something to do, but first, he had to get through the mandatory meeting happening in half an hour. Brittani and Gus's brothers were preparing a fast meal for people to eat while they listened. Marc assumed the meeting would end with a vote, but he wasn't sure if Angela might handle it first. If she got wind of what he and Adrian had just talked about, there may not be a vote at all. She might just tell both of them to leave.

5

“This is a mandatory meeting of Safe Haven Refugee Camp.” Standing in the center of the cafeteria, Angela rotated to include everyone. “It’s the last one we will have on American soil.”

The mood immediately sobered as people thought of what they would miss.

Angela had counted on it. The vote would wind them up a little, but she was hoping it would be the only excitement of the evening. “We have almost everything we need. Like usual, we’ll be stopping on the way to pick up the rest of it.” She paused. “We’ve had five deaths since the last meeting. All

of you know what happened.” Angela respectfully listed off the names, glad she didn’t have to include Ivan, and moved on. She wanted them sleepy, not teary. “Everything seems okay in this town. I haven’t picked up problems and neither has anyone else. We’ll know for sure over the next couple of days. If they are good, some of them may want to go with us. If so, we will evaluate them on an individual basis.” Angela turned the page in her notebook. “We’re still going to have a party, but obviously, it’s been delayed. I don’t want to do it while we’re here because we don’t have enough supplies for all of their people and it would be rude not to invite them.”

Everyone was able to understand that even though they were disappointed.

“We’re staying for two days. We’ll leave on the 18th, after breakfast.”

People murmured at the reminder that it was only November. Winter was just getting started. It made people grateful for the heat pouring from hotel vents.

“Unless anyone has anything they need to discuss, we’re going to finish with the vote. Does anyone have new business?” Angela scanned the crowd, giving people time to come forward. She could feel several of them wanting to ask questions and was glad when they decided to wait for a private moment. Angela waved. “Adrian Mitchel.”

Adrian had been about to slip out now that he'd eaten. He stopped as the camp turned to look at him, bringing an awkward silence.

“The Eagles have voted to have Adrian placed on conditional banishment. As leader of Safe Haven, I have the right to overrule them, but I can't be unbiased about this. I've decided to leave it to the camp. Everyone over the age of 10 will vote.”

Many of the adults didn't like Safe Haven's kids being allowed to have a say. All of those children loved Adrian; it was obvious which way they would vote.

Angela didn't care if it looked unfair. It wasn't. The kids had earned the right to vote on their future.

Ready for the nod when it came, Harry and a few helpers passed out the ballots they had spent an hour making from notebook paper. Angela had insisted on an official record for this meeting.

“While people fill out their ballots, I have a few minor updates to deliver. The first one is training will restart in the morning.” She paused for the light cheers to fade. “All Eagles who are not on duty will report to the lobby at 8am.”

Team leaders wrote it down.

“Samantha hasn't detected bad weather coming, so it's okay to be outside. Do not leave Safe Haven's perimeter. We don't know these people yet and they don't know us. I don't want to offend them.”

No one wanted that. Besides saving them, everyone was delighted at the amenities. The hot water had already been enjoyed by at least half the

camp and there was music and movies blaring from almost every room. Angela made a note to remind people to conserve energy and then continued. “We tested the radiation levels in this area and they’re not registering, so we’re fine. There is ash on the ground here, however, so like when we were traveling before, don’t pick things up and just eat them or use them. They need to be sanitized first.”

Angela turned the page. “Other than the shortwave radios that the Eagles and leadership are using, we are still on silence. It would be horrible of us to bring the refugees to this town. Please do not let kids play with radios and be careful not to sit on them when you get in and out of vehicles or chairs.”

As the first round of ballots were folded and passed forward to Harry, who was collecting so Tommy could count while everyone watched, Angela resisted the urge to scan the results. She also continued to fight the urge to sway the vote. She would do so the entire time she was in charge of this camp, to set an example for everyone in it and for those who would come after her. Safe Haven’s leaders had to be fair, no matter how hard it was. “That’s all I have for now. Remember to thank Brittani and her helpers for this hot meal. We’ll count the votes and then everyone will be lights out an hour after that.” Angela retrieved her bowl from the counter, not looking at Adrian.

Adrian was still by the door, now with a ballot in his hand. He crumbled it up and dropped it in the garbage can, then went outside. The rookie hadn’t

even looked at him as he handed it out, not realizing Adrian was who they were voting on, but it had given Adrian a flash of when he had been a respected, honored member of the camp. Nervous joy from the chance he was getting to have that returned was hard to contain. He left so he didn't ruin it with the wrong thought at the wrong time.

Adrian took the elevator, approving of the guard who rode with him but didn't speak.

Adrian nodded to Kevin and left. As he stepped outside, the guard on point waved toward the side entrance of the hotel. "Room 4B, top floor."

Adrian realized what was happening and went where the guard directed, not allowing himself to think.

6

"Don't do this again."

"We didn't have the votes." Kyle was humiliated.

"No. Only the camp can lift his banishment." Angela left Kyle stewing over the results, not surprised, just disappointed. So was Adrian. She could feel it, making this all worse.

They would have if you hadn't refused to vote.

Angela didn't respond to Morgan's frustrated comment as she went by his post on the first-floor stairs. Adrian's banishment would be reinstated as soon as they left.

Angela spotted Marc slipping outside to avoid the grumbling and the congratulations. She found Kendle in the crowd and gave her a motion to watch out for him. They had a team on duty, but those guards would be distracted with news of the vote results.

“Excuse me?” Bucky came to Angela, accompanied by an Eagle from the crew outside. “The mayor wanted me to check with you before we go to bed and to remind you that we’d like Safe Haven to take meals with us. We eat at noon and again at 7pm.”

Storing the ration-type schedule, Angela nodded. “We’d be honored. We have supplies to add for the meals.”

Bucky was horrified. “You’re our guests! We wouldn’t dream of that.”

“We can exchange lists, then. Maybe trade?”

“That would be wonderful.”

Kyle trailed Angela and Bucky as they discussed items for trade. He was shocked the vote had gone this way. The Eagles had tried, but they’d forgotten the herd had voted Adrian out and only they could bring him back in. He hadn’t done enough to earn their forgiveness yet.

They never will. Angela sighed. *He doesn’t deserve it and deep down, they know that. Marc has always been right.*

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sleazy, But Effective

1

Kendle joined Marc. He was standing just outside the hotel doors, unhappy even though the vote had gone his way. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yeah, that’ll happen.”

Kendle shrugged off Marc’s gruff tone. His anger wasn’t directed at her. Because of her loyalty to Marc, Kendle had voted not to lift Adrian’s banishment, but it had been a close choice for her because she believed the man deserved another chance.

“If that’s all you can think about, go find someone else to partner with.”

Kendle tried not to be offended. She locked down her stray thoughts and paid attention to the hotel around them. Neil and his team were doing rounds of the outside perimeter right now, but only because Marc had gone out. It was clear the Eagles were trying to keep leadership inside the yellow tape. Kendle applauded the effort, but they didn’t understand. It wasn’t going to work for either of Safe Haven’s bosses. Kendle still considered Marc to be Angela’s XO. A lot of the camp did. The fact

that Angela had skipped it during the meeting was causing talk.

“She didn’t bring it up because it’s not a camp decision. Most of the camp doesn’t even know it exists. It’s an Eagle rule.”

Kendle hadn’t spent a lot of time in training since joining Safe Haven. “I guess I’ll hear about it at some point.”

“Everyone level three and above gets that part of the speech. Until then, most Eagles aren’t included because they don’t have the wisdom to make a choice based on what’s best for the camp.” Reminded of why he had lost his chance, Marc fell silent. It allowed him to hear Kyle’s footsteps as he came from the stairwell next to the elevator and approached Angela.

Angela was still in the lobby, talking with a few of the women who were on their way to the dessert carts. Most of the camp was in the rooms now, enjoying luxuries the old world had considered slumming. He watched Kyle tap Angela on the arm and whisper in her ear. When Angela said goodbye to the women and followed him, Marc knew where she was going and couldn’t take it. “I’ll be around.”

Tired, Angela missed it. The elevator slid upward as she turned to Kyle. “What’s the problem?”

“You have a meeting upstairs.”

Angela frowned. She’d thought everything was covered. “With who?”

“Marc arranged it.”

Angela's eyes narrowed, but she resisted the urge to force it out of Kyle's mind. Instead, she stared, waiting for him to give it up.

Kyle held tight to the mental brick barrier Jennifer was always teasing him for using.

When the elevator finally slid open on the fourth floor, he released the breath he'd been holding and led the way.

Angela followed, unable to help dropping her hand to the gun on her hip. The hall was empty except for two guards at each end of the long hall. It was dim and creepy.

Kyle opened a door halfway down.

Two of the four guards came to take up a position on either side of the room.

Now more confused than concerned, Angela stepped by Kyle with a quizzical expression.

Kyle shut the door behind her and headed toward the elevator.

“Good evening.”

Angela stared at Adrian.

Adrian immediately gave what she needed the most. “I've never been so proud of anyone.”

Angela's smile lit up the room and made her look young again.

Adrian stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, joy bubbling. “You did it!”

Angela didn't flinch. She returned the embrace.

Looking up at exactly the wrong moment, Marc caught the shadows on the window of the hotel room and froze. He couldn't be certain of who it was, but at the same time, he knew. As he watched the couple, his heart shattered a little.

His demon spoke up. *Perhaps it's not what you think.*

Marc marched to the lead rig where he was going to spend the night in the bunk.

It wouldn't be hard to be sure...

Marc resisted the temptation. When he'd told Adrian it didn't matter because he was going to have her every night after this, he meant it.

2

"I can't believe you did it."

The two guards who were able to hear them assumed Adrian meant keeping Safe Haven alive. Adrian's next words gave them the real reason.

"You led them through every hell in my notebooks. They'll leave now."

"The price was too high."

Adrian refused to allow sorrow to ruin the short time they had together. He stepped back, arms lowering. He wanted to say so many things that he couldn't pick one. He settled for staring at her with his emotions unguarded, something he'd only been able to do a handful of times since they'd met. "I'm forever in your debt."

"So why are you ruining it this way?"

“Actually, I’m not.” Adrian let her view his plan.

Angela groaned. “I wish you hadn’t.”

The suite Ciemus had chosen for Angela was on the top floor and filled with flowers, welcome baskets, and packages of supplies that Safe Haven hadn’t seen in a long time. Angela gestured. “Add it to the camp stocks.”

“You don’t want to pick through it first?”

“Of course, I do, but we don’t handle things that way. Add it to the stocks. I’ll thank the mayor.”

“Fine.” Adrian stepped aside so she could see behind him. “Just get in the bed.”

Angela laughed. The bed was covered in papers, notebooks, and maps. There was also a snack and a change of clothes. Angela peered toward the small, dark washroom. “Hot water?”

Adrian grinned. “I got you a towel and stuff. Take the clothes if they look okay.” Adrian hadn’t been sure if she wanted an evening in Eagle clothes.

“I don’t.” She opened her kit and dug out a pair of Marc’s sweats and one of his tops. She vanished into the bathroom without another word. Angela started to come back out for a flashlight and remembered the lights worked. She hit the switch with a silly grin.

Adrian listened to her movements for a minute, smelling her, longing for more nights like this. He smothered it as the water came on. Tonight wasn’t about him. They were a day from the ocean, from reaching the boat. A week after that, Safe Haven

would leave America and have a chance to flourish in peace under a welcoming sun. Few refugees would be able to follow them, even if they found his notes at their old campsites. Safe Haven had once left maps and directions for people to reach them, but those days were gone. Those who came after them would have to figure it out from the few clues that had been left. Adrian had even placed one on the mountain before Safe Haven had been trapped in there, but he doubted it had survived the battle with Dirce.

Adrian listened to the people below them as the smell of hot, soapy water floated from the bathroom, soul at peace for this moment. The fight at the hangar might have been the last they had to face before leaving. The relief was incredible.

3

“Damn it.” Marc was in the cold bunk of the truck, tossing. He hadn’t gone to sleep yet, though he was trying. The anger and jealousy had faded into misery at the thought of what life would be like if Angela chose Adrian, if they were already together. He believed giving her free will to do as she wanted was the right choice, but it was hard to stay in this icy truck when he—

Angie needs you.

Adrian’s tone was sated. Fury got Marc out of the truck in seconds, bootlaces dragging. It wasn’t

the first time he'd run somewhere and tied them later.

Eagles watched him storm into the hotel.

Kyle motioned Daryl to go find out what had happened. None of them wanted to be caught off guard or in the crossfire if Marc snapped.

Marc went to the elevator that was open from Ivan coming down. He didn't speak to the man.

Ivan shrugged, thinking Marc had better get with the program before the camp was forced to vote on his banishment next.

Marc missed it as the elevator took him to the fourth floor. Guards met him as the doors slid open. Marc assumed the men below had notified them through code. He approved of the security even as he shoved by them.

"Open the door," Adrian called.

Greg opened it, frowning as he saw Marc coming down the hall. He didn't look inside the room. After Angela had arrived and the pair had exchanged a greeting, there had been silence.

Marc entered the warm room with his hands on his guns, mouth opening.

"Shhh..." Adrian pointed. "She's on the edge."

Marc looked over to find Angela's head drooping against a pillow that had been placed behind her. Sitting up, she was covered in papers and ink marks. It was clear she'd spent the entire time right there, working.

Adrian was on the couch under the window. He yawned. “I couldn’t stand to watch her do that anymore.”

“Do what?” Angela snapped awake. “I’m sorry... What did I do?”

Marc’s lips curved into a reluctant smile. “She wouldn’t lie down?”

“Not without her guard.”

Angela yawned and tried to focus. “There you are!”

Marc felt her welcome and the peace in the room, and couldn’t bring himself to disturb it. He went over to her for the cheek kiss she wanted. Vanilla wafted up, teasing his nose.

Angela’s arms tightened around his neck for an instant before she let go, telling him she wasn’t mad anymore.

Marc sighed “Well, I am, but we’ll handle it tomorrow. Let’s get you settled, okay?”

Angela nodded obediently as Marc gathered the papers. When he held them out to Adrian, the man was there to take them or tell him where they went. They worked together without thinking.

“It was awesome of you to do this.” Angela yawned again. “I really did need time with him to go over stuff. It’s good now.”

Marc nodded, forcing a smile that wasn’t convincing but passed muster because she was so tired. While she rubbed her eyes, Marc studied Adrian. The man was still in his dirty clothes and didn’t appear to have gotten any supplies. He was

too tall for the couch and didn't have a pillow or blanket. He looked miserable.

Adrian stretched, spine cracking. *I haven't been this happy in months. Thank you.*

Marc knew that was probably true, but he couldn't let it go at that. *You didn't do this for yourself.*

No.

Why didn't you tell me that?

Would you have believed me?

Maybe... Probably not.

You wouldn't have. I did it this way to try proving to you there's nothing for you to be jealous about. You can leave her alone with anyone and this is always how it will end up. You shouldn't ever doubt her love. None of this was her fault.

Angela slid under the blankets. "A little of it was. I'm attracted to both of you and I can't help being human. There might be a seat in the front row of hell for me over that, but right now, I don't care." Angela looked at them as her body relaxed under the blankets. "Please stay. Both of you, this one time. But stop talking about this mess or I'll go to the lobby and sleep in the hotel entryway with Dog."

Adrian grinned. That was the Angie he'd missed.

Me too. Marc nodded. "We'll stay. You rest."

"And no more talking," she grumbled, lids closing.

“That’s asking too much.” Marc turned off the lamp on her side of the bed.

Angela yawned again, head sinking into the pillow. “Can’t blame a girl for try…”

Marc smiled. She was adorable in moments like this, reminding him of the little girl he’d allowed to steal his heart for all eternity.

Marc went to the minibar of the large suite.

Adrian sat up, not certain he could handle another bout of drinking with Marc while he was in a bad mood.

“I’m not anymore.”

Adrian sighed and got up. There was a stool on each side, giving them a clear view of Angela and the bathroom on one side, and the windows and room door on the other.

“I can’t ever do it. I hate you too much.”

Adrian groaned. “Oh, come on! I don’t need those images in my head.”

“I mean it. If that’s what tonight is supposed to be the start of, forget it.”

Adrian snorted. “I’ve never considered it and neither has she. I’d bet she barely tolerates sex with just you.”

“What?!”

Adrian backtracked, trying to explain. “Hold your huff, big boy. She was abused. If you weren’t considerate of her jumpiness, you’d only get near her a couple times a year. It’s not like that, right?”

Marc shook his head, thinking of the moment in the medical camper where she’d insisted that he

give her a hand-job before the others rose. Marc smirked. *Okay, so I insisted. Either way, it worked out.* He frowned as he realized that's what Adrian meant.

"You don't view her as a battered woman except when you're in bed because she can't hide it from you there, when you're so focused on her reactions to see what pleases her."

"This wasn't what we're supposed to be talking about."

"I got that, but who says we can't take a side trip into your love life? I hear there's a light at the end of every tunnel."

Marc snorted, amused when he didn't want to be. "Fine, but finish up. I can't take much more of your voice."

"Then I'll make it clear for you. Angela could never cheat on her mate. She was abused. Abused women almost always agree to physical moments to make their partner happy. In Angela's case, you've begun to show her the good side and she's adjusting, but you still can't grab her and kiss her like you could when you were young, right?"

"No. She freezes for that instant."

"That's one of 100 signs she puts off, Marc, and right now, she's never felt more vulnerable. Thinking she would let me fuck her is insane." Adrian flipped an ashtray, making it thump softly. "Thinking I would rush it that way is an insult."

"What's your point?"

Adrian scanned to be sure Angela was sleeping, then leaned forward. “My point is when you die, she’ll be alone for the rest of her life if you still hate me when it happens. I’m the only one who might be able to finish what you’ve begun, but she won’t be able to get over the guilt.”

Since they were on the subject, Marc admitted his biggest fear. “She’ll be in your bed a month after I’m in the ground. A year after that, she won’t even mention my name anymore. You know it. You said that to me.”

“I used it to hurt you. I’m sorry for that.”

It didn’t mean much because Marc didn’t believe him. “You’re better for her.”

“Only because you hold her back or get in her way.” Adrian glanced over. “I heard you’ve been using my methods for crowd control. How does that feel?”

“Different. A little sleazy, but effective.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly.”

“I was just starting to get it.”

“Get what?”

“Why you guys have always handled the herd so carefully and hidden so much.”

“You’ll have some time to view it from her side without the weight of the choices now. That will be good for her. She doesn’t feel safe, even with the Special Forces teams. Only you make her feel that way.”

“And you.”

Adrian didn't confirm it. He didn't need to. "She needs us on her right and left. I can do that from a distance. I'll make all the trips you want to send me on and I'll stay out of your sight as much as I can." Adrian was willing to do whatever it took to give Angela and the camp peace from the drama.

"I have other plans." Marc took out his notebook and pen, refusing to take the chance that Angela was listening. He wrote quickly and then gave the pen to Adrian.

Put her on edge and then go away.

Adrian drew a question mark.

Marc jotted the next line.

I have the scroll. Put her on edge and then get ready for my call.

Adrian hated it that Marc now knew all the details, but he was also relieved. This way, the bond would be broken and Angela's love for Marc would eventually form the soulmate connection, which would erase all charms. She would be free to love Marc then and Adrian had no doubt that she would. Adrian stopped there.

Keep going or I'll dig it out of you.

Adrian sighed. *It will also mean when she comes to me after your death, it's because she does love me and it wasn't all charms and bonds.*

That was the other truth Marc hadn't wanted to face, but he also hadn't realized Adrian was worried about it. Marc almost felt sorry for him. At least he knew Angela loved him. Adrian might never have that knowledge. *How long do you think it will take?*

Adrian sighed again. *It depends on how hard you want me to hit her with it. If you want it before the boat, I'd need to swing from the hip.*

Thanks to their conversation, Marc didn't think of anything sexual first. "How about a day of it being like it was before and then you go?"

Adrian winced. He wanted that more than he was willing to admit yet. "Yeah. That would kill us both to lose so soon."

"And the camp?"

"Will love it and then hate it, like her, but if you handle their needs like I would have for a couple of days, it'll pass with them. The sheep are always easier to tend than the shepherds."

"What about the lambs?" Marc was thinking of the children now.

Adrian chuckled. "They are the hardest part of the job and the biggest joy at any given time. It gets crazy."

Marc agreed. He had enjoyed the time with the kids, but he already feared he could fall into it like Adrian and Angela did.

"You have free time now. You'll be on her security for 12 hours a day if you do doubles, but you'd still have a few hours to spend with the kids. Everyone would love that, and I'd bet you learn a lot about how to handle people from handling them."

"Maybe." Marc ended their talk as he stood up. "I'll let you know in the morning on what we've discussed. Everything's on hold until then."

“You got it.” Adrian looked at the couch.

Marc pointed at the ground on the other side of Angela. It was between her and the door.

Adrian went there with a grin that Marc loathed, but he wanted to sleep in a real bed without fear of Angela being hurt while he was out. When he’d told Captain Grant that Adrian was a guard dog, it had been absolutely true. No one would get near them tonight.

No, they won’t. Adrian bedded down where he was out of Marc’s line of sight but could still watch Angela as she slept. Moments like this were worth dying for.

Marc almost drew his gun from under the pillow and decided to go to sleep instead. *I’ll make a choice on that tomorrow too.*

4

“It’s hard to believe those are the same people you brought in.”

“More proof; as if I needed it.” Grant had no doubts. Safe Haven’s light had already spread to include parts of their town. It was magical.

“I am curious how you decided it was them.” Donna’s thin brows arched. “We’d been hearing calls and fights for weeks, and before the pause, for months.”

“I could feel the difference. I just knew.”

Donna shrugged, willing to let it go. Captain Grant's instincts were part of why he'd been given a role in her administration.

"What do you think of them?" Grant kept his distance from the woman sitting on the window ledge to eat an apple and stare at the hotel through the window.

The mayor's office was just as nice as the banquet hall, but it lacked the expensive paintings and carpet. Most of their luxury items had been burned or stored, but William had insisted they needed to have one great place for people to meet for meals. Grant agreed. The rest of the town was barren of the finer reminders of their old lives. It was nice to have one space the war hadn't ruined.

"Interesting. Wild, though."

"They're dangerous. Trouble follows them everywhere they go."

Donna glanced over at him. "You like that."

Grant chuckled. He didn't need to confirm it. Everyone knew who he was, what he was like. Being stuck inside these walls, even though he'd helped build them, had been torture after the freedom of eight years in the Navy and two years of local fishing afterward.

"Am I making the wrong choice?" Donna tensed, bracing for his reply.

"William would say only fate knows that."

Donna snorted, cheeks reddening. "What does Captain Grant say?"

“I think they’re good, strong, and they have exactly what we need.”

Donna relaxed, turning back to the window to resume her observations. “Yes, they do.”

Grant recognized how she’d distracted him from the real concern, but didn’t push. Their mayor was a hardened woman who was out of her league when it came to descendants. Everyone was, but Donna insisted strict adherence to town laws would keep people in line. Captain Grant had to admit that it had worked so far, but now Safe Haven was here and they didn’t have just one magic user. They had an entire camp with endless power. Grant couldn’t help his concern.

“What do you think will happen when they meet?” Donna waited for a reply. When there wasn’t one, she turned around to find the man gone.

Donna sighed, turning back. “Yeah, I couldn’t guess either.”

5

Ivan came around the corner of the parking area, finally finished with his round of the camp. He had begun on the top level and worked his way down to the men on duty outside. His team had been honored to receive third shift point over the hotel.

Shivering a little at the cold draft, Ivan decided the next time one of the Eagles insisted on giving him a winter set up, he would accept it. His men already had. They looked warm.

I love watching the sunrises.

Ivan nodded. "Same here. I always..." Ivan looked over, mouth dropping open.

Dog peered up with golden eyes flecked in amusement. *Are you okay?*

Ivan was trying to form words. "Uh, yeah. One of them?"

Dog shook his head, letting the motion run down his back to his bushy tail. *No one is like them.*

Ivan found the mental capacity and intelligence in an animal to be too much. He stared at Dog with eyes that said his mind was on the verge of blanking out.

If the boss gave you a shift by yourself, you're stronger than that. Snap out of it!

Ivan slowly came out of the daze, staring at the animal. He'd heard stories about Marc and Dog, but passed them off as tales to add to the Ghost's legend. He hadn't considered that the wolf was like his master.

This is the part of Safe Haven I missed the most.

Ivan forced himself to answer. "The sunsets?"

Watching the magic. Dog's big head turned toward the hotel. *These are the best moments here.*

Ivan would have questioned further, but a glint of light caught his attention. He tensed, hand going to his radio to alert people there was trouble.

The wolf next to him stared at the hotel without blinking. *Watch this.*

The glint of light started at the bottom of the building and slowly moved upward until it formed

a shield around the hotel. Glistening and expanding in the morning sunrise, it was the most beautiful thing Ivan had ever seen.

You should step back.

“What?”

Dog nudged his leg, forcing the fascinated soldier to move.

The shield snapped into place around the perimeter, giving them a distorted view for a few seconds that quickly cleared.

“Wow.” Ivan studied the barrier. He could see the shield around the camp in the distance, but he couldn’t feel this edge of it even though he was only standing a foot away. “How did you know where it would come up?”

It’s the same perimeter. We’ve been using it all along in Safe Haven.

Now Ivan understood why the tape was always the same distance from the center of camp. The Eagles had been doing that without discussing it since they’d left the mountain. “Cool!”

Dog’s tongue lolled out as he chuckled. *You’re definitely one of hers.*

Ivan shook his head. “It’s your master I came for.”

Has that changed?

Ivan considered, then shrugged. “Maybe a little, but it’s because of the last few days. Women screw all of us up at one point or another. He’ll recover.”

Dog rose to his feet. *I believe that too.* The wolf padded away. *I want to go watch what happens next. May your rounds be quiet and boring.*

Ivan laughed and followed the wolf. “What makes the shield come up?”

The Eagles are meeting. The boss just woke up and heard it.

“Angela causes that?”

The happiness of the humans allows her to do that.

Ivan hesitated and then pushed on. “My shift ended with sunrise. Can I hang with you?”

Dog stopped to look over his shoulder, intelligence showing in every line of fur on his beautiful face. *Why do you think we're talking?*

Ivan stuttered for a moment and then hurried to catch up.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Slaps, Hits, and Thuds

1

“**E**veryone’s here.”

“The meeting has started. Quiet!”

Dog and Ivan entered the hotel lobby and found 50 Eagles gathered in front of Kenn. They moved through the rear of the crowd to reach the elevators.

“We’re going to do a two-hour training session today, and every day from now on, when we can. While we’re here, we also are going to take advantage of the amenities. When we’re on the road, we’ll make do with whatever is available.” Kenn was delighted to be in charge. The smug vibe didn’t fade as he spoke. “If you look around, you’ll notice we’ve split you into three groups. Neil and his team are handling the Kai class. If you’re a level one, go stand with them.” Kenn paused for the slightly dismayed people to do that. None of the level ones had passed a Kai class yet.

“Jennifer and Ray are going to handle the weight room and workouts. If you’re a rookie, that’s where you belong.”

The remaining group in the room, the level twos, realized they were going to be with Kyle and

his team. Half the crew groaned, while the other half grinned. Gus and Stanley were especially nervous about training with Special Forces.

“Everyone stays with their team and goes where they’re told at the end of each lesson. Exactly one hour and 35 minutes from now, everyone will meet at the pool and do at least 10 laps to finish their shift. After that, you’re all free to shit, shower, and shave. Then be back here at noon, right where you’re standing now.” Kenn made a gesture and got them moving.

Ivan approved the setup even while wishing he were getting to be a part of it. He was a rookie, so he would have been in the gym with Jennifer and Ray while they encouraged him to run until he puked. Getting in shape was the hardest part of being an Eagle so far. If not for his military training, and his determination to stay in good condition after that, Ivan would be one of those who couldn’t run a mile in a short time. As it was, he and his team would be able to pass a level two fitness test right now. The rest of the rookies would not. Nancy and Debra, along with Kim and a few other women, were just getting started on the pain that came with such an honored position in Safe Haven.

As Kyle took his team toward the elevator, he gave the wolf a nod.

Dog huffed. *Too soon to tell.*

Ivan looked down at Dog. “What was that about?”

He is acknowledging your attendance at this lesson.

Ivan frowned. “What lesson?”

Dog headed toward the elevator. *Let’s see if you can figure that out by the time I’m done with rounds.*

Mouth dropping open again, Ivan followed. He’d assumed he was excused from training today because he had worked the night shift. He’d been disappointed.

Senior men had also been looking forward to the lessons, mostly because they were the trainers this time. When Angela was fully recovered, she and the council would do most of this. Until then, the two Special Forces teams, along with the level fours, tried not to smirk or gloat.

Dog and Ivan took the elevator to the third floor, following the rookies. The sound of a drill sergeant barking orders and gym equipment clanking echoed before they reached the room. Ivan recognized Jennifer’s voice and pitied the people in there. She was a hardassed little thing. Kyle was a lucky man.

Ivan watched, finding it interesting how the team worked out in tandem around tables and equipment that had been set up along the walls. Ray and Jennifer both had clipboards. Ivan also recognized Conner and Pam. He didn’t know the others, but he’d seen them in Safe Haven since his arrival. The rest of the rookies now climbing onto dusty weight benches and treadmills were familiar to him. They’d already spent time together. Ivan looked at Dog, not sure why they had stopped here.

What do you see when you look at the other rookies?

Ivan concentrated on communicating silently with the wolf instead of speaking and disrupting the lesson. *Men and women who want to be stronger?*

Look again.

Ivan did as instructed, scanning leadership and then the team. Unable to figure out what the wolf wanted him to see, Ivan waited patiently for a clue. So far, that was how training was done and the wolf was his teacher for this class. Ivan wasn't sure yet if he should be amused or embarrassed.

There is no difference being shown, no matter the gender or chore.

Ivan shrugged. *Many military setups are like that.*

But there are also people in this room who are attracted to each other. Some of them also don't like each other, but they have trust.

Ivan did another fast scan, but because he didn't know the people personally, it was impossible for him to tell who was who.

Satisfied, Dog moved down the hall toward the smaller elevator at the far end. *You got that quicker than I thought you would.*

It took Ivan a few seconds to realize he had passed the first lesson. As he replayed his thoughts, he figured out the problem. He didn't know his fellow Eagles. That was something he needed to remedy.

Ivan was able to accept the lesson because all the senior Eagles had been preaching it since he'd joined Angela's army. Rookies were told if they didn't know each other, there was no way they could trust each other.

Now curious about the next lesson, Ivan followed Dog into the elevator. He hit the second button without being told.

Dog sat to wait. *She might be right about you.*

Ivan couldn't believe the praise from the animal made him feel good, but it did. He spent the ride in silence, trying to figure out what was wrong with his brain.

2

"He took my book!"

"She threw my car!"

Angry voices echoed down the hall as Ivan and Dog got off on the second floor.

Ivan mentally groaned. He had hoped this level would be empty. On his last trip through, he had stepped in something that was still making his shoe stick to the carpet every few steps. He'd tried to scrape it off outside, but failed. It was annoying.

Dog led him straight toward the running, screaming, laughing, playing children. Toys and clothes were all over the floors, with pieces of each also flying through the air.

Down!

Ivan ducked as a die cast car was thrown from one of the rooms. It slammed into the wall next to his head. *Thanks.*

Dog eased along the wall to the next room. *More coming.*

A barrage of hot wheels flew out of the room next to Ivan. As they slammed and clanked their way down the wall, naked Barbies exploded from the opposite doorway. Heads and arms popped off and rolled down the hall while laughter and screams of horror overwhelmed the few adults in the background.

Dog looked at Ivan. *I want you to distract the kids so I can go by without getting it in my fur.*

Without getting what in your fur?

Dog's snout drew up in a revolted curl. *Whatever is stuck to your shoe.*

Ivan chuckled, standing as den mothers came hurrying down the hallway with a small group of younger children. Left with only guards, the kids here had used the opportunity to have fun and fights.

Ivan saw a service caddy and rolled it over next to the wolf.

The animal looked up in haughty scorn. *What are you, the vet?*

Ivan snickered. *You didn't say you had to be comfortable.*

Dog was forced to admit the human was right. He crawled into the bottom of the service cart, muttering.

Ivan casually pushed the wolf past the rooms where adults were now delivering scolds and being ignored by children attacking the movie piles.

Ivan paused at the end of the hall and slid the cart along the opposite wall.

Dog stepped out and led the way toward the stairs, where Ivan could hear the faint clicks and clacks of weapons.

Once again, the pair stayed in the doorway so they didn't interrupt the lesson. The daycare had old, faded drawings Ivan didn't examine too closely. It was sad that the scribbles had survived when their artists probably hadn't.

"There always comes a point in Safe Haven where an Eagle is forced to shoot without being 100% certain of where that bullet will go. In some situations, there won't be anything you can do except remember your training. I know that sounds like something we used to hear in the movies, but live by it. If you can hit something by the sound of it, you might be able to save someone's life. If you can reload in the dark, you might be able to at least save your own." Kyle pointed at the tables. "We're going to do timed break down and reassemble."

He didn't look at Kenn. "The boss has ruled that Kenn cannot be leader or XO of your team. All of you were bumped up to level two when we left the mountain, but we know you don't have a chain of command yet. Kenn is not eligible for those positions. The boss expects the rest of you to step up and do your duty. Kenn will always provide

support, no matter what team he's on." Kyle knew Angela had arranged it that way because the level two team was just as inexperienced as the level ones and the rookies. Kenn would get them into shape fast.

"Each one of us will work with each one of you. Do the best you can, and we'll repeat until the lesson ends." Kyle nodded at the team in the doorway, but didn't get distracted. He was elated to be training again, though it felt odd to be doing it indoors. The second-floor daycare had been perfect for this. "Put your blindfolds on."

Ivan watched in appreciation as the team began to break down weapons, blind. He hadn't had that lesson yet, but he was confident he would be able to do it.

"Done!"

Everyone chuckled as Kenn finished first. Ivan hadn't known about the man's experience. He glanced down to ask if that was the next part of his lesson and found Dog already padding toward the stairs closest to them.

Ivan made a mental note to get to know Kenn and his history in Safe Haven, then followed.

The third-floor gym was directly to the right as Ivan and Dog came up the stairs. There was a group of people in the hallway, though there was only one team being trained and they were already inside.

Ivan and Dog moved through the hopeful camp members who were considering becoming Eagles. Ivan had expected to see some of these people at the

other classes, but as he studied the group who winced and groaned at the sounds, he realized this was everyone's biggest fear.

Ivan and Dog had no trouble getting to the entryway as the wolf was recognized. The men and women in the hall had been with Safe Haven for a long time. They understood the wolf, once again wearing a bright red collar, was on duty. They assumed Ivan was on the same team.

Ivan was encouraged by the respect, but he didn't think many of them would follow through. The sounds coming out of the room were ugly slaps, hits, and thuds that Ivan doubted few of these people would be willing to put themselves through as long as there were others to do that dirty work. Ivan didn't resent them for it. He only wanted people in their army who were able to do the job.

Dog sat in the doorway.

"Until you can control your fear, your fear will control you." Neil's voice was loud enough for everyone in the hall to hear. "No one likes being hit or hurt. It's human nature to be afraid of anything that causes pain. We have the pain response. It's why the old world took seven to 12 weeks of a recruit's life to get them over it or convince them they couldn't cut it. As you reach each level, these classes will get harder. All of you have just had the beginning stage. Now, you'll practice with each other until the time is up."

Ivan swept the level one team, noting it had six members and he didn't know any of them. The two

women and four men were bruised and bleeding, but wore expressions that were relieved instead of angry or scared. Ivan assumed they'd just had that pivotal moment where they learned pain was only pain and it would go away. He'd had his own moment during Boot Camp, but he was still sometimes reminded of it during a rough fight—like the one they'd just had at the Naval Station.

“Between your sets, take 20 seconds to watch while we demonstrate what you're going to go through as Special Forces.” Eager, Neil turned to his team and motioned them into place.

Neil's team wasn't as enthusiastic, but they didn't hesitate to surround him on the mat. Neil was so far above everyone else in kai that the team workout had turned into the other six men trying to defeat him in the highest level each of them knew.

“Go!”

It was a brutal battle. Neil was hit so many times that Ivan expected him to fall down dead at any point, but the scrappy trooper took all of them out and was still able to stand when it was over. Ivan had never been more impressed by a physical demonstration. He immediately wanted private lessons. He made a mental note to get to know the man so he would agree.

Ivan didn't catch it this time, but Dog did. *Your lesson is over. I'll let the boss know how well you've done.* Dog padded off. *I wonder if the mess is open...*

Ivan stood there, speechless, as he realized all three lessons had been the same. The wolf had

taught him he needed to get to know people in this camp and then he could become a full part of it. Ivan was thrilled.

“I could use a bite.” He trotted to the wolf’s side and tried not to look as cocky as he felt.

3

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“I promise you, it’ll be fine.”

“What if she picks the kai class?”

“Neil might get his ass kicked for the first time ever.”

“I’m serious.”

“Who says I’m not?”

Angela’s day began with the sound of Adrian and Marc half joking, half bickering. She had woken earlier, but hadn’t been ready to get up. The men had assured her most of the camp wasn’t awake yet and that had made it okay. Now, her people were up. She needed to be too.

Angela stretched, enjoying the feel of the large bed. None of their stops had been this comfortable. She could feel people already dreading the call to leave.

Not paying attention to anything except her normal wake up ritual, she was unaware of the two men now staring at her.

Marc was allowed to gawk and he did, admiring the swells of her breasts and the hard nipples he could see through the shirt. Her beautiful curls were

in disarray around her face and over her shoulders, making part of him twitch. Marc immediately thought of the Aerosmith song, Ain't that a Bitch.

Next to him, Adrian wasn't looking at her physical attributes. He was certainly aware of them and approved, but he was more interested in her waking thoughts. As they immediately went to the camp, he couldn't help but smile. He hadn't done many things right in his life, but putting her in charge had been one of them.

Marc sighed. "I can agree with that."

Adrian motioned toward Angela. "You handle her. I'll get the door."

Marc nodded, not doubting someone was about to knock.

Tap-tap-tap.

Marc went to Angela. "*Good morning.*"

Marc's tone made her blush. "Don't even think about it."

They both chuckled.

Marc helped her move the blankets when she began to climb out, certain she needed to use the bathroom. She had been in the bed for 12 hours. When half that passed, Marc had begun to worry, but Adrian insisted descendants kept different sleep patterns when they used more energy than they could afford. Marc didn't like to rely on Adrian for information, but that was why the man was here. He was forcing himself to do it.

“The camp is asking questions about the party and the pool.” Adrian grabbed his coat. “I’m going to take a walk and distract them.”

Marc didn’t feel that he had a right to interfere with the choice.

Adrian knew, but instead of gloating as he was certain Marc was expecting, Adrian gave him a sympathetic look and left without speaking.

Marc realized Adrian knew exactly how he felt because the former leader had spent the last two months ostracized from the camp he’d built.

Angela came from the bathroom. “Update me.”
Marc waved Whitney in.

Whitney cleared his throat, not staring at Angela or the mussed bed. “Zack’s boys are getting worried.”

“That took longer than I thought it would.”

“We’re keeping them entertained.”

“Entertained?”

“The Eagles donated handheld devices and some games.”

Angela smiled. “Thank you for that.”

Whitney shrugged. “We’d beaten them already. They’ll have to erase our profiles to get the high scores.”

Angela snickered. She held some of those high scores too.

“I think we can hold them for another week if we let them start official shifts. They have some jealousy over Charlie and Conner having duty.”

“That’s fine. They’re going to be Eagles. Give them a taste of what that’s like, but make sure the den mothers still include them.”

Whitney nodded. “Everyone who was injured is either on the mend or already there.”

“That’s great. Tell the medics how happy I am with them. They’ve handled things well since we left the mountain.”

“I will.”

“What about our tiny menagerie?”

“The same. Bees are building a new hive and coming back to the coffee can. Samantha has them in the garden truck so they don’t have to go far. The bigger animals are already looking better, but those damn chickens never change—they shit, eat, and have their way with the hens. All’s good there.”

“Any eggs yet?”

Whitney skimmed his notes. “No.”

“What’s the gender ratio?”

“Nine hens, four roosters.”

“Cook two of the roosters. Less competition for the females will let the other two ease up and let’s face it, the eggs will save us room on the boat. Stocking frozen meat or live birds will be a huge hassle, but the eggs will keep at room temperature for months.”

“So priority to females?”

“Yes, but only in the fowl. Once we settle on the island, we’ll build a pen for the males—for meat.”

“If they survive long enough to reach maturity.”

Whitney couldn’t help the complaint. The

Delawares they'd found and been raising were the meanest animals Whitney had ever dealt with. Even a wolf or bear could be scared off with enough light or noise, but their geese-sized flapping bastards just kept right on coming.

Angela laughed. "They really do."

"The two fish we had left died yesterday. It wasn't enough for a meal, so we fed it to the hens. I've never seen something stripped so fast."

"I can imagine."

"I mean it. The government could have them sent in place of any team and gotten good results. If you dropped them in with piranhas, you'd have sushi."

"What about the cats?"

"Better by the day. The bunker cat was healthy, just had fleas and clumps of crap in its fur. Our tabby is playing again. Tonya won't let me bring it out into the sunlight. I think she's scared of it running away before she can finish her testing, but she said something about sunlight interfering with whatever she's giving it."

"We'll let her make the rules for now." Angela chose that because they didn't have anyone else with even Tonya's basic lab skills.

"That's it." Whitney gave her a lifted brow.

"No, I'm good."

Whitney left with a polite nod at her guard.

Marc needed to fill the awkward silence as he shut the door. "So, what do you want to do today?"

Angela hesitated.

Marc sighed as he realized Adrian was going to be right yet again. “Let me guess. Eagle training?”

Angela tried to sound casual. “Among other places, maybe.”

Marc motioned to the kit Adrian had put together and placed at the foot of the bed. “Get dressed. I’ll escort you wherever you want to go.”

Angela grabbed the kit and hurried back into the bathroom, good vibes growing.

Marc went to the window to stare at the bubble around them, refusing to think about anything except that it meant Angela was happy.

Angela didn’t like how long it took her to get all the gear on. It had been a while since she’d worn the full outfit. Because of her weight loss, it didn’t fit the way it used to.

By the time she came from the bathroom, Marc was muttering and her mood had fallen. Refusing to look at him in case his expression mirrored hers as she’d stared at herself in the bathroom, Angela stomped toward the door. “Let’s go.”

“You look good to me.”

Angela snorted. She opened the door as Marc reached her. Not expecting the move, she tensed under his fingers and then relaxed as he pushed her against the wall with his body. All he wanted was a kiss. She liked those.

“I meant it.”

Afraid he had noticed her freeze up, Angela gave him a more enthusiastic response than she had

intended. It swept them up, reminding the couple it had been a bit since they'd had enough privacy to do more.

“Excuse me.”

Marc took his time ending the kiss. It felt good to do it while Adrian was watching.

Adrian forced himself to observe, trying not to think about anything that would make the moment more awkward than it already was.

“What?”

“People are nervous. She needs to get down there.”

Angela pulled out of Marc's arms, straightening the clothes that didn't fit right.

As she stepped by him, Adrian fell in on her right.

She needs a size smaller until we fatten her up.

Because Adrian had taken her discomfort seriously, Marc made a note. He didn't understand what the big deal was, but as they moved down the hall and he noticed her fidgeting, he got it. She didn't need the distraction.

Exactly. You've already seen how much there is to cover. Can you imagine being in charge of it all while having a constant wedgie?

Marc snickered. *Absolutely not!*

Adrian didn't add to it. Marc had gotten the point. It wasn't that her comfort was a priority. It was that her attention was a priority and discomfort was a distraction.

As they moved into the elevator, security on the hall came with them.

No one spoke.

Adrian was certain that was because he was here. The men were trying to be respectful. Marc had always been considered a good guy in Safe Haven and that hadn't changed.

Are you sure? Marc hated himself for asking.

Yes.

Yes.

Angela and Adrian answering at the same time made Marc bring up a mental wall. He moved to the rear of the elevator and stood there impassively.

When Angela hit the basement button, Adrian tried not to gloat. He had explained she would be more interested in laps than she would be in wrestling around on the mats with Neil. It was gratifying to know he was right.

It was another embarrassment for Marc that he refused to dwell on.

As they exited the elevator, word spread that the boss was out. Camp members appeared to verify it, but they left her alone when they saw she was surrounded by security and wearing her Eagle outfit.

Marc remained near the entryway as Angela entered the wide room with a large pool. It was a reminder that he had been removed from leadership; he suffered it with his chin up and his mind running through the training he'd received over the years. The only time the situation was able to break

through his concentration after that was when Angela and a few of the other women came from the changing room in bathing suits and dove into the water. Like the other males in Safe Haven, and some of the females, he stared at them and didn't care if he was caught.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Swallowing the Same Curses

1

Safe Haven was assembled in the lobby of the hotel exactly 10 minutes before noon. Everyone had received a shower and gotten a good shift of sleep. They looked healthy and happy, despite the fidgeting and twitching.

The townspeople had placed items in the rooms, including the workout areas. The garments were so new they were uncomfortable. Because of that, Angela didn't feel so out of place as she once again moved her shirt from overtop her holster. She wasn't expecting trouble, but she didn't want her clothing to be in the way of reaching her weapon. That was a big lesson taught during the rookie level.

Near the front doors of the lobby, Captain Grant and the mayor were already waiting. They had arrived early to observe Safe Haven for a few minutes before the two populations met.

Donna watched them nervously.

Grant was encouraged. There were 127 people in this lobby, but there were no fights or glares across the crowd, no pushing or shoving. He did acknowledge the fact that the men who had been

responsible for the drama at the Naval Station were not in attendance yet. Grant half expected one of them to be told to leave, though he didn't know the camp well enough to be sure which one. He was betting on the blond still being here. A guard dog was always needed during the apocalypse.

“Safe Haven will stay together and mind their manners.” Jennifer walked the crowd, giving reminders that were mostly for the younger population. She made eye contact with the children who had been responsible for the din in the hall during the Eagle lessons, then continued. “If you have a problem, go to the parking area behind this hotel. You do not come in here if we sound the alarms. You go straight to the trucks!”

Donna exchanged glances with Grant.

Grant shrugged, though he understood. Safe Haven wasn't sure yet if their hosts could be trusted. Grant thought that was wise. The people in this town were good, but after everything Safe Haven had gone through, if they hadn't already learned that lesson, he would have been disappointed.

Heads craned as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

Kyle and Neil came out first and did a fast scan before stepping aside to reveal Angela. As she moved forward, two men behind her became visible. All four guards were dressed in full gear and flashing expressions that warned people not to come close without permission.

Grant stared, amused and surprisingly aroused. The sight of Angela with wet hair hanging down her shoulders, dressed like one of the fighters, was something he would imprint in his brain to examine later. Noting the two troublemakers lined up behind her as if they were perfectly unreachable guards was thrilling. It appeared she had gotten them in line overnight. He was curious as to how that had happened.

“They use a lot of security.”

Grant nodded at Donna’s comment. “From the stories I’ve heard, they’re going through the same thing we did when the new people moved in.”

“They’ve had a lot of traitors.”

“I’ve been assured the people who are here now have all been vetted.” Grant grinned. “And they know how to make an entrance.”

Donna wasn’t as impressed. She preferred it when people didn’t flaunt themselves. She put on a cheerful smile as Angela reached her. “Good morning!”

“And the same to you.”

“How did you sleep?”

Angela chuckled. “Like I haven’t in months. Thank you.”

Donna beamed as she led the way out. Her people were waiting in the banquet hall and she didn’t want them to become worried.

Angela walked with her security. She wasn’t surprised when the mayor stayed a few steps ahead of them. The woman didn’t seem the type to be

comfortable with processions like this. Angela assumed the town had insisted. That was the only way Safe Haven would have been able to get her to agree to do something like this for guests. It was awkward to be put on the spot.

Behind the boss, Safe Haven walked slowly and observed their new surroundings. It had been a long time since any of them had been in a fully functioning town.

The center held a row of business and offices that included city services and a banquet hall. On both sides of this professional row were blocks of brick homes with faces in every window. It was clear that not everyone had been invited to breakfast.

Donna noticed her slight frown. “The main banquet room only holds 300. We drew lots for who would join us.”

The banquet hall was a quarter mile from the hotel. As they walked, Angela and the others became aware of noises in the distance.

Angela looked at Grant instead of the mayor.

Grant regarded the mayor for permission, though he wanted to answer Angela’s silent request.

Donna nodded. “They’ll hear about it even if we don’t tell them.”

Grant fell in with Angela, stepping between her and Kyle without concern.

Kyle would have knocked the man out of place, but Marc reached up and tapped him on the shoulder, preventing it.

Kyle dropped back a little, silently cursing.

“We’re having attacks along the western side of the wall. Some of the refugees from the Naval base found the town. We’re handling it.”

A large explosion came from the north.

Grant looked in that direction.

A moment later, a bright glint flashed at them from the wall behind the houses.

“All good.” Grant smiled and hurried to open the glass door, where a number of their people were crowded around, staring and waving. “After you, ladies.”

Donna led the way into the banquet hall. “We have breakfast ready.”

Angela wanted to ask how the woman planned to integrate the camps, but she didn’t have to as she saw the townspeople were all on one side, at long tables with benches and chairs. The other side of the banquet hall, much like this town, was empty except for the furniture.

The hall was lavish and elegant, with tablecloths and warm ceiling lights that welcomed the weary travelers like a dream. They hadn’t seen this type of luxury in almost a year. It was so unexpected that most of Safe Haven wasn’t speaking as they crowded into the entrance, just gaping.

Angela motioned her people toward the empty side, glad that the mayor had set it up this way. It wasn’t because of diseases either side might be carrying. That ship had already sailed at the Naval Station. Safe Haven had encountered 1000 people.

If one of them had been sick, there was no avoiding it now. She'd done the best she could by insisting everyone have a shower and antibiotics. So far, no one was showing signs of illness. She liked this setup because it allowed her to observe Donna's people.

While Safe Haven squeezed into ragged lines to reach the tables, Angela read the signs on the walls, slowly rotating to get all of the literature. While she did it, she scanned the 100 souls gawking at them from the opposite side of the elegant hall.

All meals will be taken together, in two shifts. Only 1-2 days of leftovers are allowed in any home or kit unless permission was given.

Food waste is illegal. Repeated offenses will shrink portions.

If you don't work and you're 10 or older, you don't eat. Exceptions are the weak or sick.

Everything is shared. If there is not enough for everyone, the item will be stored until the number of mismatched baskets is enough for a flea market.

The after-dinner curfew is in effect, except for workers and security.

Unauthorized cars, radios, gunfire, fireworks, or other attention getting objects and events are prohibited.

One gallon of water per person, per day, is the limit. Those with injuries, illnesses, or births may get more.

“I can tell you don’t approve.”

Angela let out a deep sigh as she searched for the right words. “I miss the days when those rules weren’t necessary.”

“Me too.” Once the camp was seated, Donna went toward a circular table centered between the two camps.

Angela followed, with Marc and Adrian on her heels.

Kyle remained with the camp to help the teams keep their people under control.

Donna motioned the line of servers to bring the food. The banquet hall began to ring with clanks and chatter as the two camps began to eat.

Angela looked at Adrian, and then the seat on her right.

Adrian took that position without looking at Marc.

Marc stayed behind Angela’s chair, not telling Adrian he had expected it. Ciemus wanted both legends at this meeting.

Grant took the seat next to the mayor as servers hurried over with four steaming plates of food that smelled wonderful.

For a few minutes, there was just the sound of eating and drinking as both camps got settled. Angela enjoyed the food. Home-cooked and fresh, it was a treat she allowed herself a second helping of without being prompted.

Both of her men were pleased to see she had an appetite today. As she finished off the second plate

of fried potatoes, gravy, and scrambled eggs, she let out a belch and smiled. “Best meal I’ve had since the war.”

Servers waiting nearby passed the word so their cooks would relax about whether or not Safe Haven was enjoying the meal.

Donna had only consumed half of her portion, but she’d drunk three cups of coffee while letting everyone eat. She’d studied Angela and her companions the entire time the caffeine had been building in her system. Now, her fingers were twitching restlessly against the mug, giving away her nervousness.

Angela picked up her cup with both hands and took a sip. The coffee tasted fresh as well. “You have to tell me how you have things set up. I may be able to copy it if we have the space where we’re going.”

Given an opening, Donna jumped on it. “There are a lot of things we could teach each other. Maybe we could go somewhere private and talk?”

Angela stood, taking her cup.

Donna hurried to lead the way. “There’s a private room over here. We can leave the door open if you’re worried about being out of sight.”

“I’m not.” Angela followed the mayor into the room, aware of two town security guards moving into the entryway behind them.

The private room was identical to the main room, only smaller, with fewer windows. There

were several employee entrances and an empty serving counter.

“You can’t go in.” The local guards crossed arms over wide chests and refused the men entry.

Adrian looked at Marc.

Marc shrugged. *I’m game if you are.*

Almost in unison, both men lifted a hand and sent the guards in front of them tumbling out of the way.

“Let them come in if it makes them feel better!” Donna hurried to settle things down, aware of both camps now staring in surprise and concern. “My people would never let me enter your camp alone. I understand.”

Angela moved toward the table near the window, noting it had been set for three people. “I’m not alone. I’m with you, and it’s *you* they’ll hold responsible for my safety.”

Marc and Adrian took up spots on either side of the entryway, replacing the mayor’s men.

The two locals got up with embarrassed glares.

Grant’s motion of denial kept them from challenging the Eagles.

Angela calmly sat in the chair. She was interested in why Donna wanted to talk to her away from everyone. Male bravado wasn’t usually impressive to her, though she was a bit amused by the display. Eagles didn’t like being challenged, in any way.

Out in the banquet hall, silence was holding. People were returning to the meal, but the good mood had been interrupted.

Jennifer wasn't certain if Angela was okay with the way Marc and Adrian had handled things, but she was. There were several members of the town who had been eyeing Safe Haven as if they were less than what they were. She had been picking up snide thoughts from people who didn't understand the camp in front of them was special. Marc and Adrian had just proven them wrong and brought a layer of respect to the hall that Jennifer was happy to feel.

Marc scanned the private room and found two doors, along with a wall of windows. He kept his eye on them as Angela and the mayor sat down.

Donna pushed the teapot in the center of the table toward Angela, too wound up to pour without spilling. She didn't usually allow herself so much caffeine at one time. "I'd like to tell you about our town and then ask for a favor."

Angela began to assemble the cup of tea. "You mean payment."

Donna was horrified. "We do not expect payment for helping you."

Angela hoped that was true. "I'll take you at your word."

"You can." Donna smoothed wrinkles from her stiff suit jacket. "This town is special."

“Because you have a descendant?” Angela made it clear in her tone that Donna wasn’t who she was referring to.

Donna nodded, relieved Angela knew. “We’ve always had descendants here. Ciemus has hidden your kind for centuries. Our people have accepted magic, unlike the ones you care for. I would imagine it has been a long road just to get them to where you have them.”

Angela nodded, but didn’t elaborate. It had been worse than long, but she hoped they were almost over it now.

“Our town is the opposite. We look for those who are special, and help them avoid capture. Or at least, we did until the war. After that, we just tried to hide the descendants who were here.” Donna grew pensive. “We lost all of them but one.”

Angela suspected she was going to be asked to leave someone here and began preparing a way to get out of it. Safe Haven needed the descendants and the descendants needed Safe Haven.

Donna seemed to read Angela’s mind. “Please don’t think that way about us. That’s not the favor I need.”

Angela stirred her tea without comment. She was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Have you noticed anything about this town?”

Angela picked what the woman wanted from the variety of caffeine-laced thoughts running through her mind. “You have more women than men.”

“Yes, because of the draft. After the soldiers came through, we buried our dead friends and family, then started building the wall from their homes to prevent it from ever happening again.”

Angela stared for a long moment, realizing she had been wrong in her first assumption. “Your problem isn’t too many women. It’s a shortage of *men*.”

Donna frowned. “They were right. You do figure things out fast.”

Angela ignored the praise. Coming from a stranger, it didn’t mean anything. Adrian’s approving nod made her feel great. “Ask your favor.”

“Will you take some of my people with you and leave some of your people here?”

Eagles who heard the request frowned.

Angela’s plans widened. “How many and why?” They were both important questions, but Angela was also picking up images from Grant that she found amusing. He was currently thinking about sailing away on a boat and leaving all the politics behind. If he came with Safe Haven, there would still be politics, so the joke was on him.

“You can leave as many of your people here as you want. We’ll match you person for person, or as many of my town as you’ll allow to go.”

It was as reasonable as it got. Angela sat back in her chair with the cup. “I’ll talk to my camp about it, but I don’t see why not. Everyone will have to be vetted.”

Donna was relieved to have the first part over. She drew in a breath, aware that Angela was waiting for the second part of her answer. “We’re doing it because all of our births since the war have been female and Safe Haven has good men. When our alpha suggested it, the town voted and agreed. Now that we see it might succeed, people are talking about how well it could work out. You’re about to go on the water and this town has been pulling life from the river for its entire existence. We’re going to stay here and keep learning to live off the land. Your people know how to do that. It’ll be a trade of towns.”

“The first postwar swap between cities.”

Donna chuckled at the wording. “We’re not quite big enough to be a city.”

“If Safe Haven leaves men here with you, you might be in a few years. Our men are fertile and as soon as I say you want them for population building, they’ll pick out a mate from across the room without even knowing her name. They’ve missed women.” Angela wasn’t about to pull any punches about the men in her camp. They were lonely and horny.

Donna wasn’t intimidated. She was thrilled. “The women in my town feel the same, but most of us will never leave. The solution was to find others like us and mix. When we began to hear of Safe Haven, we made preparations.”

“Such as the strict rules.”

“Yes.”

Angela leaned in, aware of Marc and Adrian listening. “Has it worked?”

Donna nodded. “We’ve had less violence every month since we began even though our population has increased.”

“With female births?”

“Yes, but also new arrivals and families returning from the grave. For the last three months, there have been no rapes or deaths that weren’t accidental or natural. We follow the alpha’s guidelines and remove those who don’t.”

“Your alpha sounds wise.”

Donna’s face lit up with an emotion Angela instantly recognized.

“Yes, William is the best!” Donna motioned for Grant.

“Why haven’t I met him yet?”

Angela saw Grant tense at the comment as he joined them. She opened her mouth to ask him about it and then froze as the strongest wave of energy she’d ever felt swept over the room in a deep scan. It brought goosebumps to her arms.

Marc and Adrian moved shoulder-to-shoulder in the doorway.

Angela looked around, trying to see who was putting off such a vibe.

“Ah! Here he is now.”

Donna’s words faded as a man appeared over Adrian’s shoulder. Of tall stature, with red and gold hair, only half of his face was visible, but Angela already knew it would be pleasing.

Marc and Adrian caught the thought and without discussing it, brought up their personal shields and combined them into one block across the entryway. Neither of them had felt that type of power either and it didn't matter that the man wasn't intimidating at all. William appeared to be a young country clubber to Adrian and a bowling geek to Marc, but both of them recognized the danger.

William chuckled, deep green eyes glowing in the obvious mark of a descendant. Without lifting a finger, he sent a wave of power that knocked Marc and Adrian out of the way—like they'd done with the mayor's security.

William stepped by the groaning men and entered the private room. "How are we today?" He slammed the doors to the private area.

"I'm sorry for that." Donna was embarrassed. "He insisted we feed you first. He says you need to gain weight."

The doors immediately opened behind him.

When he would have turned around to fight her guards, Angela sighed. "That would anger me and strain our new trade agreement."

William gave her a charming grin as he came forward instead and slid into the seat. "I guess they can stay." His grin widened, showing beautiful white teeth. "It's sweet they both love you."

Neither Marc nor Adrian had felt the man's scan. It made them nervous that he already knew what made them tick. They stayed in the entryway,

but this time they had their guns out and were ready to use them at Angela's nod.

Angela didn't tell them to put their weapons away. She was too busy scanning the man who was staring at her in exactly the same manner. She was aware of Marc and Adrian's displeasure, but she also felt the mayor's unhappiness and realized Donna was suffering from the same affliction as the men in the entryway.

Angela tuned them all out and concentrated on William. Within a few seconds, she knew he had inherited the position of town protector from his parents, making him the only descendant she'd met who was raised by his family. "Merovingian."

William chuckled, leaning back to cross one leg over the other. "As are you, I'd wager."

Angela delved deeper into his mind. "You love them. You won't leave them, and you won't take them anywhere else."

William nodded. "We're not safe anywhere else."

"What makes it so special here?"

"William." Donna beamed at her man. "We'd be safe anywhere he is."

Angela knew there was more to it than that, but didn't push. She could feel the man's impatience, his excitement at meeting her. Not sensing any form of animosity, she gave him what he wanted because of her own curiosity.

Marc and Adrian both stiffened as Angela dropped her mental shields and let the stranger in.

“You’ve sacrificed everything to keep them together.” William’s heart broke for her pain as he scanned her memories of the children and friends she had lost.

“You buried your parents after the war.” Angela saw the couple die in front of him on a supply run.

“You wish they would quit fighting over you. You don’t think you’re worth it.”

The men in the entryway began to pay more attention to the words.

“You’re not sure Donna and Grant have done enough for Safe Haven to agree.”

“You’re not sure you have enough people to survive on the island.”

Donna didn’t interrupt the exchange, but she had as many questions as the other witnesses.

“You know about the future of the descendants.”

“You know about the past of the descendants.”

“You’re lonely,” they echoed at the same time.

Angela didn’t withdraw from William’s mind. Nor did she force him out. It was astounding to find someone like herself.

William’s smile returned. “Yes, it is.”

Angela couldn’t help it. She leaned forward. “Prove it.”

Marc turned to Adrian. “Is that why she needs both of us? Because we can’t match him, even together?”

Adrian didn't like how it was going to feel to admit that. "We could be, if we were open to it the way she is."

Marc didn't ask anything else, but he and Adrian felt each other trying to determine if they wanted to take that route. Watching William charm Angela was making them reconsider their rivalry. It would take both of them if the man became a problem.

Out in the banquet hall, both camps were eating and trying to listen. In the far corner behind Safe Haven, Jennifer was getting all of it and letting Eagles read it by touching her arm or shoulder. As each revelation came, they were fighting not to let out *oohs* and *ahs* that would alert the boss.

Jennifer frowned as the line disconnected. "Damn, it was just getting to the good part!"

2

"Will *you* do something?"

Marc and Adrian both wanted Angela to deny William's request, but it was impossible for her to do that when she could feel the identical emotions that she'd been handling alone for so long bubbling up in William's throat. "What would you like?"

William leaned forward eagerly. "Anything you want."

Angela poured his tea without moving.

Adrian listened while Marc stared. *I can't do that.*

I didn't know she could. Adrian didn't tell Marc he could move objects. It wasn't a skill that he was proficient at. He'd used others for that part of the job.

I'm not surprised, Marc commented distractedly.

While William clapped and Grant grinned, the mayor rolled her eyes and let out a sigh that said she suffered through moments like this. They were making her uncomfortable.

William looked at Angela with a mischievous grin. "Should we stop or make it worse?"

Angela didn't want to offend her host, but like William, she was delighted to have found someone who was almost exactly like her. After so many months of being alone in these levels of abilities, she'd thought she was the only one.

"So did I." William laid his hand on hers. "You could stay."

Angela allowed it, but pulled away as soon as she felt like she could do so without being rude. She still didn't like to be touched. "No, I can't."

"I could come with you."

Marc and Adrian both shouted mental denials.

Donna tensed in the chair and then clamped her mouth shut to keep from saying anything.

"No, you won't."

"No. I would never leave them, not even for someone like you."

Angela was flattered. She gave him a smile that would have brought most men to their knees with the amount of alpha pull it had.

William simply glanced at her with knowing eyes and a kind smile. “Will we have time to talk again before you leave?”

Angela nodded immediately. “I’ll make time.”

William clapped again and then tossed his hands in the air. His happiness became a small rainbow of flower petals that settled over Angela and the table.

Marc and Adrian exchanged another glance as Angela giggled. *We’d better start working soon.*

I have been all along. Adrian grunted. *I just can’t keep up with that.*

William chuckled. “I can keep up with it and then some.”

“Safe Haven will stay an extra day.”

Angela’s announcement drew cheers from both the camps in the adjoining hall, drowning out Adrian and Marc’s protests.

Angela didn’t care. She was staring at William in delighted recognition as she finished exploring his mind. “You’re Byzantine.”

Now, William was the one to clap. *Welcome to my sanctuary, Angela. You’re safe here.* “Would you like to go for a walk?”

Before her security could protest, Angela stood.

Delighted, William hopped up with seemingly boundless energy, appearing much younger than the

40-something he was according to the wrinkles lining his eyes and hands.

“Do you want me to—”

“No, Mayor Marsh, we’ve got it.” William was quick to cut her off. “I’ll have our guest back within an hour.”

Angela nodded toward Adrian. “You have point over camp.” She didn’t tell Marc to stay here. He already knew what she wanted. Now she would see if he could give it to her.

Marc was torn. There was nothing in William’s behavior to imply that Angela was in danger in any way. He had no reason to protest letting her have privacy, except for his emotions. Swallowing the same curses Adrian was, Marc gave her a stiff nod and turned toward Safe Haven.

Everyone in that camp saw Marc’s expression and tensed.

Marc smoothed his face and went to stand guard over Adrian as the former leader assumed point duty. Marc heard Angela giggle again and then a door closed. He assumed she and William had left by one of the other exits in the private room. He immediately began planning the fastest way to reach her if she called for help.

“She doesn’t need us. The camp does.”

Marc didn’t like Adrian’s reminder, but the boss had made her wishes clear. Now, he had to be man enough to respect them.

Chapter Thirty
A Mix of Both

1

“**A**re you cold? They told me you were sick recently.” William was in the process of removing his jacket.

“No.” Angela revealed one of her innermost fears, trying to learn to trust again. “Is it really okay here, for *us*?”

Assuming she wanted to use her gifts, William hurried to offer comfort. “We’ve been protecting them for centuries. There’s nothing you can do in this town that will cause my people to rise up against us.”

Taking a deep breath to face the longtime fear, Angela brought up her personal shield. Clearly visible, it would protect her from the wind, eliminating her need for the jacket hanging over her chair in the main banquet hall.

William brought his up too. “Is that all? I thought you were going to do something shocking.”

Challenged, Angela took a fast glance around and then brought up a powerful gust of wind and hit herself in the face with it. She moved her head around to help that draft dry her hair.

Angela looked so much like old commercials that William burst out laughing.

Angela snickered. “I’ve wanted to try it since I copied this gift, but I never found time alone after a shower.”

William was still chuckling. “My parents taught me how as a kid because they were tired of me going through so many towels! My parents hated doing laundry and I used a lot of it.”

As William relived the good memory and Angela shared it with him, she realized he was innocent in ways that she wasn’t. Despite being a decade older, he seemed a decade younger. She didn’t know if that was because he had led a sheltered life here, but it was refreshing to not find darkness in him anywhere. Even the shaded areas in his mind were pranks, like the one he had played on Marc and Adrian by doing the same thing to them that they had done to his two security friends.

“Wow. You see everything.” He stared at her in longing. “Are you certain you have to go?”

Angela felt an edge of danger now. She refused to step away from that line. “I don’t want to. I love my country.”

“Then stay!”

“I can’t.”

“Because you don’t believe your people will be safe here. You don’t believe my people will be either.”

Angela's enthusiasm dampened. "I think you'll all be dead within six months of saying goodbye to us."

William hated the chill her words provided, but he didn't refute them. "Then we'll have six more months here."

Angela nodded. "Yes." She waited for him to lead her somewhere, positive that he had suggested the walk for more than a few moments alone.

"I want to give you something." William got moving, stealing looks at her. He wasn't examining her because she was a woman. He was studying her because she was Byzan. "I'm surprised your lovers don't understand what's going on with you."

Angela wasn't sure she wanted to discuss that with William. She had no guarantees he wouldn't talk about it. "Only one of them is a lover."

"Ah, yes. The wolf and the guard dog. Is it okay to look?" William hadn't gone through her mind as deeply as she had his.

"I'd rather you didn't. You can get the full from anyone else."

William decided he would go straight to the sources on that. "There's a bookstore up here around the corner, next to the church. You can wait outside if you like. It will only take me a minute to grab what I want."

"I love bookstores. I'll come in with you."

"Great!"

Angela enjoyed the walk through the quiet town, aware of people in doors and windows who

were pleasantly surprised to find their descendant walking down the street with Safe Haven's leader. The fact that there were no guards in sight from either camp said a lot about how well things were going.

"These people love you. You've done a good job here."

William glowed at the praise. "That means a lot coming from you."

"You do know my guard dog built Safe Haven, right?"

William looked behind them even though the banquet hall was out of sight. "I had no idea that was the same man."

Angela sighed. *That bothers me too.*

"Please?"

Angela stopped as he opened the door to the bookstore. "If you must."

She stepped inside, letting him shove into her mind and pull out every single thought and memory she'd ever had concerning Adrian and Marc. His face tensed and emotions shifted as he explored, but he didn't speak about it even after he had examined all of them.

Angela refused to relive it, instead considering what questions she needed answers to the most before she was on the boat and the information was out of reach. She came up with three, but only asked one of those. "Why are we like this?"

William was processing everything he had viewed. He answered distractedly. “We’re what you would call team leaders.”

“What’s the level directly below?”

“Rookies.”

“Invisibles?”

“Bingo.”

“And the level above?”

“That would be your Special Forces.”

Angela concentrated for that one. “Jennifer and Leeann?”

William examined those people in her mind. “Yes.”

“After that?”

William looked upward. “The big boss.”

It was a comfort to know there was another floor between her and that level of power. She didn’t want to go any higher than she was now. In fact, she wanted to skip down a level or two.

William sighed. “I couldn’t agree more.” He took her to the center of the musty shop. “We’ve managed to print 10 copies during my lifetime. I want you to have one of them.”

Angela examined the book under the glass case, assuming it was the very first edition. The intricate drawings and delicate penmanship on the cover seemed familiar to her, though she was positive she’d never viewed it before.

William took a copy of the book from underneath the podium and handed it to her. “It’s

not just a memento of your time in our town. It's your history."

2

"They don't have art or jewelry. Did you notice?"

"No, but I saw they don't have electronics. Not even a phone."

"Wow. We've got it better than they do. At least we can play games when we find batteries or use the solar chargers."

"We don't have the wall."

"We have the bubble."

"True."

Marc and Adrian paused to let camp members go by as they escorted everyone back to the hotel. The conversations around them were all about the town.

"I think we may have a problem."

Adrian and Marc were in the rear of the slowly moving, well-fed camp as Jennifer joined them.

"We know." Adrian was trying to read Angela through their bonds and failing at every attempt.

"She's thinking about staying."

"We know." Marc could feel it too. For the first time in her life, Angela was with someone who was like her. "Maybe we should."

Marc obviously didn't want to leave America, but Adrian gave him the benefit of the doubt. "Tell me why."

“I just don’t want to go.”

Adrian respected the honesty. “You know we can’t stay. These people are not going to survive.”

Marc believed that too. He had noticed several gaps in the wall that anybody with training would be able to take advantage of. This town had been lucky so far that the majority of refugees had been too busy chasing Safe Haven to find them.

“If she decides to stay, the camp will too.” Adrian lowered his voice. “I can’t get them to follow *me* onto the boat.”

“Some of them would. But I agree it’s a problem.”

“I think it’s worse than you two realize.” Jennifer made sure no one could hear her as she filled them in on something she’d discovered during Angela’s conversation with William. “This town has accepted magic in ways that Safe Haven hasn’t and may never. Right now, Angela is playing with her gifts in an alley behind the main town, with dozens of strangers watching her, and she isn’t the least bit afraid. *She* likes this place.”

Marc and Adrian exchanged another glance of concern. Adrian had always feared the herd refusing to go when the final moment came. He’d never considered that Angela might. This one would be completely up to her.

“Actually, it’s up to fate.” Jennifer increased her pace to leave them. “I’ll check in with you later.”

The men let her go, satisfied with the job she had done so far during her turns on point. Marc was

actually impressed. He hadn't believed a teenager could be mature enough to handle their camp the way Jennifer had. He now considered her a level two Eagle.

"You should tell her that."

Marc shrugged. "Okay."

"I mean it," Adrian insisted as they neared the hotel. "Everyone in Safe Haven respects you. Moments like that will help your cause."

"I'm thinking about suggesting an early lights out."

Adrian knew that was as close as Marc was willing to get when it came to asking for his advice about authority limits now. It was a sore subject. Adrian tiptoed around it. "Seems like a good idea since we're on the road tomorrow. Might also be a good idea for the boss to come back and find things ready to go."

"It also might piss her off."

Adrian nodded. "Yeah."

Marc sighed. "Mention it to her, will you?"

"I will. Are there any other observations you'd like to note?" Adrian kept his tone neutral, hoping not to trigger Marc's anger.

Marc was more concerned with the descendant behind them than he was the one walking next to him. "I've got all kinds of shit. Get your notebook out."

Adrian did.

“It’s the boss!” Eagles on outside duty hurried to surround Angela as she walked toward the hotel from a nearby alley, alone.

None of them openly scolded her, but they were thinking it.

Angela didn’t care. The last hour had been wonderful and she was already mourning not being able to do it again. Using her gifts without fear was an incredible rush. After they’d left the bookstore, William had taken her to his training alley, where he practiced daily while his people watched. A few town kids had shown up during her tour, begging him to make rainbows of flowers. When he’d invited her to join in, Angela hadn’t hesitated.

William’s shield over this town was dense, preventing trackers from picking up magic use. The mental walls had even prevented Jennifer from detecting the residents. Angela assumed that was why William wouldn’t take his people anywhere else. This location was special.

Angela entered the hotel with nods and smiles for people, sending good vibes that brought the shield up. It had been a great start to the—

“Look out!”

Angela and her security ducked or spun around, reaching for weapons.

Cold water splashed Angela from head to toe.
“Oh!”

Her security echoed the yelp, almost reaching the same pitch as water splashed and splattered them too.

Stanley ran to them with an empty animal watering bucket dangling from his fingers. "I'm sorry! I tripped!"

Greg shoved the boy away before he could reach Angela, then wiped water from his face and arms. The boss had gotten most of it, but both of them were drenched.

Angela moved toward the elevator with stiff shoulders and lips flattened into a thin line.

Stanley followed with more apologies.

Gus's brother, Lou, grabbed the boy's arm and pulled him toward the kitchen. "You need more water. She doesn't."

As the elevator began to move upward, the people in the lobby burst into laughter.

Next to Angela, Greg also began to snicker.

"What are you laughing at?" Angela scanned the Eagle. "You're just as wet as I am."

Chuckles filled the elevator as the men realized she wasn't angry.

Greg pushed the stop button. He looked at Angela as the metal box shuddered to a halt. "We'll only have a couple minutes before the guards think something is wrong."

Angela would have skipped this moment, but it was obvious the men were determined. "Go on, then."

Greg dropped all pretenses and faced her with remorse. “We’re sorry for the embarrassment because the vote went the other way. We’re also sorry for handling Marc like that without giving you warning on it.”

Angela let out a sigh. “It had to happen at some point. Let it go.”

The men were relieved to hear it. Except for Daryl, who had been one of the more outspoken people supporting Kyle’s idea. “We really would like it if you’d let us make it up to you.”

Angela stiffened.

The wet team around her expected a scold for the continued groveling, but Angela didn’t speak. Assuming she was using her magic, they waited to see what was going on.

“Does everyone feel that way?”

It took them a few seconds of replaying the conversation to figure out what she meant.

“Mostly.” Daryl gave her a pointed look. “This camp doesn’t go anywhere without you.”

A grin stretched Angela’s lips. “They don’t, do they?”

Believing they had gotten her in a better mood, Greg restarted the elevator. “You just let us know what you need and we’ll help you with it—no questions asked.”

Angela smoothed her expression as they neared the floor, donning the profile of an annoyed leader who had just been soaked by the camp klutz. “Get

changed and meet me back here in 10 minutes. I'll give you instructions then."

Greg understood their marker was already being called in. "Is this keep-it-low or open-ended?"

"As low as it goes, Eagle. Not even your teammates."

Greg and the other three men didn't scowl or protest. Excitement filled the air. They hurried to get changed and get back.

4

"I'm calling an emergency camp meeting."

Silence fell through the cafeteria. Everyone turned to look at Angela, who had just come to the entryway.

Greg and Daryl handed off security to Ivan and his team, who came over to take those early evening posts.

"We're doing it here. Now."

Adrian and Marc scanned her thoughts, dismayed to find their most recent fear front and center. Adrian hurried over to her. "What are you doing?"

Angela shoved by him. She went to stand in the center of the tables, aware of everyone looking at her with tension. For half a day, this camp had been happy. Now they were wondering if the bill for that peace was already coming due.

"This town found a way to live off the land and protect themselves from the effects of the war. They

have the life we're planning on building. They're so much like us it's scary. I know you've all noticed."

Heads nodded in agreement. People resumed eating as they listened.

"It's good here. You know that too." Angela scanned the camp. "Mayor Marsh has invited Safe Haven to stay—permanently."

Murmurs and mutters took the place of eating once again.

Marc and Adrian shoved mental complaints and reminders at her, but Angela refused to be swayed from the decision she'd made. "I told you we weren't going to vote on Safe Haven's destination anymore because we didn't have another choice then. That has changed."

Angela moved to the center of her people, going to stand near the kids. "How many of you noticed we didn't get to meet the town's children?"

That hadn't occurred to most people. The ones who had noticed it thought the town was wise to keep their children away from strangers.

"Ciemus has less than a dozen kids. There are families here who would adopt our orphans and give them the love and care this town is obviously good at providing, especially to descendants. It would be a horrible crime for me to keep this information from you." Angela sat backwards on one of the benches and took out the book William had gifted to her. "This town has been protecting descendants for a long time. If Safe Haven leaves, I can't see a future for us."

Before people could get distracted, Angela opened the book and began to read. *“I want to go with Safe Haven. I’m terrified of staying here, but I’m too big of a coward to leave. I can only hope when Safe Haven comes, my courage will return with it.”* She shut the book. “The date on that entry is a week after the war. The alpha here knew we were coming and in all that time, he didn’t make a single plan to force us to stay or to force us to take his people to the island. Despite having the type of power that I possess, William and his people have remained uncorrupted. If we were to stay, I don’t believe we would have trouble fitting into their routines. Nor do I believe they would have trouble adjusting to ours. The mayor said there can be a Safe Haven side of town or we can mix.”

Angela looked toward the cafeteria, where a small, well-guarded group was arriving. “Everyone has questions, I’m sure. It’s impossible to make the right decision without information. Mayor Marsh and the other leaders of the town have agreed to join us for dinner and do what they can to satisfy concerns we have. After we eat, we’ll vote.”

“Can the people who vote to leave, still go?” Kevin asked, picking a bean from his teeth.

“Of course.” Angela didn’t look at Greg as he slid onto a bench next to Kyle with his plate and began eating. “Supplies will be divided.”

Belches and snuffles echoed, along with clinks of silverware and dull thumps of trays. It all sounded funny to them.

Sitting at the table where Angela was, Leeann asked what everyone was thinking. “What’s *your* vote?”

“There’s darkness when I look, either way.”

“That’s not an answer. Do you want to stay here?”

“Yes. Deeply.”

“Is that your vote?”

Angela sighed. “I won’t tell you that. I can’t influence this choice. I suggest we listen to the leaders here and see if we like the answers. Then you guys have to talk about what you want from the future.”

Before the girl could speak again, Angela joined the council at a long table in front as the mayor, Captain Grant, and William were seated. She didn’t look at anyone, delving into her own mind to be certain. If she voted to stay, enough Eagles would remain with her to allow for protection and expansion of this town. Within a year, everyone could be flourishing and Ciemus might even be able to take in new refugees.

Will the mayor give us that authority here?
Adrian asked silently.

Angela nodded, but didn’t add to it. She didn’t want to embarrass the mayor by revealing the woman’s secret. Donna wanted to have a baby before she was too old to try. If Safe Haven were to move in here, Angela would be in charge within a month.

Jennifer glared. “Is that what he bribed you with?”

Adrian and Marc glowered at the teenager, thinking if they were able to keep their mouths shut, then she should be able to as well.

Jennifer didn’t even notice. She leaned back in the chair and studied her mentor with an expression of betrayed anger. “We all know the reason. You’re scared of the ocean trip and here, you’ll be a queen.”

Silence fell at the accusation.

Distracted, none of the council saw Daryl slide over to the next table of Eagles and resume eating.

Angela slowly stood up. “I’ve been accused of holding this vote under false pretenses. Does anyone second the charge?”

Jennifer flushed, hand rising. “Wait. I didn’t ask for that.”

“It’s SOP for leadership here.” Adrian was proud of Angela for doing this even though he didn’t want Safe Haven to stay. Moments like this were why he’d chosen her as his heir.

“I don’t understand.”

“You just challenged her honesty, her fairness, and her worthiness to be called the boss.” Kyle’s tone was layered in disapproval. “You can’t just take that back. Does anyone second the charges?”

No one spoke.

Angela glanced around the cafeteria, seeing a few expressions did echo Jennifer’s thoughts. “It occurred to me earlier that this might happen because I took an hour away to enjoy myself. I’ve

given you everything—including one of my children. I would never trade Safe Haven. Not for new sheep and not for peace.” Angela moved toward the exit. “I abstain from the vote. Make your own choices. I’ll do the same.” Angela’s hard, hurt tones echoed as she left them. “Being alone might be nice for a change.”

Panic filled the air, sending thoughts to times without her to rely on.

Kyle subtly nodded at Jennifer while everyone turned to stare at her and the council.

“Well, shit just got real up in here.” Samantha grinned, trying to break the tension.

“I’m sorry for all this.” Jennifer stared at the council. “But it’s the truth.”

“You’re mistaken, Enforcer,” William informed her coldly. It was the first time he had spoken with Angela’s heir. So far, he wasn’t impressed by the girl. “You have no idea what she fears, but I promise you, it isn’t the ocean and she is not bribable.” William dropped his mental walls before Jennifer could slam through them.

Marc made a gesture for Safe Haven to go on eating. He assumed Angela wanted Adrian to handle things while she was out of the room, but he wasn’t sure. Until Jennifer had spoken up, Marc assumed she would do it.

Jennifer scowled. “I am doing it.”

“I think the camp would like something a little more open.” Kyle came to the table. He placed a

hand on her shoulder, getting her to look up at him. “Remember who we are, Jenny.”

Jennifer flushed and withdrew from the powerful descendant’s mind with only part of her curiosity satisfied. “Fine. How did you talk our leader into this when not a month ago, she said if we stay, we’ll die?”

“I don’t know how to explain that in a way you’ll understand. It isn’t whatever the guard dog did to her. She’s safe here.”

Jennifer knew that was big for Angela. “Are the rest of us safe here too or do you just want our leader?”

“Everyone is welcome in Ciemus.” Donna frowned a bit. She didn’t care for the dramatics.

Jennifer ignored the woman, still glaring at William. “I don’t trust you.”

“You’ve been through hell. I’d be surprised if you trusted anyone.”

Jennifer glanced at Kyle and then back to William. “We’ll have Safe Haven rules or yours?”

“I think we can use a mix of both.”

“What if we disagree about what the rules should be?”

“Safe Haven’s people would obey their rules and our people would obey ours.”

“That means we would have to have a split town.”

William nodded, leaning forward to draw an imaginary border on the napkin with his finger.

“Yes, we would do it like this...”

Jennifer and William began to haggle out the details, further dismaying Marc and Adrian. If William was able to convince the teenager, then it was probably a done deal. Both of them realized Angela was leaving it to Jennifer to find a loophole.

Marc and Adrian exchanged looks and then began to ask their own questions, praying they found one the man couldn't answer.

"Isn't someone going to go after her?" Grant was staring at the doorway where Angela had disappeared.

Sitting next to him, Samantha patted his wrist. "She'll come back when we're done grilling you."

Grant tried to place the blonde and barely managed to. "You're the weather girl, right?"

Samantha chuckled. "That's me."

Grant wasn't sure if he had offended her. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to call you."

Samantha leaned forward with her hand out. "A lot of people call me the weather tracker, but I'm just Samantha."

Grant shook, flashing an intent smile. "Nice to meet you, *Sammi*."

Sitting on the other side of Samantha, Neil looked over in surprise. *I thought he had the hots for Jennifer!*

Grant's grin grew. Safe Haven men were easy to screw with.

“We have a problem, Boss.” Kenn found Angela sitting on the side of the swimming pool, watching the water.

She looked up in alarm. “Our camp or their town?”

“Ours.”

Angela jumped to her feet and followed Kenn out of the pool room. “What’s the problem?”

“Safe Haven is refusing to vote.”

Angela wasn’t sure what he meant. Kenn had a wall up and that wasn’t good. “What’s going on?”

Kenn held the door to the cafeteria open and motioned her inside. “Safe Haven says there’s no reason for this meeting.”

Angela noted their guests were wearing smiles instead of alarm or fear. Angela swept her camp, able to feel the love and admiration in the room, but she had no idea why she was receiving it. She picked Leeann for a replay of what had happened.

Leeann shook her head. “We’re doing this openly. That was a camp choice.”

Angela waited impatiently, withdrawing from her scan. “Get on with it, then.” Not knowing what was happening was making her twitchy.

Everyone looked at Marc.

Marc came to where she was standing and handed her a slip of paper.

Safe Haven goes where Angie goes.

Angela looked up. “But I... It’s good here. The ocean might kill us all.”

Looking at their faces, it was obvious no one had been sold. They'd known all along she was lying about the easy trip to the island. Faced with people who were no longer blind sheep, Angela was filled with pride for how much they had grown. "You're sure this is what you want to do?"

Nearly every head nodded. A few people were going to stay, but not nearly as many as Angela had feared.

"Our future is up to you." Marc drew her attention. "We go where you go."

Angela didn't stop the tears. "Thirty-six hours from now, Safe Haven needs to be in their vehicles and ready to go south. I'll be in the front rig."

A loud cheer echoed throughout the hotel and into the darkness.

Chapter Thirty-One

Teeth Out and Hungry

1

“**H**ow far ahead did you view before it all went black?”

Angela stiffened. Just for an instant, only someone looking for it would have noticed.

Kendle settled against the wall nearby, waiting for the guards to finish their patrol of the cafeteria. She and Angela, plus the cooks and security, were the only ones still here. After the meeting, Ciemus leaders had hung around for an hour, answering questions. When the camp had begun to get bored, Angela had sent their company home and ordered lights out. Kendle had come in the rear entrance and caught the boss off guard during toast and tea.

Angela chose her answer carefully, wanting to trust the castaway. “To the island and back, in short flashes.”

“Meaning you missed a lot of the between?”

“Yes.”

“And as those moments approached, you looked each time to see what had changed?”

“Of course. I also consulted other people.”

“When was the last time you could see?”

“How do you know I can’t?”

“Because we almost died in the hangar.”

“Blind spot.”

Kendle grunted. “Yeah, that’s what everyone thinks.”

“But...?”

“We were rescued and brought to sanctuary.”

“Fate.”

“Maybe...”

“If not for...?”

“If not for William. You two already knew each other. Even Marc hasn’t picked it up, but I did.”

Angela tried not to smile, glad Kendle couldn’t see her face. “How do you figure that?”

“You let him touch you.”

Angela slowly turned around on the seat. She pinned the woman with a potent wave of approval.

She let off it, allowing Kendle to breathe again.

Kendle was glad she was leaning against the wall. “What was that? And how do I get more?”

“My respect.”

“It was amazing.”

“So are you. Anyone else would have curled up and died. You’re the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

Angela didn’t need to blast Kendle again. The words did it for her. Kendle didn’t know what to say.

Angela turned back around. The evolution was finally releasing its hold on her gifts. The alpha wave was now full strength.

“Does Marc know you dream walk?”

Angela stiffened again, but this time, she didn't care if anyone noticed. Kendle had just approached a line of no return. "No one does."

"Not even Jennifer?"

"She will after this because of your thoughts. It will make her see there's another level to be monitored."

"That's where you met William?"

"I got stuck. He saved me."

Kendle wanted the full story on that. She came around to join Angela on the bench. "Will you tell me? I've wanted to do it, but I'm afraid of getting lost."

"Are we finished with the other thing?"

Kendle frowned in confusion. "What other thing?"

"You, hoping I die."

Paling, Kendle wanted to say yes. "Probably not. He's an amazing man."

"Yes."

"And you don't treat him right."

"No."

Kendle sighed. "I'm working on it. And whatever you hit me with is still ringing in my ears. That should help."

Angela chuckled. "I meant it. No one else figured that out, even though my jumpiness is what causes both of them to flood with the need to protect me."

"Even when you don't want it."

“Yes. I didn’t ask for this mess. I’m doing the best I can with it.”

“Other than personal issues, we seem to be doing okay. It’s not bad with you as boss.”

Angela’s tone immediately sank into mourning. “I wish you’d been here when Adrian led us. He’s also amazing.”

“Just not as a lover.”

“Well, he’s had enough practice. I’m certain it would get me there.”

“But not like Marc.”

“He was the first. He’ll be the last.”

“Adrian thinks he’ll get to slide right into it after we bury Marc.”

Angela liked it that Kendle didn’t pull any punches. “He also thought he was being let back into camp.”

Kendle snorted. “So he doesn’t see as far as you?”

“He only sees me. Same as Marc.”

“Marc knows what you did.”

“Marc figured out the result after my rescue, where the camp helped. Big difference between figuring it out and having a film to replay in your head.”

“Fair enough. What about when he does find out?”

“He’ll be pissed at himself for overlooking it.”

“That’s not fair to him.”

Angela slapped her arms on the table. “Let me tell you what’s not fair! I’ve got two mutts humping

my leg every time I turn around and when they take a break, their little yappers come around and bite my ankles because they're jealous *they're* not being humped. Meanwhile, we could all die at any time, but that isn't enough drama. People in this camp have to keep making more. It's like we've learned nothing from the old world or the war."

Kendle didn't want to cringe from Angela's anger, but there was no choice as heat radiated.

"And now, I've got you trying to find a way to get me to admit a weakness so when the chance comes up, you'll know how to kill me." Angela stood up, fists clenching. "You can't. None of you can. Not even William or Jennifer can. I am Byzantine!"

Kendle fell to the floor. Only one other moment in her life had given her this terror and she regressed to it now, waiting to feel the pain of Ethan's bite. Her throat closed up like the clamp was back around it. "Please!"

Angela locked down on herself, ashamed and enraged. She kept forcing herself to breathe and control the new power as Marc and Jennifer both appeared in the entryway.

Kendle was still waiting for a killing blow. She refused to move.

Jennifer swept the scene and Angela's anger, then shook her head. "Not my circus, not my monkeys."

Marc wanted to laugh at the copy of an old world meme, but he was afraid to anger Angela further. He could feel how on the edge she was.

“The next time she thinks about killing me or letting me be killed, I’ll finish this!”

Marc nodded. “I was thinking she could be a runner. We need a lot of stuff and she’s great on a team.”

Angela already knew that. “Yeah, but she’s shit as a person.”

“You know what she’s been through.”

“And that’s why she’s shuddering at my feet instead of burning.”

“Thank you for that.”

“I don’t want her dead. We need her.”

“Not if she’s planning your death.”

“She’s thought about it since Adrian told her you need someone to console you.”

“Once again, it’s *his* fault?”

“Isn’t everything?”

“You knew which way the vote would go.”

“She knew all of it,” Kendle muttered.

“Shut up!” Marc shouted. “Haven’t you done enough?!”

Angela’s red orbs slowly began to fade into the calm blue of a leader in control.

Marc breathed an inaudible sigh of relief. Kendle might not know how close she’d just come to death, but Marc did.

“Why would you care?” Angela moved toward him, tone mocking, challenging. “You have me!”

“And you have Adrian.”

“Not by my choice. I didn’t pick him. He used magic on me and in retaliation, you chose my replacement!” She refused to listen to his protests as she moved by him. “I would have let you kill him for what he did to me. But you picked out another bitch before I’d done anything wrong. That’s why Adrian is in our lives, in your face and worming his way back into this camp. You couldn’t wait for my judgement. You didn’t have faith in me and in our love. You moped and bitched, and forced me to change plans when I couldn’t count on you to do your duty.” She jerked a thumb at Kendle. “At least Adrian’s your equal. You picked a skank who still isn’t sure if she wants to live or die. Where’s *your* honor?”

Angela left before she could say anything worse. She never would have said it at all if Kendle hadn’t pushed. “I’ve been trying to make peace with her.”

Jennifer had been waiting in the hall outside the door. Despite her words, she *was* part of this circus and the ringmaster needed to vent. “We’ve all been expecting a lot more fireworks between you and her. I was impressed.”

Angela snorted. “Stop blowing smoke. You’re too young for that habit.”

Jennifer chuckled. “I’ve never liked her, but I honestly thought she was coming around.”

“So did I. She disappointed me.”

“Ah. I wondered how she angered you so fast when you’re usually ice cool with her.”

“That’s part of the problem. It gave her the confidence to think she could handle me if she caught me asleep.”

“Dream walking?”

“Yes.”

“That could work if she caught you far enough away. You wouldn’t be able to return in time to defend yourself.” Jennifer stopped. “That bitch!”

Angela kept walking. “Yep.”

“She’s the reason you still don’t feel safe.”

“I’m not.”

“I thought Tommy would make her happy.”

“He does, but she’s obsessed with Marc. They shared a kiss that reminded her of her late husband, Luke.”

“I didn’t think they were married.”

“They were as far as she’s concerned. She was innocent when she washed up on that island. He cared for her and then loved her. She misses him. When she’s around Marc, she has flashes and can’t separate the past from reality.”

“Damn. How do we help her?”

“Not we. She’s kept herself closed off from everyone here, including Tommy. Only Marc can help her now.”

Jennifer caught the tone and hurried to catch up. “She’s not going on the boat with us, is she?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not Marc can force himself to do what has to happen now.”

Jennifer didn't ask what it was. She didn't want to know.

2

“Get up.” Marc refused to help Kendle to her feet. He was furious with her and with himself.

“I'm sorry.”

Marc sighed. “Me too. You have to stop now. That was your last chance.”

“I don't know how to stop!”

Tommy appeared in the doorway, complicating things further.

Marc grunted, waving him in. “He's the one you need to talk to.”

“I know.”

“Then you'll talk with me and I'll send you out of here the first chance we get.”

“I'll go.” Kendle didn't have any anger left, but she couldn't stop from noting that she'd been right. Facing Angela head-on would be suicide. Any attack would have to be while the alpha was sleeping.

Marc's fury came out in a sonic blast that slammed into Kendle with half force.

Kendle screamed.

Tommy hurried to her, unaware that Marc was causing it.

Finish it now, while she's on the edge, Angela advised. *And I'm sorry for your pain.*

Marc threw himself forward, shoving Tommy out of his way so he could jerk Kendle to her feet. His mouth descended toward her skin, teeth out and hungry.

“Nooooo!” Kendle began to shriek. “No! No! No!”

Marc had never felt so bad in his life. As soon as the awful noise started, he handed her struggling form to Tommy so that man couldn't swing on him.

Marc watched her curl against her lover, sobbing. “Kendle, what happened to Luke?”

“He died after we landed. Their medicine didn't work!”

Marc left Tommy to comfort her, finally getting the reason for Kendle's crazy behavior. She'd been refusing to accept that with all the power she had, a lack of antibiotics had killed her mate.

Marc saw who was waiting for him as he left the cafeteria. “Get lost!”

Kenn followed Marc's stiff shoulders down the hall, not speaking. He didn't like this job either, but there was no doubt Angela was right. He could feel Marc hating himself for doing what had needed to be done.

“What?!” Marc spun around.

“Did you like it?”

“You know I didn't!”

“Then you don't need me. The boss is wrong.”

“She's never wrong.” Marc thought about that.

Kenn waited for it, bracing.

“Angie knew I’d stop. She couldn’t send you. They would have noticed the difference.”

“Yes.”

Marc scowled. “I guess she’s back to the mind games.”

Kenn gave him a funny look and walked away. “When did she stop?”

3

“How is she?”

Kyle shrugged at Marc’s whisper. “Quiet.”

Marc sighed. “That’s not good, is it?”

Kyle shook his head. “We never think so.”

“Any advice?”

Kyle grinned. “Hard and quick, like ripping off a bandaid. Then it’s all over.”

Marc was chuckling as he tapped on Angela’s hotel door.

“Come in.”

Marc entered the room, glad to see Angela was alone. He hadn’t been certain if Adrian would be here yet. It had taken them hours to do rounds and be sure people were settled enough to sleep. Safe Haven had been given a lot to think about.

“Is everything okay?”

“As much as it can be. Tommy’s got her right now.” Marc moved to the bed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know she was still a threat to you.”

Angela's face tightened. "She's also a threat to Cody and all the other kids. Adrian told you how to break me. Kendle already knew."

"Do you want her gone?"

Angela shook her head. "I want her converted."

"I don't think that's possible anymore."

Angela shrugged. "Then kill her."

Marc blanched. He hadn't thought she would give the duty to him.

Angela sighed, fingers running over the stiff book in her hands. "Keep her where she is—fighting for us and away from me."

"Why didn't you remove her?"

"You love her."

Marc clamped his mouth shut. He'd just realized that himself, while making her terrified of him.

Angela snorted. "Kendle isn't afraid of anything except *her* ghosts. She'll be back to normal as soon as she knows I'm okay to be in the same space with her."

"Are you sure?"

"Please don't ask me again or you'll find her body stuffed in someone's kit in the morning."

Marc chuckled. "Sexy."

Angela snorted again. She didn't mention his emotions, but it hung between them as if she were shouting about it.

Marc needed a distraction and he had a question that mattered. "They weren't going to go, were they?"

Angela was proud of him for figuring it out. “Not after seeing it was possible to stay alive on American soil.” She got up from the bed, leaving her papers out for later. She needed to go have a happy hour or she would never get to sleep. “I don’t want to leave sanctuary. Why would they?”

“Why did you decide to let them have the choice?”

Damn. I thought he’d figured it all out. “The book William gave me.”

Marc didn’t care about the mementos or picture book the town had put together for her. “I don’t understand.”

“The bond I have with our people is amazing. I have no idea why they love me so much, but they do. If there was something I wanted, I could get them to go my way on it.”

Marc wondered if that included Adrian’s banishment, then answered himself. *Yes, of course it would.*

“Do you get what I’m saying?”

Marc had to concentrate, pushing the emotional issues aside to study it. “You knew which way they would go because of how Adrian’s banishment went. You knew they would want to make it up to you.”

Well, he got half of it. Angela shut the book and set it on the nightstand. She went over and kissed Marc on the cheek. “Don’t think about that too much. It’ll just ruin your mood.” Angela headed for the exit. “I’m on the kids’ floor for a while.”

“Baby time?” Marc teased.

Angela nodded quickly. “They’re not awake often and I can’t steal many hours from the camp. Gotta take it where I can get it.”

“I think it’s sweet. They need a mommy.”

“They have one, Marc. They have a father, as well.”

Marc swallowed a protest of not knowing the two real sons he had yet. She was right. All the kids here needed to be loved so they didn’t grow up to be like Matt or Adrian.

Angela opened the door and paused to look expectantly over her shoulder.

Marc’s grim expression faded. “I didn’t think you’d want me around for a bit.”

“I always want you around. You’re my heart.”

Warmed, Marc hurried into the guard position and escorted her down to the floor housing their kids.

4

“I would have thought you’d be happy right now.” Grant joined William in the mayor’s small office, both waiting for Donna to arrive. “You seemed like you were having fun.”

“We were.”

Grant understood from the curt tone. That was the problem. William didn’t want Safe Haven to leave. “Maybe one of the people who stay will be a descendant.”

William shook his head, staring morosely out the window toward the hotel. “None of her descendants are going to leave her.”

Grant didn’t think so either, but he didn’t like it when William was unhappy. No one did.

“I’ll deal with it.”

Grant didn’t doubt that was true, but he was still concerned. When William was unhappy, the town was unhappy. “What can I do?”

“Don’t leave.”

Grant frowned. “I can’t promise that.”

“We need you here.”

“Safe Haven can use me too.” Grant had almost made up his mind. There were several positions in Safe Haven that he had already figured out ways to start hunting. “In fact, it’s almost a done deal.”

William peered over at him. “Have you told the mayor yet?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

William studied him. “Hoping she can talk you out of it or hoping she’ll let you go without a fight? I sense both.”

“That’s because I feel both. You know I love these people.”

“I do. You’ve done well by them and you’ve helped all of us. You’ve earned the right to go face your destiny. The mayor will understand and wish you well.”

Grant knew that was true, but he wanted to do something to calm William. The storm clouds in the distance weren’t entirely Mother Nature, though

most people wouldn't know that. Grant wondered briefly if Safe Haven's powerful leader did and then pushed it out of his mind to concentrate on the problem at hand. "What can I do for you?"

"There's nothing you can do for him." Donna had been listening as she came down the hall to her office. She sank behind the desk and regarded William with a frosty demeanor. "He's going to sit here for the next hour and complain about the unfairness of his life while the rest of us would give anything to have his abilities. Oh, poor Willy."

William's lips twitched. "I didn't know you cared."

Donna snorted, pushing off her shoes. "I don't care how much power you throw over that one, you can't have her."

William laughed aloud. He wasn't used to Donna talking to him that way. It caught his interest. "Are you busy tonight?"

Donna's body came to life. "What did you have in mind?"

William swiveled his chair toward the window. "A little conversation and some wine, and if you're very nice to me, a dance."

Grant chuckled at the interaction. If anyone else heard them, they would assume William's arrogance made him dangerous to women, but exactly the opposite was true. The females in this town had been trying to get his attention for a long time, but he was incredibly picky. Donna was one of the few repeat women he'd ever been seen with

and the only one he took anywhere openly. The town had speculated they would eventually settle down as a couple. The only ones who didn't know it yet were William and Donna.

Grant stood up and left the office without being noticed.

William stared at Donna in the window, eyes sparkling. "I saw you looking at her guard dog."

Donna blushed. "Well, of course I looked at him. That's Adrian Mitchel. You've heard the stories."

Slightly jealous, William shrugged. "I wasn't impressed."

Neither was I. Donna stared at William's shoulders. It was a struggle for her not to reveal how jealous she was of the time William had spent alone with Angela. She couldn't compete with that and she knew it.

"I wouldn't try," William promised. "And she has no interest."

"Your word?"

William nodded, motioning toward her. "I promise. Come here."

As the mayor slid into his arms, William thought about asking her if she'd changed her mind but didn't. Donna had made it clear that she liked being an Invisible and didn't want her gifts unlocked. Until she changed her mind, all they would be was lovers. It was yet another layer of loneliness. William wasn't sure he could carry much more.

“Bye-bye!” Caleb didn’t want her to go. He was settling in with the other kids and den mothers, but she had come to save him from the sickness. He was bonded strongest to her.

Angela was honored and a little intimidated by the idea of being a parent to so many kids. She eased out of the room. She enjoyed her time with the children. It was the adults she needed to hide from.

Angela moved down the hall toward the elevator. The women had been glad to have another set of hands for bedtime, especially ones the children would obey. She would have to crackdown on the rules after they left.

Enjoying the hour without a guard that she had forced from Marc by sending him to do a security walk, Angela took the elevator to the fourth floor and went toward her room. She could tell by the tension up here that Adrian had already arrived.

“Good night, Boss.” Kyle held the door so Angela could enter the room. He and his men were the only ones who had access. Not even Neil’s team had been cleared to guard Angela while they were here. None of them had kept up on their training.

“Wake me if you need me.”

“You know it.” Kyle nodded to Marc and Adrian, positive none of them would be sleeping soon. He could feel the confusion of the men and didn’t envy Angela the night ahead. They didn’t

understand what she'd done, but Kyle and the Eagles did. It was why they'd helped Greg to convince the camp not to vote. Angela had been giving them a chance to stay in a place that was almost safe, to give up living where death and chaos always visited. He respected her for trying to do that, but it wouldn't be Safe Haven anymore if they stayed here. They would become a part of Ciemus, not the other way around.

Kyle secured the door, hoping Marc and Adrian gave her a break. He had no doubt about what Angela wanted, but she was willing to sacrifice her happiness once again to please her people. Kyle didn't want the men to harass her. He wanted her to sleep.

Angela knew her men were expecting an explanation, but she wasn't sure how to tell them. So far, no one had figured it out all the way. She believed Adrian might have, but it was unconfirmed. She pointed to the book William had given her. "You should check that out."

"We need to talk." Marc still wasn't interested in William's gift.

Adrian was. He left the couple to settle their personal issues.

Angela sat in the chair next to the bed as Marc took the seat by her. Now that he had her cornered, Marc wasn't sure where to begin.

Angela only needed one thing from him, but she refused to think about it. He had to come up with it on his own.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Not trusting you.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“William.”

Angela looked at him in confusion. “How did that happen?”

“I realized if you were going to replace me, *that* would be the type of person who would be a match for you, not Adrian. For the first day we were here, it was all I could worry about. Then I decided if William was a better match for you, I would step aside. A lot like Kyle is considering doing over Grant’s interest in Jennifer.”

Angela waited, giving him time to collect his thoughts.

Marc struggled to find the right words even though he had planned what he wanted to say. “Then I figured out what you did for Safe Haven tonight. I finally get it. Every single choice you’ve made is for the good of the camp. It honestly doesn’t have anything to do with me or Adrian or your new friend.” He reached over to take her hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t see it sooner.”

Angela rested her head on his shoulder, letting out a sigh of relief, weariness, and contentment. “Thank you. I needed that.”

“I don’t know where we go from here, but I’ll do whatever it takes to earn the respect of the camp back, and to not embarrass you again.”

“What you’re doing right now will smooth things over with the Eagles and the camp. By the time we get on the boat, I think most people will have already put it out of their minds. It’s not as big a deal as you think it is.”

“Going from XO to bodyguard isn’t a big deal?”

Angela chuckled. “From XO to body man.”

A grin stretched his lips. “I’ve done that job before. I used to be good at it.”

“I know.”

“It’s going to take me some time to get used to the new you.”

“I’m still the same girl who used to sneak into the cornfield with you, Marc. I’m just a lot more on top of it.”

“Is there a way for me to become like that?” Marc felt Adrian’s immediate attention to the conversation.

“Why would you want to be?” Angela was unable to help the bitter response. “Haven’t you seen what it does to us? There’s not one descendant who has ever found peace or happiness.” She gestured toward the book in front of Adrian. “It’s all in there. None of them have a happy-ever-after.”

“I can’t stand it that you feel this alone. And I’m jealous of the things you and William were already able to do upon a first meeting. I want that with you.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “So does your dog.”

Angela placed her hand around Marc’s wrist. “The things you would have to do to reach these

levels, the torments you would have to put yourself through, would hurt me and interfere with the camp. Once you read some of the stories in the book, you'll understand why I have to leave. There can only be one Byzan in each group."

"What happens if there's more than one?"

"Read the book." Angela headed for the bathroom, needing to remove sticky spots from her body. The kids had all gotten hugs. "I'll be in the shower for the next 10 hours or so. Throw a blanket over me at some point."

Marc wanted to grin but couldn't. He went over and joined Adrian at the desk.

Adrian had frozen. "I know what she did."

"What?" Marc was reading the page Adrian had open.

"You'll figure it out."

Marc looked over his shoulder as Adrian thumbed through the stiff, glossy book that obviously hadn't been opened after printing.

Descendants who can absorb powers are a rarity, mostly because our kind doesn't survive long once captured. Hunted until we are almost extinct, a Byzantine has only been documented four times in history to have lived passed the age of forty.

Marc winced.

Byzan have more powerful gifts than alphas, who have more gifts than all other descendants. There are also enforcers, trackers, and invisibles. This chapter details each type of our kind, and what we can do. Triggers for evolution are also

mentioned, but briefly, as the list is exhaustive. Before we get into specifics, it is important to note that some alphas have the potential to become Byzantine. The odds are 1-20.

Adrian quickly counted how many descendants were in Safe Haven.

So did Marc. Then he kept reading, fascinated.

It is also worth mentioning that the only historical record of having two Byzan in the same group ended in tragedy. An entire clan of descendants turned on each other until only the two Byzan were left. The government contained them until their deaths. The lab determination was madness from proximity. Two Byzan repel each other. If forced to maintain contact, madness results. For more details, see the later chapter on lab results.

“Oh, come on! From the beginning.”

Adrian obediently flipped the book back to the first page.

The History of Descendants

Written by Amota Shalet 1580-1622, Cindrea Shalet-Thatcher 1622-1712, Oliver Dormer 1712-1755, Liza Barr-Dormer 1755-1813, Colton Abbot 1813-1886, Melissa Abbot 1886-1922 Amelia Sinclair 1922-1972, William Sinclair 1972–

This is a compilation of information gathered by the founding families of Ciemus. We are forever grateful for their sacrifices.

Chapter One: Who We Are and Why We're Hunted

Marc and Adrian sat shoulder-to-shoulder and read each page without arguing or considering their rivalry. The information was priceless.

They were still reading when Angela came out and climbed into the bed. When she fell asleep, neither of them noticed.

6

“Hey, Dog! What are you doing in here by yourself?” Charlie had just entered the pool room to find the wolf lying next to the clear water.

Dog lifted his head. *I like the sound. It's soothing.*

“Me too.” Charlie slid his gear under a chair. “Did you do your laps yet?”

Dog gave a huff. *I'm not required to do laps.*

Charlie shrugged. “Mom said everybody.”

Dog gazed toward the water, wanting to. *I'll get a lot of fur in there. I haven't had a bath in a while.*

“I think the filters will have it cleaned out by morning.” Charlie removed his sandals and jeans, and went toward the water in his swimming trunks. He hadn't had time to get in his laps earlier and he was determined not to miss any classes or requirements of the Eagles from now on. His conversation with Kendle had been enlightening.

Charlie dove in, glad he'd remembered to close the door to the room as he hit the cold water and let out a yelp.

Dog chuffed in amusement.

Charlie surfaced and wiped the droplets from his face. He swam around in the water to spot Dog. "I don't think she'd be mad at you if you don't like water or something like that."

Dog stood, tail wagging. *I love it.*

Charlie swam to the edge of the pool so he could start laps. "There's plenty of room for you. We can do them together."

Dog jumped into the pool a few seconds later, also admitting a brief yip.

Charlie pushed off the wall.

Dog stayed right next to him, paws a blur under the water.

Understanding Dog was familiar with swimming, Charlie relaxed. He hadn't been sure if he might need to help the wolf.

Dog snorted water at him.

Charlie shrugged as they reached the end of the wall, taking a moment to wipe the water from his face. "I wanted to be sure."

Dog didn't pause at the wall. He quickly spun around and headed for the other end.

Charlie hurried to catch him.

The next few minutes were spent with the pair racing. By the time they were half finished, Charlie was breathing funny and the wolf was ahead of him. "Slow down!"

Dog paddled through the water, reaching the other end. He paused, paws keeping him afloat.

Charlie reached the end of the pool and took a good look at the soaked animal. Dog seemed happy.

I am. It is good to be home.

Dog knew Charlie wanted to talk, so he began the other half of their laps. It wasn't as easy for him as the boy thought it was, but Dog's pride wouldn't let him admit that. The long trip had built him up, but it had also weakened him in ways.

Passing by, Ivan saw shadows and paused to see who was using the pool while the camp was asleep. Recognizing Charlie and Dog, Ivan was able to mark the pair off his location list. He had been charged with keeping track of the camp members while the boss slept. It was a relief to know Angela's son wasn't getting into trouble.

“Those two were a pair before Dog left.”

Ivan spun around, bumping into the wall.

Jennifer chuckled. “My bad.”

Embarrassed, Ivan forced himself not to say something nasty. Now that it was so late, the hotel was eerily quiet. The time they had spent in the mountain, and then on the road, hadn't prepared him for what it sounded like to be indoors again. He knew he wasn't the only one suffering it, but most people weren't doing double shifts in this hotel. He couldn't stop thinking about the movie *The Shining*.

Jennifer's face fell. “If the girls from that movie show up, I'll call a bugout myself.”

Ivan chuckled with her.

“I’m headed to get a snack for the pregnant women.” Jennifer looked toward the pool room. “It’s great to see those two together. Some of the camp can tell you about the adventures of Dog, and all the little side stories that go with him. He and Charlie are close.”

Ivan didn’t say anything as Jennifer moved down the hall toward the elevator, but he connected it with his earlier lesson. He didn’t know the histories of Safe Haven and it was obvious they were important. Vowing again to fix that, Ivan continued his rounds of the hotel, waiting for dawn to creep in and lighten the sky.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Sanctuary

November 19th

1

“**G**ood morning!” William was waiting in the lounge as the elevator doors opened.

Angela sent out a wave of welcome.

William blasted her with one of his own, inadvertently hitting the men behind her.

Instead of jealousy or anger, Marc and Adrian sent their own blast, trying to copy the descendant greeting. Adrian had known about it, but he’d only used it a few times during his career. After reading the book, both men now understood William wasn’t a threat. The story of his parent’s love affair and the people it had hurt had resonated with Marc and Adrian. The fact that the couple had died together also concerned them. They’d spent the hours between reading and dawn talking, trying to come to terms with the issues between them. Neither man had filled Angela in when she woke. They hadn’t finished their conversation.

As Angela walked toward William with her hands out and William did the same, Adrian turned to Marc. “Are we leaving it there or do you want to

go someplace and finish? We have an hour before duty.”

Marc opened his mouth to protest, to say Angela needed to be protected and they couldn't leave her alone. He led the way toward the hotel bar instead.

Angela didn't notice. William's mental welcome was swarming over her and feeding energy banks for her trip. She was accepting it graciously and trying not to explode at the feel. It was incredibly powerful, but it didn't hurt the way all other descendant energy had so far. This was the soothing balm of a cool ocean after walking in the burning sand. It was a hot bubble bath after shoveling snow. It was chocolate during PMS. It was beautiful.

William chuckled at all the thoughts going through her mind, experiencing the same. Much of the research he'd done over his lifetime suggested the difference in energy currents was what caused the pain. Because he and Angela were on the same level, there was no need for their bodies to perform a conversion. It was a complete cycling process that continued until she finally broke it by stepping back and bringing up a mental wall.

William realized she was doing it to keep from making his loneliness worse. She had just read his memories of last night, where he hadn't slept because he had been excited about seeing her this morning and at the same time, devastated that she was going to be gone soon. She was trying to make this as easy on him as she could. The consideration

was welcome. In this town, William had become known as unshakable and unbreakable. No one ever thought to offer him comfort.

“I do have someone who does that for me.” Angela peered behind her to pinpoint Adrian and found him gone. Eagles had moved into place around her.

Angela smiled, pleased. She turned to William, motioning toward his town. “The mayor said we could use your clinic for the blood work and vetting. Would you like to escort me?”

“I’d be honored.”

William and Angela moved off, falling into a discussion of how to get the townspeople through the process in just one day.

They left the hotel. As the door slid shut, the people left in the lobby were able to hear parts of the conversation coming from the bar.

Those who had a shift reluctantly left, hoping Kyle would tell them later. He didn’t always, especially if it was something leadership didn’t want the lower ranks to know yet.

Rookie and off duty members were waved on by Kyle. He and his team also kept their distance from the bar and tried not to eavesdrop. When the conversation became louder, it was impossible to do that.

“You already get her nights! Letting me have an hour a day isn’t asking too much.”

“It is when I know what you’ll use it for.”

“I thought you were over that. The only thing it will be used for is to get her mentally and physically in shape to lead these people.”

“I can’t trust you to only do that when you guys are alone. Even if I could, your broken spell would still be working on you both.”

“That’s not what’s bothering you. I can feel you thinking about staying in America because you think it would be easier on her and the camp. You have to stop doing that. It’s part of what gave her doubts.”

“Doubts about what?”

“About staying in Ciemus.”

“She chose to take us out of here. She didn’t have doubts.”

“You’re crazy if you believe that. Angela wouldn’t have called that meeting if she hadn’t had doubts.”

Kyle and his Eagles kept an eye out for anyone who wasn’t supposed to hear this conversation. He was glad the camp was in their rooms, enjoying the day off before they returned to traveling. Angela had insisted the town fighters would take care of any problems. Safe Haven had a skeleton crew right now, with Ivan on point. All of the descendants and other leaders were involved in vetting the new people, which meant Angela was trusting their safety to one team. Most people weren’t concerned,

but Kyle couldn't help it. He hadn't bonded with these new people the way others had. In fact, he was pretty sure he already hated one of them.

"I know it didn't work out like we planned, but I still want to try to break one of the bonds."

"I've been thinking about that. Safe Haven needs a lot of things to take to the island. I'm not sure about the timeline for departure now, but I'm going to assume it hasn't changed at all. That will require fast runs by all the teams to gather the last items we need."

Marc frowned. "So?"

"So, you have a double shot coming up. I'll be away and she'll be in a great mood because of everything that's happened, and because her new friend William is going to offer us an escort. When she feels safe, she relaxes." Adrian's voice lowered. "You need to work on the soulmate connection while I'm gone. ...I think you should talk to William about it."

Marc was speechless.

Adrian wasn't sure if he should continue, but at this point, he was already giving Marc advice about his love life. It was too late to take it back. "I'm not saying you don't have her needs covered, I'm just saying you could cover them better. I'll bet he knows things you and I wouldn't have considered."

Marc forced his mouth to work. "What makes you say that? He doesn't appear to have a female in this town."

Adrian wasn't certain that was true, but it didn't matter to his point. "I heard him wondering why neither one of us had made that connection with her. I didn't realize I could until after I had already cast the charm. Once I'd done that, there was no way the connection would work for me. With you, though, it's more than possible."

Marc struggled to remember what Adrian had told him about it. "That's the one strong enough to break all of them?"

"Yes."

"So tell me how it's done."

Adrian snorted. "If I knew how to do it, don't you think I would have done that instead?"

Marc grunted, recognizing the truth. Of course, Adrian would have gone for the easiest methods first. It was only when everything else failed that he would have tried something more dangerous and risked exposure. Even back then, Adrian had been careful to cover his ass. "What's the second hit?"

"When William leaves, and I'm already gone, she'll probably go straight to that edge we discussed. All you'd need to do is...interrupt her time with the kids a little. For a day or two, maybe."

"You're fucking evil."

Adrian sighed. "I'm going to stay here if we can't work something out."

Marc looked over, but not in surprise. "What happens in that future?"

Adrian shrugged. "Jennifer and Angela haven't been able to see it in weeks, and I've never been

able to. Every time I go between worlds, the Demon of Time senses me and chases me out.”

Marc blinked. “What?”

“It’s like when you scroll dive and run out of air, only I don’t have a demon and a witch to pull me up.”

Oddly enough, Marc understood. “So you don’t know any of it?”

Adrian sighed. “This town being here, *him* being here, changed everything. Right now, Jennifer is sitting in the middle of the bed listening to kids snore while trying to figure out what’s going to happen when we leave. Samantha is in the shower, listening for the next storm to come in and wondering what happens when we leave. The kids are not dreaming at all.”

“What does that mean?”

“Usually when there’s darkness, it means death. In this case, it might mean we don’t need to run anymore. It might actually be more dangerous for us to go, than it would be to stay. Until one of our seers picks something up or we get an answer one way or another, I’m not convinced Angela will leave tomorrow.”

“You mean that future isn’t set?”

“Exactly. She stuck with her original decision because to do anything else was too awful to contemplate for our entire journey. There wasn’t a choice. Now that there might be a different future, she’s second-guessing what she saw. None of us being able to read anything about the future comes

directly from *her* indecision and inability to see what's coming."

"What does it really mean?"

"It means she had to make the call in the blind this time."

"And she still chose to leave."

"Yes. She can't see it coming, but she still feels something. Otherwise, we'd be *unpacking* right now."

Marc began to consider their weapons and potluck ammunition.

Adrian kept pointing out things that Marc would need to enact his plan.

Everyone else left them alone.

3

"Are you sure you want to stay for more of this? It's going to take about seven hours." Angela knew he wasn't bored, but she felt like she should ask. William had watched her organize the clinic and assign Safe Haven people as they arrived for duty.

"Yes." William had placed himself in a chair next to the reception desk in the doctor's office. "You can't drag me out."

Angela chuckled, happy to have him here. She would miss him even though they had only known each other for such a short time.

Forcing her mind into work, Angela did a fast walk-through to be positive everything was in place before she let the locals in. The town clinic was

carpeted and held smells that said it had been freshly cleaned; it didn't have a doctor or staff. Angela assumed William healed people anytime they fell ill. That meant this town hadn't been forced to fight every day of their survival or just one descendant, even a powerful one, would have been drained. That wasn't the case with William. He was the peppiest person she'd met so far, spreading laughter and light as he walked by.

Tonya and the team medics were in the reception area, each with enough equipment to perform 20 blood tests. Once people were finished there, they would spend time with Charlie and Conner in the next two exam rooms. While they were doing paperwork, the boys would be doing the first mental scans and making notes.

Angela glanced in and found both teenagers leaned back in the chairs, playing handheld video games. William had gifted them a bag of batteries.

Angela moved down the white-tiled hall that smelled of antiseptic. She went by the next four exam rooms that were across from each other. She had stocked them with notebooks and pens. She and Marc, along with Adrian and Jennifer, would do the deep scans of people coming through from those four checkpoints.

Angela paused in the next doorway. They had cleared the furniture out of this larger room and brought in three small desks. Kendle, Kenn, and Samantha were seated uncomfortably at them. These three descendants were going to ask intimate,

personal questions. Because they were getting the people after Marc and the others had already grilled them, this room would reveal the most secrets if they had any. Angela nodded to Samantha, but didn't offer comfort. This was part of the duty. She didn't look at Kendle at all.

Kendle didn't breathe until Angela was out of sight. Marc had terrified her for a minute, but she still feared Angela the most.

Angela moved down the hall to the second reception area at the far end of the office. Dog and the kids, along with den mothers and Eagle teams, were in this room watching cartoons. While it would appear to be a simple introduction, the adults would observe how the locals interacted with Safe Haven children. The fact that half of these kids were also descendants would provide yet another layer of scans. Angela was confident that no one they approved today would be an assassin or a traitor. She and Adrian had come up with the plan this morning while Marc evaluated the security of the town to decide if it was okay for everyone to be away from the hotel for so long. Angela hadn't been worried about it as much as Marc, but it was good practice for when they were back on the road.

Angela moved to the lobby, where Tonya and the medics were getting bored. William still looked as excited to be here as when she had first offered to let him observe. "We're ready. Send over small groups every 20 minutes until a line forms. When the line goes down, send the next group."

“Until when?”

“Until we get them all.”

“You’re not going to set a limit on how many people you’ll take?”

“No. I also won’t set a limit on how many people can stay. Free will matters to me too.”

William delivered a smile of connection. “I’ve never done anything as hard in my life as making sure all of my choices benefit my people first. I would rather climb a mountain or return to that Naval Station without weapons.”

Once again floored by the feeling of having someone who knew exactly what she was experiencing, Angela motioned toward the first room. “After you send a group, feel free to walk the rooms and listen. When you go back, you’ll be able to let your people know what to expect so they won’t be as nervous.”

“Nothing I can tell them will ease that. Everyone fears not being good enough.”

“I’m sorry we have to be so strict, but I doubt it’s an issue. Your town has a great leadership structure.”

William’s happiness faded a little. “I need a replacement for one of them.”

“You might think about having two slots covered.”

William studied her curiously. “I thought Donna was happy.”

Angela gave him a pointed glance and tone. “She’s lonely. She’d like to have a family.”

“I’ve offered to unlock her gifts.”

People listening stored that information. If William could do it, Angela could too.

“That can also happen if she has a baby.” Angela snickered at his immediate thunderous expression. “Jealous much?”

William laughed, nodding. “Absolutely.”

“Why does it have to be someone else who fills her with life and love?”

“You know why.”

Angela’s face tightened. “It won’t be that way for you.”

“What if it is? What if I find someone later who matches better? I’ll rip her apart. You’ve read the stories. We always move on without the...”

Angela nodded at him. “Soulmates can come from different levels. It doesn’t have to be a match.”

“But it’s easier and better.”

Angela sighed. “Yes, but you can’t force her to face her destiny.” Taking pity, Angela gave him hope. “As soon as I realized my baby would have gifts, I was glad I was like him, so I could help him and know what he was going through. Talk to the pregnant women in my camp. Most of them are in the rear room with kids right now. You’ll see that the ones who don’t have it, wish they did and those who do, feel safer because of it.”

“She’ll come to it on her own?”

“I believe so, but you’d have to make the offer to give her the baby.”

William blushed.

Angela laughed. “Let her know we’re ready, then go check out the women. Who knows? Donna may get so jealous, she’ll approach you.”

“That’s what I’ve been hoping for!”

Angela’s laughter was loud and hard as she realized he had been using her to make Donna jealous. “I love this town.”

William smiled, sending great vibes that were very familiar to both their people. “So do I.”

4

“You’re forgetting some areas.”

Theo looked up with a frown as Candy stopped by the table. He barely kept himself from saying anything snotty. The last time they’d spoken, she had been sharp and stormed off. That had caused him embarrassment.

Candy leaned over the table to point at their map of the ship. “Below deck one, there’s something called a tween deck. Below that, is the tank block. That’s our machinery space.”

“How do you know?”

“That’s a Royal Caribbean ship. My brother worked on one. He said those spaces are huge, and there are other nonessential components of the ship there too. The ballast pumps and compressors, water tanks, sewage. That’s a lot more space you’ll be able to use.” Candy had been listening to them try to figure out where they were going to fit everything while she and the other women escorted

groups to breakfast, bathrooms, and entertainment. It was noisy. Flushing toilets and running showers had become a constant noise during their time here, reminding people how peaceful it was not to be in a city. The lack of civility wasn't a hindrance for some of them. Candy could feel a few people even wishing they were already back on the road. *Have we become vagabonds?*

The pool was open to the camp right now. The mayor's people had restocked it with towels and toys. Theo knew Angela had placed adult swimmers in the room to help if it was needed. They hoped to filter enough water through the ship's system to allow this fun on the boat as well. "Are you off duty now?"

Candy nodded. "As of about five minutes ago."

Theo motioned toward the table. "Give us the information you have." He looked at Ozzie. "Make a note that we need to talk to people who've been on cruises or had family who worked on ships for other information."

Candy already had something else. She pointed. "You have it slotted for us to use the passenger cabins, but I think everyone would be more comfortable if they were closer to deck one. Employee living quarters were usually on decks 1, 2 and 3, and sometimes 4. The rooms aren't as large, but the dormitory style set up would save space and food. All the passenger cabins could then be used for storage."

The team was taking notes now, missing what was going on in the cafeteria behind them.

Candy knew about it, but she wasn't interested in getting involved. She would much rather prove to Theo that Angela had been right to put her on his team.

“It's just a cup of coffee!”

The guards looked toward the cooking area, where Brittani and Gus were once again arguing. Next in line to be served, Shawn and Missy were watching the entertainment. It was boring in the hotel with the boss gone.

“Why don't you admit you want to be one too?” Gus turned to leave. “I've never known you to be afraid of anything.”

Brittani's mouth dropped open. “I ain't afraid!”

Gus kept walking. “I'm not.”

Brittani clamped her mouth shut at the correction, clenching her hands in an effort to keep from grabbing something to throw. Gus didn't understand how dangerous the job was. He saw a bunch of men playing war and couldn't wait to join them. He'd always been like that. She'd been getting him out of trouble the entire time she'd known him. She was afraid of what would happen if she wasn't there to tell him no.

I'll bet that's part of the problem.

Brittani gasped as the wolf brushed against her leg. She hadn't had much contact with the animal, though she'd certainly heard the stories.

Dog was snickering about how easy it was to scare humans. *The boss wants you to lead a team.*

Brittani's first thought was *yes!* She refused to say it, however, fighting with herself.

That's exactly how Gus feels every time the Eagles walk by. He deserves to make his own decisions and so do you. Dog moved toward the cafeteria. *The boss wants an answer by the time we leave on the boat.*

Shawn and Missy began to serve themselves as Brittani sank down in the chair behind the counter with a stunned expression and a heart being torn in two directions.

5

“What happened to you?”

Kenn kept washing his hair. “Peanut butter.”

Daryl's brows came together. “I thought you and the boy made peace.”

“I wouldn't call it peace, but this wasn't him.”

Daryl stepped into the shower room. “Is there a new problem?”

Kenn sighed. “Just an old one coming back to haunt me.”

Daryl understood someone had found out about his past. “You want a support moment? You've earned it if you need it.”

Kenn was glad to hear that. He grunted, feeling soapy peanut butter slide under his nails in a thick glob. “I'm good.”

Daryl made a note for the next shift and then returned to rounds, trying not to trip on the carpet. It felt odd under his feet.

“Hey, got a minute?”

Daryl sighed as Kevin caught up to him. “What?”

Kevin missed the curt tone. “Can you ask Angela to send me out when we leave here?”

Glad to. Daryl nodded. “I’ll add your name to the volunteer list.”

“Cool. Listen, I’ve got a bottle. Do you want to—”

“No.”

Kevin stopped.

Daryl kept walking. Kevin wanted to get drunk and dwell on the past. Daryl wanted to stay sober and embrace the future.

Kevin shrugged it off, heading in the opposite direction. Maybe one of the younger Eagles wanted to hear some war stories.

6

“Do you like younger lovers?”

Kyle paused in the doorway of the clinic, caught by Jennifer’s suggestive tone. The sound of her being provocative had stolen his breath.

“That depends on your definition of *young*.”

Kyle’s brows came together as he realized Jennifer was talking to Captain Grant.

“Under legal age.”

“What’s the legal age in Safe Haven?”

“15, with exceptions.”

“Exceptions like you and the mobster.”

There was a pause where Kyle and everyone else listening strained to hear her answer.

“Yes!”

Jennifer’s defiant tone snapped Kyle into motion. He gave his paperwork to Tonya. The boss and council had been here for five hours now. The line of townspeople waiting to be vetted had slowly faded into random show ups, so the kids had been sent to lunch. The new people would be assigned to a camp member later. They were already being cleared, so there was no need to have a separate quarantine zone. That was in the updates he’d just delivered. He had 100 camp names for her. They had all volunteered to help the new people adjust.

Angela scanned him. “Nothing from the boat team yet?”

“No.”

“It’s time. Make it a 4-man crew.” Angela’s voice echoed down the hall.

The next sound was the scrape of Adrian’s chair as he stood up.

Still observing everything going on in the clinic, William moved to where Angela was working. “I can have him outfitted and ready to go in an hour. I’ll take them to the gate too.”

Angela nodded, then turned her attention back to the farmer sitting in front of her with arthritic knuckles and a blade of grass hanging from his

mouth. Many post-apocalyptic settlements might have turned him away because they would assume he only had a few years of manual labor left, but Angela understood his mind was full of wisdom they would need during their time on the island. “What would you suggest as the best fruits and vegetables in a confined, rocky space?”

“Depends on the weather. For your island, I’d use berries of any kind and beans of every kind. Both of those are climbers. Put in stakes and you’re all set.”

“Excellent...”

William and Adrian moved toward the exit as Angela and the others continued to get people vetted and onto Safe Haven’s roster. Angela’s calmly bored tones hadn’t changed the entire time, leading Adrian to believe it was safe to go. This town wasn’t evil. It was sanctuary.

“What are you doing?” Kyle pulled out of Tonya’s grip. “I don’t need blood work.”

Tonya held up a slip of paper. “Boss’s orders.”

Kyle read the paper with a scowl.

Tonya jabbed the needle into his vein and began syphoning.

“Did she say why?”

“Nope.”

Kyle caught the tone. “Do *you* know why?”

“Yep.”

“Well?”

“Sorry. I have orders. Put your finger here.”

Kyle put his finger over the cotton ball and turned around to find Angela.

“In here, Kyle.” Marc’s tone was cold.

Kyle approached the room nervously, suddenly certain that he knew what was going on. *I’m not ready!*

Yes, you are. Get it done.

Kyle couldn’t refuse Angela’s order. He went in and sat at the table with Marc, aware of Jennifer in the room across the hall, now staring in surprise.

Jennifer directed a townswoman to the next room, where Angela was finished with the farmer. She lingered as the older man went to the next room.

Angela and the woman shook hands. “Have a seat. This will take a minute.”

Realizing she still had it in her hand, Jennifer handed Angela the woman’s file.

Angela motioned Jennifer back to work.

Jennifer went, stomach full of butterflies. *The boss approved my request.*

Yes, I did. You’ll have my decision in a few days. You’re either being cleared for marriage or denied and split up. Please remember that you asked for this.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Teamwork

1

“I need to let the mayor know we’re opening the gate.” William pointed toward the hotel as they stepped outside. “I’ll meet you in the lobby as soon as I’m finished.”

“I’ll hurry.” Adrian was determined that he and William would have a short conversation before he left.

“I’m looking forward to it.” William scanned him coolly. “I want to know why she hasn’t killed you yet. Giving her leadership isn’t enough to cover what you’ve done to her.”

Adrian grunted. “We’ll talk.”

The men went in separate directions, but their thoughts went to the same place—the future.

It only took Adrian a few minutes to gather a volunteer team. Angela had been specific about who was able to go and who wasn’t, narrowing it to the men who were getting bored.

Adrian and his small team made it downstairs to the lobby just as William was coming through the front doors. He waited there as Adrian approached, eyeing their clothes and weapons. “We will copy some of your fighting styles and setups. The mayor

hopes you'll do the same if there's anything you can learn from us."

"We've been making notes."

"Good. The mayor offered her private security bikes. We're having them fueled."

"That's very generous. It will take 15 minutes to gather and load what we're taking. If you want to show me your weakest points of defense, I'll give you information. You can scan me while we do that. Then I'll ask a few questions and be on my way."

William was pleased with the cooperation. "Bucky will take your men to the parking garage. You and I will take the wall over to join them."

Adrian put Harry in charge. "I'll be 15, no more."

"You got it." The Eagle had worked with Adrian in the past and knew that's exactly when he would be ready. Adrian, like Angela, preferred punctuality.

William walked toward the wall, pointing to a ladder. "We'll begin there."

Adrian noticed William was in excellent shape as they climbed. Even in the cold breeze, he was only wearing a thin jacket that allowed everyone to see he had kept himself in shape over the years. He wasn't out of breath by the time they reached the top of the sturdy, two-person wide ladder.

Adrian was. *No more elevator trips for me. I need more stairs.*

William lifted a brow.

Adrian waved it off. “Just an old dog trying to learn new tricks.”

William let Adrian catch his breath and study the wall, aware of Angela watching them through a window of the clinic.

Adrian felt it. “We didn’t get to say goodbye again. She doesn’t like it.” Adrian knew there was no point in trying to keep secrets from William. Back when he’d tracked their kind, William would have been a four-team capture with heavy casualties.

“I would have died first. I almost did when the draft came, but these waters are special.”

Adrian was curious, but he had other priorities.

William pointed to the other side of the wall. “This is what surrounds us on three sides.”

Adrian studied the area, noting sick cypress trees and swampy patches where he had no doubt the land would give under their vehicles. There were also shapes he identified as abandoned houses and cars. Behind the isolated section of land, Adrian thought he could see the high rises of a city.

“This is the only place we go in and out, but we have two other spots with a functioning gate. If anyone is watching, they won’t know we have escape routes.”

Adrian turned around to view the inside of the wall, more interested in how that was set up than with the defenses the townspeople had created. He knew Angela was working on a list, with Marc’s help. Adrian was going to see if he could add

anything to it, while studying the town Safe Haven might end up in if they couldn't sail away in their boat.

In a far corner of the 2x2 mile town, movement caught Adrian's attention. Because there was so much of it, he dug out his field glasses and adjusted them to find a large herd of deer. Peacefully grazing along the inside of the wall, Adrian estimated there were 50 adults and half that number of fawns. "That's smart."

William brightened next to him. "It was my idea."

"Are you slaughtering yet?"

"Only the ones that die on their own. We're trying to get a full herd before we start consuming."

Adrian turned his glasses to a wide swatch of farmland with plants and trees of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Overtop were canvases that had come from a carnival or circus.

"Actually, we took them from the zoo." William's tone dropped. "We ate the animals."

Adrian didn't scold the man or think badly of him. In the first months after the apocalypse, many people had starved to death because of moral lines. People had to make that decision for themselves, but in the end, life usually got its way and forced humans to do things they didn't want to.

Adrian switched to the next area and found the river. Roughly 15 feet wide, the wall was built over it in two places, allowing a half-mile stretch that housed a large, ongoing fishing operation.

Townspople covered the area, all of them working. Nets were being stretched out and pulled in, boats were hauling, women were scaling, and two warehouses next door had constant activity. It was organized and impressive. “How long did it take to build that?”

“We’ve always been a fishing town. It took us roughly three months to shrink the operation and relocate it here. We built the wall first.”

“Where did you find the materials? The surrounding area hasn’t been stripped.”

“No, we didn’t want to give away our location. From a distance, the wall looks like trees and shadows. We have a reclamation department.” William pointed when Adrian stared in confusion.

It took Adrian a moment to figure out that the construction site had once been a gas station. Now, there were stacks of pipes, wood, wires, windows, doors. “That is brilliant.”

William smiled. “Captain Grant did most of it. Safe Haven is lucky to be getting him.”

“The boss already thinks so. She’s been working on him since he picked us up.”

“I’m not surprised. Grant has never been satisfied here. Much like your Eagles, he craves danger and adventure.”

“Speaking of danger, you’ve got a problem over there.” Adrian pointed. “You put your garbage too close. I would imagine you already can’t drink the water downstream from it, right?”

William nodded. “We realized it too late. We have plans to move it, but everything else was put on hold when we realized Safe Haven was coming.”

“Well, we’ll be gone shortly and people will need to be kept busy.”

William chuckled at the hint. “It really is too bad Safe Haven can’t stay. Between our two populations, the offspring would almost certainly be genius.”

2

“Is that all of them?” Angela was ready to be done.

“That’s all the townspeople. Tonya and the medics, along with the security team, are going to hang around and finish the blood work.” Marc was also eager to be done. It was late afternoon and they hadn’t had an update since Kyle left hours ago.

“Things are fine. Ivan has it covered.”

Marc didn’t argue, but he wasn’t as sure.

Angela didn’t have a problem with that. It was going against an order that wasn’t allowed. Over time, she and Marc would work things out in the control and rules department. Once he re-earned the approval of the Eagles, she would immediately put him back into leadership.

Angela and Marc left the clinic to find an ugly green sunset moving in on a brisk wind that made them zip their jackets.

For a brief moment, both of them considered what it would be like to stay, then pushed the thoughts down. Marc did it because he knew Angela wasn't going to change her mind. Angela did it so that she wouldn't.

“Here comes your friend.”

Angela smiled as William joined them.

“Your team just left.”

“Did he give you things that will help?”

William's head bobbed furiously. “I didn't realize there were so many gaps in the wall. We'll work on that first after you leave. We'll handle the garbage next.”

Angela was relieved. She didn't want anything to happen to this town. She extended a folder. “These are the people we're refusing to take.”

William nervously opened it and then chuckled. The folder was empty. “Everyone will be relieved.” He motioned toward the banquet hall. “The camps are supposed to meet for a meal. Are you coming?”

“I'd like to wash up first.”

William left the lovers alone with their security team and went to the mayor's office. Donna was going to be thrilled at Safe Haven's decision. William was too, but he was also sad that so many of his own people wanted to leave. For a brief moment, he reconsidered his own decision to stay. If not for this location being so important, he probably wouldn't. Angela's light was hard to fight.

“It’s the boss!” Members of both camps cheered as Marc and Angela entered the banquet hall and moved toward the center table. The mayor was already seated there, with most of the council. Angela had told Ivan to send the camp over with heavy security.

Marc gave Angela the chair next to the mayor. It was a leadership seat, making those on either side protection.

As soon as they sat, servers hurried over to bring plates of chicken that made Angela grin. “I am so hungry!”

Marc chuckled. Being here had been good for her appetite. *It’s also been good for other things.* He mentally snickered. It had taken them half an hour longer to get cleaned up than they had estimated. Angela had insisted they shower together.

“I hope you approve of the way I set things up.” Once again, Donna had consumed too much coffee in her nervousness about Safe Haven accepting their people. Like many of them, she had been worried they would be turned away because of the things they’d been forced to do to survive, such as emptying the zoo. It had been hard, but that had provided almost six months of meat for her people.

“Safe Haven does not judge things that are not done with evil intent.” Angela tried to calm the woman. “I do like the way you set things up. It will give people a chance to get to know each other.”

Angela wasn't blowing smoke. The banquet hall now held more tables, in a slightly different setup. The people who were leaving, and the Safe Haven people who were staying, were all at a center line of tables. Happily eating and exchanging information, it was the first time the camps had directly mixed. It seemed to be going well.

"Some of the people who came to the clinic today had pieces of paper with numbers on them." Angela looked at the mayor for an explanation.

Donna waved toward the full center tables. "We had so many people who wanted to go that we made them draw lots for who was evaluated first, just in case you changed your mind about how many you'd take."

With the last mystery solved, Angela dug into the food.

Silence fell for a minute on the Safe Haven side of the banquet hall, drawing Angela's attention. She watched as Brandon moved to the center tables. He didn't look at anyone as he sat down.

"Well, I didn't expect that." Marc was immediately suspicious and began to work on why Brandon had decided to stay.

"Isn't it obvious?" Angela frowned. "In Safe Haven, he has to hide who he is. When he's exposed, which always happens in our camp, he'll be banished like his cousin. Here, no one hates him yet. It's a second chance."

Marc hadn't thought about it like that. "Is it a good idea?"

Angela shrugged. “He’s not corrupt.”

Marc decided to leave it alone, relieved to have one less Mitchel in Safe Haven.

And that’s why he’s leaving! Angela scolded sharply. *It isn’t your fault, but you don’t have to be happy about it. We needed him to fight for us.*

Chastised, Marc fell silent to consider her words.

During the distraction, William leaned over to whisper in the mayor’s ear. “I’d like to talk to you later. Alone.”

Donna hid the shiver that his voice drew. She nodded before returning her attention to the people in the center of the room. She was monitoring them to make sure no one angered Angela’s camp.

Seeing he wasn’t going to be able to get her focus right now, William helped her watch things. Once she was satisfied there wasn’t going to be problems, she might even relax enough to have a good time. Everyone else seemed to be, especially Safe Haven. It was easy to pick out their happiness. Smiles and laughter were echoing across the banquet hall.

William was fascinated at the way training was taking place even while everyone was supposed to be on downtime. Eagles were at rear tables giving lessons to men William assumed were rookies. They were talking about the missing team, the coming storm, and of course, Ciemus. None of the observations were bad, but many of them were informative to William. He and Captain Grant had

planned most of the defenses and they were always on the lookout for new ways to add to them. Adrian had given him several suggestions that would be put into effect.

“The same is true of Safe Haven.” Angela smiled at him. “We’ve already taught each other a lot.”

“I’ve been thinking of a communication system to allow us to reach to the island. Do you have someone who’s good with that sort of thing?”

Angela motioned Kenn toward the table.

Kenn stood up.

Angela went still, bringing Marc to his feet. “Which direction?”

“Breach! We have a breach in the wall!” Town radios throughout the crowd blared the warning. “Everyone get to your shelter! We have a breach!”

Marc reached over and took a hold of Angela’s wrist. No matter what happened next, they would chase it together.

“We have a breach in the north wall! Everyone check the wall!”

William pulled Donna to her feet and directed her toward the private room. “Stay in there.”

Grant keyed his radio. “I want a status report on all sections of the wall!”

The Eagles waited for the town to do more, but it was clear they were relying on the fighters outside to handle it.

Angela couldn’t take the chance, so she took over. “Special Forces team one, along with Jennifer,

will stay here with our people and the mayor. The level four team will go to the breach. Kenn, Conner, and Charlie will take the level two team to the south wall for support.” Angela stood up, making motions. “Someone alert Ivan at the hotel and lock them down.”

Kyle and the other team leaders began to direct the security around the perimeter of the banquet hall without being told.

Donna waved. “We should get everyone into their basement cellars.”

Grant shook his head. “We’re safer right here with all of their security.”

Angela made another set of gestures and two teams took off running toward the hotel. There were half a dozen camp members there now, all pregnant or wounded. With only a skeleton crew on duty, they didn’t have enough manpower to protect all the ground floor entrances.

“We have a breach in south wall! South wall breach!”

Grant began putting the local fighters into positions around the entrances and exits to provide support.

“Do you think that’s it?” Donna worried. “Those gates are supposed to be secret.”

“We knew that wasn’t going to last.” William was looking at Angela, waiting to see what she was going to do next.

“We’re going to help secure your wall.”

None of the Eagles were surprised by Angela's decision and neither was her camp. The only people who thought about protesting were those who didn't want Angela to put herself in danger for strangers.

Kyle motioned Neil's team to go with the boss. Their time in this town had been mostly quiet and Kyle knew it needed to stay that way. If his team went, there was guaranteed to be gunfire. If Neil's team went, there might only be hand-to-hand combat.

Angela moved toward the exit, surrounded by security. She met Grant there, approving of the dozen hard bodies he had chosen to help. Everyone else would be left here. Hundreds of lives needed to be defended while they secured the wall.

Angela moved outside, aware of the townspeople letting Safe Haven lead them through this. It was obvious they knew the Eagles were better equipped for these moments. The fishermen had saved their lives by showing up at the naval station in time, but when it came to surprise ambushes, Safe Haven was legendary for surviving.

The teams went in opposite directions. William stayed with Angela and Marc. He was confident Grant and his men would be able to secure the wall, and he wasn't worried about Safe Haven not being able to hold up their end. He just wanted to see them in action.

The team leaders had chosen crews who were in good shape. As a result, it was the leaders who were out of breath by the time each team made it the mile

to the wall. They understood as they ran, listening to sporadic shouts of alarm, that the main town had been placed in the center so it was a quick access to any part of the wall if there was a problem.

Shadows moved as townspeople came to doors and windows. Fighters waved them back inside and kept moving.

Around the town perimeter, lights were now flickering in the darkness as security with torches ran to the wall. It was obvious from their reactions that the town had run this drill before. Everyone knew where to go without instructions.

Angela and William concentrated, searching for the evil thoughts that always came during an attack. They moved through the darkness, away from the center of town and into shadowy alleys between empty buildings. Many of the homes here were being reclaimed, lending to the atmosphere.

It took them eight minutes to reach the wall. In that time, they didn't spot anyone.

William hurried to the gate and the confused guards standing in a cold, nervous line in front of it. "Where's the problem?"

The guards pointed toward a section of the wall that had been cut away. It was obvious whoever had done it had spent hours chopping to make the body-sized hole near the ground. It would have required one swing every few minutes to keep from making too much noise.

"Whoever got in here, wanted in badly." Marc examined the wall. "Looks like an axe."

“Did you see anyone?” William questioned the guards. “Do we know how many there are?”

“We haven’t spotted anyone yet, but we’re searching.”

William sent his gift out further.

As the team stood there in the darkness, staring at each other in confusion, it hit all of them at the same time.

“They drew us away from both camps.” Angela was running before she finished the words, feeling the pain but ignoring it as her out of shape body was forced to get in gear. She didn’t hear radio calls or panic from her people yet and that was good, but if the intruders had come because of Safe Haven, other refugees would be called in. This town would be swarmed.

During the time it took to get to the banquet hall, Angela made mental contact with the others she’d sent to the wall, calling them back.

Marc stayed on her heels. He assumed the intruders were here for Safe Haven, which meant they were here for Angela. Whatever they found when they reached the hall would probably be dangerous to her. He was trying to figure out what the trap was before they triggered it.

The locals felt Angela’s concern and stayed close to her and her team, providing protection. Later, when there was time, William planned to order a complete sweep of the town to verify no one else was inside, but right now, he was positive Angela was right. They had been lured away.

“Where’s the boss?!”

“Let us out of here!”

Angela and her group arrived amid shouts and threats of violence. Everyone in the banquet hall was being kept inside by the local fighters who had been given orders from William to do so as he and Angela walked out. The townspeople were fine with that, but Safe Haven was beginning to rebel.

Angela stepped in and did a scan as camp members surged her way, calming. She quickly noticed absences. “Where’s Jennifer? And the mayor?”

One of the rookies pointed toward the private room where Angela and the mayor had their first discussion.

“Eagle teams to the private room!” Angela could feel the danger now, but she wasn’t picking up thoughts of hatred against Safe Haven. In fact, she wasn’t picking up any thoughts at all, only a sense of menace that worried her.

Everyone watched in concern as Neil’s team hurried into the private room.

“They’re gone!”

Angela and Marc hurried in, followed by William. They could hear the other teams returning outside.

Marc motioned Angela back toward the main hall. “You need to be in there with them.”

Angela knew it wasn't because of her injuries or her gender. Safe Haven had been on the verge of rebelling against the local security after only 15 minutes. They needed to be able to see her. She went that way, leaving Marc to find the missing people.

Angela caught sight of William, but not Grant as she reentered the banquet hall. She motioned Neil to go support Marc and then went to stand in the center of the room to calm her people. Unlike Safe Haven, most of the locals were still seated, though they wore familiar expressions of terror. It reminded her of animals at slaughter time.

5

“Let go of her!” Kyle’s rage-filled shout echoed through the basement hallway, but the man dragging Jennifer away refused to comply.

The basement of the banquet hall was a maze of tunnels for deliveries and storage, along with office rooms for management. The lighting here was a single ceiling bulb at each intersection.

“If you keep coming, I’ll kill them both!”

With a gun in Jennifer’s ribs and the mayor being forced to walk ahead of their captor, Kyle didn’t have a clear shot. It was only one man, but it was obvious from the way the intruder held his gun that he knew how to handle it. Kyle was worried about being able to make the shot at all down here in the dimness.

Behind Kyle, his team was in that deadly V formation with their weapons aimed on the intruder, but they were all in the same position as Kyle—no clear shot.

Kyle heard footsteps running down the hall and knew who it was. He didn't take his attention away from the man who was slowly tightening his grip around Jennifer's throat until she was having trouble breathing.

"Where do you need us?!" Marc shouted, seeing the attacker was approaching an intersection.

The attacker spun around, pulling Jennifer in front of him.

Ahead, a shadow broke away from the exit door. "Let her go, Lang!"

Jennifer's captor spun around again, jerking her along and knocking her into the wall.

Kyle's fury radiated through the hallway.

"Get out of here, Grant!"

Grant eased his way down the dim hall without a weapon. The man looked like he had done it before. Kyle was encouraged. This was a bad situation. None of them had a good shot. Jennifer's clothes were blending perfectly with the shadows, making it impossible to distinguish edges and lines.

"My truck is 10 feet to the right of this exit." Grant calmly negotiated with the intruder. "I'll trade you the keys for the girl, as you go out."

The attacker obviously hadn't expected to be found so quickly. While he was trying to figure out

what to do, Donna ran out of his range and ducked behind Kyle and Marc.

Lang lifted the gun. "Get over here! You're the one I came for!"

"That isn't gonna happen." Grant stopped. "It's over. Let the girl go."

"Down the road!" Lang knew he was trapped.

Grant shook his head. "You know me. I'm not going to let you take that girl out of here. I'll kill you first."

Faced with no choice, Lang dragged Jennifer toward the exit. "The keys for the girl!"

Grant held them up.

Lang shoved Jennifer down the hallway, putting space between them.

"Now!"

A team of locals came from the doorway in front of Grant at his call. They jumped on Lang, slamming him to the ground with the weight of their bodies and anger. When they began to beat on him, forcing him into submission, Grant didn't stop it.

Kyle ran over to help Jennifer up. "Are you okay?"

Dazed from the lack of oxygen, Jennifer staggered against Kyle and waited for the shakes to go away. She had been caught off guard and unable to use her gifts because the man had threatened to kill the mayor. He knew there was a descendant here and he had come prepared to die as long as he took the mayor along. It had forced Jennifer to find a different solution. She'd been in the middle of

formulating a plan when Kyle arrived. She and the mayor had only been in the bathroom for a couple of minutes, but it had been enough time for Lang to sneak through the small window and take them captive.

“Gun!”

The sound of a shot in the basement hallway was loud.

Everyone turned in horror as Grant slid to his knees.

Neil put his gun to Lang’s temple and pulled the trigger. Grant hadn’t seen the ankle holster in this dark hallway and Neil hadn’t wanted to insist on searching the man himself and angering the local team.

Blood slid down the front of Grant’s chest and fell to the carpet.

Angela appeared a second later, followed by the rest of Neil’s team.

A cold wind swept through the basement and snagged Angela’s attention away from the awful scene. She turned in the direction of the hotel, mental alarms blaring.

“What is it?” Marc could already tell from her expression that it was bad.

“Someone just took a lifeforce at the hotel.”

Marc took off running.

Everyone else stiffened in anticipation of radios lighting up with refugees or trackers recognizing magic and calling in the horde again.

Grant slumped to the floor.

William and Donna hurried to help him.

The hum of magic filled the hallway.

“Keep her here!” Marc shouted over his shoulder. He wanted Angela in the basement with Kyle and away from all the unprotected doors and windows upstairs. The gunshot had drawn the locals from their banquet hall posts, leaving Safe Haven shorthanded to cover it all.

Angela stared at the radio on the floor. If the refugees hadn’t noticed the lifeforce being taken, it was possible they might escape this without the town being overrun. She didn’t want to risk it by using magic here to heal Grant. She didn’t tell William not to however, aware that his healing gifts were inferior to hers. It was a rare descendant who could do more than the basics because they couldn’t practice it.

“I could use your help.”

Angela hurried. She had medical skills for a moment like this.

William turned to her with a deep frown. “I got him stable, but it won’t hold.”

Angela nodded to a few of her men. “Make us a stretcher.”

Eagles hurried to do it as she knelt next to Grant to examine his wound. It looked as if the bullet was still in there. “Why doesn’t this town have a doctor?”

“Because my parents died.”

“Make it a priority to find or train medical help.” Angela wrapped a curtain panel around Grant

in case he started bleeding again during the move. As she helped him, she stayed mentally connected with Marc, worried. “Why did these people attack you?”

“Lang and his group came through not long after the war.” Donna was recovering her nerves while longing for a cigarette. “We had to kick them out for repeated thefts.”

The Eagles moved Grant onto the stretcher they’d made by breaking apart chairs and tying them with rope that was always in the small pouches on their tool belts.

Donna’s face revealed her remorse. “Captain Grant wanted to put them down, but I wouldn’t let him.”

Angela met the woman’s eye. “You’ve learned that lesson?”

Donna nodded, expression morphing into the rage that Safe Haven’s people expressed daily. “There won’t be a next time.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Sweet Hot Chocolate in a Great Wrapper

1

“Coming in!” Kyle made the call so he didn’t surprise Eagles who were supposed to be on duty at the hotel entryways.

“All clear in here!”

Marc hurried into the lobby at Ivan’s adrenaline-laced shout. Dog and Samantha were in the corner near the entry to the bar. Around the drafty lobby, there were three bodies and Eagles with victorious expressions. Marc scanned the scene from one side to the other as Kyle and his team came in.

Broken windows and overturned furniture implied the exits had been too well covered, forcing the intruders to come in a harder way. Marc saw muddy footprints on the carpet that led to the elevators, where a blurry smear implied there had been a physical struggle. He spotted mud on Peter’s knees and legs, and assumed the soldier had been responsible for stopping someone from getting onto the elevator and up to their people. Marc kept scanning as he swung around.

He saw a knife in a picture where someone had missed, and another blade protruding from a body lying on the floor under it. *Second time was the charm*, he thought, vision automatically splitting everything into a grid. He spotted blood on the wall beside the hotel desk and the edge of a shoe sticking out from behind that counter, but there wasn't an Eagle nearby. As Marc stepped closer, he realized the body had been drained. Whoever had killed this one, had taken the lifeforce.

Marc looked around and found only Samantha within range. More than surprised, he stared at her, waiting for an explanation.

Neil ran into the lobby and quickly spotted Samantha. He ran toward her.

Kyle grabbed Neil's arm, swinging the man around before he could interrupt. "Wait."

Neil jerked away and tried to go again, but was stopped by Kenn, who shoved him back toward Kyle. Kenn didn't speak. He didn't need to.

Samantha was staring at her hands. Resting them on her small stomach bulge, she didn't appear to be aware of anyone.

Marc knelt, putting up a hand to stop Dog when the wolf would have come over to him. "Samantha?"

Samantha slowly lifted her chin. She had a split lip and blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

"Tell me what happened."

Samantha responded to the alpha tone when she might not have to anything else. She was in shock.

“I decided to go to the banquet hall. Ivan was going to walk me over. We came down the elevator and someone attacked us. I... I don’t remember much after that.”

Marc looked around for Ivan and found the soldier slumped against the bar behind Samantha. He was splattered in drops of blood, as was the carpet and the doorframe.

“There was a small group in the lobby when we came down. They must have cut the glass, because we didn’t hear anything break. Dog and I did the best we could over here, but one of them got by us.” Ivan lifted an aching arm and pointed to the body behind the hotel counter. “He was headed for the elevator like the other ones. Samantha wouldn’t get out of the way and he slapped her.” Ivan stopped, not certain how to describe what happened next.

Marc didn’t need to hear it. He was currently reliving it in the minds of everyone who had witnessed it. He stood up and made a motion to Kyle and Kenn.

Glaring at all of them, Neil hurried forward to comfort Samantha.

“It was self-defense. We don’t need to talk about it again.” That was Marc’s way of telling the Eagles to keep it from the camp if they could.

The Eagles had no problem with it. In fact, they were almost glad it had happened because now Samantha’s injury would be healed. All of the council would be back to full health by the time they left.

Dog sat next to Marc's ankle like he always had in the past after moments like these, expecting the usual reward.

Marc gave it to him, spending a full minute scratching his chin and ears. Dog had blood over his muzzle and a slight limp that said he had fought hard.

"Someone should tell the boss." Kyle was anxious to verify that Jennifer was still with the rest of the camp. He had only been willing to leave because Angela was with her.

"Go provide security for the boss."

Kyle hurried off at Marc's order, grateful. Right then, he couldn't care less that Marc didn't have the authority to give it.

2

"Here they come." Jennifer and Angela were waiting at the main glass doors as Kyle and his team came in. Even though William and a double escort of local fighters was around them, both women instantly felt better when the Special Forces team stepped in and surrounded them. Safe Haven always felt that way when it came to security. They had been through too much together to trust anyone else.

"There was a minor breach at the hotel. The bad guys are dead."

"Injuries?" Angela was resisting the urge to go there.

“Bumps and bruises, but that’s about it.” Kyle didn’t mention who had taken the lifeforce or exactly what had happened. He tried hard not to think about it so the other curious descendants in the banquet hall wouldn’t pick it up. He was certain Marc’s order to keep it quiet would be echoed by Angela. “They’re cleaning the bodies out of the lobby.”

“I need an escort to the doctor’s office.”

Next to Angela, Jennifer perked up. She had been busy berating herself for getting into that situation and not being able to get out of it. Jennifer didn’t know what to do.

“I have a way for you to get rid of that restless energy.” Angela motioned Jennifer to follow.

Jennifer didn’t care what the chore was. She wanted to redeem herself immediately.

“There’s nothing to redeem.” Angela tried not to start shivering as they stepped out into the eerily silent town. “You’ve seen how many times people have gotten by the rest of us. This is a hard game we’re playing.”

Jennifer tried to let it go because she knew that’s what Angela wanted, but it bothered her.

The well-protected women walked to the doctor’s office, where Grant had been moved into an exam room. Three team medics were with him. Angela had told them more help would arrive shortly.

Jennifer caught the thought, pace increasing. “He saved my life. I have no problem with that.”

Behind them, Kyle frowned but didn't protest.

Daryl and Morgan entered the clinic first to confirm things were clear, while Shawn and Whitney stayed next to the boss. Kyle lurked in the rear, daring anyone to come near them.

Jennifer hurried into the clinic, going to the only exam room with a light on.

Seconds later, a hum of power flowed through the clinic, telling everyone magic was being used.

Angela had brought up her personal shield over the building so it wouldn't be detected. She also intended to tell William his open use of magic needed to stop or he would end up drawing trackers to the town. His shield wouldn't be enough. When she had been playing with her gifts in the alley, she had assumed there was some sort of protection that kept the town from being discovered, but she now knew that wasn't the case. This town was incredibly lucky to still be here.

"Actually, it's the water." William refused to say more or lift his mental shield because they had an audience.

"My beautiful angel."

Grant's voice came echoing down the hall to where Kyle was standing next to Angela.

"You have the most beautiful hair I've ever seen."

Kyle moved toward the room.

When Kyle's team would have interfered, Angela held up her hand. *Wait for it.*

Curious, the team paused to observe.

Kyle stopped in the entryway of the exam room. Jennifer was leaning over Grant as if she were his lover. Grant, fully recovered, had one hand wrapped in her curls and the other clasping her wrist.

“I’ve wanted to touch it since I first saw you.”

“You saved my life. I’ll cut it off and give it to you in a braid if you want it. Thank you.”

Jennifer was allowing the touch of a man other than him. Kyle barely controlled his jealousy. Bitterness flew out instead. “If you don’t stop hitting on her, you’re going to get shot again!”

Grant burst out laughing.

Jennifer turned around to yell at Kyle, but his quizzical expression stopped her. She joined Grant in amusement as the adrenaline faded.

Kyle didn’t like being laughed at. “What am I missing?”

Grant recovered enough to look at him, eyes sparkling. “She has nothing to worry about from me. *You*, on the other hand, are simply adorable.”

Kyle stared in complete confusion as everyone else chuckled. “I don’t get it.”

Jennifer snickered. “He’s gay, Kyle. He likes guys and screwing with people.”

Kyle stared in suspicion, then embarrassment. “Oh.”

Fresh laughter rolled out into the night.

Angela turned to William. “Do you need help cleaning the hallway or repairing the wall?”

William's regret was obvious. "No, please get rest before your trip. My people will handle it. I'm very sorry you were attacked here."

Angela waved it off. She was glad it hadn't been Safe Haven getting someone else attacked for a change. This time, it wasn't one of *their* loose ends. "I need to get everyone settled in the hotel. I'll be up if you need anything. Please don't hesitate to ask."

Angela stepped out into the cold night air with Kyle's team. Kyle would remain to escort Jennifer when she was ready. The town had a few injured, with no dead—matching Safe Haven. Because of that, the town was calm and again mingling in the banquet hall. It had been impossible to keep the two camps separated during the breach, but there was no reason to do so now because people were getting along.

As Angela began to close the clinic door, it was pulled out of her hand.

William's face appeared. "I forgot. Would you like an escort to the boat?"

Angela sighed. "It would be my honor to accept."

William gave her a charming grin and then shut the door.

Angela was smiling all the way to the banquet center. He was doing exactly what she would have if guests of theirs had been attacked while under her protection. That, of course, would have required Safe Haven being in their own town, like this one.

That was the hardest of all this for Angela. She really did want to stay.

Donna was in the banquet hall, comforting her people when Angela returned. The frazzled mayor hurried over to express the same regrets that William had, pleading with Angela not to hold it against the people who wanted to go with them.

Angela spent the next half hour calming Donna and waiting for the lobby of the hotel to be cleared so she could move her camp. She could feel their twitchiness. It mirrored hers. Despite enjoying being here and wishing she could stay, Angela found herself eager for morning. It was tiresome to pretend a civility she rarely felt anymore. It was time to go.

New sounds echoed through the town for the next three hours as the townspeople repaired the wall and swept the town to verify Lang's entire group had been removed. Every local was relieved each time a team checked in to let the mayor know the progress of the wall and that no one else had been discovered.

Safe Haven was relieved when the radios stayed quiet. None of them knew who or what might be moving through the darkness around them and they didn't want to.

“Keep up!” Adrian increased speed on the bike. The wolves chasing them through the cold, damp woods were determined to have a meal, but Adrian didn’t want to use his gun. During the six hours they’d been gone, he had viewed several campsites that were new enough to make him certain there were refugees all over this area. What he hadn’t counted on was the wildlife. Nature hadn’t attacked them in so long that he had forgotten to watch out for it.

Staying on Adrian’s bumper, his team rode through the darkness behind him with grins of terrified excitement on their frozen faces and wild animals nipping at their muddy boots. The two drag riders used knives on the animals, while the others cleared a path through the underbrush with the once expensive bikes.

“Up here!” Adrian steered up the incline, gaining air as he reached the pavement of the highway.

A few seconds later, all five bikes were speeding over the broken concrete at speeds the wolves couldn’t match.

The pack stopped as the sound of humans faded into the distance, then padded back into the forest they were sworn to protect.

4

“All clear!”

“Everyone is accounted for.”

“Tonya and the medics too?”

Kyle gave a curt nod. “Everyone.”

Angela knew his attitude wasn't because of her question. Jennifer being attacked had reminded him that Safe Haven was still a target, even if it was just to hurt other people.

“Samantha is waiting at a cafeteria table for you.”

“I'm on my way.”

Kyle assumed Samantha would get the third degree from Angela and approved. Unlike the descendants, Kyle hadn't gotten to view what had happened, but magic use could have endangered them all.

“Mayor Marsh is shoving supplies and vehicles at us now. She feels bad we were attacked. I want to take advantage of her generosity.”

Kyle gave a grunt this time.

“I have a folder for Marc. He and William are going to take a walk around the wall now. It's been four hours since the attack. They want to verify every breach has been repaired.” She handed him the folder.

Kyle was gone a few seconds later, not in the mood to spend time talking to anyone. Jennifer had insisted on resuming work immediately, even though she'd used a lot of energy to heal Captain Grant. She and Ivan's team were escorting the few remaining Safe Haven people from the banquet hall to the hotel as they finished eating. Dinner had been interrupted and the pregnant women hadn't gotten

to free graze the way they were used to. With the threat over, the females were lingering to munch. Angela wasn't rushing them.

Kyle saw Marc and William climbing up the ladder and hurried to catch them. He shoved the folder into Marc's hand before returning to the ground. He was out of sight a few seconds later, without a glance around the wall that all the Eagles wanted to see from this angle.

William and Marc exchanged glances. They understood Kyle's attitude. Angela had been in that situation several times and Mayor Marsh had gone through it tonight. No man wanted to see his woman being threatened by a scumbag. It was hard to live with, especially when the females refused to give up the dangerous duty to stay sheltered with the camp like their men wanted them to.

William and Marc began a walk of the wall in the dark. The torches the guards used on the first sweep were now out and there were no noises coming from any of the dim homes around them. Insects and animals were making noise again and the spooky vibe was gone. It was a relief to both of them.

"We'll have the rest of the town finished within the next half hour. It's taking longer because Captain Grant usually handles this sort of thing."

"You're getting a crash course."

William chuckled at Marc's joke. "It looks that way." William paused to examine the first gate.

This is where Safe Haven would leave from in the morning.

Marc would have picked up the sadness even if he hadn't caught the thought. It was intense. "Are you going to be okay when we leave?"

"I'm not dangerous to anyone."

Marc knew that wasn't true. "We have a council. It's seven people, but we usually bring in the team leaders too. Sometimes personal dramas do get in the way, but it keeps all of us from going out of our minds. You might try that."

"Actually, we did have a similar set up before the war. Afterwards, people were so shocked by what happened that they just wanted to be taken care of. It was hard to fill Grant's position the first time."

Marc thought of how Safe Haven's people had been when he and Angela had first joined the camp. "I think it's human nature."

William sighed. "Whenever I hear that, I'm always reminded of the Laws of Nations."

"The essays by Emer Vattel?" Marc pulled it from the college education that was required of a Marine officer, glad that he could.

William nodded. "Our founders were certain this town would be the final chance for humanity to achieve a balance that doesn't come from politics. We're living his vision."

Marc thought of the name of the town. "So Ciemus means final chance?"

"It translates to Last Call or last sanctuary. From here, there's nowhere left for humanity to run."

William turned toward the hotel to pinpoint Angela's location.

Marc paused. *Last call, a sanctuary.* That's why Angela called the meeting. She'd figured out what this town was and why it was here.

"It's a relief to know there are two of us now, though you won't even officially be a village until you reach 300 people."

"The Laws of Nations. Do *you* believe that's possible?" Marc didn't believe for a minute that this town was living it in every way.

"It's become easier since the war, but yes. Politics destroys society."

"I always thought mankind's greed did."

"That part of Utopia has to succeed for everything else to work," William informed him seriously. "Once you breed a society that no longer depends upon a governing body, but rules itself, then there's no longer a reason for the greed. A society formed in that way will take care of itself without expecting anything in return."

"Civic duty."

William smiled. "Exactly, except it comes from a spiritual and moral level that simply won't allow a corrupt decision." William moved to the next gate on the wall.

The view from atop the wall was impressive, but Marc was more concerned with the wall itself. They'd done a great job of welding sections of the homes together. The wide area at the top was set up with a small shelter near each gate for the guards.

Plastic tubs painted black held their weapons and gear. It was organized, but not enough to be a true defense if the refugees found them. Marc knew there was a lot he could do here. Within a month, he could have weapons up that would allow for an almost automated protection. It was a shame they couldn't stay.

"Yes, it is. There's a lot I could help you with as well."

Marc followed, questions forming in his mind faster than he could ask them.

William cut him off. "Your lover told me you would want things like that. I've already sent my notebooks over."

Marc frowned at the term. Angela was more than that.

"I meant the island woman."

Marc's frown grew. "We're not lovers."

"That's how she views you—like lovers who've been torn apart. Be careful."

"I will. We're watching her now." Marc hated it that William knew their every secret.

"If you were open to more power, you could know my secrets." William lowered his voice. "And I do have a few, even from my mate. Don't we all?"

Marc nodded. That was also human nature. "Will you tell me how to do the things I want?"

"It's in the notebooks."

"How did you know somebody would want them?"

"I didn't. I wrote it for myself."

“I don’t think your notebooks are going to cover everything I want to know.”

“The information you seek the hardest, Marcus Brady, does not lie in any mind but yours. You already know the answer. You refuse to accept it.”

“Tell me anyway.”

William stopped and spun around so fast that Marc was forced to retreat to keep from colliding with him.

“Fine! I will.” William studied him intently, verifying his suspicions first. “You can’t accept her as anything other than what you knew as a child.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. The reason the dog’s backfire snared her so easily was because she was looking for an escape. He threw a rope down a dark hole and she grabbed it, not caring what the cost was at the time. You would have done the same.”

“She’s not trapped.”

“Really?” William turned toward the hotel, pointing. “If you had your way right now, what would she be doing?”

Marc’s first thought was *sleeping until I get there, then waiting with warm food and a clean body.*

Marc dropped his head in shame. Of course, it was the truth. He wanted Angela to perform the female roles and let him handle the man stuff. He’d never felt emasculated before they’d come to Safe Haven.

“The guard dog doesn’t feel that way. He’s empowered by her. Why can’t you be the same?”

“I’ve felt Angie ask that about 1000 times.”

“Before you go throwing yourself off my wall, I’m going to let you in on a secret your subconscious doesn’t want you to figure out. Are you ready?”

Marc gave a curt nod, now humiliated.

“It’s not because you’re a bad person. It’s because you couldn’t protect her when you were kids. You didn’t know what was going on until most of it was over and you’ve carried that guilt all your life. You don’t have any resentment for the female of our species. You hate yourself.” William placed a hand on Marc shoulder, sending comfort in his gift. “You shouldn’t. She’s right. You’re a wonderful man and when you finally accept that none of it was your fault, you’ll be able to be her soulmate. You won’t need to find a plan to break a bond or form a connection that’s based on lies and manipulation. She already feels that way about you. Once you can love yourself too, everything will work out exactly the way you want.”

“How do I do that?”

William moved toward the third gate. “Let’s keep working.”

“Adrian was certain you could help me.”

“I can. I’m just not sure I want to.”

“Why not? I’m a great guy. You just said so.”

William frowned instead of giving the laugh Marc was going for. “That’s the problem. She’s not.”

“I guess you aren’t either?”

“Not even close. I would have charmed her faster than the guard dog did. You have an amazing woman there.”

“Not you, too!”

“Yes, me too. You have to ease up and accept that you’re not the center of her universe anymore. Now, she’s yours. Face it and your problems are over.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I know you wish you could follow her into her dreams and protect her there too. That’s why I like you for her instead of the other one. He’ll get her killed.”

“Yes, he will. He doesn’t... Wait. How do you know that about me?”

William chuckled. “Would you like me to tell you how to dream walk without her knowing?”

“Depends on what I have to trade for it.”

“Just a promise, if it’s one you can keep.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t drop any more of the Mitchel family here. One of those per clan is also enough.”

Marc chuckled. “You sound like you know them.”

“I know *of* them, and that, my new friend, is quite enough. We’re only taking this one because he’s not corrupt. I have no idea how that’s possible,

but it is. I suspect Brandon will replace Grant, in time.”

Marc didn't care about that. “I've got a nightly meeting with the kids. Will you be up late? I'd like to talk more.”

William chuckled. “I don't usually go to sleep until dawn.”

Marc wondered if Angela would prefer that schedule once they settled on the island.

“Does she have nightmares? Sleeping during the day eases that.”

“Not as often anymore.”

“Are you sure?”

Marc realized he wasn't. Half their sleep times were still apart and nearly all of them had been for months before this.

William sighed. “How long until your meeting?”

“Less than an hour.”

“Okay. I'll try to hit the points that matter. Listen hard.”

“I will.” Marc wasn't feeling the cold or scanning the darkness. William had both of those covered with his powerful sweeps and thick shield. Marc just concentrated on not falling off the wall as William began to give him information and secrets about descendant mates that even Adrian didn't know.

“Hey, boss.” Neil fell in step, seeing he had her alone for the moment, except for Ivan, her guard. “I think the babies did it.”

Angela’s head went around, finding Neil behind her.

They moved into the elevator without speaking, waiting until they were alone.

As the elevator began to move up the hotel floors, Angela motioned Neil to explain.

“I’ve never seen her in shock like this over anything related to her gifts. I know she hasn’t reclaimed anyone yet, but have you ever witnessed a descendant react that way?”

Angela shook her head, waiting for the next piece of the puzzle Neil was working on.

“After it was over, I got her settled in the cafeteria because she hadn’t eaten yet. As I set a tray in front of her, she told me something that made me believe she didn’t do it.”

“What did she say?”

“They didn’t mean to. They were hungry and then scared.”

“Yes, I can see where that would make you think the babies were responsible. I’m on my way to talk to her now. Come?”

“Yes.” Neil was glad for the invitation. It was also extra security for the boss as she moved through the hotel, though it wasn’t needed at this point. All their new members had volunteered to take shifts on security duty outside the hotel so Angela would be able to sleep after the camp finally

settled down. Neil was relieved. It meant he would have time with Samantha, who obviously needed it.

Angela stopped in the hall outside the cafeteria, aware that most of the council and team leaders were already inside. She could feel them, but she could also hear them. The mood was always high after a survival victory.

The large cafeteria was busy with people waiting in line to see what Brittani had made. Mindful of supplies, the woman was still coming up with a full tray of food for everyone, for each meal. She was getting inventive here with a stove and refrigerator, and some of it had come out surprisingly good. Angela wasn't certain who would get to enjoy the powered setup on the boat, but she hoped it wouldn't be Gus's pretty mate. They needed Brittani to become an Eagle.

Neil waited, hoping Angela was able to see something.

"I haven't been able to see anything since before we got here."

Neil stared in surprise at the admission. "Neither has Samantha."

"Neither has Jennifer, Adrian, or anyone else, that I know of..." Angela's eyes widened. "We can't view anything because we're evolving. We took lifeforces. People died—a lot of people. It was an awful tragedy."

"But Samantha only took one, tonight," Neil pointed out. "Why has it been blocking her the whole time?"

“Because she was already in the middle of an evolution.” Angela didn’t want to bring up bad memories, but it was impossible to avoid it here. “Jeremy’s death scarred her. Surviving the time in the mountain affected all our gifts in one way or another.”

Neil frowned. “Is it normal for it to take so long to come back? We’ve been out of the mountain for over two weeks.”

“It hasn’t been gone for her the entire time. She predicted the storm that hit the mall.”

“Then your theory doesn’t make sense.”

“It does if there were three evolutions, instead of one.”

Neil groaned. “Because she’s pregnant, the babies went through the tragedy with her! They have to evolve too.”

Angela nodded, actually able to smile. “I thought it was something bad.” She smacked Neil on the shoulder. “Let’s go tell her what’s going on so she’ll relax and you can get some sleep.”

Neil hurried to get the cafeteria door open for her. “That would be great.”

Ivan followed, storing every detail he’d heard.

6

“Are you off duty right now?”

Neil let out a sigh as he dropped onto the bed. Angela had just left, with Samantha in the clear. The boss had even escorted them to their room,

chatting and smiling so the guards would know to relax. “Yes.” He groaned. “I love a firm mattress. This is a firm mattress.”

“When do you have to go back on?”

“Ten wonderful hours. After I love you, I thought we’d nap and then go down to enjoy the pool.”

Samantha paused on her way to the bathroom.

Neil didn’t look at her. He wasn’t sure if she was ready for that. Frankly, neither was he, but they had to move on.

Samantha went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Neil sighed, sitting up. *Why are women like that? Men at least give a clue about how we feel.*

“Get naked.”

Neil grinned. “Okay.” *There’s a clue.*

He was stripped and under the cool, soft sheets in less than a minute. But he wasn’t hard. He was nervous. Her injury was healed, but her heart wasn’t. He’d only brought it up because their goodnight kisses had gotten hotter since the rescue at the hangar, leading him to believe she was ready.

“Oh, damn!”

Neil flew from the bed and shoved into the bathroom, dangling.

Samantha was standing in front of the mirror. Also naked, she was gaping at her stomach.

Neil glanced in the mirror and froze. She was big. A basketball-sized lump under her skin was

pushing outward, forcing her to stretch. Deep purple lines crisscrossed her skin.

“Is this normal?”

“I’ll find out.” Neil headed for the bedroom to get dressed.

“Hey!”

He turned around. “What?”

“I thought we...” Her face fell. “I’m too fat now, right?”

Neil stuttered, brain frying. “I don’t. What...?”

Samantha held in tears. “I’m sorry.”

Neil pointed at the bed. “Get. In.”

Samantha frowned, hand coming up. “You can’t—”

“Now, Sammi.”

Samantha shivered at his tone. She’d last heard it as he groaned and grunted behind her before the quake. She got into the bed.

Outside the room, Ben and Wade grinned at the noises. It was good to know the couple was recovering from Jeremy’s death.

Pam came down the hall on a round of the floor, but she didn’t stop to chat. The Special Forces men were intimidating to the other Eagles, as they should be, but Pam also wanted to reach the bottom floors before the shift changed. Morgan was on duty at the kid’s meeting. Pam wanted him to see her in clean clothes, with clean hair. She was careful to block her thoughts from him by thinking about her duty to

the camp, but under that, she was hoping he might be interested in what she had to offer.

Pam smiled at the funny feeling of the elevator on her stomach as it dropped, then smoothed her expression into the calm alertness her job required. The senior men were adamant about not spooking camp members.

Morgan felt her coming. There was only one female who drew him that way. Morgan hid a smile as he smelled Green Apple shampoo. It used to be a standard for women trying to get a date. Now, it was all they had, but it still brought good memories.

Pam didn't have a reason to stop, so she slowed as she passed the room where Marc was teaching the children to control themselves.

A squeal of laughter echoed through the door.

Pam looked at Morgan, stopping.

Morgan stared back, wondering what she thought of him.

Pam felt her cheeks grow hot. "What's going on in there?"

The guard shrugged, keeping a straight face. "Nightly meeting."

Pam put a hand on her hip as another loud blast of young laughter spilled from the workout room. "Does the boss know he's not giving them real lessons?"

Morgan pinned her with a hard look. "Says who?"

His tone said not to tell anyone. She hadn't been going to, so the reminder was insulting. She lifted her chin. "I'm no snitch!"

Morgan resisted the urge to tell her he thought she was sweet, hot chocolate in a great wrapper and dropped the arrogant attitude. "She wants them to bond. Go think about that somewhere they won't catch it."

Pam left to do exactly that.

By the time she'd gotten off the elevator on the ground floor, she had figured out the puzzle. Angela wanted them to bond so the kids wouldn't be able to rebel against Marc as easily if there was a next time. Pam liked it that she was able to keep up so far. Joining the Eagles had been the right decision for her.

Angela caught the thought as she walked by and was glad. She had a lot of work for Pam if the woman continued to prove herself.

Angela scuffed her shoe on the carpet, almost tripping. Her feet hadn't adjusted to civilized foundations yet. Sadly, they wouldn't have time. "Maybe on the boat. That should be long enough to make me miss these apocalyptic roads."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Playdates

1

“**S**afe Haven doesn’t steal. Safe Haven makes their beds, cleans the rooms, and brings down their garbage!” Jennifer had to shout on this floor as den mothers fought to get everything together in time for Angela’s deadline. Safe Haven had arrived with 155 people. They were leaving with 234. That would eventually allow for extra hands with the kids, but not today. “Safe Haven leaves in five hours. Make sure to bring down your garbage!”

Jennifer had already placed a thank you note in all the rooms Safe Haven had used. She was hoping at least leaving the hotel clean would make up for not having anything to give their hosts in exchange for the rescue and hospitality. When she’d mentioned that, Angela had told her it was covered but not how.

Jennifer moved toward the elevator, almost glad to be leaving. The echo of children yelling inside this narrow hallway was giving her a migraine. The Eagles were also suffering from the noise and sharing stashes of Advil, but her issue was lack of sleep. Jennifer was pulling a double even though

they had new rookies to help. She had been made to feel weak; she was afraid she still looked it. She had repairs to do on her image with the Eagles and the camp, even though she hadn't done anything wrong. She couldn't have people view her as vulnerable in any way. She also wanted to make sure everything went smoothly for the bugout. Then she would sleep in Kyle's truck. He was crashed now, along with the other drivers. They wouldn't get up until 8am, when Safe Haven was going to the banquet hall for breakfast goodbyes with the town.

“We kicked your ass!”

“You kicked me in the balls.”

Jennifer paused for the team to come out of the workout room where they'd been burning off restless energy. She knew Kenn's history. It wasn't so long ago that Kenn had been okay with beating on people in the same manner. “Everything okay here?”

“Right as rain.” Ivan grinned. He had bloody knuckles.

Jennifer understood Kenn had received the beating this time. Shaking her head, she moved down the hall. *You guys don't know you're poking a bear.* She moved into the elevator. This was the second time Ivan and his team had picked on Kenn while they'd been here. Jennifer was positive the Marine would pay them back soon. She was almost looking forward to it. If they did it again, she definitely would be. Bullying wasn't okay in Safe Haven.

The elevator opened. Jennifer was drawn to the window. There was a lot of activity in the lot around the hotel. Eagles were fueling tanks, airing tires, letting engines run to make sure their vehicles were ready for travel, and other chores. In the middle of the chaos, Jennifer spotted Marc.

She frowned. He was supposed to be sleeping, but he'd been helping William and the mayor secure the town because Grant couldn't yet. She'd healed the worst of Grant's injury, but he still needed recovery time.

Marc had only been back for an hour and it was dawn. Jennifer saw Kevin approaching Marc. She didn't expect anything good by the way Kevin's chin was down and Marc's was up.

“Got a minute?”

Marc grunted. “Yeah, I'm not busy right now.”

Instead of flushing, Kevin got angry. “That's exactly what I need to talk to you about.”

Without sleeping yet, Marc didn't have the patience to deal with the excuses he felt coming. “I won't tell them about your drinking problem or your attitude issues. Try not to have any of either while you're here.”

Kevin stared in surprise. “How did you know? I haven't told anyone.”

“You knew Adrian had a handcuff key.”

Kevin froze.

“You betrayed me. Deep down, you knew there was going to be payment for that at some point. You

feel it coming and you're running." Marc shook his head in disgust. "And that's why you were never going to get on the boat with us anyway, Kevin. You've been a lazy, drunken coward. You'd rather start over where nobody knows your name, than to be stuck with us and have to make up for your mistakes—like we're all doing. Good luck to you and good riddance."

Marc moved by the speechless man and went to finish directing their trucks into a line in front of the hotel.

In the window upstairs, Jennifer turned away. She hadn't known Kevin was drinking too much, but she had picked up the thought about the handcuff key from Marc not long after the UN mission team had returned. She'd assumed Marc wasn't going to punish him for it. *Another one who sets time bombs to detonate weeks later. Lovely.*

Jennifer continued her rounds of the hotel. "Safe Haven does not steal. Safe Haven cleans their rooms and brings down their garbage..."

2

"I'm sorry they're going."

William looked up from the mayor's bed. "Even after all the time you've spent jealous? You really haven't been a gracious host."

Sitting in the chair by the bed with her one daily cigarette, Donna let out a deep sigh and a cloud of smoke. "I'm sorry for that."

Donna's bedroom was a single space with a bed and a desk. She preferred to live here instead of in a home alone where it wasted resources. She'd told him it was important to lead by example. William was always impressed with her. When Donna finally faced her destiny, he would be right there to support her. "I'm not."

Keeping the sheet around her body, Donna twisted around to look at him. "Why?"

"Because the time with Safe Haven has reminded me of things. Would you like to hear them?"

Donna nodded, gently crushing out her smoke to finish later. She loved the way his mind worked. William was amazing. She cherished the time they spent together.

"The first is that we have a lot of work to do on our security."

"I agree completely. Between the information they gave us and what we come up with on our own from it, we'll double our chances of survival."

"I think so too. The next thing I've learned is that I'm too open about what I can do."

Donna was relieved to hear him admit it. That had been one of the town's biggest problems with his family. Unlike the other descendants who had come before, the Sinclair family didn't like to remain hidden.

“That’s because you can’t help anyone if you hide.”

“You’ve helped everyone in this town by remaining here.”

“I thought about going to the island with them.”

Donna smile widened. “So did I.”

They both chuckled.

“That’s part of the third thing I learned while we’ve had guests. I wouldn’t want our town to be different. If we went with Safe Haven, it would be.”

“I didn’t want to admit it, but I like how strong their women are. If they had stayed, I would have wanted to be like that too.”

“What’s wrong with being like them?”

Donna’s cheeks turned red in the dawn light. “They would find out I’m an Invisible and then I wouldn’t have you.”

William stared at her in surprised amusement. “You think I like you because no one knows you’re a descendant.”

Donna gave a quick nod. “It’s our secret.”

“Why were you so nervous?”

“I’m always fighting what I want.” Donna was glad to be able to trust him enough to tell him the truth. “I want to be like you. I’m just scared of what I might do with it.”

“Aww. Come here.” William gathered her onto his chest and kissed her. “I think this town could use a bit of naughtiness from its mayor.”

“What if I get out of control?”

He shrugged under her. “I think I can handle you.”

“Yeah, you probably can.”

William kissed her to silence any further conversation on the topic. He hoped she would follow through, but even if she didn't, he was now able to see that forcing someone to become something they didn't want to be would never work. It was evident in many of the relationships in Safe Haven, impossible to deny. Free will had to apply to humans in every form and they had to obey moral standards that they set for themselves. Society would never keep from destroying itself until they figured that out.

William let go of his plan to get Donna pregnant so she would accept her descendant gifts to bond with their child. Thanks to Angela's arrival, and the things he'd learned while the refugee camp was here, William didn't want to be that type of person anymore. He had just set his moral line and he wasn't going to cross it.

Unless Angela calls for me...

3

“Is everyone in here ready to go?” Ray and the Eagles in charge of escorting the wounded entered the clinic with cheery smiles. All of them were ready to be back on the road.

Tonya handed him a paper with the list of names. “I'm going to the hotel now. Mark me off

the list.” She hurried out, bracing against the cold wind moving in from the northwest.

Ray motioned one of his men to go with her, then scanned the people in the clinic. He saw everyone was waiting in the lobby, but he motioned Pam to check all the rooms anyway. “When I call your name, give me a shout and then we’ll get everybody moved.” There were only three people here, making it easier. “Trinity?”

There were two women in the room, so Ray had to ask.

A stocky blonde woman with black streaks through her curls and a 9mm on her hip stood up. Her arm had been broken from a fall during the chaos in the banquet center. Her new cast was already receiving signatures.

Ray went over to her, taking his pen from his pocket. He put his name on a small corner. “I’m Ray.” He shook her good hand.

“Trinity.”

Ray pointed at an Eagle. “That’s Conner. Just stay with him.”

Trinity immediately went, giving the boy a curious smile. “Wow. You’re a young one.”

Ray and the others chuckled as Conner blushed. It wasn’t hard to decipher what that meant. Trinity was obviously single and hunting for a Safe Haven male. Ray certainly intended to go that way if his heart ever mended.

“You must be Jayda.” He held out his hand to the other woman in the room.

The dark-skinned redhead gave Ray the same smile that Trinity had flashed. “Do you need a volunteer for guard duty?”

Ray grinned. “Another Eagle hopeful. That’s awesome. We need you ladies to step up.”

Jayda moved to the next Eagle in line without being told. She’d been observing Safe Haven the entire time they were here. She had always known she was going to ask to go. “As soon as my pulled muscle heals, I’ll be signing up for tryouts.”

The Eagles approved her eagerness. Running to the wall and tripping over something in the dark had injured Jayda. She’d kept herself from falling on debris, but pulled a muscle.

Ray went to the last person waiting. “Captain Grant. I’m your personal escort to breakfast and then to the vehicles.” Ray shook the man’s hand.

Ray quickly let go. The heat coming off Grant’s skin was giving him sweaty palms.

“How did you get stuck with me?” Grant stood up with the help of a cane. Jennifer hadn’t completely healed his injuries. He had refused to let her drain herself to do it.

“The boss was one short, so I volunteered. It’s an honor to welcome you to Safe Haven.”

Grant grinned and didn’t speak his dirty thought.

Ray and his team escorted the injured trio toward the banquet hall. The group moved slowly, thanks to two leg injuries and a broken arm that was busy flirting with the entire team. Ray tried to hurry

them along, but it wasn't easy. Many of Safe Haven's men had been without intimacy for a long time and the women of this town knew they were about to leave. Sexual tension was sparking in the air, making Ray miss Dale. He was glad when the team escorted the two women into the hall, leaving him with Grant.

"Over here, Captain Grant!"

Ray escorted Grant through the mixing camps to the mayor, who was at the center tables. As Grant sat in the chair by the mayor, Ray took up a position behind him. Angela had insisted Captain Grant be welcomed into Safe Haven with full honors for saving Jennifer.

Eagles around the room began to clap, also wanting to show their appreciation for what the man had done. Jennifer was a stern younger sister to them now.

Uncomfortable at the attention, Grant peered over his shoulder at Ray. "It's because I'm gay, right?"

Ray's sadness briefly disappeared as laughter rolled up, bubbled out of his chest, and spilled from his mouth. "Why? Did you recently come out of the closet?"

"I was never in."

Ray sobered as he realized the man was serious. "Good, because I don't recommend it. Safe Haven prefers honesty."

"Is that how you got the scars on your hands?"

Ray glanced down. "Some of them."

“Will I have to sail that shore too?”

“No.” Ray straightened his shoulders. “I paved the path. All you have to do is walk it.”

Grant flashed him a smile and turned back around.

Curious, Ray leaned down. “How did you know?”

Ray didn’t care that the man knew his sexual orientation, but it was important to not put off those vibes to strangers.

“My gaydar is spot on.”

Ray snickered against his will and resumed his post.

Grant let it go for now. They would have plenty of time for him to help Ray. The information they’d shared while Jennifer healed him had given Grant details about Safe Haven and he was determined to bring peace to their camp. It was a small price to pay in exchange for being found worthy to go with them.

4

“What are you doing here?” Tonya stopped next to Kenn. “You should be getting ready for the bugout.”

“It’s covered.” Kenn was leaning against the outside of the men’s restroom on the top floor. “Ivan’s team is inside.”

Tonya scanned his new bruises and scrapes, scowling. “What happened to you?”

“Me and the boys were playing.”

Tonya put a hand on her hip. “Who beat on you?!”

“Shhh...”

Tonya looked toward the bathroom as cries of dismay echoed from the stalls.

Kenn chuckled lowly. “I got in a lot of kidney shots.”

Tonya frowned. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I made sure they were going to need to use the bathroom soon. I didn’t want to miss it during one of our fuel stops once we get on the road.”

Confused, Tonya slid next to Kenn as the voices got louder.

“It’s blue! What the hell is it?”

“Maybe it came from the town. You know we’ve been hitting the pussy kinda hard since we got here.”

“I know. I almost fell out of the closet at the banquet last night.”

“What are we gonna do?! If the boss finds out we’re pissing blue, she’ll put us on toilet duty for a month.”

Tonya began to snicker as she realized what Kenn had done. “Let me guess. *You* brought the water canteens for the workout. You knew what they were going to do.”

Kenn nodded, blue eyes sparkling at her. “I used double the amount Charlie hit me with.”

The door opened. The men stumbled out.

“It doesn’t even hurt. What happened?”

“I can’t think of anything that does this, not even AIDs.”

“And you get sores with syphilis.”

Without noticing the couple standing behind the door, the worried team moved off down the hall, discussing the symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases.

As soon as Tonya heard the elevator ding, she let the laughter roll. “That is so mean.”

Kenn chuckled, nodding. “I agree. That’s why I did it.”

“How long are you going to let them go until you tell them it’s harmless?”

Kenn shrugged, leading the way to confirm the rest of the rooms up here were cleared. “I’m not certain yet. It depends on how many more playdates they insist on having.”

“Fair enough. Want some company for the last of your round?”

Kenn tucked her under his arm. “You know it.”

5

“Should we tell them?” Kendle and Charlie had paused to let the mumbling team of soldiers go out of the hotel as they’d come in from helping fuel vehicles.

“I think Kenn’s right this time.”

“He’s right to bully people?”

“Actually, that’s what they were doing to him. They don’t know my mom already punished him.”

Kendle frowned. “A lot of people in Safe Haven don’t feel like Kenn was punished enough. They think he should have been banished.”

“Yeah. This comes from the same people who voted to lift Adrian’s banishment after he betrayed us to the government.” Charlie smiled coldly. “It works both ways.”

“I agree. I’m just letting you know the camp liked it when you were torturing Kenn.”

“They liked it because it was funny, not because he was getting something he deserved for hurting me and my mom.” Charlie tried hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice as he explained why he thought Kenn was right. “We can’t have vigilante justice here. If the camp votes for a punishment, then we should do it, but we shouldn’t let the Eagles punish each other, because they’re not always right—like in this case.”

“I can agree, up to a point.” Kendle shrugged. “But there comes a time when the bosses have too many people to supervise and they can’t cover every situation. Then it’s up to us to handle each other.”

“Do you think Safe Haven is at that point?”

“I think Safe Haven was there before you and your mom joined.” Kendle motioned toward the cafeteria, where the women and kids, along with a few of the camp members, were having a snack. Only the people who were staying in the town or leaving were at the mayor’s breakfast right now. It

was mostly for goodbyes. Safe Haven had eaten in the hotel cafeteria and now people were grazing on the remains Britanni wouldn't be able to store for their next meal.

Kendle was glad the mayor had provided baskets for Safe Haven's dinner, but that meant Angela would drive through the night to reach the boat site. Kendle wasn't looking forward to another long shift of traveling, but she was ready to leave this town. The moment with Marc had ruined it for her. She was refusing to think about what had happened.

"So what's my next step?" Charlie whispered it so no one else in the lobby would hear them. Camp members were carrying things out to the vehicles, making the guards nervous as they tried to keep track of everyone. Charlie didn't want to add to it with this conversation.

"While you're in the cafeteria, eat something." Kendle reached over and squeezed his arm. "You need to have a man's body. I already think you have a man's mind. We just need to bring it out a little more."

Charlie hadn't realized that was an issue. He flushed in self-conscious embarrassment.

"You're 15, kid. It's unreasonable to expect yourself to have a man's body when you haven't reached a man's age. We'll work on it."

Charlie immediately began to compare his physical status to every man in sight.

Kendle sighed. "I'm not trying to give you a complex. Pay attention."

Charlie tried, cheeks bright red.

"Becoming a man is a process that takes years. It's the same way for becoming a woman. In the old world, you would have learned a lot of these things in school and from parents who had a 9-to-5 job and were able to spend time with you. In this world, we have to emulate others around us." Kendle found Marc entering the hotel. "I picked your mom."

Charlie was surprised to hear that. "I didn't think you liked her."

"I respect her, and that's a lot more important. All we're going to do is make Tracy respect you. Everything else will come on its own. At some point, pick someone to emulate physically and we'll go from there." Kendle gave him a motion to get going.

Charlie jogged off, eager to be out of her sight because of the embarrassment, but also wanting a minute alone in the elevator to consider her words. Kendle believed a good relationship depended on respect. Charlie hoped that was true, because he liked the ideas she was giving him. *I'm glad she came to Safe Haven.*

Still monitoring the boy to make sure he had taken her point the right way, Kendle got the thought and was warmed. She didn't want Charlie to worry about something as unimportant as looks, but when it came to physical strength and health, it was a priority. Their security had to be in great

shape. It was a benefit that Tracy would notice and respond to it. It was a win-win for all of them.

“Thank you for helping him.”

Kendle stiffened as Marc stopped next to her. She didn’t look at him. “He’s a good kid. I like him.”

“He likes you too or he wouldn’t listen to your advice. I wasn’t certain about putting you two together at first. I’m glad I was wrong.” He moved off before Kendle could reply, trying to form a truce.

Kendle’s eyes narrowed. She didn’t want to be his friend. She wanted his love.

Kendle stewed over Adrian’s backfired charm while she was alone on the elevator with her non-descendant guard.

Marc took the smaller elevator to the fourth floor to wake Angela. They were leaving in a few hours and she needed time to get ready for it.

Neil opened the door to the suite without speaking, about to drop. When the camp rolled out, he would be asleep in a bunk.

“Me too.” Marc saw Angela wasn’t up yet. He sat on the edge of the bed and gently rubbed her arm. “Angie?”

Angela slowly came up from her dark dreams, depressing images chased away by the sound of his voice.

“Good morning.”

Angela smiled, stretching. “Mmm.”

Marc checked his watch. “You can snooze for half an hour, but you’ll have to skip the hot shower.”

Angela woke a little, frowning. “Are you nuts?” She sat up to kiss him on the cheek, then rolled off the other side of the bed to claim the bathroom.

Laughing, Marc dropped into her warm spot and shut his eyes. “I’ll take it then.”

6

Ray checked his watch, still standing behind Captain Grant’s chair. “We should get you over to the hotel.”

They’d been here for the last three hours while the locals came to tell Grant goodbye. He was obviously the person of honor at this going away breakfast, but the town had included everyone who was leaving and recognized everyone who was staying. Despite being in an apocalypse situation, Ray didn’t have the patience for these old world processions anymore. He was glad it seemed to be over.

His team had already left to escort Trinity and Jayda to the hotel. Ray was positive it would include a short stop in a narrow alley on the way. Ray doubted the boss knew what had been going on with the Eagles and the townswomen while she’d been dealing with leadership and the wall breach.

Do you really think so?

Ray looked toward the door, where Angela was entering. He didn't answer, trying to figure it out first.

Angela waited for him to get it, not pointing out that he was currently providing protection for the man who would likely end up being his partner for the duration of his life in Safe Haven. As long as Grant didn't push Ray until he was ready to let go of Dale, they might find the sort of peace and happiness that few couples ever achieved. She was glad to have both of them in her army.

You wanted this to happen.

Angela gave Ray an approving nod. *This town needed new life and the Eagles needed a reward for their hard work.*

Do they know?

Of course. The women in this town have been very open about what they want. I insisted that our men be the same. Very few of them wanted to give up their life with Safe Haven to remain here and raise a family. Knowing this town is good, and the mothers are good and have support, allowed the Eagles to agree.

You don't think they would have anyway because they're getting sex?

Angela snickered. *Maybe before the war, but not now. Eagles always think things through. You know that.*

Ray did. He let go of Angela's attention so she could greet the mayor, who had just realized she was here. It was time for the boss to play nice again.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Close

November 21st

1

“I can’t believe you’re going already! It was so wonderful to have you here!”

Angela suffered through the mayor’s effusive gushing without speaking, hoping that would make it go faster. There were three people here she wanted to speak with and all of them were male.

Nodding and smiling in the right places, Angela scanned the men and women sitting together at the center tables. Ten of them were camp males who hadn’t found the courage to join the Eagles, but had been considering it. This town would allow them to be guards too, but not at quite so extreme a level.

The four women who had chosen to remain here were all sterile. Faced with a constant handicap in Safe Haven because of their inability to have kids, they’d chosen to stay here, where they would be hidden in plain sight in a town that had too many women anyway. It was still going to be a struggle for them, but not as extreme—like with the camp men who were staying. Angela had spoken with each one of them over the last two days to confirm they were making the best decision for themselves.

She had wished them all well and even now, Neil was cutting their share of the supplies from Safe Haven stocks. It would be given to Donna to add to the town stores, which were shared out equally.

Angela blinked, realizing the mayor had stopped speaking. “I’m sorry. You were saying?”

Donna gave her an understanding smile. “He’s waiting for you in the private room.”

Angela held out her hand. “I wish you all the happiness in the world.”

As her hands touched, Angela realized the woman wanted to ask a question and hadn’t found the nerve. Hating the time being wasted, Angela leaned. “I could have chased him to the ends of the earth and it wouldn’t have mattered. He only wants you.”

Angela left the grinning woman, moving to the center table. She didn’t feel bad about the lie. She did feel bad for the forlorn Eagle sitting with a townswoman who didn’t appear to be flirting the way the other women were. Angela wanted it clear to everyone that Brandon was an upstanding member of Safe Haven so he would have an honest chance here. She went toward him.

Brandon turned around, chair squeaking. “Is everything okay, Boss?”

Angela sat next to him and placed her hand on his shoulder so they could have a last private moment together. *Are you sure this is what you want to do?*

She had nodded to Kevin and received a curt copy of the gesture that had convinced her Kevin didn't need this.

Brandon was warmed that she had come to check on him. He'd made friends in Safe Haven, but he wasn't close to anyone. That had occurred to him while he was sitting here waiting for this embarrassing gathering to be over. He had promised himself he would make real friends here. *I'll miss you guys, but yes. This is the best thing I can do for everyone.*

You're stronger than all the other Mitchel men are. None of them have ever been able to walk away from an obsession.

Brandon glanced over her shoulder toward the door, where he could see the faint shadows of Safe Haven vehicles being lined up for a day of travel. *I don't think I'll ever love anyone again.*

You don't have to stop loving her.

Brandon peered up in confusion. *Of course, I do. She belongs to Billy.*

No, both of you belong to her. Angela looked at the mayor. "Brandon might be a great replacement for Captain Grant if that slot's open."

The mayor immediately began to study Brandon, allowing Angela to slip into the private room where William was standing at the window.

Before Angela could reach the table, there was a commotion behind her. It sounded like something had fallen over.

Donald shoved himself up off the floor in front of the closet door that had opened while he was leaning against it. He turned around to help Carina up, groaning when he saw her shirt was half buttoned.

Aware of the tense silence behind him and the fact that he was busted by the boss, Donald gave an innocent look. “We were just saying goodbye.”

Angela continued into the room as people laughed and senior Eagles moved in to deliver a reprimand.

“We leave in 45 minutes!” Jennifer’s loud call from outside made people jump. “In 35 minutes, everyone must be in their assigned vehicles or they will be left here. I repeat, Safe Haven is leaving soon. Be in your vehicles early!”

William secured the door from where he sat, not turning to Angela yet. He was fascinated by how the Eagles were preparing for travel. Now that they were happy and healthy again, Safe Haven was interesting in every way to William. He was going to model his town after the mythical refugee camp.

Angela thought about the long day of travel ahead of them without having her gift to rely on. She expected to be twitchy from now until a few nights after the boat set sail. She assumed it would take her that long to stop expecting the ship to sink or blow up.

“I wish I had understood you were worrying over that. I could have told you what was going on. I knew you were in the middle of an evolution

because of how we found you. You can't take lifeforces and not be changed."

Angela sat at the table, noting he had made her a cup of hot, sweet tea that was exactly the way she liked it. She picked up the cup to warm her cold hands and found herself taking steps to avoid the conversation that had to happen now. She hated goodbyes.

"Before you began this last evolution, how far into the future did you see?"

"A little after we come back. There's a big fight, bigger than the one at the Naval Station and then there's darkness."

"Is it a long time between then and now?"

"Not as long as I would like it to be. It's going to take us months to get to the island and months to get things set up. We have a one-year hurdle to get over and then we're good for three. Right at the four-year line, I start seeing doors opening and then it switches me to the boat ride back and arriving to find a country I don't recognize."

"I've heard rumors that the gates of reality were breached because of the darkness. Without power and the ability to turn on the lights to verify there's nothing in the corner waiting to jump out at us, the human brain reverts to believing in monsters." He gestured to include both of them. "Then you add in people like us and it makes it easy for them to believe in that sort of thing."

"I've always wondered if our belief in something is what makes it happen, versus there

being a grand plan where everything happens whether we believe or not.”

“As do I.” William let out a deep sigh. “Will we ever have time to sit and explore through discussions like this?” It was his way of asking if they would see each other again.

Angela was glad she was able to limit the depression that was going to hit them both as soon as the convoy pulled out. “Who do you think is going to meet us at the dock when we return?”

“You have your gifts back!”

“No, and that’s making me twitchy as hell, but I don’t need them to know we were brought here for a reason. I have every faith that Ciemus will be one of the last towns standing in this country. We’re going to need you. I would suggest you spend the time getting everyone here ready for the battle that’s to come.”

He frowned. “We can’t breed fighters in that time.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to. We didn’t have enough people to survive on Pitcairn Island until we came here. Ciemus didn’t have enough men to keep the population going until we came here. I believe all you need to do is ask for fate to send you good men and women to help defend the light. Maybe the sheer numbers will swing things in our favor and give us time.”

“Safe Haven is leaving in 35! Everyone should be in their vehicles in 25 minutes!”

William glanced out the window to where Jennifer's shout was echoing across the parking lot to reach the people standing around the main door, both in and outside of the banquet hall. "Are you sure about her?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to have her here." William chuckled.

Angela laughed at the joke. It was a relief to know William hadn't spotted anything in the teenager that she may have missed. Jennifer was going to be one of the most powerful descendants ever seen, but Angela was only going to allow that to happen if the girl wasn't corrupt.

"You know there's no guarantee for any of us." William sighed gravely. "It's a daily battle we face."

Angela had to stifle a sob. "It's impossible for me to explain what it feels like to hear someone else say that!"

William gave her a sad, understanding smile. "I felt the same way when you poured my tea."

"Safe Haven is leaving in 35 minutes!" This time it was Kendle's shout echoing down the convoy to be mirrored by the Eagles on duty.

William noticed Angela's tension and sent a fresh layer of his light to smother her in protection. "Don't take that one with you."

Angela frowned. "I don't have a choice. It's her island we're going to."

"That's unfortunate."

"I'm going to have to kill her."

“If you don’t, she’ll kill you.”

“Yes...”

“It’s not because she knows our secret.”

Angela didn’t feel the rage this time, only the sadness that nothing would change the path Kendle had chosen. “No. She wants my life. I can either give it to her, along with Marc, or I can bury her on the island that should have killed her the first time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

Unable to take her sadness, William clapped his hands and made a rainbow of rose petals float over them.

Angela tried to pull out of it. “More please. I’ll do the same for you.”

“That’s how you want to spend our last half hour together?”

Angela smiled. “It won’t be our last. We have amazing things to do together in the future. This is just a pause.”

William clapped his hands again, bringing more flowers. “If it goes bad here...”

“Ciemus is always welcome.”

“What about me?” William stared intently. “Would you have a welcome for me...personally?”

Angela shook her head, unable to keep from the small smile even though she didn’t want to hurt William’s feelings. “It’s only him.”

“...and after?”

Angela's face went blank to hold in her agony. "I can add you to the list. All you have to do is outlive my dog. Ask anyone. That isn't easy to do."

"I'm sorry."

"You should be."

"I am."

"You ruined a very nice moment."

"I'll make it up to you."

Angela crossed her arms over her chest, pretending to be indignant when she was actually amused. "How?"

"I'll tell you about the water here."

Angela stilled. She'd been waiting for this and almost afraid of it. If they had some kind of eternal fountain, she wouldn't leave.

William sighed. "I wish." He leaned in. "But this is still incredibly valuable. The water doesn't obey Mother Nature. Water only obeys the tides and itself."

"What does that mean?"

"You can have a peaceful trip over the ocean. Just make a deal with the water."

"This sounds insane and then I remember I can read minds and throw fire at people." Angela grunted. "What do I trade?"

"The only thing that really matters in the end."

"My life."

William studied her. He didn't need to scan to know what she was doing now. "Do you really believe you're clever enough to cut a deal and still get out of honoring it?"

Angela looked at him with an expression that would have terrified Marc and Adrian. “Who says I won’t honor it?”

2

“Everyone needs to get into their assigned vehicle right now. Safe Haven is leaving in 10 minutes!” Kenn had point over the bugout. He was using the plans he’d developed for leaving the mountain. Eagles with lists of names were walking the idling vehicles to verify everyone was in them. Safe Haven wouldn’t roll out until all their camp was accounted for. “Ten minutes, people!”

A few of those standing outside to continue their goodbyes got in, but most of them ignored Kenn’s words to stare at his bruises.

Kenn noted the food baskets were finally reaching the front of the convoy. Lou and Brittani were the last two members of the delivery team who still had baskets to give out. Those were going to the lead truck, where Marc and Angela were standing by the passenger door, with Dog dancing around their feet. Morgan was already in the driver seat, waiting for the order to roll. All around them were slightly annoyed Eagles who had once again been split from their mates. The only exception was for those who were sleeping during the ride.

Everyone else seemed happy with the arrangements. Each Eagle had been assigned a camp member, and each camp member had a new

Ciemus local to help with adjusting into camp life. Even though most of them were rookies, it made everything faster because there was a trio of hands.

Kenn did a fast scan and found Tonya stepping into the medical camper. All of the blood tests for new people were finally finished, freeing the equipment for other uses. The sick cat was in a carrier in her hand. It had spent most of the time in a closet in the basement. Kenn had told her it would be fine in the animal trailer with the bunker cat where it would get fresh air and sunlight, but Tonya had insisted the animal be brought in where she could check on it as much as she needed to. Kenn didn't think the cat had cared one way or the other. The tabby had gotten used to being fed and rubbed. It wasn't even protesting being in the box. *She tamed it, like me.*

As Tonya turned around to shut the door, her clothes pulled tight against her body and allowed Kenn to view the small bump of her stomach. His child was beginning to make itself known. Kenn swallowed his sudden nervousness about being a real father and forced his mind to the duty at hand. He was sleeping for the first shift of travel. He could let his mind wander as he lay in the bunk of the medical camper, trusting Shawn to keep up. Right now, he had to get them rolling.

Kenn went toward the lead truck to put Angela inside it. No one cared for her still being out in the open, especially while so many of the Eagles were

in vehicles and unable to help if there were problems.

That smells good.

Brittani smiled at Dog. “I added an extra piece of chicken in there for you.” She’d quickly adjusted to Dog since their moment in the cafeteria. She’d been giving him scraps when he came by during his guard shifts with Charlie.

Dog sat by her ankles, allowing her to hand the basket to Marc overtop him without flinching.

When she reached down to stroke the animal without showing fear, the Eagles were impressed. Very few people had the nerve to do that even though Dog was so tame for being a wild animal.

Marc stared in pleasant surprise.

Angela didn’t, but it was encouraging. The only test left for the woman was to spend time with their kids.

“I don’t want to be Safe Haven’s cook anymore.”

Angela let out a long suffering sigh. “Finally!”

Brittani’s cheeks turned red. “What does that mean?”

“It means I was getting tired of waiting.”

“How can you know what I want? I refused to think about it around any of you.”

Angela gave her a first layer of trust. “I knew it the first time we made contact over the radio.”

Brittani didn’t know what to say.

“Well, that’s a first.” Lou chuckled when Brittani smacked his arm.

As Lou reached around her to hand the other basket to Marc, a cold wind blew across the convoy.

Birds flew up in the distance, cawing in terror.

The temperature dipped.

A loud cracking noise echoed across Ciemus and brought the deer herd to alertness. Noses tilted into the wind; they mirrored every human inside the wall.

“Do you hear that?” Brittani looked toward the gate.

Another large cracking noise came from the opposite end of town, turning almost every head in that direction.

During the distraction, something long and thick flew over the gate. Shot by the downdraft of a storm that had given no warning, a tree barreled at the front of the convoy like an arrow.

“Watch out!”

“Get down!”

There was no room for Marc to shove Angela out of the way. He lunged over her with open arms, hoping if he shielded her with his body, she would survive.

Still turning around, Angela threw a shield up, but she and her witch hadn’t been ready.

William threw a blast toward the tree, but he already knew he hadn’t reacted fast enough.

Brittani had already waved her hand. Still facing the wall, she’d been the first one to spot it. Power

slammed into the tree, ramming the pine into one of the town jeeps.

Pieces of tree and jeep exploded, slamming into other vehicles and the side of the hotel.

William's wave of force hit the ground in front of the truck.

Shouts echoed as earthy shrapnel rained over them.

"It's back!" Brittani swung to Angela, grinning ferociously. "Did you see that?! I've got it back!"

Footsteps flew toward them and shouts came from the towns, but all Angela heard was Brittani. "You have your gift?" Angela let Marc help her up, not feeling the stinging of scrapes and scratches. "All of it?"

Brittani nodded, barely resisting the urge to use it again just to prove it. She couldn't wait for the opportunity to play. She'd missed it while cooking. "It went down on me right after the earthquake. I didn't think it was coming back."

Brittani didn't have the information the other descendants and the Eagles did, because she hadn't been part of a team. That would have to change, because not all descendants were in the Eagles, but all descendants needed an education. Knowing how gifts evolved was basic knowledge all of them had to have. *I'll form another class with adult descendants once we set sail. Maybe we'll practice our gifts together. Surely, we'd be safe to do that on the ocean and our island.*

Brittani realized hundreds of people were staring at her in shock, but saving the boss was second to feeling like herself again. “What?!”

Angela chuckled, heart thumping wildly as Marc checked her for serious injuries. “You have one request.”

Angela was prepared for the woman to say she wanted Gus to be banned from the Eagles. Angela wasn’t sure how she would get Gus to agree.

Brittani smiled. “I’d rather be a rookie in your army.”

Angela smiled. “I’m going to give you that anyway. You have one request when you want it.”

More people rushed over to be certain they were okay.

Brittani took Lou by the arm and led him toward their assigned vehicle. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

She sounded so much like the other Eagles that Angela laughed. “Be at the next training lesson.”

“Will do.” Brittani led Lou to their assigned vehicle, grinning. She felt as though weights had been taken from her ankles.

While the guards verified Angela wasn’t seriously injured and her truck wasn’t damaged, William and the mayor did the same, examining the shattered jeep that had been lined up to provide security. No one had been in it yet and no one was injured, but the vehicle was a loss.

“We’ll pull around it.”

Donna nodded. She had already picked a few of their mechanics to come and clear a path. “You can still go on time.”

William was glad. Angela wasn’t going to wait, not after being in danger again. He could see her need to go in every expression and gesture she made.

William gave Donna one last hug and then a fast, hard kiss where he moaned against her lips and sent a wave of need that he hoped she felt as much as he did. He would miss her.

Instead of withdrawing like she usually did when they were in public, Donna kissed him back and tried to open her mind to whatever he wanted to give.

Around them, Ciemus people laughed and cheered.

The couple broke apart slowly, a little embarrassed at the attention. They preferred private moments for their displays of affection.

“You have the maps and the channels?”

Donna held up the folder. “We’ll get started on the improvements. You’ll only be gone for two weeks. We’ll be fine.”

William walked away before he could kiss her again. “Open the gate.”

Because everyone had been ordered to be in their vehicles and remain there, descendants throughout Safe Haven’s convoy had been forced to stay where they were instead of running to help Angela. As the story spread, magic hummed from

people regaining control over wonky gifts and new doors popping into place. Moans and groans, along with cheers and claps, echoed from nearly every vehicle.

Eagles made sharp gestures to stop children when they would have spent their energy playing with the returned abilities.

The townspeople watched in confused amusement.

William observed raptly. It was amazing to be sitting in the same convoy with Safe Haven anyway, but the story of everything that had happened during their stay in Ciemus would become part of the legend.

Morgan looked to Angela as he started the engine of the truck, waiting for the call to go.

Her dazed, faraway eyes met his.

Morgan waited patiently, glad she was searching. Everyone had missed it. The ability to look into the future for what was coming wasn't always correct when it actually happened because every event before it rippled down to make changes, but it was still better than being blind.

William didn't resist as Marc and the men on point pushed him into the truck. Angela didn't appear to notice and William was eager to have the gate secured.

Dog jumped up, landing in William's lap for a brief moment before darting into the narrow rear bunk. William leaned aside so Marc could do the same without giving him an unintentional lap dance.

Marc chuckled as he went by. “Good looking out.”

Seeing William was inside the Safe Haven truck, the fighters of the town also got into their cars and jeeps.

“Load up!” Bucky admired the way Safe Haven was double and triple checking to be positive they had everyone. The Ciemus set up didn’t allow for that. Bucky planned to bring it up to William in one of the many updates he was going to give over the next weeks.

The locals got in their vehicles, leaving only the security team on the convoy. Kenn smacked the rig to get everyone’s attention. “One minute and we’re set to roll.”

There was no reply from Angela, who was deep under the hold of her gift.

“She’ll call when she’s ready.” Marc had to answer, stopping William from doing it. The new man didn’t know they always waited in this situation. Marc knew the townspeople were used to following their own instincts, but those who signed up for the Eagles would quickly learn that didn’t work. Improvising was a bad idea unless your teammates knew about it.

“You and I are going to learn a lot from each other.” William got comfortable as Kenn and his men hurried to their own vehicles.

“You’ve already given me a lot to think about.” The man really had. Marc had no doubt his scroll diving would be put on hold for at least a few nights

while he puzzled through the suggestions William had been able to pull from his knowledge of descendants. There was a lot of it. Marc settled into the bunk, but didn't lie down yet. He wouldn't until they were rolling. Sitting in front of an open gate was making him nervous.

I just became a father.

Marc looked at the wolf who had settled at the far end of the bunk behind the driver. *What?*

Congratulations! William felt like he needed to send it. He was getting the images clearly from the wolf, mesmerized by the sight of the four pups squealing as they were cleaned by their weary mother.

She gave birth. I felt it.

Marc gave the wolf a congratulatory scratch. "You dog!"

All three of the males in the truck chuckled.

Angela didn't respond.

Why didn't you bring her with you? Marc continued the mental conversation instead of speaking so the driver would be able to concentrate.

Would you like me to butt out as well? William wasn't sure about the boundaries on these things. His town hadn't minded his mental curiosity.

Actually, yes. Marc was using it as a test of the man's ability to follow through. He wanted to know if William could be trusted.

William withdrew and turned his attention to the convoy, where Eagles were leaning out of their windows to scan for trouble.

Before Marc and Dog could continue their conversation, Angela came back to life.

“Wow.” She grinned, sounding as if she had just woken from a deep, restful sleep. “That was incredible!”

Marc and William chuckled.

Happy they had a window of opportunity, and not wanting to ruin the good mood by telling them anything she had viewed yet, Angela picked up the mike on the truck.

Silent alertness came from those who saw, slowly spreading to the rest of the convoy until everyone was staring at their vehicle radio in anticipation.

“On behalf of Safe Haven, I want to thank Ciemus for indeed being a Last Call Sanctuary. It has been our privilege to be your guests. If anyone changes their mind about going with us, you have nine days to join our light. This is a last call, one and all. Safe Haven is leaving.”

Morgan shifted the truck into gear.

William could feel the excitement build as they rolled through the gate. He waited, curious, as the truck cleared the gate.

Do it now. Thirty seconds. Angela sent the permission to all their eager descendants and camp members. They wanted a proper Safe Haven goodbye.

Magic hummed.

Both camps cheered as the protective bubble rose around Safe Haven in a shimmering shield that

followed them out of sanctuary and back into the wilderness.

In nine days, they would be on the ship, watching America fade into the distance. Only one soul in the lead rig was eager for it, but all of them were determined to make it happen. Last call had just sounded.

The End of Book 9

What would you like to do now?



[The next book in this series](#)

[Deleted Scenes](#)

Eagle teams after the quake

Book 10 Sample

Go back to the beginning of this book

Deleted Scenes

1

Ivan followed Angela to the chilly house assigned to shelter Neil, Kenn, himself, and her. Conflicted, he was unprepared for Neil to come out as the boss went in.

The door shut behind her, telling Ivan she knew this was coming. Thanks to Kenn's warning, Ivan was braced for more threats. He didn't expect Neil to walk right by him with a quick nod and nothing more. Relieved, he turned to do a scan and found Morgan standing there with his big arms crossed and a scowl on his lips.

"Got a minute?"

Ivan nodded, dismayed. He knew how to handle someone like Neil. Morgan was a mystery.

"Are you a threat to the boss?"

"No."

"She thinks you might be."

"Did she say that?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just now, when she left you out here." Morgan motioned toward the empty fuel house. "Let's have some coffee and talk."

"Sure."

Morgan nodded to Neil as he came from the icy bathroom tent. The two men escorted Ivan to where a number of senior men were waiting. Thanks to the vet, anyone who bonded so fast with the boss was now a suspect for worse things. Ivan was tired and grouchy, making it a perfect time to be interrogated by the group. Neil hadn't been satisfied with Brittani clearing the man, so he'd asked Morgan to do it. An hour from now, Ivan would either be one of them or gone.

Deleted Scene #2

1

Angela came to slowly, aware of the stopped vehicle underneath her and Adrian's musky scent surrounding her. It was an awful way to wake up, considering that her mate was in the seat next to them.

He's not in the truck right now. Adrian tightened his arms around her. *He's outside, helping clear a wreck.*

Before she could look, Adrian sighed. *The windows are fogged up right now. No one can see us.* He didn't tell her that Ivan probably could. The man had sniper watch over the truck. They had both been asleep when Marc stopped.

Allowed to be herself for one moment, Angela relaxed in his arms, delighted at the feel of waking up with him. It had happened a few times over the months she'd been in Safe Haven. She treasured the memory of each one as much as she loathed them.

Adrian dipped in against her neck, kissing her skin. *Good morning. How did you sleep?*

Angela tilted her head to allow him access. *It was beautiful. You didn't let go of me at all.*

Not unless I have to. Reminded of the precarious situation and short amount of time, Adrian placed a

kiss to her cheek. Still under the charm, he couldn't help but try to seduce her. *Kiss me?*

Caught in the moment of weakness, Angela gave it a brief second of consideration before withdrawing from his arms. "You should go now."

Angie!

Angela was jolted out of the fantasy by Adrian's stiff hand on her shoulder. "Wake up before he thinks that's really happening."

Angela flushed as she realized everything that she had dreamed about was true, except for Adrian making a move on her.

Adrian slid out of her embrace and then out of the truck, not about to draw Marc's anger when he hadn't done anything wrong. He slammed the door, angry that he wasn't able to take advantage of the opportunity he had just been given with her. Angela's sweet scent was all over his clothes and hands, and in the cabin of the truck. Her hair was even on his shirt. Adrian was in heaven and hell.

Left alone in the truck, Angela settled into his warm spot and was quickly back under the haze of sleep. She couldn't be held responsible for her dreams and she wasn't going to try to justify them, especially not to Adrian. All of this was his fault anyway.

Aware of her thoughts on the matter and Marc's questioning glare, Adrian detoured toward Kendle. He wanted to make sure she checked on Kevin and Ray at some point. He didn't think he'd slept enough to have the patience yet.

Marc scanned the truck. He hadn't caught Angela's dream, but he had noted Adrian's response and approved. He also worried that Angela had asked for something Adrian couldn't give now because of their deal. Stewing over it, he motioned Kenn and Kyle to take point as he returned to the truck.

Before he opened the door, flashes of Angela's dream lashed out to steal his breath. After a few seconds, he withdrew, grinning. Angie was horny. When she got like that, her dreams were full of the men around her as the witch explored everything Angela wouldn't let her do during the daytime. It didn't mean anything, but it had made Adrian uncomfortable enough to make him leave her company to avoid being accused of anything. That meant he was making progress. Pleased, Marc found Adrian across the small crowd and motioned toward the truck.

Aware that Angela had gone back to dreaming, Adrian groaned. "When am I going to get a break?"

Deleted Scene #3

1

“I assume you know now that I’m not a threat to them?”

Jennifer was surprised to realize William was speaking to her. “I’m sorry?”

William leaned closer. “To your boss’s relationship. I’m not a threat to them.”

Jennifer stared at him, finally catching the condescending vibe. Her eyes narrowed as she studied him. “You think I’m too young... Too new... Too soft...”

William frowned. Not because he didn’t want Safe Haven to be offended, but because he couldn’t close his mental barrier.

Jennifer snickered. “I’m just getting started here, big man. You might want to try harder.”

Safe Haven descendants in the room looked over.

Angela shifted in her chair to watch William’s face.

“Wow.” William strained, fighting to bring down his mental shield over a door that no longer hurt him as badly. He didn’t care if she saw what was in there. He wanted to know if he could keep her out. He hadn’t braced for her attack, hadn’t considered her a threat.

“And that’s where you made your mistake,” Jennifer informed him coldly, all pretense gone. Because Angela admired William, Jennifer’s feelings had been stung.

William grunted, unable to speak and fight her at the same time now. She’d increased the strength. His shield was a fruit rollup in the sun.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

William slumped back in the chair as Jennifer roamed his mind unchecked. She flew through his doors and crypts so fast that he couldn’t keep up with all the memory flashes.

Jennifer withdrew, satisfied she’d made her point, but still offended.

“You’re very talented.”

Jennifer frowned. She could still hear that tone. It said strong gifts didn’t mean anything without the brains to use them. She turned to face him directly. “Listen, you may have fooled the boss with your fake doors, but I know what’s in your heart and I didn’t need a gift for that. If she wasn’t already under a charm, you might have tried it.”

“You don’t know that.”

Jennifer grinned in triumph. “Neither do you.”

“No, but you couldn’t have...” William stopped, caught.

Jennifer smirked. *Let’s hear that tone now, big man.*

William couldn’t stop the chuckle. “Maybe I should have scanned *you* for charms.”

Jennifer snickered, gaze going to the frowning Special Forces man in the doorway of the banquet hall. “From the frying pan with Marc and into the fire with Kyle. It’s a good thing you aren’t going with Safe Haven.”

“Actually...” William let it hang, teasing.

“No.” Jennifer glowered at Angela. “Tell me you didn’t do that.”

Angela had been keeping track of the pair. She shrugged. “He offered and I accepted.”

Jennifer saw the joke and let out a relieved, annoyed grunt. “You could have told me it was just an escort.”

“You could have asked.”

What Did You Think?

I'd love to hear how you feel about this book!

You'll see this request at the end of every title I write because it matters so much to me and to the other readers out there. Please [take this link to the book's page on my website](#), so you can pick the store of your choice for a review. It doesn't have to be long, though it certainly can be if you like. Just tell me, and the world, how you feel about it.

Feedback helps me in many ways, but the biggest is that it drives me to keep producing. I have self-doubt moments just like everyone else. Your review might be what pops me out of a bad place and allows me to keep rolling! And if you ever need some kind words, I'd be happy to do the same for you. The world is often an ugly place, but we can help each other through those hard times with small acts of kindness.

“I have found that it is the small everyday deed of ordinary folks that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.” -Peter Jackson

New Merchandise!

The Life After War series now has tank tops, t-shirts, mugs, hoodies, bookmarks, and more. It's time to get your LAW on!



[Take me to the merchandise page!](#)

Eagle Teams After the Quake

Special Forces Team #1

Kyle, Daryl, Morgan, Shawn, Brandon, Kendle,
Whitney, Donald

Special Forces Team #2

Neil, Greg, Ben, Quinn, Wade, Tommy, Tim

Level 6

Zack, Theo, Ozzie, Ramer, Carl, Scott, Dexter

Level 4

Ray, Conner, Pam, Randal, Gary, Jennifer

Level 2

Kenn, Gus, Nathan, Stanley, Andrew, Harry,
Michael

Level 1

Courtney, Jonny, Kim, Ian, Rod, Molly, Tracy

Rookie

Ivan, Peter, Boothe, James, 3 more soldiers

Book 10



Setting Sail

1

“**T**hat was Safe Haven!”

Vihaan rose from the dying bushes next to the small cabin. The tracker had been watching it for days, drawn by the feel of magic, but that flood of protection from the south was unmistakable. Someone had used a massive shield. The power signature was rippling across the land.

Vihaan stayed straight as he crossed the backyard, not caring if the family found his tracks

or saw him through one of the few windows. His footprints would alert them to predators in the area. If they were smart, they would see the tracks and leave. If they weren't, Vihaan would have fun after his work in the south was finished. He wanted to know why the family put off a feel of magic. All descendants were supposed to be laboring for the same boss, sent to the international detention center for reeducation, or killed. There were no exceptions.

The noon sun beat on Vihaan's white-clad shoulders, bringing a fresh layer of sweat. The temperatures were rising in the south and dropping in the north. He had spent time in both areas over the last weeks, trailing prey, and the only constant here was the wind. It blew in from the west with anger. Vihaan liked that. It reminded him of the winds at home. It was the only thing here that did. Everything else about America was a foreign challenge. *I have many tales to tell my family when I return.* None of them had the gift. Vihaan had enjoyed that too, though he'd learned they were likely Invisibles who would eventually evolve. It wouldn't matter. Upon his return, he would be named the head of his family. Then, he would take a wife from a neighboring leader, claim that land, and begin his future in the new world order.

Click-click!

The radio in his pocket paused, then clicked three more times.

Vihaan didn't answer the alert, though he was certain others in his group would. Everyone within

50 miles had felt the Safe Haven emission. Many of them, unlike himself, would now go south to track it.

Vihaan went to the small motorbike he'd liberated the day he'd been dropped into infidel country. He fired it up and drove off without worrying over being heard or chased. This area was deserted except for the small cabin with two kids, one mother, and two men both performing roles of husband. Vihaan presumed it was two brothers sharing a family, like his people sometimes did, and approved. When he claimed them, the woman and children would know what was expected. They were the first American family he had witnessed living this way. *Maybe I'll spare the men so they can pass it to those we keep as slaves.*

Vihaan deliberated, then shook his head. No Americans should be spared in the end. The new world was here and those stubborn fighters would never conform. Vihaan respected them even as he hated them.

2

Ciemus

“We need to go dark and quiet.” Brandon followed the mayor away from the gate. “Angela shouldn't have brought up the shield. Trackers have this location now.”

Donna pointed at one of her men and kept walking. “Call the water.”

Brandon stayed on her heels, confused but curious like all of Safe Haven had been about the water sheltering this town.

Donna jogged up the stairs and entered her office. She pushed a button on the desk.

Brandon didn't hear anything, but he knew the people did. They were running toward the fishing area.

Donna pointed to her window. "This is the best view of it."

Brandon went to the glass, aware of Donna eyeing him as if he were a threat. He could feel her concern about being alone with him, but time would ease that. He'd learned that from watching Angela jump every time a guy tried to make friends. Now, he would die for her and she would die for him. They were Eagles.

"Are you regretting your decision?" Donna was very perceptive of male moods.

Brandon sighed, moving the curtain aside. "Not yet."

Donna smiled at the cautious tone. "There's time to catch up."

"I have no future with them." Brandon didn't want to start his new life here on a lie. "I'm a Mitchel."

"Ah." Donna sat down. "I feel better now."

Brandon observed her in the glass. "Why?"

"Because I knew something was wrong with you even though your leader tried to cover it. This isn't as bad as I suspected."

Brandon chuckled. “I’ve never gotten that response before. Maybe it *will* work out.”

Donna pushed the button again. “Providing you remember two things, sir.”

Brandon saw locals pulling ropes from the water by the wall. “What are those?”

“We need babies and you’re a Mitchel.”

Brandon snickered.

So did Donna, but it was clear from her expression that she meant it.

Brandon nodded, still laughing. “I’ll do my best to uphold that part of the family reputation.” He waited to hear her response, but the action at the river drew his attention and held it. The water was rising. It spilled over the banks and ran over the boots of the men and women still pulling on the ropes. The locals smiled and chatted as if it wasn’t happening. When the water kept coming, filling spaces and rushing over the ground, Brandon frowned.

The water covered ankles and then the knees of the pullers. Brandon didn’t witness any shifting in the wall, but it was obviously having an effect as the liquid rushed over the waist high crops, soaking them.

The people who had been fishing were smiling as the rolling liquid covered their faces.

“They’ll drown!” Brandon’s mouth dropped open as he realized the locals were covered in a water shield. They were playing in it. “How is that possible?”

“William made a deal when the war came.” Donna observed him. “We are sheltered, but it’s a small area. To enlarge it would draw attention no matter how high the water gets.”

“That’s why the walls are muddy even in winter!” Brandon watched as the water submerged the town. It was astounding how fast it happened. “What happens when it reaches the top?”

“It overflows, of course.” Donna lit a cigarette from her ration. “It covers the land for miles and prevents anyone from catching sight of the wall.”

“What if they were already in the area?”

“It flushes them out.”

“Or drowns them?”

“Yes. We’ve found bodies of people caught in tents or abandoned homes. Because of that, we ask the water to come during the daylight, so people will have a chance to escape.”

“Why do you let your enemies escape?”

“Why do you assume everyone is an enemy?”

Brandon’s amazement faded. “Because they always turn out to be. I’ve stopped giving people the benefit of the doubt.”

“William is the opposite.” Donna flipped her ash and stubbed out the cherry. “I’m in the middle. You’ll take Grant’s place and restore the balance that’s been taken.”

“Why don’t you just go with them?” Brandon turned from the fantastical sight. “The water won’t protect you forever. Someone will make a better deal to wipe you out. Why are you staying?”

“It’s not something we can explain. You’ll have to experience it.”

“You mean go out while the water’s up?”
Brandon kept his face blank.

Donna pointed at her doorway, where water was trickling in.

Brandon hesitated. “I... Am I covered?”

Donna gave him a pointed look.

Brandon sighed. “We’ll find out together.”

Donna nodded, gun coming up from her drawer.
“Go cleanse yourself or meet your maker.”

Brandon flipped the latch on the window. “I’m an Eagle. I was just waiting for orders.”

Donna sniggered as the man dove off the window ledge. The water rushed over him in giddy welcome. “Should have known. The Mitchels are all special.”

“Help!”

Donna shot up and ran into the flooding hall.

Kevin barreled into her, knocking them both to the ground.

Donna groaned. “Are you okay?”

“Hands!” Kevin shoved to his feet as the water advanced, not feeling the bleeding scrape on his arm. “And teeth! In the water!”

“Damn.” She sat up as the roaring liquid rushed by, chasing the panicking man. “I hate it when this happens.”

Donna brought her gun up and shot Kevin in the chest.

“Why...?” The former Eagle staggered, hand coming up.

The water slammed into his knees, knocking him backwards onto the hall floor.

Donna was sorry it had come to this. She went into her office and replaced the missing bullet.

A few seconds later, the water carried Kevin’s body toward the stairs, already shredding it.

3

William snapped awake. He’d fallen asleep while trying not to listen in on Dog’s fatherhood story. William glanced around and found a bored driver, snoozing passengers, and a convoy of people who already felt tired again.

They were on Interstate 65, in a barren area with few trees or homes. The views were molding weeds and a broken road that didn’t appear to have had traffic at all since the war. The wind blew through the reeds and was lost beneath the rumble of their engines. It was empty here.

William wasn’t positive what had woken him with panic in his throat and adrenaline pumping through his heart. He sat up to do a deeper scan of their surroundings.

“It was in Ciemus.” Angela didn’t open her eyes. “You have one less transfer than we counted.”

William caught the images and grit his teeth. Donna being in danger was terrifying.

Angela snorted. “She wasn’t.”

William relaxed, understanding one of Safe Haven's citizens hadn't passed the final test. "She's strict about that."

"So are we." Angela shifted. "We just don't have the water to make the choice." *Yet*, she amended. It was taking all her powers of reasoning to find an answer to that one. "I can have Ivan take you back. He's restless anyway."

William shook his head, feeling better. "No. I'm here until you tell me to go."

Listening, Marc frowned when she didn't tell him it would be soon. He forced it out for a more pleasant image of sailing away without any of the males now competing for Angela's attention. His behavior said his position might be open, but Marc was down to final options. Angie was his and always would be.

Angela reached back to clasp hands with him. She refused to read his mind, positive that it would upset her. His bad moods came from one direction now and she didn't have time for it. The next nine days would be hard and wonderful. They would have moments of glory and they would have deaths. All of it was inevitable. When they finally set sail, most of their troubles would be settled.

"You promise?" Marc's fingers tightened on hers.

Angela nodded. "Yes. As long as you follow through, we're free. If you weaken, for even an instant, we're doomed."

Comforted, Marc went back to sleep like none of it mattered.

Angela didn't. She appeared to drowse while scanning every living thing the convoy passed. If she missed a threat right now, Marc wouldn't get a chance to enact his plan. A dozen trackers would converge on their convoy and bring refugees along to do the work. *I just need a week and then you can all come for us. I'll be ready.*

4

“Should we go south or stay on our own trail?” Hannah looked at her sisters over the tire tracks she'd been studying when the magic blast went over them like ice water.

Janet shrugged, still kneeling. The foliage here was thick and green, but there were no animals to hunt or smells to chase. They'd been forced to follow tires, the only sign of civilization in this area. They'd been tracking this same print for weeks now. “Up to you guys. Hate to have wasted all this time just to cry off the hunt.”

Hannah and Tisa snickered. Janet was tenacious when she had a scent.

“I say we stick with the bloodhound.” Tisa fluffed her matted brown hair. “She gets us there, you know?”

Hannah nodded, not clicking the radio in response to the alert, though she assumed all trackers would end up in the south by the time it was

over. These tires had taken a detour to a naval station where there had been a recent, vicious battle, and then gone east a bit. Now, they were slanting south again. Janet swore they were on the trail of Safe Haven and Hannah believed her.

“I hear something.” Tisa peered east, where a thick grove of trees blocked their view. “Do you hear it?”

Janet stood up. “Water.” The sense of trouble slapped at her. “We need to go up.”

Tisa pointed at the roof of a nearby farmhouse. “That’s 20 feet.”

The women ran, listening to water coming over the land with no mercy for the people or structures. Someone shouted behind them, then screamed as they were overwhelmed.

“Where’s it coming from? The sun’s out!”

“That’s a dam breaking, not rain.” Hannah farted as she jumped a fallen tree.

The sisters laughed, loving the excitement of these apocalyptic living conditions.

The three trackers kicked together to open the locked door of the home, then pounded through the house to find the stairs.

“Here!” Hannah led them up to the attic, where she shoved a path to the window. They would have to climb out, and then up, if the water came this high. If not, they had a good perch to watch the damage.

“I see something.” Tisa gasped. “It’s a town! And trucks! I see trucks leaving! It’s them!”

Water surrounded the farmhouse, preventing the sisters from chasing the convoy as it rolled out of sight.

Tisa screamed in frustration, punching and kicking boxes and trunks in the attic.

Hannah waited, listening to the water, watching it. She could swear there were liquid hands coming up the front steps.

Janet began searching the attic for new threads. She loved the feel of American clothes,

Tisa joined her, fingering her own threadbare jumper. It was time for a change of duds. Their masters didn't like to issue new gear. They'd been supplying their own needs since being dropped off.

Hannah snorted at her companions and continued to watch the water. She didn't see the hands again, but she didn't doubt herself on seeing them. Hannah looked down at her own clothes, changing her mind. The leather outfit might be hard to swim in. She joined the others. "Any bathing suits in there?"

5

In the West

9am

I feel like I'm in an apocalypse.

Heavy sheets of ash fell over the speeding jeep. In the distance, smoke rose to the sky, covering the sun. It made driving rough. Sheer drop offs on either side would kill them if the jeep slid too far one way

or the other. Nature wasn't wasting any time in reclaiming her domain out here.

Jeff flipped the wipers on high.

Ash recoated the window as soon as the wiper cleared it. Jeff grimaced.

Hurry...

I am. Jeff squinted through the filthy window. The road was missing pieces, with wrecks and debris all along this route, but he was following it anyway. A voice was calling to him from near the place where he'd already tracked Becky and Seth to. He assumed they'd made a den because Becky's signature on his mental grid had stopped moving. *Bad idea,* he scolded. *She's going to get killed before I can reach her.*

"Are you okay?"

Jeff jumped. He peered in the mirror at Romeo. The boy was under Doug's arm while the big man snored. He was wearing three layers of clothes and using a jacket on his shoulder as a pillow, like everyone else. Jeff noted the Eagle position of the tools on his belt and nodded approval. The boy was a fast learner. He'd only demonstrated that for the child once. "I'm good. You?"

"Scared."

Jeff understood why the boy felt that way. "We have action coming and then I'll take you all back to Safe Haven."

Romeo made a face. "They don't like us there. Isn't somewhere else?"

“Isn’t *there* somewhere else.” Jeff followed Doug’s educational wishes. Doug was trying to show the boys how to blend in so they weren’t mistaken for foreigners. If they spoke English well, many people were dumb enough to believe that meant they’d been citizens here. Jeff approved the ploy. The two kids would need all the help they could get. In the time they’d been traveling together, Jeff had been won over by the quiet, respectful brothers. They didn’t fit into Safe Haven because they were too normal. Jeff liked them for it. He had no patience with children who couldn’t be trusted—like Becky.

Hurry! We’ll be gone soon!

Jeff jerked, hands slipping.

The jeep swerved, rattling passengers.

“Is everything all right?” Allan sat up to stretch.

Jeff recovered a smoother roll over the broken road. “Yeah. Slap-happy.”

“I can take a shift if you want.” Allan yawned. “I couldn’t be more bored.”

“I’ve got it.” Jeff was already back into his mind. Allan wouldn’t be able to follow this path.

“He’s hearing things.” Romeo flashed concern to Allan. “And he’s worrying.”

Allan nodded. “We’re all worried.” He looked at Jeff in the mirror. “What are you hearing?”

“Someone needs our help.” Jeff sighed, speeding up through the ash storm. “And it isn’t who we came here for.”

6

New Mexico

“We have to help them now.” Becky was tired of waiting. “They’re being shipped out soon!”

“Not until we make a plan. We just found them. If they ship the kids out, we’ll follow and hijack the truck, but until they leave, we don’t stand a chance. They have forty men down there.”

“We didn’t even get close enough for a real recon.” Becky tossed herself into a dusty chair in the front room of the small cabin. They didn’t worry about whatever might be on the floors or in the corners. In this new life, it was better to hang out in those places and make friends with those creatures. Neither of them flinched at spiders on their skin anymore or snakes on their bedrolls. They’d adapted.

“Would you feel better about waiting if we do that?” Seth took the rocking chair next to Becky. He’d gotten comfortable using it over the week they’d been here.

“Maybe.”

Seth understood her concerns, but two Eagles wouldn’t be enough for this challenge and he knew it. He also wasn’t sure if they might have already been noticed by one of the descendants protecting the camp that was only a quarter mile from them. It wasn’t safe here. “We’ll go down tomorrow, okay? You’ll see I’m right about not blasting in there.

Then we'll work on a better plan and a new base of operations.”

Juniper trees and rocky ground that refused to grow anything else surrounded their cabin on three sides. To their back was a steep cliff with a small graveyard at the top. The cabin had been empty when they'd arrived, and bore no prints to tell of a struggle, no damage or bloodstains. Seth assumed this cabin had been unused before the war too, but he wasn't sure because there had been a Christmas wreath dying on the door.

Becky let him talk her out of attacking the camp now, but she had decided as soon as Seth let her get close enough, she was going to take matters into her own hands. She wasn't spending another night listening to the screams without stopping it.

Seth began to love her, hoping she would sleep. They had a habit of hunting at night for prairie dogs and running a dark house, though that had been interrupted by screams last night.

Seth unbuttoned her long sleeve shirt and slid his hands over her lacy bra, wishing he could give her a bubble bath. They were using creeks and rivers they crossed, which had provided some fun memories, but Seth wanted to give her the luxuries of a woman. Soaking in a tub for hours was one of those, according to the camp hens, and the sense of time growing short was bugging Seth. He wanted to give her special moments now, while he could. He wasn't sure they were going to have a later.

UN Detention Camp

“They’re coming.” The girl’s voice was thick with her witch’s timbre. “Soon. Hours.”

The kids huddled around to listen and to hide the seer.

“Kill them all. Then we will go to Safe Haven, where the alpha will end our misery and accept our lives in honor.”

“The alpha.”

“Safe Haven.”

“*Angela.*”

“What’s going on in there?!” A sentry banged on the bars of the portable cages. “You go to the clean!”

The kids immediately stood, including the girl still searching the future. She continued to whisper as hungover men led them to their weekly shower. It was the last time they would be blasted with the icy water that sometimes stripped skin, the last day they would spend penned up like dogs. The long shelters were large and had cots, but they were still cages. Set into the side of a cliff, the children were grateful that awnings over the cages at least provided shade from the desert sun. The sky was covered in layers of smoke, but the sun was still getting through to beat on them with ruthless heat.

The kids held onto each other and their clothes as the hoses came on. Their shorts and skirts were

ragged, the tops were falling apart. Cloth couldn't stand up to the hoses either.

The shivering descendant in the middle, being sheltered, hid her elation. When help came, the alpha would break her mental chains. The other kids wanted the safety of Angela's camp, but the descendant girl just wanted to know the alpha before she died. She wanted to know *any* adult who was good, like her. That person would share an unknowing bond that would go as deep as deep would go. Until the war, little Kimmie hadn't known there were others like her. *Now, that's all I think about.*



[Setting Sail](#)

Book 10